headstream

Designing Youth Digital Wellbeing

Headstream Brief

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Introduction

Digital spaces are representations of our physical world. When all of our social dynamics, cultural norms, and economic externalities become condensed to live within our screens, users experience the good, the bad, and the ugly all at once every time they go online. This new digital world, one that is exacerbating the tendencies of our reality, has become one of the primary sources raising today's young people. Since youth are learning about the world through social technologies, tech platforms have a moral responsibility to center the wellbeing of young people throughout the design process of products.
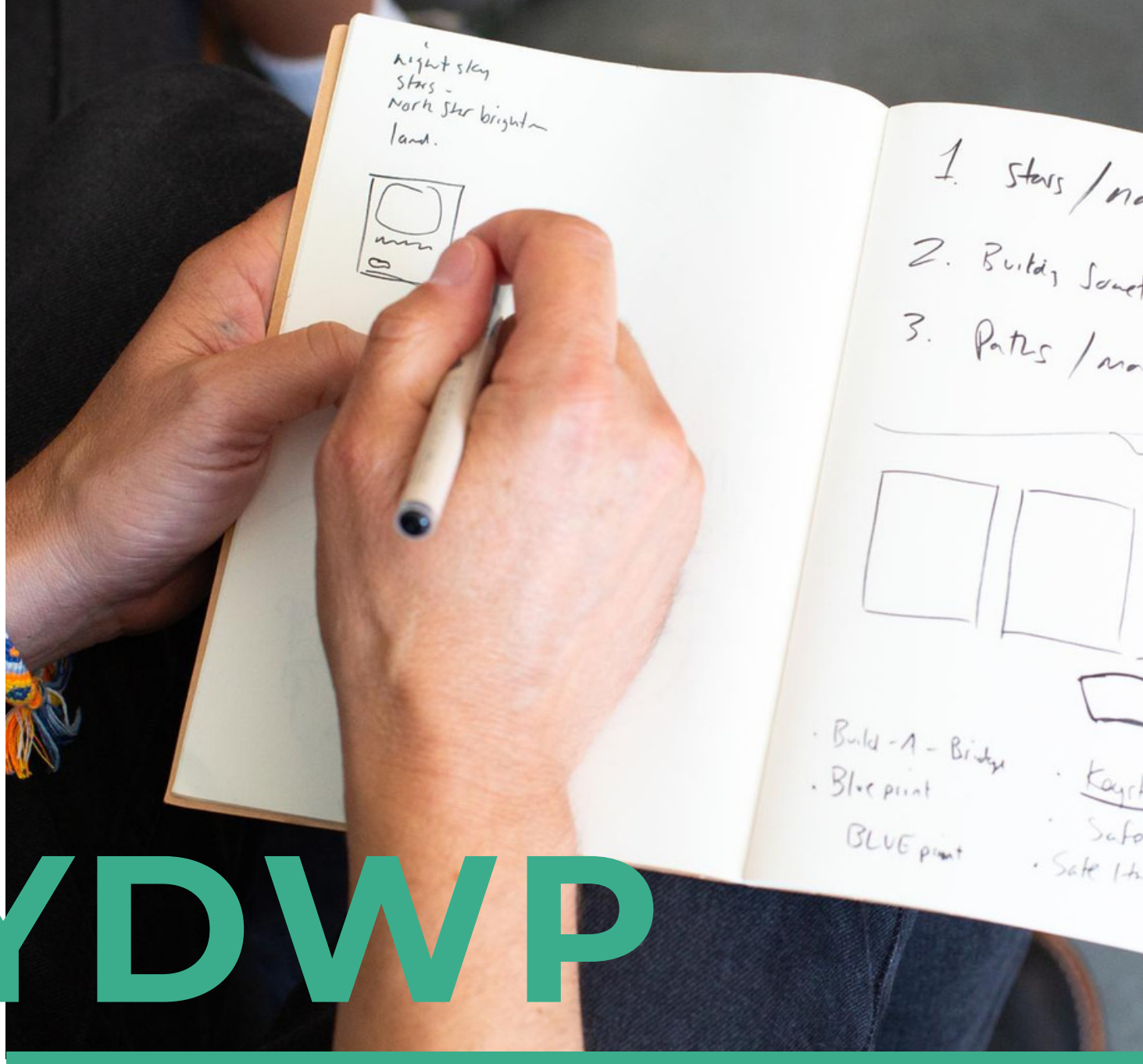
The Problem

It is within this design process that Headstream saw an opportunity to transform the ways youth wellbeing is intentionally uplifted on large social technology platforms. In order to prioritize the wellbeing of youth users, social media and gaming companies need to shift their co-creation process to build for youth, with youth, and by youth. Addressing the barriers that exist to the adaptation of youth co-creation processes underpinned our inaugural Collab Lab program. Six tech practitioners from some of the largest social technology platforms and six youth leaders from Headstream's Youth 2 Innovator (Y2I) community came together to model a process of co-design that led to the creation of a set of digital wellbeing principles for the sector.

