

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
The *TechTank* Podcast

“Teens are using AI—but not how we think”



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[00:00:00] **CO-HOST NICOL TURNER LEE:** You are listening to Tech Tank, a biweekly podcast from the Brookings Institution exploring the most consequential technology

issues of our time, from racial bias and algorithms to the future of work Tech Tank takes big ideas and makes them accessible.

[00:00:25] Welcome to the Tech Tank Podcast. I'm co-host Nicol Turner, Lee, senior fellow and director of the Center for Technology Innovation at the Brookings Institution. From headlines about how students are using artificial intelligence to cheat on assignments to lawsuits alleging that conversations with chatbots lead to fatal outcomes, the relationships that teens are forming with AI chatbots have been the subject of much scrutiny, but even more teens think AI will have a positive rather than negative effect on their lives. And this is not the only finding that we are hearing about. And I'm so excited about our guest today because we want to talk about a lot of this research that came out of the Pew Research Center. We're finding that class and race have huge factors and major determinants when it comes to who is getting online to use AI. Researchers like myself are seeking to better understand what teens think about these things as AI becomes an even bigger part of their daily lives. And a recent Pew research study, which I'm going to talk about today, found that most American teens say they're using AI chatbots primarily to search for information and help to do schoolwork and to a lesser degree, get this use it for emotional support and advice, which I think is at the heart of many of these concerns. So this is not a monolith, and there's some notable differences that I'm going to talk about today. And I am joined by Monica Anderson, the director of Internet and Technology Research at Pew Research Center, an author of a new report on how teens in the U.S. use AI. Monica has a deep bench of experience in public opinion research and is published widely on topics like the digital divide, privacy, social media, among other things. Monica, thank you so much for joining me today.

[00:02:07] **GUEST MONICA ANDERSON:** Thanks so much for having me, Nicol.

[00:02:09] **CO-HOST NICOL TURNER LEE:** Listen, I wanna jump right in because I was really fascinated by reading the recent results from the Pew study on how teens use and view AI. And it's no secret, Monica, that this is a very timely topic right now. So the first thing I wanna jump into, why this study and why now?

[00:02:30] **GUEST MONICA ANDERSON:** Great question. I think one of the things that is central to the work that we're doing at Pew Research Center is to study emerging technologies, and there is nothing more emerging and top of mind than talking about AI. At the same time, we also know that teenagers are often the first ones that are adopting these new and emerging tech. And for us to be able to really understand how teens are navigating this full digital environment. We have to make sure that we're putting down those markers right now when it comes to AI adoption. And I think one of the things that we really wanted to do with this work and why I think it's so important is to make sure

that we're grounding conversations. In data, it's very important to learn about people's experiences to bring in anecdotes, but we also see that there's a lot of value in doing the scientific representative surveys for us to get a better understanding of what this means for all teens in the U.S.

[00:03:36] **CO-HOST NICOL TURNER LEE:** So I wanna go a little bit deeper in this, right? and just really start with the surprises, right? So let's talk a little bit about what surprised you in the study and then we'll go into some more of the studies findings.

[00:03:50] **GUEST MONICA ANDERSON:** Yeah, for sure. I think one of the things that really stands out is just the diversity of reasons that teens are gravitating to chatbot. So you've got a majority are using them to search for information, but you've also got. A little over half that are using it to get help with schoolwork. I really found it fascinating that you've got about 20% of teens saying they use it to get news, and while they're smaller shares that use it for more personal reasons, 16% are using it for casual conversations, and about one in ten are using it to get emotional support or advice. Another thing that really stands out to me. Is that teens experiences are not a monolith, right? Not all teens are using it or using it in the same way, but there's some really interesting differences and patterns when you start to drill down into race and ethnicity and so across. Many of the reasons that we asked about whether it was for getting help with schoolwork or summarizing content or getting news or emotional support. in fact that Black and Hispanic teens and at times Black teens standing out even. Further when it comes to using chatbots for this use. So I think it's really important, as you said at the top of this program, that it's for us to drill down into those experiences because they often match up with what we've seen in social media and internet use more broadly.

