A young woman with dark, curly hair is looking down at a red smartphone she is holding in her right hand. She is wearing a white t-shirt under a dark green bomber jacket. The background is a dark, textured wall.

2024

# A Double-Edged Sword:

How Diverse Communities of Young  
People Think About the Multifaceted  
Relationship Between Social Media  
and Mental Health

## Credits

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You can read the previous reports here:

[Digital Health Practices, Social Media Use, and Mental Well-Being Among Teens and Young Adults in the U.S.](#)  
by Victoria Rideout and Susannah Fox (2018)

[Coping with COVID-19: How Young People Use Digital Media to Manage Their Mental Health](#)  
by Victoria Rideout, Susannah Fox, Alanna Peebles, and Michael Robb (2021)

2024

## **A Double-Edged Sword:**

**How Diverse Communities of Young People  
Think About the Multifaceted Relationship  
Between Social Media and Mental Health**

COMMON SENSE IS GRATEFUL FOR THE GENEROUS SUPPORT AND  
UNDERWRITING THAT FUNDED THIS RESEARCH REPORT

**Jennifer Caldwell and John H.N. Fisher**

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# Introduction

National narratives about youth well-being have increasingly focused on how to address the youth mental health crisis. The stakes are high; the rate of suicidality for young people has increased dramatically over the past decade, with outsize risks for youth of color and LGBTQ+ youth.<sup>1</sup> While a multitude of complex factors are contributing to the growth of mental health challenges among young people, social media has often landed in the center of the conversation.

To better understand youth mental health and its relationship to social media use, researchers have shown that it is critically important to listen to and honor the experiences of youth themselves.<sup>2</sup> In pursuit of a richer understanding of their experiences with social media and their mental health, this study—the third in a series—has engaged with and centered young people in the design, execution, and interpretation of the research findings.

The lived experiences and context that young people bring to their use of digital technologies are critical to understand in all their nuances. However, they are difficult to translate into broad assessments that are generalizable to all youth. The kinds of platforms, content, and communities that youth engage with are deeply important to consider. Each of these vary across different groups of youth, but also according to the mental health concerns and sensitivities that individual young people bring to their social media use. In a landmark review of existing research on indicators of social media use and adolescent health by the National Academies released this year, the authors concluded that: "[D]espite widespread concern about social media's effects, it is hard to offer an overall summary of the relationship between social media and mental health beyond observing that the effects, both helpful and harmful, accrue differently to different users."<sup>3</sup>

This lens of variable impacts, and a focus on youth who experience *both* the positive and negative sides of digital technologies more intensely, has helped to inform the analysis in this report. Building upon work from leading scholars who study social media's impact on youth mental health, this study adds to a growing body of research that supports the "differential susceptibility" model for social media. In other words, different users will have different responses to the same platform—even when presented with the same content or experience.<sup>4</sup>

To that end, this report shares the results of a nationally representative survey of 1,274 teens and young adults age 14 to 22 in the United States. It was fielded during October and November of 2023 and includes oversamples of LGBTQ+, Black, and Latino youth to ensure representation and yield statistically meaningful results of these demographic groups in the data set. Trend questions allow for comparisons between two other cross-sectional samples, one from 2018 and one from 2020, that examine the role of digital technologies in youth well-being before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey also includes a set of items that allow us to identify and take a closer look at young people who are experiencing symptoms of depression, as measured by the PHQ-8 depression scale.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Akkas, F. (2023, March 7). *Youth suicide risk increased over past decade*. Pew Charitable Trusts. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2023/03/03/youth-suicide-risk-increased-over-past-decade>

<sup>2</sup>Cortesi, S., Hasse, A., & Gasser, U. (2021) *Youth participation in a digital world: Designing and implementing spaces, programs, and methodologies*. Youth and Media, Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society. <https://cyber.harvard.edu/publication/2021/youth-participation-in-a-digital-world>; Frey, W. R., Patton, D. U., Gaskell, M. B., & McGregor, K. A. (2020). Artificial intelligence and inclusion: Formerly gang-involved youth as domain experts for analyzing unstructured Twitter data. *Social Science Computer Review*, 38(1), 42–56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439318788314>

<sup>3</sup>National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2024). *Social media and adolescent health* (supplementary "Highlights" document). National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/27396>

<sup>4</sup>Beyens, I., Pouwels, J. L., van Driel, I. I., Keijsers, L., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2020). The effect of social media on well-being differs from adolescent to adolescent. *Scientific Reports*, 10(1), Article 10763. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-67727-7>

<sup>5</sup>Kroenke, K., Strine, T. W., Spitzer, R. L., Williams, J. B., Berry, J. T., & Mokdad, A. H. (2009). The PHQ-8 as a measure of current depression in the general population. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 114(1-3), 163–173. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2008.06.026>



This study has found that while the rate of youth facing depressive symptoms has declined since the pandemic, returning to 2018 levels, this rate is still high, representing nearly half of young people reporting any type of depressive symptom. Social media use has followed a different pattern, with youth reports of "almost constant" use of social media platforms remaining relatively stable from 2020 to 2023, but still higher than 2018. The data suggests that young people experience both distressing and affirming content online, and that they take steps to both avoid content they dislike and curate their feed to see more of what interests them. Young people also take breaks from social media to avoid spending too much time on it, or in response to harassment or other negative interpersonal experiences. And many youth acknowledge that they cannot always manage their online experiences as well as they would like.

Subgroups of social media users also have unique practices and vulnerabilities. Black youth are especially likely to use social media for professional and educational opportunities, and creative expression, even as they are also more likely than their peers to step away from social platforms through temporary or permanent breaks—especially in response to harassment or other negative interpersonal experiences. The data in this study also clearly shows that LGBTQ+ youth, who are more likely to struggle with depressive symptoms, face greater levels of online exposure to hateful content and stress, even as they also find more solace and community in online spaces than their peers. And youth with depressive symptoms reported more negative and challenging experiences across many dimensions when compared to their peers without symptoms, suggesting that youth with depressive symptoms are a group that needs continued prioritization in future research under the differential susceptibility hypothesis.

In general, the findings discussed throughout the report are those that reflect changes over time or differences across demographic subgroups that are statistically significant. As with earlier surveys, this is not a longitudinal study; it is not intended to determine a causal link between patterns of technology use and mental health outcomes for youth.

## Summary of Methodology

- This is a nationally representative survey of 1,274 teens and young adults age 14 to 22 in the United States.
- The survey was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago, using their probability-based panel, as well as online opt-in panels to oversample for those who are LGBTQ+, Black, and Latino.
- Data was collected from October to November 2023.
- The survey was fielded online, in English or Spanish.
- The survey included several open-ended questions for respondents to share personal experiences.
- Findings were compared to separate cross-sectional surveys conducted in 2018 and 2020.<sup>6</sup>
- Data was analyzed by gender, age, race/ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ identity.
- A screener was included in the survey to identify levels of depressive symptoms (PHQ-8).
- Changes over time and differences between subgroups were tested for statistical significance at the level of  $p < .05$ .
- In this report, the term *teens* refers to people age 14 to 17, the term *young adults* refers to those age 18 to 22, and the terms *youth* and *young people* refer to our entire sample of 14- to 22-year-olds.
- For additional details, please see the Methodology section of this report.

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<sup>6</sup>As noted throughout the report, this 2020 survey was fielded during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

# Key Findings

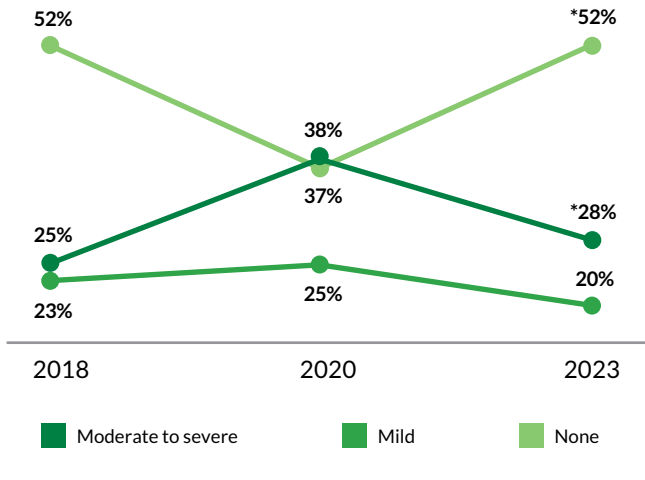
## 1. Depressive symptoms among young people are down from pandemic highs, but comparable to already-elevated 2018 levels.

As the pandemic subsides, widespread concern remains about the dramatic increase in mental health distress among young people. To assess changes in these trends, the survey asked teens and young adults to complete the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8), a commonly used and validated scale for measuring depressive symptoms. Nearly 3 in 10 (28%) young people age 14 to 22 report moderate to severe depressive symptoms. This rate is down from almost 4 in 10 (38%) teens and young adults in 2020. However, the 28% rate is similar to the pre-pandemic levels that were reported in 2018 (25%). Overall, 48% of young people reported any depressive symptoms in 2023, and in 2020, 63% of young people reported the same.

As in earlier surveys, there are notable differences between LGBTQ+ youth and non-LGBTQ+ youth in terms of rates of moderate to severe depressive symptoms. Almost half (49%) of LGBTQ+ young people age 14 to 22 report moderate to severe symptoms of depression, compared to nearly a quarter (24%) of their non-LGBTQ+ counterparts. However, LGBTQ+ young people's rate of moderate to severe symptoms decreased notably from 65% in 2020 to 49% in 2023.

## Depressive symptoms are down from pandemic highs, but comparable to 2018 levels

% of young people age 14–22, by year of data collection and by depressive symptoms



\* Significantly differs with 2020, at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8). Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted in 2018 ( $n = 1,334$ ), 2020 ( $n = 1,492$ ), and 2023 ( $n = 1,274$ ) with young people age 14–22 nationwide.



## 2. Young people experience both costs and benefits from their use of social media, and many implement strategies to manage the negative aspects.

Social media remains a critical and complex piece of young people's lives—highly valued as a place for many forms of social connection and support, but also problematic in serious enough ways that can prompt them to take breaks from or stop using the platforms altogether. Nearly a quarter (24%) of all youth age 14 to 22 report being on social media almost constantly throughout the day, a number that is virtually unchanged from the 25% who reported the same in 2020. This still reflects a notable increase from the 17% who reported this in 2018.

More than half of all social media users age 14 to 22 said the platforms are important for seeking support or advice when they need it; 54% reported this in the latest survey, as did 53% in 2020, an increase from the 43% who said this was important in 2018. Similarly, the majority of youth social media users said the platforms are important in helping them feel less alone; 55% said this in the current survey, as did 59% in 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, up substantially from the 46% who reported the same in 2018.

However, young people have also observed a range of ways in which their patterns of social media use may be problematic for their day-to-day routines and healthy habits:

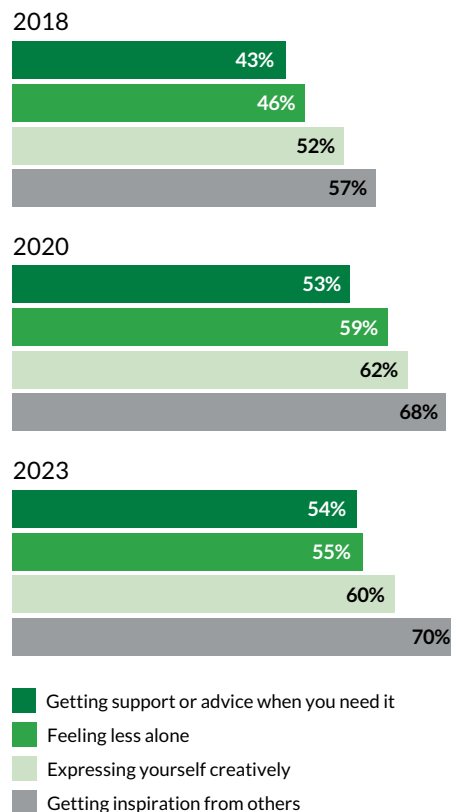
- 73% of youth social media users say they unconsciously reach for social media when bored.
- 49% agree that they can't control their use or end up using social media for a longer period of time than they originally wanted to.
- 46% say that using social media takes time away from other activities they care about, and the same number say it has reduced their "attention span" or ability to concentrate.

At the same time, most youth have taken breaks from social media and work to improve the content in their feeds:

- 76% of social media users age 14 to 22 put a range of measures in place, over the 12 months prior to the survey, to try to control content they do not want to see.
- 67% said that, over the last year, they have attempted to "curate their feed" by liking or spending more time on certain content to see more of what interests them.
- 63% have taken a temporary break from a social media account so that they wouldn't be tempted to spend so much time on it; 41% have permanently shut down a social media account for the same reason.

### The importance of social media for connection and creativity grew since 2018

% of social media users age 14–22, by year



**Note:** The differences between 2018 and both subsequent survey waves are significant at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: "How important is social media to you for: \_\_\_\_?". The chart reflects "somewhat" and "very important" responses. Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

### 3. Most young people encounter negative attacks on identity and body-shaming comments on social media, as well as identity-affirming and body-positive comments.

Hateful and hurtful language that attacks young people's sense of self or their community can easily proliferate on these platforms. A majority of young people age 14 to 22 who use social media often or sometimes face body shaming (61%), sexist (58%), transphobic (58%), racist (55%), or homophobic (53%) comments that may be directed at others or themselves.

That said, social media is not only a space for negative comments and experiences. It can offer venues to explore one's identity and uplift others:

- 68% of social media users age 14 to 22 often or sometimes come across comments celebrating a range of body shapes, sizes, and capabilities.
- 63% of young people often or sometimes see comments affirming people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds.
- 63% see comments affirming those from LGBTQ+ communities.
- 60% see comments affirming intersectional identities (e.g., Latino and LGBTQ+).<sup>7</sup>

Notable differences emerge based on age, gender, race/ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ identity. In our current data, compared to those age 14 to 17, young adults age 18 to 22 report that they are more likely to often or sometimes come across LGBTQ+ affirming comments (67% vs. 57%). Young adults, compared to teens, also report that they more frequently encounter comments celebrating intersectional identities (63% vs. 56%) and a variety of body types (73% vs. 62%).