The first barrier social media and gaming companies needed to address was **the absence of a unified definition for youth digital wellbeing**. Highlighted by Data & Society's *The Unseen Teen* report, it is clear that policy and product design changes require a unified and working definition of digital wellbeing in the best interest of youth.

The second barrier that requires addressing is **how to directly engage youth in the co-creation process** for the products that they use most. At large, the tech sector lacks clear pathways for how to utilize youth co-creation as a means to design for wellbeing. This massive product development flaw is a result of a myriad of fixable obstacles including strategic prioritization, legal hurdles, under-resourced and under-trained teams focused on youth user wellbeing, and a design process that doesn't include youth participation until very late, if at all.

Collab Lab was developed to address these two barriers. We created an experience where young people and social technology companies could come together face-to-face, demystifying traditional power dynamics, to work towards a common goal of understanding each others' different perspectives of digital wellbeing and apply those learnings to a set of principles that could guide the sector.

The following principles and recommendations serve as a starting point for tech practitioners, our term for wellbeing champions in the sector, to intentionally design with youth while putting their wellbeing at the forefront of digital innovation. These learnings stem from our collaborative workshops, over the course of three months, with six tech professionals from some of the largest social technology platforms and six youth leaders from Headstream's Youth 2 Innovator (Y2I) community.

Over the course of a series of workshops, we discovered that even the most well-intentioned professionals and passionate advocates for youth wellbeing in digital places have different perspectives and misaligned priorities from their Y2I youth counterparts. For the tech practitioners, their primary concerns revolved around privacy and protection. For the Y2I Leaders, their fundamental needs for social technology stem from allowing their authentic selves to foster online, which cultivates their sense of safety on digital spaces.

The two perspectives are more valuable when understood separately and reshaped collaboratively into a unified set of principles. The following table outlines the basic components of each principle, key takeaways from the process of creating the principle, and the first steps to putting the principle into action.

YDWP

Youth Digital Wellbeing Principles:

We are at an inflection point. Mounting concern from employees within social media and gaming companies along with mounting pressure from policymakers and the media has forced us to address the impact social technologies have on society. Particularly for the youngest generations of our society. But even for the companies and product builders who are willing and resourced to address user wellbeing, do they know where to focus? Collab Lab's set of eight Youth Digital Wellbeing Principles is intended to serve as a foundational building block for tech companies and tech builders to begin their own process of defining youth digital wellbeing.

"By defining the concept, the principles provide a reference point for innovation at the core of different platforms, algorithms, or features."

Harini Sridar, Collab Lab Leader

Youth Digital Wellbeing Principles Table

YDWP	Basic Components	Process Learnings	Suggestions
Safety on Digital Spaces	Safety must enable authenticity by protecting youth from racist, homophobic, transphobic, misogynistic, and harmful content.	Clear need to align on what safety feels like versus how safety is practically upheld.	Create equitable community guidelines to protect users from online harm and cultivate a sense of belonging.
Building Healthy Communities	Platforms need to put users in positions to find communities they resonate with.	Youth long to find niche communities while also learning about other types of communities that exist that may be different than their own.	Build accessible pipelines to similar identity-specific content and visibility to other identity-specific content.
Diversity & Representation of Your Online Consumption	The need for a pipeline to identity groups representative of the user and access to diverse content from different identities and perspectives.	Clear need to align on how diversity and representation applies to identities and experiences versus types of content.	Build accessible pipelines to similar identity-specific content and visibility to other identity-specific content.
Agency Over Your Online Experience	The ability to choose what you consume and to choose whether you create or consume.	Youth value agency as freedom of choice in online engagement while tech practitioners refer to it as enabling users freedom in the use of their online information.	Create greater control for youth users to navigate how their digital experience is presented to them.
Progress to Adapt & Develop Platforms	Making spaces for evolving conversations and growth on online platforms while including the user throughout the design process	Youth were able to humanize tech practitioners as they saw their desire to apply this principle while clearly not having the answers.	Develop opportunities for co-creation across every stage of the product design process and build in a culture of growth within the platform's online culture.
Fun-filling Online Experiences	Positive play - creating healthy, safe, and sanctioned "escapism" while eliminating a culture of performance.	Tech practitioners create digital mechanisms for play, youth build a culture of fun on the platform.	Host conversations with youth on how they can safely have fun online and begin designing around those stories.
Transparency & Education on the Impact of Our Tech Experience	Tools that enable education around how the algorithm impacts users and publicly acknowledging when companies make mistakes in their decision-making.	Existing resources for users to learn about how the algorithm operates is inaccessible and too dense for users at large, especially youth, to easily understand.	Create digital pop-ups that teach users about the algorithm they are using in accessible and bite size ways.
Authenticity in How You Show Up Online	Giving users options about how they communicate themselves to other people online free of backlash.	Authenticity is the foundation that allows for every other principle to be carried out in its best form.	Sit back and listen to different expressions of authenticity that are longing to be had online.