[00:05:25] **CO-HOST NICOL TURNER LEE:** and that's so interesting to me, and I want to come back. To the demographic differences that the study revealed, and I want to sort of stick on this, like competence that young people are basically saying that they have, right? We as adults or parents sometimes think that, we have to train young people on how to use these tools. But I think in the study you saw about a quarter of teens describe themselves as extremely or very confident in their ability to use things like chatbots and had high awareness. How does this compare with some previous work that the Pew Research Center has done on AI literacy? Are we seeing this as a growing trajectory? Where it's just going to get higher among young people and maybe the parents will be left behind, right? Or is this something that is just a trend or a spike in trend that's happening now just given the prevalence of AI?

[00:06:10] **GUEST MONICA ANDERSON:** Yeah, I think what we're seeing overall for teens or adults is more people are familiar with AI in ways that they weren't four or five years ago, and teens are especially. Know about AI, 95% say they've heard of it. Nearly

60% say they've heard a lot. So that means that these conversations that are happening around AI are also happening amongst teens, and I think that's really important and interesting. The other thing that we wanted to do with this work is also understand whether or not teens feel comfortable with using these technologies, and as you point out about one in 14 say that they are highly confident and you've got about another third saying that they're somewhat confident. So teens by and large are feeling pretty confident when using these tools. That's not always the case when we've asked similar questions, compared to older Americans, but I think that also just points out of how pervasive these tools are already in the lives of teenagers, and even more so when compared to older generations.

[00:07:21] **CO-HOST NICOL TURNER LEE:** And that's interesting and I want to point out for the viewers, again, we will tell you where you can get access to this report. But one of the things I found to be interesting in terms of AI's impact, as a scholar that is working on, more of the humane impacts of AI. Teens were more positive about AI and how it was going to impact them. About 36% to 15%, that was on the personal side, but then there was a little mixed reaction when it came to society. 31% of teens thought it was going to have a positive impact, 26%. And then I think later, you basically ask, a subset of those questions and that teens are very, much aware that AI is going to have an impact on society negatively. And there was a question I was tickled that. I do have some friends out there that are young that understand this, whereas 31% thought that AI was going to have a positive future. There were 26% of teens that did think that there was going to be, misinformation, loss of human factors, environmental impacts. Was that surprising to you as well, Monica, that teens are a lot more astute and not just the literacy on the tools themselves, but they understand where this is fitting into society.

[00:08:32] **GUEST MONICA ANDERSON:** Yeah, absolutely. And I think, we need to make sure that we're giving young people credit when it comes to their views and experiences with technology. Who can better tell us what they think AI is going to impact young people than young people themselves. So I think this is just something that we've seen throughout all of our work that teens have really insightful and thoughtful things to say when it comes to the way that technology might be impacting them and society, and perhaps in some ways that us older folks don't quite get yet. And I think, there's a pattern that we've also seen where people are more likely to think about the negative impact of technology on society than on themselves, right? It could be, you're thinking about your personal positive ways that you can use this technology, but when you step back you think about, oh, here are some of these societal things that might be happening. And so to, to your question on understanding how teens are thinking about AI's impact on society for those who said that they think it will be positive, they really coalesced around three things. They felt like the reason why they

felt this way is because it's going to make life better or easier, that it's simply good for learning and getting information, and it's going to lead us to be more productive. Now on the other end of the spectrum, for those who said that actually this is going to be negative for society, there's two things that really pop. One is this concern about losing critical thinking and creative skills, right? That was by far the, most commonly cited reason among teens. And then the second most cited was around job loss. And that really is in line with other work that we've done, especially with adults where. There is a real fear about what AI might bring to jobs. Teens also mention things like misinformation, which I think is a really important part of this story and connects to what we talked about, which is AI literacy as well. And so I think it, it shows that, teens point to a lot of different reasons, but these are the ones that we're most salient in their answers.

[00:10:50] **CO-HOST NICOL TURNER LEE:** And I think that's an interesting conversation that people need to have, right? Because we, as policymakers are, I guess I'm speaking for myself based on who's listening, right? Oftentimes we think that, including the person who is most affected by the policies that we're making it, it's something that we don't often do, right? And so in this case, I think your study really informs. The views that young people have made up their mind or have some, perspective on this, and one in which we should actually pay attention to and I'm, saying this especially as more and more adults are taking the helm when it comes to privacy legislation or banning chatbots. I think your research for me was very insightful that, we need to really think about how others on the other side really feel the users. as opposed to our own ideological or, values concerns which brings me to this chatbot use. there is a lot, let me say that again, Monica, right? There's a lot of discussion when it comes to AI chatbots in particular. we have read in the news about the impact of chat bots when it. Comes through really fatal consequences for young people, particularly chatbots that take on emotional, dependency issues. We also know that there's concern about this general mantra that robots are gonna take over our human experience. I'm curious from you, in the report, there are various chatbot use cases that you talk about. And the frequency at which teens actually use them. I want to stay here for a minute because I think your findings also speak to, I think the concern that parents have with this dependency on chatbots. So where are the chatbot use cases? Let's clarify what you found in your reports.