In regard to gender, compared to men and boys, women and girls are more likely to come across both types of comments: hurtful and identity-affirming. For instance, with respect to hateful content, women and girls more often report encountering sexist (62% vs. 54%) and body-shaming comments (63% vs. 56%). On the other hand, women and girls are also more likely to report coming across all types of identity-affirming comments, including those that support intersectional identities (65% vs. 52%), people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (65% vs. 58%), and body positivity (74% vs. 64%). Similarly, nearly 7 out of 10 (69%) women and girls indicate that they come across comments celebrating LGBTQ+ people, versus slightly over 5 out of 10 (54%) men and boys.

Noteworthy differences also emerge with respect to race/ethnicity. For hurtful comments:

- White youth (60%) and Latino youth (59%) are more likely than Black youth (53%) to encounter body-shaming comments.
- 58% of White youth report coming across sexist comments, while 49% of Black youth say the same.
- 56% of Latino youth report frequently encountering racist comments, a higher rate compared to their Black peers (47%).

For identity-affirming comments, White youth are more likely to come across nearly every type of comment than their Black or Latino peers. See Key Finding five for similar data about LGBTQ+ youth.

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<sup>7</sup>Please note that the items assessing the frequency of encountering identity-affirming comments on social media were not included in the 2018 or 2020 surveys.

## 4. Black young people value connecting with others about mental health, exploring professional and educational opportunities, and expressing their creativity on social media more than White youth. Black and Latino young people are also more likely to face negative experiences online that lead them to take breaks from a social media account.

When compared to their Latino and White peers, Black young people find social media more critical for connecting with people who share similar concerns about their mental health or well-being (77% Black young people vs. 60% Latino and 53% White), connecting with family (72% vs. 62% and 61%), expressing themselves creatively (79% vs. 62% and 56%), and learning about professional or academic opportunities (80% vs. 63% and 53%). Latino youth are also more likely to say that social media platforms are important for learning about professional opportunities compared to their White peers.

In addition, Black (42%) and Latino (40%) youth are about twice as likely as White youth (21%) to have taken a permanent break from a social media account—and more than one and a half times more likely to have taken a temporary break (48%, 47%, vs. 30%, respectively)—due to harassment or other negative experiences online. Black and Latino youth, in qualitative interviews, reported that because they deal with racism and associated challenges offline, they have developed a lower tolerance for negative content and experiences online.

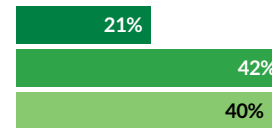
### Black and Latino youth are more likely to take breaks from a social media account due to harassment and other negative experiences

% of social media users age 14–22, by race/ethnicity who have done the following within the last 12 months

Taken a temporary break from a social media account due to harassment-related concerns



Permanently stopped using a social media account due to harassment-related concerns



White Black Latino

**Note:** Differences between White young people, and Black and Latino young people, are statistically significant for both items at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: "In the past 12 months, how often have you engaged in the following behaviors on social media?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

## 5. Social media is a double-edged sword for LGBTQ+ youth, offering both important opportunities for support and identity affirmation, and greater exposure to harassment and stress.

LGBTQ+ young people have a complex relationship with social media. On one hand, social media is especially valuable for fighting feelings of loneliness; 74% of LGBTQ+ social media users say the platforms are important in helping them feel less alone, compared to 52% of their non-LGBTQ+ peers. Yet, close to three out of four LGBTQ+ young people (72%) feel that posting content to public accounts would open themselves to harassment, compared to less than half (47%) of their non-LGBTQ+ peers.

Similarly, LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to encounter a range of both positive and negative comments on social media:

- 89% of LGBTQ+ young people at least sometimes come across comments celebrating LGBTQ+ identities, compared to 58% of non-LGBTQ+ youth.
- LGBTQ+ young people are more likely to have often seen comments that affirm intersectional identities (82% vs. 56%) and various body shapes and sizes (78% vs. 66%).
- However, three-fourths of LGBTQ+ youth encounter both transphobic (75%) and homophobic comments (76%) on social media, versus about half of non-LGBTQ+ youth (55% and 49%, respectively).

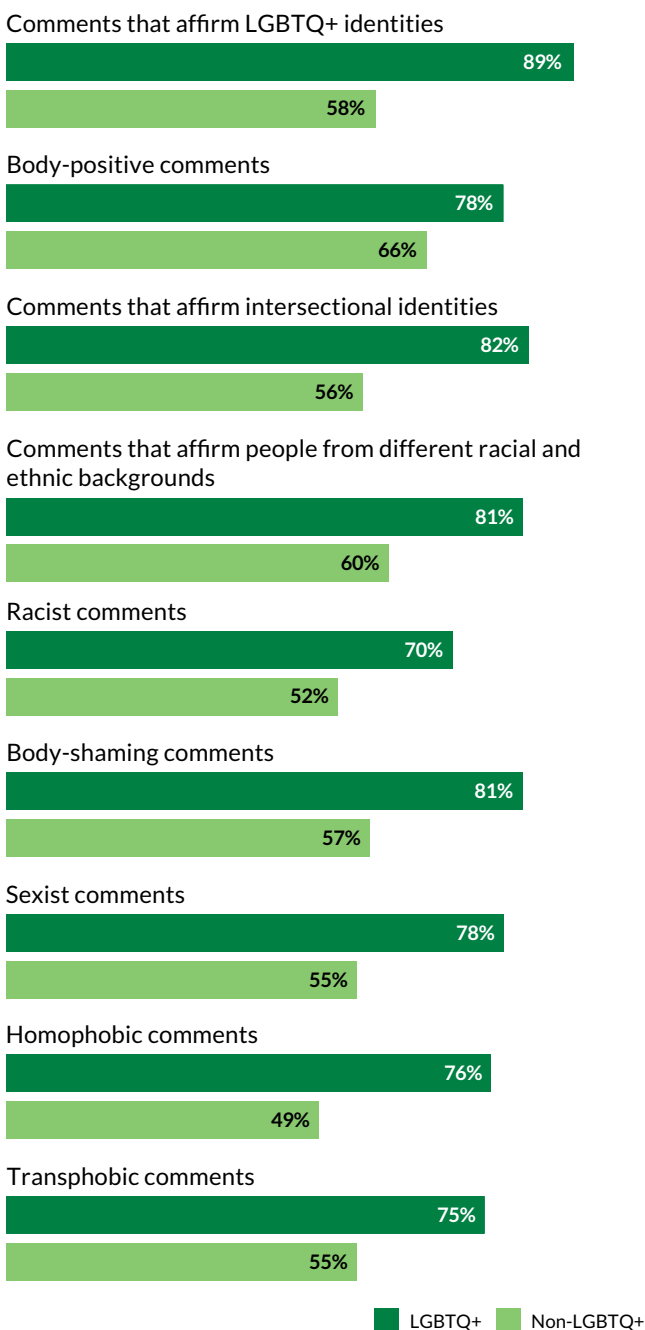
LGBTQ+ young people are significantly more likely to curate their feeds to improve their experience:

- 89% of LGBTQ+ youth social media users say that, over the past year, they have tried to avoid content they don't like on these platforms, compared to just under three-fourths of non-LGBTQ+ social media users (74%).
- LGBTQ+ youth are also significantly more likely (78%) to have tried to tailor their feed to better align with their interests vs. non-LGBTQ+ youth (65%).

These findings connect with the feedback from LGBTQ+ teens and young adults we spoke with in our qualitative interviews and focus groups. For many LGBTQ+ teens, online spaces create valued opportunities for connecting with identity-affirming content and supportive LGBTQ+ community members, and simultaneously are places where they encounter hateful content about their identities and cruelty from other users, particularly in the comments section of posts.

### For LGBTQ+ young people, social media is a double-edged sword

% of social media users age 14–22, by LGBTQ+ who encounter the below comments sometimes or more often



**Note:** Differences between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ young people are statistically significant for all items at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: "How often, if ever, have you encountered the following types of comments in social media?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

## **6. Young adults see more downsides to social media than teens do, and they also do more to manage their engagement and exposure.**

Young people are more aware of how much and what type of social media they consume than they're typically given credit for. And when they observe negative consequences associated with that use, many are taking proactive steps to manage the role of social media in their lives.

Young adults (age 18 to 22), in particular, are more likely than teens (age 14 to 17) to report somewhat or strongly agreeing that a range of negative impacts on their lives are associated with their social media use. For instance:

- 53% of young adults say they can't control their social media use or use it longer than intended, compared to 42% of teens.
- 51% of young adults say social media use has reduced their attention span, while 39% of teens say the same.
- 50% of young adults say social media gets in the way of their sleep, versus 34% of teens.

At the same time, young adults are more likely than teens to enact strategies to avoid content they dislike (81% vs. 68%) and to curate their feed (71% vs. 61%). These findings dovetail with qualitative interview findings suggesting that young adults feel they have developed greater skill over time that allows them to notice when social media is negatively impacting them, and to avoid content on social media that upsets them. When compared with teens, a larger share of young adults say they have permanently stopped using one of their accounts in the last 12 months so they would not be tempted to spend so much time on it (45% vs. 35%).

## **7. Youth with depressive symptoms are more vulnerable to social comparison and pressure to show their best selves on social media. However, they are also more likely to find resources to support their well-being and to curate their feeds in response to content they don't want to see.**

For young people who have significant symptoms of depression, the pressures and negatives of social media are far more pronounced. They more often report that they feel stressed and anxious over bad news on social media, feel bad about how they look, or view others' lives as better than their own. And as the level of severity of depressive symptoms increases, so does the likelihood of agreeing with each of these statements:

- 64% of youth with moderate to severe depressive symptoms indicate that when they use social media, they feel as if others' lives are better than theirs, compared to 38% of those with no symptoms.
- 62% of youth with moderate to severe depressive symptoms say they see so much bad news on social media that it makes them stressed and anxious, compared to 32% of those with no symptoms.
- 60% of youth with moderate to severe depressive symptoms say they see or hear things on social media that make them feel badly about the way they look, compared to 25% of those with no symptoms.

In addition, those exhibiting depressive symptoms appear to be the most vulnerable to focusing on measures of social media popularity and expressing concerns about online harassment:

- 62% of young people with moderate to severe depressive symptoms say that posting content to public social media accounts might open themselves to criticism and harassment, compared to 42% of those with no symptoms.
- 36% of those with moderate to severe depressive symptoms report that they focus too much on numbers, followers, likes, shares, and comments on social media, versus 17% of those with no symptoms.

However, youth with moderate to severe depressive symptoms also feel that social media is especially important to them for various forms of comfort, support, and connection:

- 78% say that social media is important for cheering them up, compared with 68% of those with no symptoms.
- 66% say that social media is important to them for feeling less alone, compared with 48% of those with no symptoms.
- 65% say that social media is important for connecting with others who have similar mental health concerns, compared with 55% of those with no symptoms.
- 63% say that social media is important to them for getting support or advice when they need it, compared with 51% of those with no symptoms.

Youth who reported moderate to severe depressive symptoms were also considerably more likely to take steps to manage what they see on social media:

- 90% of young people with moderate to severe depressive symptoms have tried to see less of what they do not like on social media, versus 67% of those with no symptoms.
- 81% of youth with moderate to severe depressive symptoms have taken actions to try to curate their social media feed, compared to 55% of those with no symptoms.

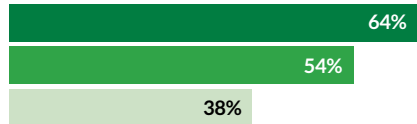
The current survey also included a question about the perceived effects of social media use when feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious, and the question format allowed for youth to report a mix of experiences. Overall, 39% of all youth social media users say using social media makes them feel better, 8% say it makes them feel worse, 39% say neither better nor worse, and 13% say a mix of both positive and negative impacts.



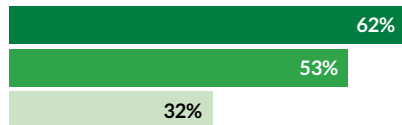
**Young people with depressive symptoms are more likely to report a range of negative impacts associated with social media use**

% of social media users age 14–22, by depressive symptoms who agree with the following statements

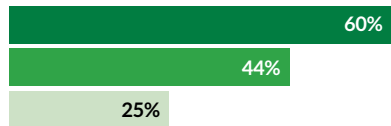
When I use social media, I end up feeling like other people's lives are better than mine



I see so much bad news in social media that it makes me stressed and anxious



I see or hear things on social media that make me feel bad about my body or appearance



Moderate to severe   Mild   None

**Note:** Differences among those with no, mild, and moderate to severe depressive symptoms are statistically significant for all items at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: "Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about social media?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.



## PART 1:

# Where and Why Youth Spend Their Time on Social Media

While the platforms that teens and young adults use have fluctuated over time, the importance of social media as a centerpiece of youth social life has been well documented for almost two decades.<sup>8</sup> Yet accounts that once required deliberate engagement while sitting at a computer now travel on smartphones as constant companions, from alerts at the earliest moments of the day to nudging notifications at night. For young people, the pull of social media primarily reflects the importance of staying connected with friends and tending to relationships at a time in life when peers are paramount.

At the same time, social media can be an important release valve for the pressures of growing up. Having fun, goofing off, being creative, and relating to other people the same age can be just as valuable to young people's well-being as more formal sources of support. And critically, many teens and young adults say that using social media simply helps them feel less alone.

### **One in four youth say they use social media almost constantly; Black youth report the most frequent use overall.**

Nearly one-quarter (24%) of all youth age 14 to 22 report being on social media almost constantly throughout the day. This number is virtually unchanged from the 25% reported in 2020, but still reflects a notable increase from the 17% reported in 2018. About 6 in 10 (59%) say they are on social media daily but not constantly, and 13% report using social media platforms less than daily. Just 4% say they never use social media.

In general, variations by gender and age are not significant, with one exception: Young adults age 18 to 22 are more likely to report that they never use social media compared with teens age 14 to 17 (7% vs. 2%).

In contrast, there are sizable differences by race and ethnicity. A much larger share of Black young people say they are on social media almost constantly when compared with White and Latino young people (37% vs. 19% and 22%, respectively).

Further, young people with mild to severe depressive symptoms are also more likely than those without any depressive symptoms to say that they use social media almost constantly (31% of those with mild symptoms and 30% of those with moderate to severe symptoms vs. 18% of those with no symptoms).