Application of Co-Creation:

Co-creation is not an additive to the design process. It is integral to creating more impactful solutions that begin to mitigate problems that arise for youth online. We have seen time and again how quick fixes are not enough, from adding frivolous additional features that seemingly appease youth or tokenizing young people as advisors without implementing their feedback. Young people continue to suffer because their needs are not being addressed at the root of the problem.

Solving these issues at their core starts with empowering the expertise of young people as practical contributors to building solutions. We need more individuals within social media and gaming companies advocating for additional resources for youth co-creation, training their colleagues on how to involve youth in their work. It requires an intentional humility on the part of tech practitioners to recognize that they can't design for experiences they have not had. Youth in digital spaces today have a unique perspective on how specific aspects of technology impact their lives.

We need more decision-makers at these companies to prioritize the wellbeing of youth users as not only an ethical imperative but also as good business. We see it as the duty of any tech company that truly cares about youth wellbeing to make space for their contributions and value those insights and needs during the product development process.

> **"We need more individuals within social media and gaming companies advocating for additional resources for youth co-creation, training their colleagues on how to involve youth in their work. "**

Co-Creation

Collab Lab demonstrated that youth co-creation shouldn't be viewed as a daunting challenge for companies, but rather as a process that leads to practical solution ideation, authentic understanding of your users, and tangible mitigation of the potential negative effects of your platform or game. The following recommendations stem from the lessons learned over three years of social technology co-creation with youth at Headstream, and particularly from the Collab Lab's youth designed and facilitated workshops. Whether you have experience working with young people or are just starting, use these recommendations as a guide for how to empower the expertise of youth as co-creators.

Recommendations

1 Youth-centered design is more impactful than youth-led design. Authentic co-creation requires centering youth stories and designing around those experiences.

2 Institutionalize the importance of creating youth digital wellbeing standards by creating metrics that can be tracked, measured, and designed for.

3 Create advisory opportunities across departments in order to incorporate youth voices in every facet of product development and to expose different stakeholders to working with youth.

4 Hire youth interns who are under 18 years old.

5 Hire workers who have experience working with youth in a co-creation fashion and/or invest in training teams across the company in working with youth.

6 Actively listen and be willing to implement feedback after a product has been released.

7 Abandon user cases and personas as a designing mechanism and replace it with intentional youth co-design.

8 Create environments to empower youth to understand that their contributions are invaluable and their age is not a barrier to participating as experts.

9 Provide educational opportunities and access to resources such as the inner workings of a business, product development process, and/or deep context of the specific department they are collaborating with.

10 Use facilitation techniques to create authentic storytelling from youth and tech professionals. When different power holders humanize each other, it allows them to create better together.

11 Build a seat at the table for youth with powerful decision-makers and collaboratively ideate change for the platforms that youth consume most.

12 Make youth aware of internal constraints to allow them to understand why certain decisions are or are not being made. This context enables stronger empowerment that leads to more meaningful co-creation.

Conclusion

Tech practitioners are referred to as "champions of the space" because with them lies the moral responsibility to shift the way tech companies see their role in raising a new generation of young adults. But current barriers to co-creating with youth, including legal, resource constraints, business prioritization, and a know-how of working with youth, create large obstacles to reap the rewards of co-creation.

There is an undeniable desire among individuals at big social media and gaming companies to integrate co-creation in a variety of different facets of their work.

Practitioners' power to influence the companies that are molding young adults today is growing, but it is the youth who have the knowledge on how digital spaces can better serve young people today. Together, we have the tools and power to build a radically better digital world, a force so powerful, that it can begin to bring equity, justice, and empowerment into the systems of our physical world.

"This set of Youth Digital Wellbeing Principles serves as a foundation and source of inspiration to define youth digital wellbeing and guide the development of your own principles."

Headstream's role is to serve as a support system for tech practitioners who are eager to work with youth but need to make the internal case for co-creation or refine their approach to collaborating with young people. We are working with participants of Collab Lab to develop a business case for youth co-creation at large social media and gaming companies. We invite each one of you to join this endeavor within your own organizations and the sector at large, or to reach out to Headstream as your first step. Youth digital wellbeing and co-creation aren't limited to individual, specific department, or company goals. These transformative areas should be integrated within companies as a part of trust and safety policies, design processes, and platform pillars, as well as across the entire social technology sector.

Join Us

You can do this. You are part of the solution and we want to hear from you, whether you are looking to learn more, start building out a co-creation practice, or even participate in future co-creation cohorts like Collab Lab. Check out our Designing Youth Digital Wellbeing Video Series to hear from our youth leaders on how you and your organization can get started today!

Join us in this mission by sharing these principles, and recommendations for youth co-creation, and by bringing them into your daily work.

You can reach out to hello@headstreaminnovation.com to kick start your role in the digital transformation to build youth wellbeing.

Contact

We want to hear from you! Please follow our work, sign up for our newsletter, and contact us if you would like to collaborate with us.

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