[00:12:31] **GUEST MONICA ANDERSON:** Yeah, for sure. And you're absolutely right, there's a lot of conversation and concern about the way young people might be using chatbots for companionship or personal uses or emotional support. And what we see in our work is that while it's not the most. Commonly use reason why teens are turning to chatbots. It's not completely absent, right? So you've got nearly 20% say that they are

using it to have casual conversations. And about one in ten say that they use chatbots to get emotional support or advice. And one of the things that's unique with this work is that not only do we ask teens, a set of questions. We also asked their parents. So we wanted to understand, okay, what are parents comfortable with their teens using chatbots for? And those two things, casual chats, emotional support or advice, were at the bottom of the list, right? And so in many ways there, there's things that parents are comfortable using, what teens using chatbots for, but that's where they draw the line. And I think one of the things that I would want to stress with this work is that, this is the first time we've really done a deep dive on how teens are using chatbots, and this is a really important kind of first marker. As we continue to do this work and we do annual surveys of teens, it's going to be really important to watch those numbers. Will they stay the same? Will they change? Will they go up over time and that can also let us better understand what those experiences are. And another thing that I know you are super keen on, is those demographic differences as well. And so even when we take getting emotional support or advice in this kind of series of questions, there's some really big differences by race and ethnicity. So about 20% of Black teens say that they use chatbots to get emotional support for white or Hispanic teens. That number drops to about 10%, and so I'm really interested to be able to track this over time to see if this pattern. Is this the same pattern we're going to continually see? But I think it also speaks to this broader conversation is that, teens are using these chatbots for a lot of things, but it's not a one size fits all and in our work we're seeing some really consistent patterns by race and ethnicity.

[00:15:06] **CO-HOST NICOL TURNER LEE:** And that is interesting to me. And I want to jump into the race and ethnicity question, if you don't mind. I was quite surprised from the study about the differences in demographics when it comes to AI use by young people and there seemed to be some gender differences. Like boys are more positive than girls about AI. But what was more striking for me, Monica, was like Black and Hispanic teens. They were more likely to say they used chatbots for schoolwork.

[00:15:35] Which is so interesting to me because on the other side of this mountain is this conversation around AI use of cheating. which, for Black and Hispanic teens, places another mark on their backs when it comes to their performance in school, which I talk a lot about. we cannot assume young people are cheating. I tell teachers all the time. The best indicator to know that a child used the chat bot is if you read the whole essay and it was supposed to be about, polar bears in Antarctica, and now it's about Columbia or someplace else because they didn't proofread it. Yeah. We can't always assume that AI is essentially the indicator of whether or not somebody's using it for a crutch. Tell me a little bit first on. Why Black and Hispanic teens you think are using chatbots more regularly? what did you find? And then maybe we can extrapolate a little bit.

[00:16:25] **GUEST MONICA ANDERSON:** Yeah, sure. And I think one of the things that really stood out to me when I was looking over this data was how much it reminds me of other findings that we have about tech use. So if we take our question about asking teens, how often do you use the internet? And so that's something we've been asking for a very long time. And every single time we've asked that question, we have seen racial and ethnic differences. And so there's a lot of conversation about screen time, but there's not as much conversation about how screen time differs across those different dimensions. About a quarter of white teens say that they use the internet almost constantly. When we ask Black and Hispanic teens that same question, that number doubles to more than 50%. We also see some consistent differences when it comes to using social media, so whether it's TikTok and even how often teens say that they use TikTok with kind of Black teens standing out for using TikTok more than other groups. And so this has been a consistent pattern that we've seen, and this is just another kind of marker in that pattern as well. One of the things I'd also point out is that, as you mentioned, Black and Hispanic teens are more likely to say they use chatbots to get help with schoolwork and one of the things I found really interesting is that as researchers, we want to do our due diligence, right? And there's times where racial differences might be driven by things like income or other factors, and in fact, we're not actually seeing that here, right? So there's substantively a difference in how teens are approaching this by race and ethnicity that's not being driven by household income.