### **Four in 10 young people who use social media prefer the platforms over in-person communication.**

The preference for digital communication over in-person interaction has fluctuated slightly since the height of the pandemic. In the current survey, 39% of those age 14 to 22 who use social media say they strongly agree or somewhat agree that they "prefer to communicate with people through social media rather than in person," which is not significantly different from 43% in 2020. However, this still reflects a significant increase from 31% in 2018.

Some notable differences emerge by demographic group, especially by race/ethnicity and by LGBTQ+ identity. Compared to their White (36%) peers, Black (45%) and Latino (45%) youth are more likely to prefer to communicate via social media versus in person. And a little over half (52%) of LGBTQ+ young people indicate a preference for social media, compared to less than 4 in 10 of non-LGBTQ+ youth (38%).

In our qualitative interviews and focus groups, LGBTQ+ youth said that finding community in person was often fraught in a climate of increased restrictions and hate toward trans and queer youth, and that online communication often felt safer and more supportive.

<sup>8</sup> Lenhart, A., Madden, M., Smith, A., & Macgill, A. (2007). *Teens and social media*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2007/12/19/teens-and-social-media/>

## YouTube and Instagram are the most commonly used platforms for youth.

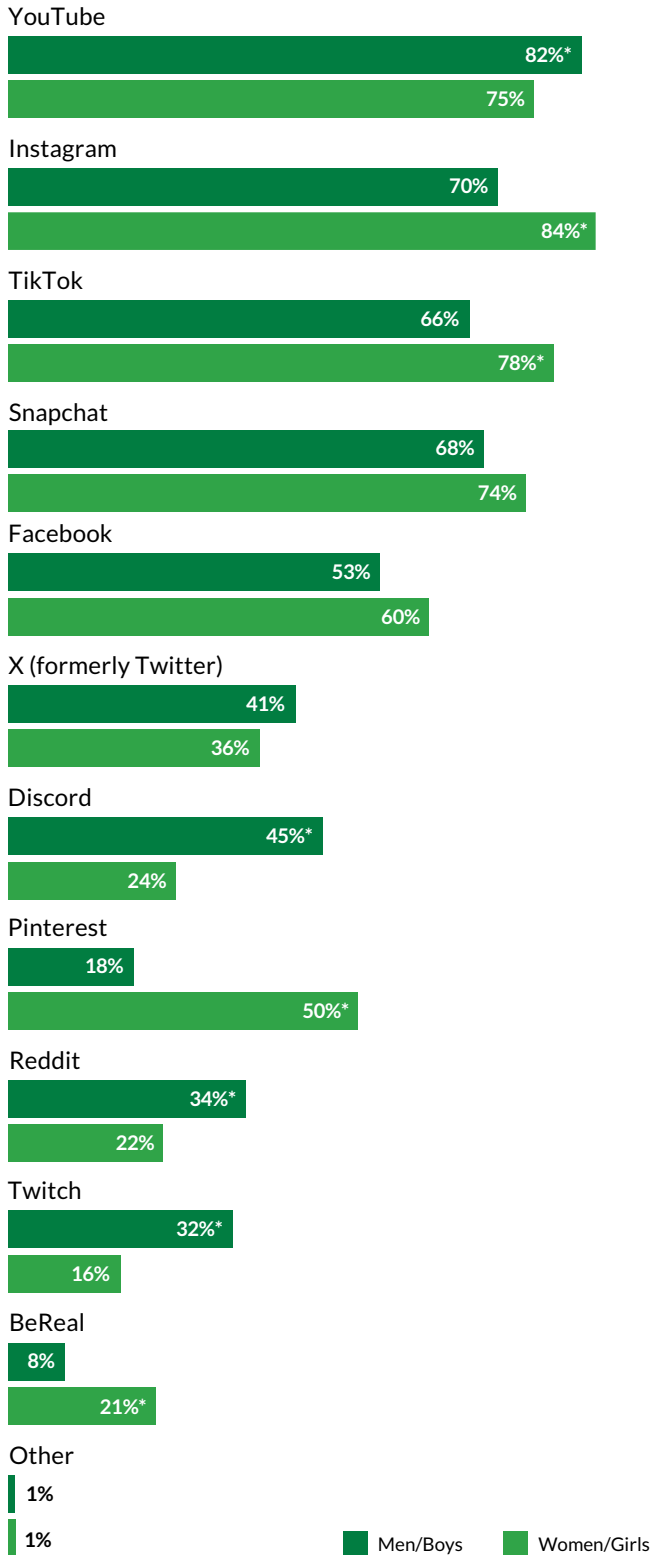
Among youth who use social media, YouTube (78%) and Instagram (76%) are the most commonly used platforms. TikTok (71%) and Snapchat (70%) are a close second, with at least 7 in 10 saying they have ever used each. Just over half (56%) of youth social media users say they have used Facebook, and 39% have used X (formerly Twitter). Another 36% report using Discord, and 34% say they have used Pinterest. A slightly smaller share, 30%, say they have used Reddit, and 25% report using Twitch. The least commonly used platform among those asked about in our survey, BeReal, has been used by just 15% of youth social media users.

Looking at variations by gender, women and girls are more likely than men and boys to use Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest, and BeReal. By contrast, a larger share of men and boys use Discord, Reddit, YouTube, and Twitch when compared with women and girls.

YouTube, Instagram, X (Twitter), Discord, Reddit, Pinterest, Twitch, and BeReal are more commonly used by LGBTQ+ young people compared with non-LGBTQ+ young people. For instance, LGBTQ+ youth are more than twice as likely to ever use Reddit (55% vs. 26%) and Twitch (48% vs. 21%) when compared with non-LGBTQ+ youth who use social media.

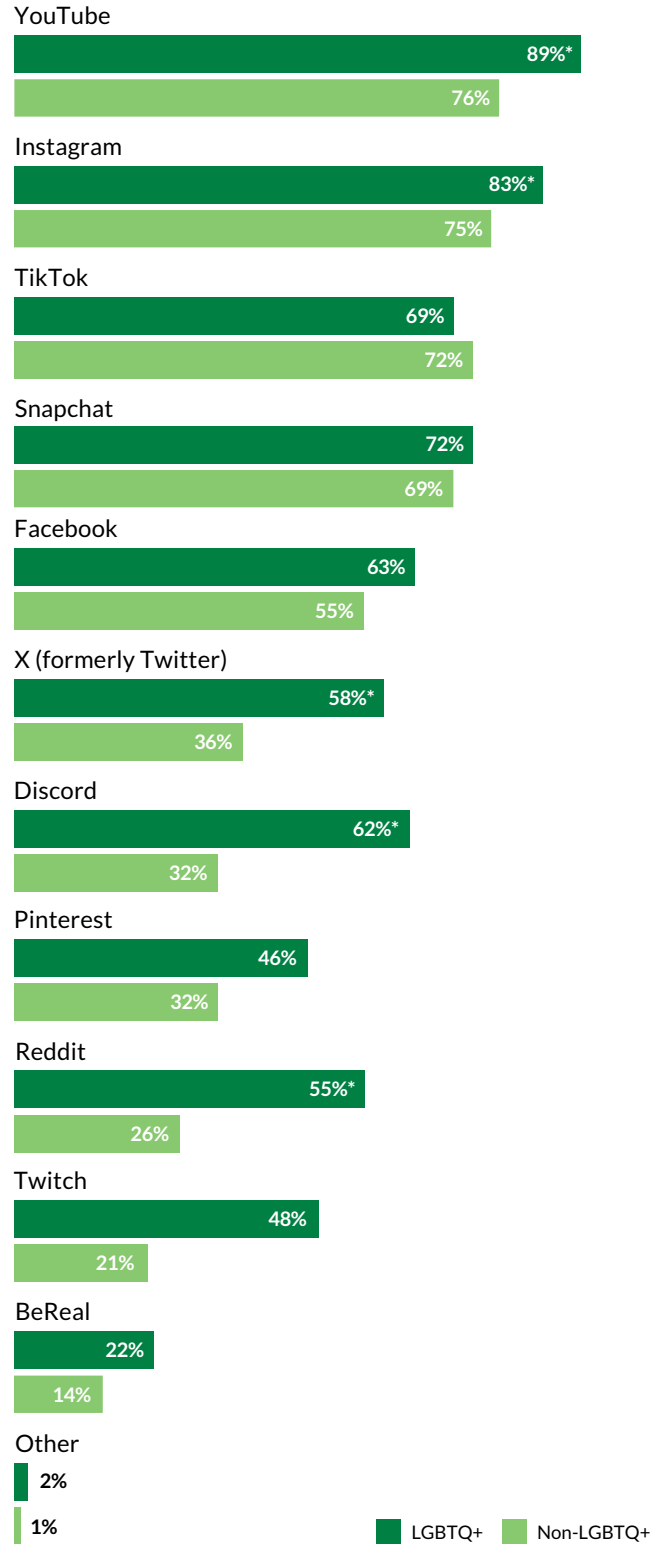
In qualitative interviews and focus groups with LGBTQ+ young people, they expressed that they tended to observe more support for LGBTQ+ communities on YouTube, Discord, Twitch, and Reddit, in particular. For example, one participant noted that platforms such as Discord and Reddit offer specific ways to access particular communities of interest, like ways to search for content tagged as supportive of LGBTQ+ people. Another participant discussed how YouTube can serve as an educational platform, as well as a form of social media, to explore and learn more about one's identity.

**Social media platform use varies significantly by gender**  
 % of social media users age 14–22, by gender



\* Differences between women and girls and men and boys are statistically significant at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: "Which of the following social media platforms have you EVER used?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

**LGBTQ+ youth use a wider array of social media platforms**  
 % of social media users age 14–22, by LGBTQ+



\* Differences between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ youth are statistically significant at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: "Which of the following social media platforms have you EVER used?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.



## Young People Discuss Why Social Media Is Important to Them

### Social media supports a wide array of important needs for youth.

Social media platforms are a centerpiece of young people's daily lives. As such, these spaces are often home to the full range of social, emotional, and cultural activity that comes with being a teen or young adult. When asked what functions of social media they consider most important, the vast majority of young people note that it is very or somewhat important for entertainment or just having fun (89%), communicating with their friends (85%), relaxing or unwinding when stressed (83%), and having a place to reduce boredom or kill some time (82%).

Young people also see social media as an important place to find relatable content (77%), connect with others who share their experiences, interests, or identities (73%), cheer themselves up when they are feeling down (71%), and stay informed and up to date on the news (70%). By comparison, 53% say it is important for keeping up with influencers or creators they like.

Notably, while social media is primarily used for staying connected with friends, 62% of youth social media users say it is also very or somewhat important for connecting with family. Another 60% say that social media is important to them as a source for learning about professional or academic opportunities (such as scholarships or what it's like to have a certain job or attend a certain school).

### More than half of social media users consider the platforms important for inspiration, creative expression, and social and mental health support.

When asked about finding information or resources on mental health and well-being, 50% of youth social media users said this was a very or somewhat important function of social media for them.

More than half of youth social media users also said the platforms are important for seeking support or advice when they need it; 54% reported this in the latest survey, as did 53% in 2020, both an increase from the 43% who said this was important in 2018.

The proportion of young people who say using social media helps them feel less alone grew substantially from 46% in 2018 to 59% in 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and remains steady at 55% in 2023. For LGBTQ+ young people, social media is especially important to feel less alone (74% vs. 52% of non-LGBTQ+) and to get inspiration from others (82% vs. 69%).

In our qualitative interviews and focus groups with teens and young adults, they reflected that their practices for connecting with others and expressing themselves changed by necessity during the pandemic, when they lost many opportunities for in-person communication. They explained that many of the habits they developed around creative self-expression, getting inspiration, and connecting to others online during the pandemic remain important to them today.

### Staying connected to family and news is an especially valuable function of social media for young adults.

In regard to specific connections—family and friends—more than 6 in 10 non-LGBTQ+ youth (64%) report that social media is very or somewhat important for connecting with family, versus slightly over 5 in 10 of their LGBTQ+ peers (53%). Compared to teens (57%), young adults (65%) are also more likely to say that the platforms help them connect with family. In addition, White youth (89%) more often report that social media is very or somewhat important for communicating with friends, compared to their Latino peers (84%).

Additional noteworthy differences arise by age group and gender. Compared to young adults, teens find social media more important for expressing themselves creatively (65% vs. 56%). Among young adults, about three-fourths (74%) say that social media is important for keeping up to date on the news, versus approximately 6 in 10 teens (62%). With regard to gender, women and girls more often report that the platforms are important for getting inspiration from others (76% vs. 65% for men and boys), feeling less alone (61% vs. 47%), relaxing/unwinding when stressed (87% vs. 80%), and learning about professional opportunities (66% vs. 55%).



## There are notable differences between Black young people and their peers when it comes to the importance they place on different aspects of social media.

Black young people report a greater importance of social media for a number of key tasks and experiences in their lives. Black young people who use social media are more likely than their White peers to say the platforms are important for staying up to date on the news (80% vs. 65%), and getting inspiration from others (79% vs. 69%). Black and White youth, compared to Latino youth, are also more likely to view social media as critical for cheering themselves up when feeling down (79% and 73% vs. 67%) and a way to reduce boredom/kill time (85% and 84% vs. 77%). In addition, Black youth were more likely than White and Latino youth to report that social media is important for keeping up with influencers or creators (63% vs. 52% and 52%).

Notably, when compared with their White and Latino peers, Black young people find social media more critical for connecting with people who share similar concerns about their mental health or well-being (53% White and 60% Latino vs. 77% Black). Both Black and Latino young people also place greater importance on finding information or resources about mental health or well-being on social media than their White peers (64% and 59% vs. 44%), and using social media to get support or advice when they need it (63% and 60% vs. 50%).

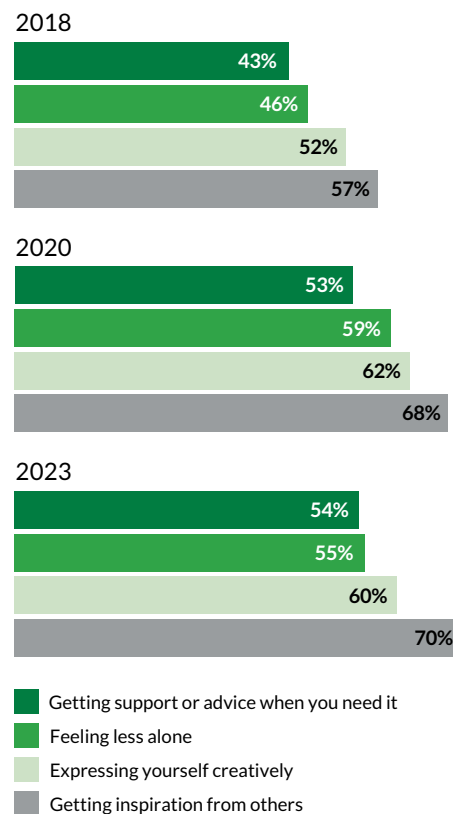
In addition, relative to both White and Latino peers, Black youth more often point to the importance of using social media for connecting with family (72% Black vs. 62% Latino and 61% White), and expressing themselves creatively (79% vs. 62% and 56%). Black youth (80%) are more likely to say that social media platforms are important for learning about professional or academic opportunities than Latino youth (63%), who in turn are more likely than White youth (53%) to report using social media for these purposes.

White youth (89%) reported greater importance of social media for communicating with friends than Latino youth (84%). White youth (84%) also reported greater use of social media for relaxing or unwinding when stressed, compared to Black youth (78%).

In our qualitative interviews and focus groups with Black and Latino young people, Black youth stressed that they don't always have access to large in-person networks around college, career, and scholarship opportunities, so social media is particularly important for finding these resources. They also mentioned that social media can be a resource for finding more diverse and less stereotypical representations of Black people. Both Black and Latino youth described the importance of being able to turn to social media for mental health support when they face stigma with regard to mental health issues, especially within their families or among older members of their communities.

### The importance of social media for connection and creativity grew since 2018

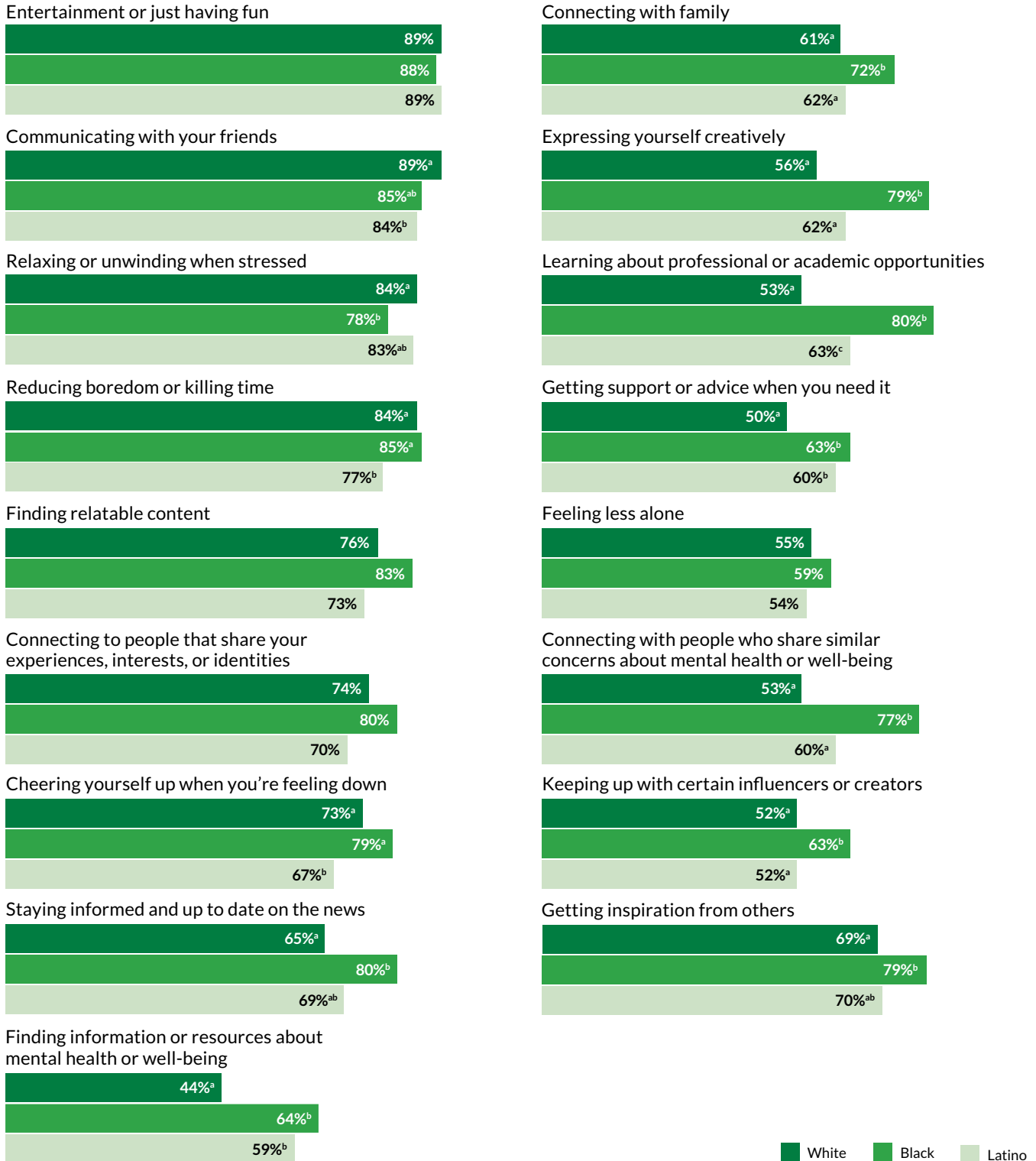
% of social media users age 14–22, by year



**Note:** Differences between 2023 and 2018, and between 2020 and 2018, are statistically significant at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: "How important is social media to you for: \_\_\_\_?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

## Black and Latino youth are more likely to rely on social media for a variety of resources and support

% of social media users age 14–22, by race/ethnicity who say social media is "very" or "somewhat" important for...



Note: Bars with different superscripts differ significantly within each category ( $p < .05$ ).

Q: "How important is social media to you for: \_\_\_?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

**Social media is especially important for connecting youth who have elevated depressive symptoms to sources of comfort, support, and others who share the same mental health concerns.**

Teens and young adults who report elevated depressive symptoms are especially likely to say social media is an important resource for making themselves feel better and finding a range of support and advice when they need it. For instance, a larger share of youth who report moderate to severe depressive symptoms (78%) and those who report mild symptoms (75%) say that social media is important for cheering them up, compared with those reporting no symptoms (68%).

Youth with depressive symptoms are also especially likely to value social media for the ways it allows them to express themselves creatively. Those who report moderate to severe symptoms are more likely (68%) to say that social media is important for creative expression, compared with those with mild (55%) and no symptoms (57%).

When compared with their peers, the role of social media in helping youth feel less alone is far more important for those who report depressive symptoms. Those with moderate to severe depressive symptoms (66%) and those with mild symptoms (59%) are both significantly more likely than those who report no symptoms (48%) to say that social media is important to them for feeling less alone.

Among youth who report at least moderate depressive symptoms, using social media to connect with people who share similar concerns about their mental health or well-being is also an important feature. A larger share of those who report moderate to severe symptoms say that social media is important for connecting with others who have similar mental health concerns (65%), compared with those reporting mild (56%) and no symptoms (55%). More generally, those with moderate to severe depressive symptoms are considerably more likely (63%) than those with mild (54%) and those with no symptoms (51%) to say that social media is important to them for getting support or advice when they need it.

Looking specifically at the importance of social media as a resource for finding information about mental health or well-being, those who report moderate to severe depressive symptoms are significantly more likely (57%) than those who report no symptoms (47%) to say that social media is important for finding these resources.







PART 2:

# What Youth Say About How Social Media Content Impacts Them

With the explosion of social media use among young people in the United States over the past two decades, there is growing evidence that how they engage with these platforms can impact their development in both harmful and beneficial ways. Social media may be used to build connections with others who share one's interests, abilities, and identities. It can also connect teens and young adults across different contexts and backgrounds, and this social support may be especially beneficial for those from underrepresented communities.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, social media can present unique challenges, such as navigating the pressures these platforms can put on young people's daily lives (e.g., feeling the need to present their "best selves"), encountering harmful and hateful content online, and balancing social media use with important healthy behaviors (e.g., getting enough sleep and spending time offline with friends).<sup>10</sup>

**Bad news, body image or appearance concerns, and social comparison can take a toll on emotional health—especially for young adults and women and girls.**

Social media can take a toll on young people's emotional well-being, from the stream of bad news exacerbating stress and anxiety, to content that can affect body image. Nearly half (45%) of social media users<sup>11</sup> age 14 to 22 strongly agree or somewhat agree that they see so much bad news on social media that it makes them stressed and anxious.

By comparison, in 2020, close to 6 in 10 youth (57%) felt that the stream of bad news took a toll on their emotional health.

Social media and emotional well-being, by age, gender, race/ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ identity

Among ages 14 to 22, percent of social media users who agree that	Total	Age		Gender		Race/Ethnicity			LGBTQ+	
		14 to 17	18 to 22	Men/Boys	Women/Girls	White	Black	Latino	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
I see so much bad news in social media that it makes me stressed and anxious	45%	36% <sup>a</sup>	50% <sup>b</sup>	41%	48%	41% <sup>a</sup>	53% <sup>b</sup>	48% <sup>b</sup>	60% <sup>a</sup>	43% <sup>b</sup>
When I use social media, I end up feeling like other people's lives are better than mine	48%	45%	50%	43% <sup>a</sup>	53% <sup>b</sup>	47%	54%	53%	60% <sup>a</sup>	47% <sup>b</sup>
I see or hear things on social media that make me feel bad about my body or appearance	39%	31% <sup>a</sup>	43% <sup>b</sup>	26% <sup>a</sup>	50% <sup>b</sup>	39%	44%	37%	55% <sup>a</sup>	37% <sup>b</sup>

**Note:** Items with different superscripts differ significantly across rows within each category ( $p < .05$ ). Q: "Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about social media?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

<sup>9</sup> Craig, S. L., Eaton, A. D., McInroy, L. B., Leung, V. W. Y., & Krishnan, S. (2021). Can social media participation enhance LGBTQ+ youth well-being? Development of the Social Media Benefits Scale. *Social Media + Society*, 7(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305121988931>

<sup>10</sup> Alonzo, R., Hussain, J., Stranges, S., & Anderson, K. K. (2021). Interplay between social media use, sleep quality, and mental health in youth: A systematic review. *Sleep Medicine Reviews*, 56, Article 101414. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smrv.2020.101414>

<sup>11</sup> All data in this section is reported out of social media users.

It is important to note that this data was collected from September through November 2020—during the COVID-19 pandemic and a particularly heated and divisive election season.

Social media also impacts how some young people think about their body image and overall appearance, as well as their lives in comparison to others. Over one-third (39%) agree that they see or hear things on social media that make them feel bad about their body or appearance, and about half (48%) report that after using social media, they feel that other people's lives are better than their own.

Young adult social media users (age 18–22), compared with teens (age 14–17), are nearly one and a half times more likely to agree that the barrage of negative news online makes them stressed and anxious (50% vs. 36%). As noted in Part 1 of this report, young adults are more likely to say they use social media for news than teens, which may contribute to greater exposure to negative news content. In addition, over 4 in 10 young adults (43%) also report that social media has a negative impact on their body image, versus only one-third of teens (31%).

In regard to gender, fully half (50%) of women and girls agree that they feel badly about their bodies and appearance based on what they see and hear on social media compared to only about a quarter of men and boys (26%), and are more likely to agree that when they are using social media, they feel that others' lives are better than their own (53% vs. 43%).

### **Negative emotions related to social media use are also more pronounced for Black and Latino youth, and especially for LGBTQ+ young people.**

Compared to their White peers (41%), Black youth (53%) and Latino youth (48%) more often indicate that they feel the emotional toll of negative news consumption. Looking at LGBTQ+ respondents, fully 6 in 10 LGBTQ+ youth report experiencing the emotional impact of negative news, compared to only 43% of non-LGBTQ+ young people. Other noteworthy differences arise for LGBTQ+ social media users around body image and negative social comparisons. LGBTQ+ social media users, compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers, are more likely to agree that they see or hear things on social media that make them feel bad about their body or appearance (55% vs. 37%), and that when they use social media, they end up feeling like other people's lives are better than their own (60% vs. 47%).

### **A majority of youth with depressive symptoms report that social media can make them feel stressed, anxious, and bad about their bodies and lives.**

For young social media users who have symptoms of depression, the severity of their symptoms tracks with their likelihood of reporting that they feel stressed and anxious over bad news on social media, feel bad about how they look, or like others' lives are better than their own.

Those with moderate to severe depressive symptoms are more likely (62%) than those with mild symptoms (53%) and no symptoms (32%) to report that they see so much bad news that they feel stressed and anxious. In addition, young people with mild symptoms are more likely to report this compared to youth with no symptoms.

Following the same pattern with respect to severity of depressive symptoms, young people with moderate to severe symptoms are more likely (64%) than youth with mild symptoms (54%) and no symptoms (38%) to indicate that when they use social media, they feel as if others' lives are better than theirs. Again, youth with mild depressive symptoms are more likely to agree with this sentiment compared to youth with no symptoms.

In addition, youth with moderate to severe depressive symptoms are more likely (60%) than youth with mild symptoms (44%) and youth with no symptoms (25%) to say that they see or hear things on social media that make them feel bad about the way they look. Similarly, young people with mild depressive symptoms are more likely to say they agree with this statement versus those with no symptoms.