[00:18:15] **CO-HOST NICOL TURNER LEE:** and that's interesting, right? In terms of other income differences. you also mentioned 20% of teens and families earning less than 30,000 a year. Say AI helps them if you just take out Black and Hispanic. Or you intersect those qualities. But when you get to the families earning \$75,000 and over that number drops to 7%. Yeah. Which is so interesting to me because it also Monica, we've known each other for a long time on our digital divide work, right?

[00:18:42] **GUEST MONICA ANDERSON:** Yes. Yeah.

[00:18:43] **CO-HOST NICOL TURNER LEE:** it could indicate a couple of things, but why is it that higher income families dropped to 7% and like where do other, data points that you found to be interesting? Because I think I saw the same thing when it came to the use of chatbots on the emotional side. The higher the income, the less likely there was parent promotion of these tools.

[00:19:02] **GUEST MONICA ANDERSON:** Yeah, I mean I think one of the things we want to be able to is continue to look at those questions and see if those patterns arise. But I often think about the way that we talk about the digital divide today might be very different than the way that we talked about it 10 or 15 years from now. one of the things

that we didn't do in this work, but I think will be interesting over time is right now, a lot of these tools are free and available. And so what does that mean when maybe having to pay for these tools come into play? are we going to see those differences? But I'd say to your point on the income differences is, when we look at other forms of tech use, income for teens is not that big of an indicator compared to maybe that it once was. So smartphone ownership. Majorities of teens, regardless of income, have a smartphone, right? Regardless of income, majorities are using social media. What we're seeing here, especially on the school schoolwork, question is one that we don't have a definitive answer as to why we're seeing it, but it's definitely something that we're going to keep a watch on because when it comes to income, there's not a lot of differences when using chatbots, but you do see it with how often they're using it for schoolwork.

[00:20:30] **CO-HOST NICOL TURNER LEE:** and it's also interesting, I think some of the concerns that parents are expressing when it comes to AI among higher income families, I would think, and I'm working on a piece on this, so I was so happy when your data came out because I was trying to find data and you gave me some good data points that, as part of a blog, if you're listening and you follow the Tech Tank newsletter, I do have a piece coming out on this. That sort of, incorporates many of the elements that we're speaking about. But what's also interesting to me is like maybe higher income parents have the resources for their kids to do other stuff, and so maybe that could be a part of it too, Monica, that they are able to do the type of literacy training 'cause maybe they're more exposed to AI in their workplaces. I don't know, seems to me, another study for Pew.

[00:21:14] **GUEST MONICA ANDERSON:** Yeah, on that point. We are able to look at what parents find acceptable by income, and there's some ways in which actually higher income parents are more okay with their teen using chatbots for. That's true. When it comes for searching for inter. Information or entertainment, and there's not a lot of income differences. When asked about whether or not you would be okay with your teen using chatbots to get schoolwork. The one area that I thought was super interesting here is that kind of flips when asked about getting some emotional support or advice there, it's actually lower income parents that say that this would be more acceptable to them when compare it to higher income parents. And there's also some income differences in terms of about talking to your teen about chatbots. So higher income parents are more likely to say they've been having these conversations, with their children as well.

[00:22:13] **CO-HOST NICOL TURNER LEE:** Yeah, and I think that's, part of the trend that we've commonly seen in digital Divide research where higher income parents just have more resources available. Maybe it's, their ability to sit down with their kids and

talk to them about these tools because they see them more prevalent in the workplace, or they follow the news. Or maybe it's because higher income kids come from families where they have choices. I really am taken by what you just mentioned in terms of. Young people in lower income communities using a lot of the free stuff. Free stuff people, Like Monica. I mean I can only imagine, and maybe it didn't come up in the study, that maybe there are, higher income students that use more of the paid stuff potentially and so they don't show up in some of these other studies. I really have a question for you, and I've got a couple more questions. I don't want to keep you, but it's like, how do we reconcile then, if most of these kids are basically saying, Hey. Hey, teacher. We are using chatbots to do our homework. Like how do you reconcile that? Because you basically let the cat out of the bag among educators who are like violently afraid that they're reading AI generated papers.