### **Over half of social media users (52%) feel like they always need to show the best version of themselves on social media.**

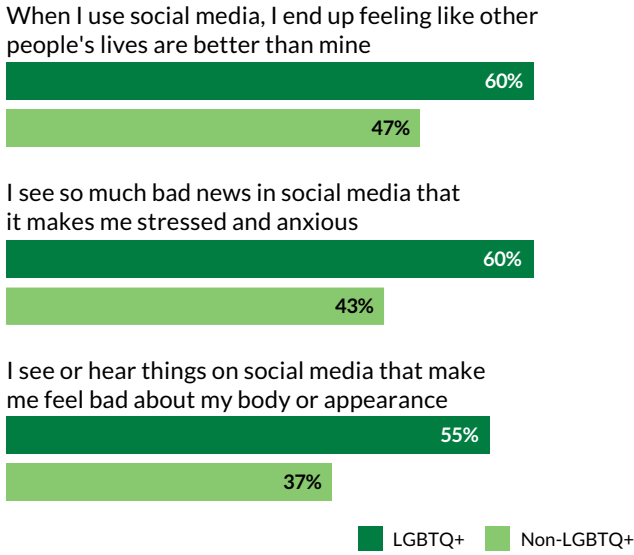
Young people may also contend with the pressures that social media can place on them to present themselves in a certain way within these spaces. The sentiment of feeling compelled to present their best selves on these platforms has remained stable, at 53% in 2018 and 52% in 2023.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup>This question was not included in the 2020 survey.



**Social media may especially take an emotional toll on LGBTQ+ young people**

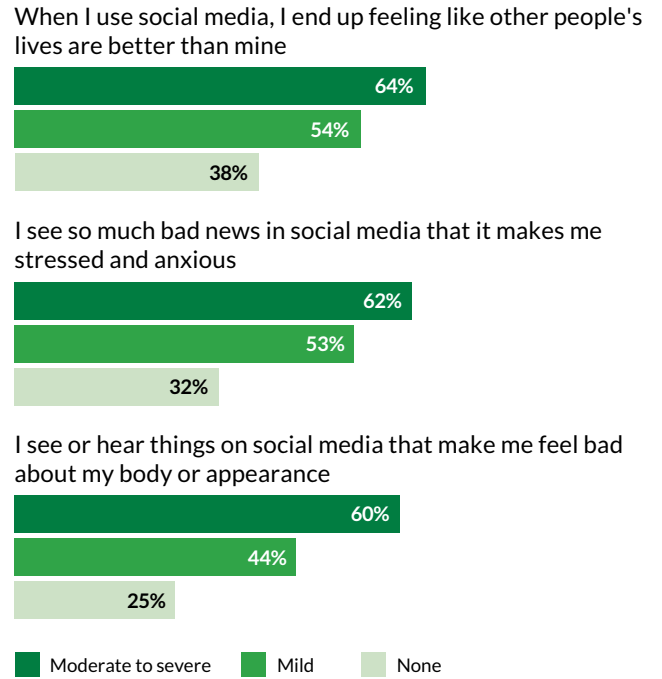
% of social media users age 14–22, by LGBTQ+ who agree with the following statements



**Note:** Differences between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ youth are statistically significant for all items at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: "Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about social media?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

**Young people with depressive symptoms are more likely to report a range of negative impacts associated with social media use**

% of social media users age 14–22, by depressive symptoms who agree with the following statements



**Note:** Differences among those with no, mild, and moderate to severe depressive symptoms are statistically significant for all items at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: "Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about social media?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

## Self-presentation pressures are particularly salient for women and girls, Black, and youth with depressive symptoms.

Women and girls are substantially more likely than men and boys to report that they feel like they always need to show their best selves on social media (63% vs. 45%). Compared to men and boys, women and girls are also more likely to report that they focus too much on numbers, followers, likes, comments, or shares (30% vs. 20%).

Black youth, too, are more likely (42%) to hone in on these social media metrics (e.g., the number of "likes" or "shares" on a post, or the number of followers one has) compared to their White (21%) and Latino peers (29%)—fully twice as likely as White youth.

Those exhibiting depressive symptoms—moderate to severe and/or mild symptoms—are also particularly vulnerable.

By way of example, those with moderate to severe depressive symptoms and mild symptoms are about twice as likely (36% and 32%, respectively) to report that they focus too much on numbers, followers, likes, comments, and shares on social media versus those with no symptoms (17%). In addition, young people with moderate to severe (62%) and mild symptoms (56%), compared to those with no symptoms (42%), are more likely to feel that posting content to public social media accounts might open themselves to criticism and harassment.

Furthermore, young people with moderate to severe symptoms (62%) and mild symptoms (56%) tended to feel greater pressure to always show the best version of themselves on social media than those with no symptoms (47%).

## Youth with depressive symptoms report greater self-presentation concerns

% of social media users age 14–22, by depressive symptoms who agree with the following statements

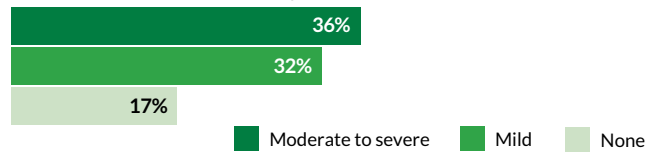
Posting content to public social media accounts would open me up to criticism and harassment



I feel like I always need to show the best version of myself on social media



I focus too much on numbers, followers, likes, comments, or shares on my social media



**Note:** Differences between those with moderate to severe depressive symptoms and mild symptoms compared to no symptoms are statistically significant for all items at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: "Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about social media?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

Social media and self-presentation, by age, gender, race/ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ identity

Among ages 14 to 22, percent of social media users who agree that	Total	Age		Gender		Race/Ethnicity			LGBTQ+	
		14 to 17	18 to 22	Men/Boys	Women/Girls	White	Black	Latino	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
I feel like I always need to show the best version of myself on social media	52%	50%	54%	45% <sup>a</sup>	63% <sup>b</sup>	53%	52%	53%	56%	53%
Posting content to public social media accounts would open me up to criticism and harassment	50%	43% <sup>a</sup>	55% <sup>b</sup>	47%	53%	52%	50%	46%	72% <sup>a</sup>	47% <sup>b</sup>
I focus too much on numbers, followers, likes, comments, or shares on my social media	26%	23%	27%	20% <sup>a</sup>	30% <sup>b</sup>	21% <sup>a</sup>	42% <sup>b</sup>	29% <sup>a</sup>	28%	25%

**Note:** Items with different superscripts differ significantly across rows within each category ( $p < .05$ ). Q: "Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about social media?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted from Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

## LGBTQ+ youth are especially concerned that sharing their thoughts and ideas publicly on social media would open them up to harassment.

Youth express hesitation about sharing their ideas, thoughts, and feelings on social media. Fully half (50%) are concerned about the possible consequences of sharing content online—namely, that posting content to public accounts would open themselves to criticism and harassment. The majority of young adults express concern about sharing content (55%), versus slightly over 4 in 10 teens (43%). Close to three in four LGBTQ+ young people (72%) feel that posting content to public accounts would open themselves to criticism and harassment, compared with less than half (47%) of their non-LGBTQ+ peers.

## Youth are encountering fewer comments online related to racism, sexism, homophobia, and body shaming compared to 2020, but a majority still see this negative content at least sometimes.

In addition to self-presentation concerns, social media can spotlight hateful and hurtful comments that attack people of different races and ethnicities, LGBTQ+ people, and people with different body shapes and sizes. For example, in regard to LGBTQ+ identity, a review of 27 studies—with sample sizes ranging from 18 to 20,406 participants—found that youth from these communities are disproportionately more often victims of cyberbullying compared to their straight and cisgender peers.<sup>13</sup>

Hateful and hurtful language that attacks young people's sense of self or their community can easily proliferate on these platforms. A majority of young people who use social media are faced often or sometimes with body shaming (61%), sexist (58%), transphobic (58%), racist (55%), or homophobic (53%) comments.

When we look at the data over time, however, we see declines in exposure to different types of problematic content, though it is important to remember that the 2020 survey data was collected during the pandemic and a highly divisive election season.

There has been a modest reduction in body-shaming comments, decreasing from 67% of social media users age 14 to 22 who said they often or sometimes encountered these comments in 2020 to 61% in 2023.

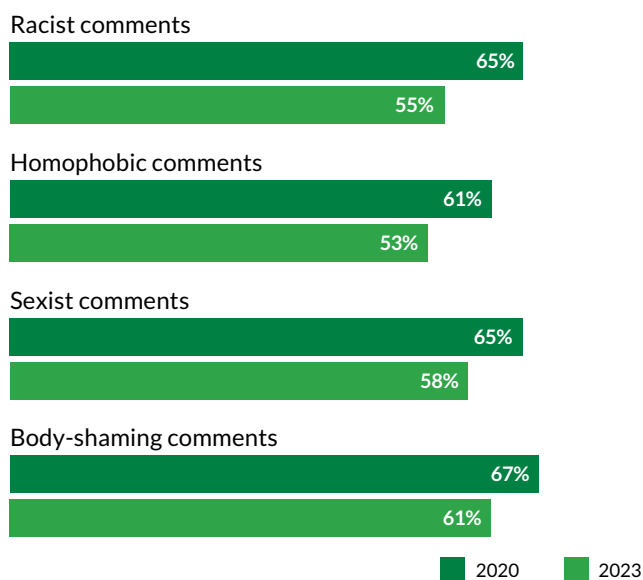
Similarly, exposure to sexist comments has also declined, from 65% who said they often or sometimes encountered these comments in 2020 to 58% in 2023.

Exposure to racist comments has also seen a significant decline, from 65% of social media users who reported that they saw these types of comments often or sometimes in 2020 to 55% of social media users in 2023.

Furthermore, the incidence of encountering homophobic comments at least sometimes has decreased significantly from 61% in 2020 to 53% in 2023.

### Over the last three years, there has been a modest decrease in exposure to hateful and hurtful comments online

% of social media users age 14–22, by year of data collection who say they encounter the below comments sometimes or often



**Note:** Differences between 2023 and 2020 are statistically significant for all items at the level of  $p < .05$ . The item asking about the frequency of encountering transphobic comments was included only in the 2023 survey. Q: "How often, if ever, have you encountered the following types of comments in social media?" Source: NORC surveys for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted in 2020 ( $n = 1,442$ ) and in 2023 ( $n = 1,231$ ).

<sup>13</sup> Abreu, R. L., & Kenny, M. C. (2018). Cyberbullying and LGBTQ youth: A systematic literature review and recommendations for prevention and intervention. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 11(1), 81–97. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-017-0175-7>

## More than two in three social media users say they have encountered identity-affirming or body-positive content.

Social media is not only a space for negative content and experiences; social platforms can offer opportunities to explore one's identity, uplift others, and build community and connection. For instance, research<sup>14</sup> has shown that these platforms may promote positive mental health among LGBTQ+ youth by creating spaces for identity development and social support.

Over two-thirds (68%) of social media users age 14 to 22 often or sometimes come across comments celebrating a range of body shapes, sizes, and capabilities. And about 6 in 10 young people often or sometimes see comments affirming people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds (63%), those from LGBTQ+ communities (63%), and intersectional identities (60%) (e.g., Latino and LGBTQ+).<sup>15</sup>

Notable differences emerge based on age, gender, race/ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ identity. In our current data, compared to teens, young adults report that they are more likely than teens to often or sometimes come across LGBTQ+ affirming comments (67% vs. 57%). Young adults, compared to teens, also report that they more frequently encounter comments celebrating intersectional identities (63% vs. 56%) and a variety of body types (73% vs. 62%).

## Women and girls encounter a wider range of both positive and negative comments on social media.

In regard to gender, compared to men and boys, women and girls are more likely to come across both types of comments: hurtful and identity-affirming. For instance, with respect to hateful content, women and girls more often report encountering sexist (62% vs. 54%) and body-shaming comments (63% vs. 56%). On the other hand, women and girls are also more likely to report coming across all types of identity-affirming comments, including those that support intersectional identities (65% vs. 52%), people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (65% vs. 58%), and body positivity (74% vs. 64%). In addition, nearly 7 in 10 (69%) women and girls indicate that they come across comments celebrating LGBTQ+ people, versus slightly over 5 in 10 (54%) men and boys.

Noteworthy differences also emerge with respect to race/ethnicity. For hurtful comments, Latino youth (56%) report more frequently encountering racist comments, as compared to their Black peers (47%). White (60%) and Latino (59%) youth are also more likely than Black youth (53%) to encounter body-shaming comments. In addition, White youth are more likely than Black youth to report coming across sexist comments (58% vs. 49%).

For identity-affirming comments, White youth are more likely to come across nearly every type of comment. For instance, nearly three-fourths of White youth report coming across body-positive comments (73%), versus 6 in 10 Latino youth (61%) and only slightly over half (56%) of Black youth. Black youth also report less often seeing comments celebrating intersectional identities (51%) compared to their White and Latino peers (61% for both White and Latino youth), as well as comments affirming members of LGBTQ+ communities (53% for Black youth compared to 62% for Latino youth and 65% for White youth).

<sup>14</sup> Berger, M. N., Taba, M., Marino, J. L., Lim, M. S. C., & Skinner, S. R. (2022). Social media use and health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth: Systematic review. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 24(9), e38449. <https://www.jmir.org/2022/9/e38449/>; Craig, S. L., Eaton, A. D., McInroy, L. B., Leung, V. W. Y., & Krishnan, S. (2021). Can social media participation enhance LGBTQ+ youth well-being? Development of the Social Media Benefits Scale. *Social Media + Society*, 7(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305121988931>

<sup>15</sup> Please note that the items assessing the frequency of encountering identity-affirming comments on social media were not included in the 2018 or 2020 surveys.

### Encountering hurtful comments on social media, by age, gender, race/ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ identity

Among ages 14 to 22, percent of social media users who have encountered the following comments at least sometimes	Total	Age		Gender		Race/Ethnicity			LGBTQ+	
		14 to 17	18 to 22	Men/Boys	Women/Girls	White	Black	Latino	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
Racist comments	55%	54%	55%	55%	53%	53% <sup>ab</sup>	47% <sup>b</sup>	56% <sup>a</sup>	70% <sup>a</sup>	52% <sup>b</sup>
Homophobic comments	53%	52%	54%	49%	54%	52%	47%	55%	76% <sup>a</sup>	49% <sup>b</sup>
Transphobic comments	58%	58%	58%	56%	58%	56%	53%	61%	75% <sup>a</sup>	55% <sup>b</sup>
Sexist comments	58%	54%	61%	54% <sup>a</sup>	62% <sup>b</sup>	58% <sup>a</sup>	49% <sup>b</sup>	56% <sup>ab</sup>	78% <sup>a</sup>	55% <sup>b</sup>
Body-shaming comments	61%	58%	62%	56% <sup>a</sup>	63% <sup>b</sup>	60% <sup>a</sup>	53% <sup>b</sup>	59% <sup>a</sup>	81% <sup>a</sup>	57% <sup>b</sup>

**Note:** Items with different superscripts differ significantly across rows within each category ( $p < .05$ ). Q: "How often, if ever, have you encountered the following types of comments in social media?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

### Encountering affirming comments on social media, by age, gender, race/ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ identity

Among ages 14 to 22, percent of social media users who have encountered the following comments at least sometimes	Total	Age		Gender		Race/Ethnicity			LGBTQ+	
		14 to 17	18 to 22	Men/Boys	Women/Girls	White	Black	Latino	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
Comments that affirm LGBTQ+ identities	63%	57% <sup>a</sup>	67% <sup>b</sup>	54% <sup>a</sup>	69% <sup>b</sup>	65% <sup>a</sup>	53% <sup>b</sup>	62% <sup>a</sup>	89% <sup>a</sup>	58% <sup>b</sup>
Comments that affirm people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds	63%	60%	65%	58% <sup>a</sup>	65% <sup>b</sup>	65%	58%	59%	81% <sup>a</sup>	60% <sup>b</sup>
Comments that affirm intersectional identities	60%	56% <sup>a</sup>	63% <sup>b</sup>	52% <sup>a</sup>	65% <sup>b</sup>	61% <sup>a</sup>	51% <sup>b</sup>	61% <sup>a</sup>	82% <sup>a</sup>	56% <sup>b</sup>
Body-positive comments	68%	62% <sup>a</sup>	73% <sup>b</sup>	64% <sup>a</sup>	74% <sup>b</sup>	73% <sup>a</sup>	56% <sup>b</sup>	61% <sup>b</sup>	78% <sup>a</sup>	66% <sup>b</sup>

**Note:** Items with different superscripts differ significantly across rows within each category ( $p < .05$ ). Q: "How often, if ever, have you encountered the following types of comments in social media?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

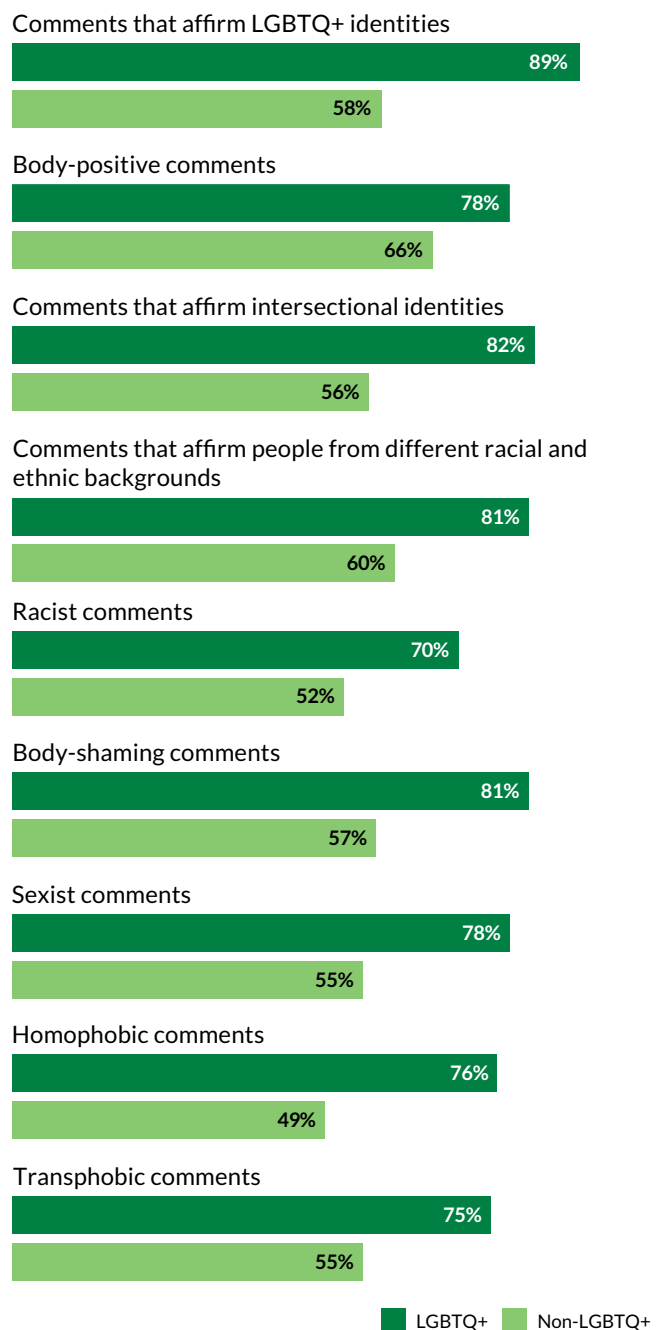
## Social media is a double-edged sword for LGBTQ+ youth, offering both important opportunities for support and identity affirmation, and increased exposure to harassment and stress.

Almost 9 in 10 (89%) LGBTQ+ young people at least sometimes come across comments celebrating LGBTQ+ identities, compared to about 6 in 10 (58%) of non-LGBTQ+ youth. In addition, compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers, LGBTQ+ young people are more likely to have often seen comments that affirm people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (81% vs. 60%), intersectional identities (82% vs. 56%), and various body shapes and sizes (78% vs. 66%). Three-fourths of LGBTQ+ youth, however, encounter both transphobic (75%) and homophobic comments (76%) on social media, versus only about half of non-LGBTQ+ youth (55% and 49%, respectively). LGBTQ+ youth are also more likely to encounter racist comments (70% vs. 52% of non-LGBTQ+ youth), along with body shaming (81% vs. 57%) and sexist (78% vs. 55%) comments.

These findings dovetail with the feedback from LGBTQ+ teens and young adults we spoke with in our qualitative interviews and focus groups. For many LGBTQ+ teens, online spaces create valued opportunities for connecting to content that is identity-affirming and supportive of LGBTQ+ people. Simultaneously, such places are also where they encounter hateful language about their identities and cruelty from other users, particularly in the comments section of posts.

## For LGBTQ+ young people, social media is a double-edged sword

% of social media users age 14–22, by LGBTQ+ who encounter the below comments sometimes or more often



**Note:** Differences between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ youth are statistically significant for all items at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: "How often, if ever, have you encountered the following types of comments in social media?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.







PART 3:

# How Young People Manage Their Social Media Experiences

Social media platforms have been intentionally designed with features that contribute to the powerful pull of the screen, from the ping of a new message notification to endless scrolling.<sup>16</sup> The buzz of content from these platforms can affect every aspect of a young person's daily life, from the amount of sleep they get each night to how well they can focus. Teens and young adults who use social media have to walk a fine line to balance playing, learning, and socializing on these platforms while managing time spent off of them.

Young people are not passive users and consumers of social media. They respond to the content they see and the experiences they have online, curating their feeds to affirm their identities and engage their interests, and taking temporary or permanent breaks from their accounts.

## Young people constructively curate their feeds to control content they dislike, are not interested in, or find inappropriate or offensive.

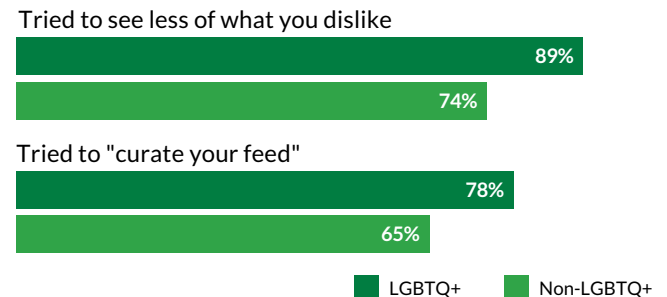
In the 12 months prior to our survey, more than three-quarters (76%) of social media users<sup>17</sup> age 14 to 22 put a range of measures in place to try to control what they see on social media. For example, some users attempted to see less of what they dislike, either by selecting a "not interested" button, flagging inappropriate or offensive content, or blocking someone whose content bothered them. Close to 7 in 10 (67%) young people who use social media say that, over the last year, they have attempted to "curate their feed" by liking or spending more time on certain content to see more of what interests them.

## LGBTQ+ young people are significantly more likely to have tried to control what they see on social media compared with their non-LGBTQ+ peers.

Nearly 9 in 10 (89%) LGBTQ+ youth who use social media say that, over the past year, they have tried to avoid content they do not like on these platforms, compared with just under three-fourths (74%) of their non-LGBTQ+ peers who use social media. LGBTQ+ youth are also significantly more likely than non-LGBTQ+ youth to have tried curating their feed (78% vs. 65%). Echoing insights from Part 2 of the report, this finding aligns with focus group and interview feedback indicating that social media may be a double-edged sword for LGBTQ+ young people: It is both an important opportunity for support and identity affirmation as well as an avenue for greater exposure to harassment and stress. These participants expressed that they manage this dynamic by "disliking" negative comments and engaging with positive content to curate their feed, helping them to stay on the "positive side" of social media.

### Larger shares of LGBTQ+ youth tailor their feeds and avoid content they dislike

% of social media users age 14–22, by LGBTQ+ who have done the following within the last 12 months



**Note:** Differences between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ youth are statistically significant for both items at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: "In the past 12 months, how often have you engaged in the following behaviors on social media?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

<sup>16</sup> Radesky, J., Weeks, H. M., Schaller, A., Robb, M., Mann, S., & Lenhart, A. (2023). *Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person's Smartphone Use*. Common Sense. <https://www.common SenseMedia.org/research/constant-companion-a-week-in-the-life-of-a-young-persons-smartphone-use>; Weinstein, E., & James, C. (2022). *Behind their screens: What teens are facing (and adults are missing)*. MIT Press.; Wells, G., Horwitz, J., & Seetharaman, D. (2021, September 14). Facebook knows Instagram is toxic for teen girls, company documents show. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739>

<sup>17</sup> All data in this section is reported out of social media users.

## **When compared with teens, a larger share of young adults have attempted to control the kind of social media content they see.**

In the 12 months prior to the survey, young adults were more likely than teens to report trying strategies to avoid content they dislike (81% vs. 68%) and curate their feed (71% vs. 61%). This finding dovetails with qualitative interview findings suggesting that young adults feel they have developed greater skills over time for avoiding content on social media that upsets them. Young adult interview participants felt they had more awareness and control over their social media behavior compared to teens, but they also explained how social media is designed to draw their attention and recognized that they may not be fully in control of just how much the design of these platforms influences their behavior.

## **Youth with depressive symptoms are significantly more likely to take steps to try to tailor the content they see on social media.**

Fully 9 in 10 young people with moderate to severe depressive symptoms have tried to see less of what they do not like on social media, versus 79% of those with mild symptoms and 67% of those with no symptoms. Young people with mild symptoms are also more likely to attempt to see less of what they do not like versus young people with no symptoms. In addition, a similar share of those with moderate to severe (81%) and mild (77%) depressive symptoms have taken actions to try to curate their social media feed, compared to just over half (55%) of those with no symptoms.

## **Half of social media users struggle to control their use of social media, or say they use it for longer than they want.**

Young people aren't always perfect at curating and managing their social media experiences, and can struggle to find balance with other aspects of their lives. Half of social media users age 14 to 22 somewhat agree or strongly agree that they cannot control their use, or that they end up using social media for a longer period of time than they originally wanted to. They are also aware of how social media may impact their daily routines and healthy habits, from getting quality sleep to spending time offline hanging out with friends. Close to half say that using social media takes time away from other activities they care about (46%) and has reduced their attention span or ability to concentrate (46%). For most young people, the pull toward social media use when bored is perceived as automatic—nearly three in four (73%) say they unconsciously reach for social media when bored.

## **Young adults, LGBTQ+ young people, and women and girls report more awareness of the struggle to control their social media use.**

Several differences arise by age, gender, and LGBTQ+ identity around challenges in managing social media use. Compared to teens, young adults are more likely to agree that social media interferes with their sleep (50% vs. 34%), has reduced their attention span (51% vs. 39%), and that they tend to reach for social media when bored (76% vs. 68%). Black youth also more often report that they gravitate toward using social media when bored compared to their Latino peers (79% vs. 69%).

Young adults, compared to teens, are also more likely to say that they have a hard time controlling their social media use, or use it for longer than intended (53% vs. 42%). As noted previously, in qualitative interviews, young adults indicated that this finding may reflect their increased awareness over time of how social media is engineered to hook attention, rather than being reflective of young adults actually having more difficulty with self-control than teens.

The majority of women and girls (56%) also find it challenging to control how much time they spend on social media, compared to about 4 in 10 men and boys (42%). When compared to non-LGBTQ+ youth, LGBTQ+ youth are also more likely to feel that social media use can be difficult to control (63% vs. 47%), gets in the way of their sleep (56% vs. 42%), and reduces their attention span (59% vs. 44%).

### Social media is more likely to get in the way of young adults' daily routines

% of social media users age 14–22, by age who agree with the following statements

When I'm bored, I reach for social media without thinking about it



Using social media gets in the way of my sleep



Using social media has reduced my "attention span" or ability to concentrate, such as at school or when reading



Using social media takes time away from other activities I care about, like spending time with friends, exercise, or other offline interests



I feel like I can't control my use or end up using it for a longer period of time than I originally wanted to



■ 18-22 ■ 14-17

\* Differences between young adults and teens are statistically significant at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: "Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about social media?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

### LGBTQ+ youth more often say social media interferes with daily life

% of social media users age 14–22, by LGBTQ+ who agree with the following statements

When I'm bored, I reach for social media without thinking about it



Using social media gets in the way of my sleep



Using social media has reduced my "attention span" or ability to concentrate, such as at school or when reading



Using social media takes time away from other activities I care about, like spending time with friends, exercise, or other offline interests



I feel like I can't control my use or end up using it for a longer period of time than I originally wanted to



■ LGBTQ+ ■ Non-LGBTQ+

\* Differences between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ youth are statistically significant at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: "Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about social media?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

## **Young people with depressive symptoms are more likely to report that social media use negatively affects their daily lives.**

Compared to young people with no depressive symptoms, those with moderate to severe symptoms and those with mild symptoms are more likely to feel as though they cannot control their social media use, or that they use it longer than intended (61% for moderate to severe, 58% for mild, and 39% for no depressive symptoms), and that these platforms have reduced their attention span (59%, 53%, and 37%, respectively). Nearly 6 in 10 youth with moderate to severe symptoms (58%), and over half of those with mild symptoms (54%), agree that social media interferes with their sleep, versus only about one-third of those with no symptoms (33%). In addition, the majority of youth with moderate to severe symptoms (54%) report that social media gets in the way of activities they enjoy, compared to 4 in 10 of those with no symptoms (41%).