[00:23:27] **GUEST MONICA ANDERSON:** I think the first thing is just how quickly this is evolving, right? Some of my colleagues. Maybe two, three years ago did a survey of teachers and had a question about AI, and even then teachers were concerned about how AI might be used, but these tools are evolving and changing so quickly, and right now as schools are trying to create policies, you've already got more than half of teens saying that they are using it and they are using it for schoolwork. And so in a sense, you have, not only are parents maybe having to play catch up, but so are educators and administrators. The one thing that I do want to point out is that we also asked teens about whether or not these tools had been helpful to them for their schoolwork. And that on balance. Far more teens say that these tools have been helpful for them than unhelpful. And even getting back into some of those demographic differences that we talked about, Black and Hispanic teens are more likely than white teens to say that these tools have been incredibly helpful to them when helping complete their schoolwork. So not only do you have these demographic differences in using these technologies, many of these teens are saying that these tools have been very helpful for them and their education.

[00:24:52] **CO-HOST NICOL TURNER LEE:** Yeah. I love the way you said, low, if you're an educator, the cat is out the bag and you're so right we are creating policies that may be about like banning or not including them in the classroom, but really teens are picking up the tricks of the trade when it comes to how to use these tools, and it makes sense, right? Because many jobs in the future are going to be requiring the use of AI tools or, may be replacing them, unfortunately when it comes to AI. So it's important to know where they fit on the food chain. Just one last question. This is not your first rodeo when it comes to AI and public perceptions. And again, I'm so proud of you. Many of you don't know, but a quick shout out, I've known Monica for almost 20 years now...15, 20 years. You previously led reports around America's perception of AI.

Are there differences in the results that you're getting from teens versus some of the previous work you've done in terms of public perception on AI? Or are you seeing these opportunities and potential harms consistent among both groups?

[00:25:52] **GUEST MONICA ANDERSON:** Yeah, there are some clear differences that we see compared to teens and older groups. One teens are just using these tools more than older Americans. Do, and that's, no surprise when you look at social media or other kind of emerging tech. This is something that is uniquely positioned and in a way that kind of young people are often the first ones adopting these new technologies. So we see that kind of adoption and use is definitely already widespread among, teenagers in a way that we don't quite see amongst older groups. The other thing is that teens. Tend to be a little bit more positive about AI when it comes to older Americans as well. But at the same time, I will point out that one of the things that is really important for this work is we often, when it comes to attitudes, we give our folks that are taking our surveys a chance to say they're not sure. So what impact do you think AI will have on you over the next 20 years? About 20% of teens said that they weren't sure, and that's something that we see across our work, right? And that sense, a level of uncertainty is a substantive answer, right? So even when we ask parents about. Would it be okay if their teen uses a chatbot to have a casual conversation with? You've got about a quarter of parents saying they're not quite sure what the right way is to go here. So with any kind of fast moving technology, I think it's also really important to make sure, and what we've seen as a pattern of people might be a little bit more positive here, a little bit more negative there. But in a lot of ways, people are still trying to make up their mind about what they think these impacts are.

[00:27:40] **CO-HOST NICOL TURNER LEE:** I think this is all great stuff. I am looking forward to the next report because I know you all are planning for something else. That's how Pew does it. And I think these results are really informative as to what the future of this might look like, and I think it's a really eye opener for those of us that have not heard or factored in the critical voices of young people. Monica, thank you so much for joining me on this discussion today.

[00:28:02] **GUEST MONICA ANDERSON:** Thank you so much, Nicole. It's always a pleasure.

[00:28:05] **CO-HOST NICOL TURNER LEE:** No, your work is really helping us better understand the diversity of perspectives on AI use, chatbot use, and we're just really looking forward to more of it. For listeners at home, you can find the report where Monica, let them know where they can get this wonderful report.

[00:28:18] **GUEST MONICA ANDERSON:** You can find all of our reports, including this one, and that's [pewresearch.org](https://www.pewresearch.org) and keep watching that space. We're going to have more on AI soon.

[00:28:27] **CO-HOST NICOL TURNER LEE:** [Pewresearch.org](https://www.pewresearch.org). Please explore more in-depth content on tech policy issues at Tech Tank, on the Brookings website, accessible at [brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu). Your feedback matters to us about the substance of this episode, so leave a comment, let us know your thoughts, suggest other topics or just like it or share it because that's how we build community. This concludes another insightful episode of the Tech Tank Podcast where we make bits into palatable bytes. Until next time, thank you for listening to Tech Tank, a series of round table discussions and interviews with technology experts and policymakers. For more conversations like this, subscribe to the podcast and sign up to receive the Tech Tank newsletter for more research and analysis from the Center for Technology Innovation at Brookings.