Those young people with moderate to severe depressive symptoms are more likely to indicate that they reach for social media without thinking about it when they are bored, compared to youth with no symptoms (77% vs. 67%). However, young people with mild depressive symptoms (85%) are more likely than those with moderate to severe or no symptoms to say they gravitate to social media when bored.

## **A majority of social media users have taken a temporary break from a social media account to reduce their use; 4 in 10 have permanently shut down a social media account.**

Avoiding negative content and curating their newsfeed to better align with their interests are not the only ways that young people proactively manage their use of social media. Some are also choosing to take temporary or permanent breaks in response to the sheer amount of time they spend on social media.

More than 6 in 10 (63%) youth social media users say they have taken a temporary break from one of their accounts in the last 12 months so they would not be tempted to spend so much time on it. A smaller share (41%) reports that they have permanently stopped using a social media account in the past year to manage the amount of time they spend on social media.

Young adults are more likely than teens to have permanently stopped using a social media account to manage their time spent on the platforms (45% vs. 35%). Turning to gender, 66% of women and girls who use social media have decided to temporarily take a break from an account due to time-related concerns, compared with 57% of men and boys who use social media.

## **Black and Latino youth are more likely to have taken a temporary or permanent break from a social media account than White youth, and they are more likely to do so in response to online harassment.**

Relative to time-related concerns, fewer young people report taking temporary (37%) or permanent (29%) breaks from an account during the past year due to harassment or other negative experiences with people online.

For breaks related to time concerns and harassment, the starker differences across the board arise by race/ethnicity. More specifically, about three-fourths of Black (74%) and Latino (73%) young people who use social media have taken a temporary break from an account due to time concerns, compared to slightly over half of White youth (56%). In addition, the majority of Black (56%) and Latino (54%) youth chose to take a permanent break from an account for this reason, versus only about one in three White youth (32%).

Notably, however, Black (42%) and Latino (40%) young people are about twice as likely as White youth (21%) to have taken a permanent break from a social media account—and more than one and a half times more likely to have taken a temporary break (48%, 47%, vs. 30%, respectively)—due to harassment or other negative experiences online.

Focus groups and qualitative interviews with Black and Latino young people included questions about this finding. Black and Latino youth reported that because they deal with racism and challenges offline, they have developed a lower tolerance for negative content and experiences online, and part of their playbook of coping mechanisms involves disconnecting from problematic spaces.



**Breaks from a social media account due to time-related concerns, by age, gender, race/ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ identity**

Among ages 14 to 22, percent of social media users who, over the past 12 months, have	Total	Age		Gender		Race/Ethnicity			LGBTQ+	
		14 to 17	18 to 22	Men/Boys	Women/Girls	White	Black	Latino	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
Taken a temporary break from a social media account so that you wouldn't be tempted to spend so much time on it	63%	61%	64%	57% <sup>a</sup>	66% <sup>b</sup>	56% <sup>b</sup>	74% <sup>a</sup>	73% <sup>a</sup>	70%	62%
Permanently stopped using a social media account so that you wouldn't be tempted to spend so much time on it	41%	35% <sup>a</sup>	45% <sup>b</sup>	38%	43%	32% <sup>b</sup>	56% <sup>a</sup>	54% <sup>a</sup>	38%	42%

**Note:** Items with different superscripts differ significantly across rows within each category ( $p < .05$ ). Q: "In the past 12 months, how often have you engaged in the following behaviors on social media?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

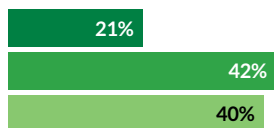
**Black and Latino youth are more likely to take breaks from a social media account due to harassment and other negative experiences**

% of social media users age 14–22, by race/ethnicity who have done the following within the last 12 months

Taken a temporary break from a social media account due to harassment-related concerns



Permanently stopped using a social media account due to harassment-related concerns



White Black Latino

**Note:** Differences between White youth, and Black and Latino youth, are statistically significant for both items at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: "In the past 12 months, how often have you engaged in the following behaviors on social media?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

**Three-quarters of young people with moderate to severe depressive symptoms have taken temporary breaks from a social media account to manage their time, and another 58% have taken temporary breaks due to online harassment.**

Turning to depressive symptoms, about three-fourths of young people with moderate to severe and mild symptoms (76% and 74%, respectively) report that they have temporarily taken a break from a social media account due to time-related concerns, whereas only half of young people with no symptoms (51%) have done so. In addition, the majority of youth with moderate to severe symptoms (56%) have taken a permanent break from a social media account due to the amount of time they spend. Only about 4 in 10 (43%) youth with mild symptoms have chosen to take a permanent break. And just 3 in 10 (32%) youth with no symptoms have done so.

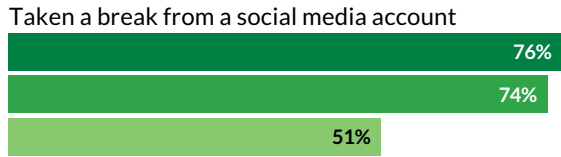
**In response to online harassment, youth with depressive symptoms are more likely to take temporary or permanent breaks from a social media account.**

The likelihood that young people take temporary or permanent breaks from a social media account related to harassment tracks with the severity of their depressive symptoms. Young people with moderate to severe depressive symptoms are more than twice as likely to have taken a temporary (58%) and permanent break (44%) due to online harassment and other negative experiences than those with no symptoms (25% and 20%, respectively). Youth with moderate to severe depressive symptoms are also significantly more likely than young people with mild symptoms to have taken both temporary (37% for mild) and permanent (29% for mild) breaks. In addition, youth with mild depressive symptoms are more likely to have taken both types of breaks compared to young people with no symptoms.

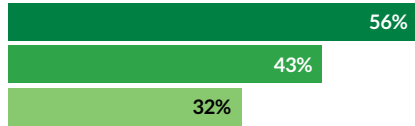
**Youth with depressive symptoms are considerably more likely to take breaks from a social media account due to concerns related to time and harassment**

% of social media users age 14–22, by depressive symptoms who have done the following within the last 12 months

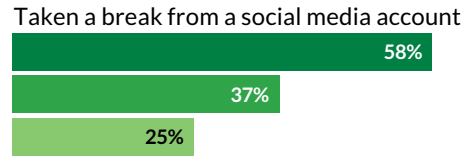
**Time-related concerns**



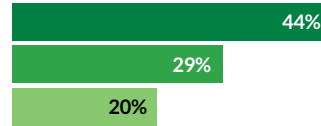
Permanently stopped using a social media account



**Harassment-related concerns**



Permanently stopped using a social media account



Moderate to severe Mild None

**Note:** For time-related concerns, in terms of temporary breaks from a social media account, differences between youth with moderate to severe or mild depressive symptoms versus youth with no symptoms are statistically significant at the level of  $p < .05$ . For all other temporary or permanent breaks from a social media account, differences among youth with moderate to severe, mild, and no depressive symptoms are statistically significant at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: "In the past 12 months, how often have you engaged in the following behaviors on social media?" Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.





## PART 4:

# The Current State of Mental Health for Teens and Young Adults

Concern about the mental health of young people has been growing over the past decade, as an ever-increasing number of studies shows a steady uptick in mental distress among teens and young adults. This worry grew during the COVID-19 pandemic, as isolation and stress exacerbated this upward trend. As the pandemic subsides, concern remains about the state of teen and young adult mental health in the United States.

As part of this survey, teens and young adults completed the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8), a commonly used and validated scale for measuring depressive symptoms.<sup>18</sup> We focused on the proportion of young people who had no, mild, or moderate to severe depressive symptoms. A score of 10 or higher on the scale is considered to indicate moderate to severe depressive symptoms and a warning sign that warrants further attention.

**Nearly 3 in 10 teens and young adults report moderate to severe depressive symptoms. This is down from 2020 levels but similar to pre-pandemic levels in 2018.**

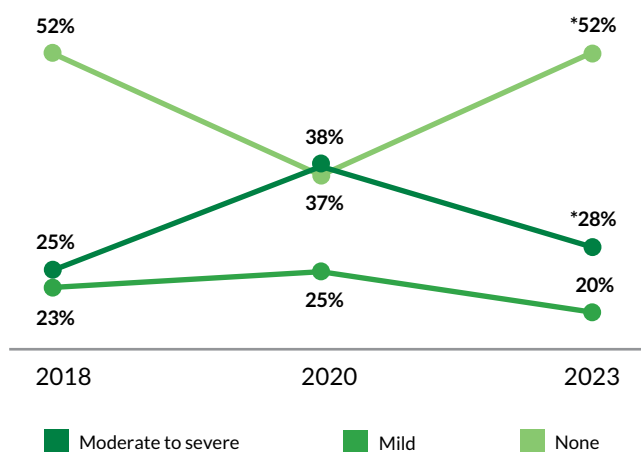
Nearly 3 in 10 (28%) young people age 14 to 22 report moderate to severe depressive symptoms. This rate is down from almost 4 in 10 (38%) young people in 2020. However, the rate of 28% is similar to the pre-pandemic rate (25%) reported in 2018.

**Moderate to severe depressive symptoms tend to be higher among young adults, but levels have improved significantly since 2020.**

The survey results show that rates of moderate to severe depressive symptoms are higher among young adults (35%) than among teens (18%). Looking at data across time by age and gender, rates of moderate to severe depressive symptoms decreased from 2020 to 2023 for teens (from 25% in 2020 to 18% in 2023) and young adults (48% to 35%, respectively) as well as for women and girls (39% to 29%) and men and boys (35% to 23%).

**Depressive symptoms are down from pandemic highs, but comparable to 2018 levels**

% of young people age 14–22, by year of data collection and by depressive symptoms



\* Significantly differs with 2020, at the level of  $p < .05$ . Q: Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8). Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted in 2018 ( $n = 1,334$ ), 2020 ( $n = 1,492$ ), and 2023 ( $n = 1,274$ ) with young people age 14–22 nationwide.

**Almost half of LGBTQ+ youth report moderate to severe depressive symptoms, compared to nearly one-quarter of non-LGBTQ+ youth.**

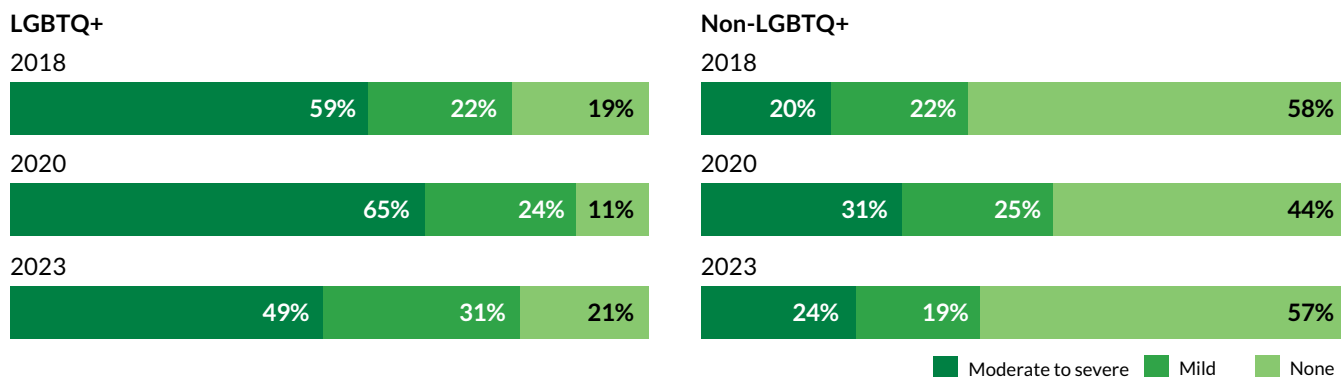
As in earlier surveys, there are notable differences between LGBTQ+ young people and non-LGBTQ+ young people in terms of rates of moderate to severe depressive symptoms. Almost half (49%) of LGBTQ+ young people report moderate to severe symptoms of depression compared to nearly one-quarter (24%) of non-LGBTQ+ youth.

However, the rate of moderate to severe depressive symptoms among LGBTQ+ young people decreased from 65% in 2020 to 49% in 2023. The rate of moderate to severe depressive symptoms in non-LGBTQ+ young people decreased from 31% in 2020 to 24% in 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Kroenke, K., Strine, T. W., Spitzer, R. L., Williams, J. B., Berry, J. T., & Mokdad, A. H. (2009). The PHQ-8 as a measure of current depression in the general population. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 114(1–3), 163–173. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2008.06.026>

## LGBTQ+ young people report twice the rate of depressive symptoms when compared to non-LGBTQ+ young people at each year of data collection

% of young people age 14–22, by LGBTQ+ and depressive symptoms



**Note:** Total amounts may not sum to 100% from the reported subtotals due to rounding. LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ youth differ significantly in reports of moderate to severe symptoms at each year of data collection: 2018, 2020, and 2023 ( $p < .05$ ). Q: Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8). Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted in 2018 ( $n = 1,334$ ), 2020 ( $n = 1,492$ ), and 2023 ( $n = 1,274$ ) with young people age 14–22 nationwide.

## Depressive symptom levels, by year of data collection, age, gender, race/ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ identity in 2023

Among 14- to 22-year-olds, percent who score in each level of depressive symptoms (PHQ-8, score 0 to 24)	Data Collection			Age		Gender		Race/Ethnicity			LGBTQ+	
	2018	2020	2023	14 to 17	18 to 22	Men/Boys	Women/Girls	White	Black	Latino	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
None (0 to 4)	52% <sup>a</sup>	37% <sup>b</sup>	52% <sup>a</sup>	65% <sup>a</sup>	43% <sup>b</sup>	59% <sup>a</sup>	49% <sup>b</sup>	54%	49%	47%	21% <sup>a</sup>	57% <sup>b</sup>
Mild (5 to 9)	23% <sup>a</sup>	25% <sup>a</sup>	20% <sup>b</sup>	17% <sup>a</sup>	22% <sup>b</sup>	17% <sup>a</sup>	22% <sup>b</sup>	19%	21%	22%	31% <sup>a</sup>	19% <sup>b</sup>
Moderate to severe (10 to 24)	25% <sup>a</sup>	38% <sup>b</sup>	28% <sup>a</sup>	18% <sup>a</sup>	35% <sup>b</sup>	23% <sup>a</sup>	29% <sup>b</sup>	27%	30%	31%	49% <sup>a</sup>	24% <sup>b</sup>

**Note:** Total amounts may not sum to 100% from the reported subtotals due to rounding. Items with different superscripts differ significantly across rows within each category ( $p < .05$ ). Q: Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8). Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted in 2018 ( $n = 1,334$ ), 2020 ( $n = 1,492$ ), and 2023 ( $n = 1,274$ ) with young people age 14–22 nationwide.



## How Social Media Makes Young People Feel When Depressed, Stressed, or Anxious

The influence of social media on mood and well-being, whether positive or negative, can vary among young people. Differences in the impact of social media may be explained by *how* and *why* young people use social media on a particular day or over time<sup>19</sup> and by the experiences that young people themselves bring to their social media use. Social media may make some young people feel better—many use social media as a place for connection, support, information, creative expression, and as a way to understand their identity.<sup>20</sup>

However, other young people may feel worse after being on social media, particularly after engaging in social comparison, being exposed to harmful content such as hate speech, or feeling like they are "wasting time" by being distracted from meaningful activities. It is also important to consider that for certain groups of young people, social media may not have a substantial impact on well-being at all.<sup>21</sup>

Further, there has been little research to date examining how social media use may contribute to a mix of emotions, making young people feel both better and worse after using the platforms. Social media might alleviate negative feelings one day but aggravate them the next, or it's possible that young people can encounter both positive and negative experiences within the same day.<sup>22</sup>

**Almost 40% of young people who use social media say it makes them feel better when depressed, stressed, or anxious; just 8% say social media makes them feel worse.**

Of young people age 14 to 22 who use social media, 39% report that when they are feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious,<sup>23</sup> using social media makes them feel better. On the other hand, 8% say it makes them feel worse, 39% say neither better nor worse, and 13% say they experience a mix of both positive and negative effects.

How social media influences well-being varies by age. Young adult social media users are more likely than teens to report that using social media usually makes them feel both better and worse when feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious (16% vs. 10%). Non-LGBTQ+ youth (41%) are more likely than LGBTQ+ youth (28%) to report that social media makes them feel neither better nor worse when feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious.

<sup>19</sup> Weinstein, E. (2018). The social media see-saw: Positive and negative influences on adolescents' affective well-being. *New Media & Society*, 20(10), 3597–3623. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818755634>

<sup>20</sup> Craig, S. L., Eaton, A. D., McInroy, L. B., Leung, V. W., & Krishnan, S. (2021). Can social media participation enhance LGBTQ+ youth well-being? Development of the Social Media Benefits Scale. *Social Media & Society*, 7(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305121988931>

<sup>21</sup> Beyens, I., Pouwels, J. L., van Driel, I. I., Keijsers, L., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2020). The effect of social media on well-being differs from adolescent to adolescent. *Scientific Reports*, 10(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-67727-7>

<sup>22</sup> Frost, R. L., & Rickwood, D. J. (2017). A systematic review of the mental health outcomes associated with Facebook use. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 76, 576–600. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.08.001>

<sup>23</sup> The survey included a question asking how social media affects youth well-being when they are already feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious. Compared to previous reports, in addition to including the options that social media "makes me feel better," "makes me feel worse," or "makes me feel *neither* better nor worse," this survey included a response option of "makes me feel both better and worse." This question was given to all young people regardless of their depressive symptom scores on the PHQ-8.

## Few young people say using social media makes them feel worse when feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious

% of social media users age 14–22 who selected the following statements

Better

39%

Worse

8%

Both

13%

Neither

39%

**Note:** Total amounts may not sum to 100% from the reported subtotals due to rounding. Q: "Which of the following statements comes closest to the truth for you? When I'm feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious, using social media usually makes me feel \_\_\_\_?"  
Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,231 social media users age 14–22 nationwide.

## Diversion and connection are the top explanations for why social media makes young people feel better when when depressed, stressed, or anxious.

Given the wide range of emotional reactions to social media that young people have when feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious, we asked them to share open-ended responses about the ways that social media has made them feel better, worse, neither, or both. We analyzed their responses for a more nuanced understanding of these differences.

Among social media users age 14 to 22 who believe social media makes them feel *better* when when depressed, stressed, or anxious, two major themes emerged: diversion and connection.

### Young people point to social media's role as a diversion from their problems as one reason social media makes them feel better when distressed.

Diversion was the most common theme among social media users who said that social media makes them feel better because it helps them divert their attention away from their problems. For example, one respondent stated, "It's a distraction from my problems and provides a temporary escape" (Latino, teen boy).

Whether content is entertaining or relaxing, many young people mentioned that social media helps them focus on something positive, instead of mulling over negative concerns that might be out of their control. For instance, a respondent explained how social media reduces negative emotions through entertaining videos: "Social media helps me feel better because it lifts my mood because social media has funny videos and positive videos to help me take my mind off of something that is causing me stress, anxiety, or depression" (Black, young adult woman).

Social media also provides relief from distress through relaxation: "It gives me something to focus on other than the immediate discomfort I'm experiencing," noting "it can also be relaxing or de-stressing, for instance when I use it to watch or listen to ASMR [autonomous sensory meridian response]" (White, nonbinary young adult).

### Connecting with others is a key element in how social media makes young people feel better when distressed.

Connection was the second most common theme among respondents who felt that social media helps them feel better. Several young people discussed how social media provides outlets to initiate new connections and establishes relatability through communities of people with similar experiences: "I'm able to connect with people who are going through a similar situation" (Latino, teen boy), and seeing "other people are going through similar patches in their lives, which shows you that you are not alone." (White, young adult man).

Social media can also be used to maintain existing relationships, which young people can turn to for support: "I mostly use social media to stay in touch with friends, so it's mostly them that help me to feel better, as opposed to the social media itself," however, "it certainly contributes." (White, young adult man).

## **Social media users report social comparison, negative content, and feeling unproductive as the top reasons for why social media makes them feel worse.**

Among the 8% of young people age 14 to 22 who use social media and report that using social media makes them feel worse when they are already feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious, three themes surfaced: social comparison, negative content, and feelings of being unproductive.

### **Young people noted that social media leads them to compare themselves to others, contributing to negative feelings.**

Reacting to the carefully crafted depictions of others' lives on social media is a common experience among teens and young adults. One Black, young adult woman shared that "It shows me curated versions of other people's lives that almost always look much more fruitful than mine," and another respondent said it "makes me hyper conscious of my perception. I am constantly being perceived and it gives me anxiety" (Latino, young adult woman).

### **Negative content can heighten distress among young social media users.**

Social media can also heighten distress through the widespread presence of negative content and interactions. For example, one respondent mentioned how social media is often filled with "information on negative world events" (White, young adult man), and a White, nonbinary young adult shared, "There is a lot of negativity so I usually end up feeling more unhappy." Some young people said that social media makes them feel worse because of all the negative interactions on the platforms. A Black, young adult woman explained that social media makes them feel worse because "people are treated badly," and a White teen boy said, "There is so much bullying."

### **For some young people, social media makes them feel like they're not being productive, which increases negative feelings.**

A few young people who use social media expressed that it makes them feel unproductive: "Doing something like scrolling through social media makes me feel like I have no goals, motivation, or hobbies" (young adult woman, no race or ethnicity given). A White, young adult woman stated that social media "makes me feel lazy and unproductive."

## **For social media users who report that social media made them feel both better and worse, most said that it depended on the content they saw in their feeds.**

For the teens and young adults in our study who report that social media made them feel *both* better and worse (13% of social media users) when feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious, many of their answers revealed some similarities: feelings depend on the content, relationships can be a source of comfort and distress, and social media can be a temporary distraction.

### **Social media content matters, often making young people feel both better and worse, depending on what they view.**

A common theme among young people was that their reaction to social media depended on the content: "It depends on the day and what content comes up on my feed. Often it serves to simply calm me down or cheer me up, but there are other times where it may make me angry or upset" (White, nonbinary young adult). Another young adult expressed similar sentiments: "Depending on what I see, it can either make me feel better or worse. I can either see something that inspires me, or something that makes me feel bad or jealous" (White, young adult man).

### **Social media can provide connection and emotional support when young people are distressed, but it can also expose them to others' distress.**

Some young people who reported that social media makes them feel both better and worse described mixed feelings. In terms of social media providing connection, relational support can also mean being exposed to others' negative feelings. For instance, a respondent explained: "I play games with my friends on Discord, sometimes they can include heavy and emotional topics that are hard to process, but it's a safe space to do so" (White, nonbinary teen).

**Social media can serve as a temporary distraction from negative feelings, but it does not address the underlying issues, often leaving negative emotions to intensify or resurface later.**

Social media can be used as a tool for temporary distraction or a way to deflect negative feelings, which helps in the moment, but the root cause of those feelings remains unaddressed, or these negative feelings emerge later—another reason some young people reported feeling both better and worse. As one respondent said, "The quick entertainment and support alleviates my worries, though then it turns into being unproductive through some of the day. This unproductivity begets feelings of worry or anxiety" (Latino, young adult man).

One user said the distraction of social media can make them feel better, "until it comes back to bite me that I've been ignoring [my feelings]" (White, young adult woman). Another noted that social media "distracts me but also makes me more anxious through the avoidance" (White, young adult woman).

**Most young people who expressed that social media makes them feel *neither* better nor worse when depressed, stressed, or anxious said social media does not impact their mood.**

The 39% of young people who use social media and said it makes them feel *neither* better nor worse when feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious had two things in common: Social media had no effect on their mood, and they did not use social media as a way to cope.

**Some young people report no changes in mood while using social media.**

Many said that social media has no effect on their mood: "It does not contribute to the negative feelings, nor does it improve them most of the time" (White, young adult woman), and "[It's] just something I do to escape reality, but it doesn't really change my mood" (White, young adult man). One respondent noted, "I don't allow social media to influence my emotions. I like to use it as a way for mindless entertainment" (Black, young adult man), and another young adult said they are able to "differentiate social media from real life. I'm aware people edit their pictures and don't tell the full truth, I'm just there for entertainment" (Black, young adult woman).

**Some young people do not use social media to cope with distress.**

Some respondents explained that social media does make them feel better or worse, and others explained that they use other methods to cope with their negative emotions: "I don't usually turn to social media when I feel any of these ways, but if I do, then it just kind of puts those feelings on hold. When I get off social media I'll feel pretty much the same" (White, teen boy). Another respondent shared their perspective: "I do not use social media to regulate my emotional state in any fashion. If I am upset it is unlikely to have anything to do with social media, and I am not particularly likely to turn to social media for a solution" (teen boy, no race or ethnicity given).

# Conclusion

The subject of how teens and young adults use digital media and technology—and the implications of these interactions for their mental health and well-being—has reached heightened levels of attention over the past few years. With reports of depression, anxiety, and self-harm accelerating among teens and young adults, many stakeholders are turning their focus to technology and social media as a source of these concerning trends, as well as a possible site for mitigating them.

As this report shows, technology and social media are a double-edged sword for teens and young adults. Many groups of youth turn to these digital technologies for emotional support, connection with friends and family, learning about ways to support their own mental health, and just decompressing by having fun. And at the same time, they experience stressful content and must deploy strategies to manage their exposure to it, including taking temporary or permanent breaks from certain platforms.

Youth of color, LGBTQ+ youth, and those with depressive symptoms make the most of the benefits and opportunities that social media has to offer, but they may bear a greater burden in the need to be vigilant when safeguarding their mental health against the ugly sides of social media. There is a notable disparity in how different demographic groups, such as Black and LGBTQ+ youth, navigate social media; these platforms serve as both a source of support and a source of harm that these groups of youth are actively working against.

Teens and young adults who report depressive symptoms more often say they have a host of concerns connected to social media, including worries about self-presentation and harassment, but they also view these platforms as an important resource for making themselves feel better. In addition, when compared with their peers, the role of social media in helping youth feel less alone is much more important for youth who report depressive symptoms.

Youth, especially youth of color, LGBTQ+ youth, and young people with depressive symptoms, are in need of safe spaces, support, and resources both online and offline. Young people who turn to social media for support and search for resources online suggest that their offline communities and environments do not provide enough for their needs. On the flipside, for many LGBTQ+ youth and youth of color, the same platforms that provide affirmation and support can also expose them to harassment and increased stress.

As such, we need a multipronged solution that includes:

- 1. More research and public understanding of these nuances.** This requires even deeper dives into the experiences of groups like youth with depressive symptoms and LGBTQ+ young people, who the data suggests face more of the challenges associated with social media.
- 2. Action from the tech sector.** Social media companies need to change their design features and put more guardrails in and around their products to limit harm and make it easier for young people to effectively manage their use.
- 3. More public education for families and schools** about how to manage the challenges that social media presents—without diminishing the positive benefits.
- 4. Most importantly, caring adults should continue listening to young people** to better understand their unique experiences and relationships with social media and technology.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Rideout, V., Fox, S., Peebles, A., & Robb, M. B. (2021). *Coping with COVID-19: How young people use digital media to manage their mental health*. Common Sense and Hopelab. <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/coping-with-covid-19-how-young-people-use-digital-media-to-manage-their-mental-health>

## Study Limitations

As with any study, various limitations should be kept in mind as stakeholders seek to translate the findings into recommendations. Crucially, this report does not seek to establish causality in its analysis and does not offer claims about the extent to which increased use of social media drives positive or negative outcomes in youth mental health and well-being. Instead, this study contributes to a growing body of research illustrating the varied contexts in which youth make use of the digital tools at their disposal to build connections, express themselves, find information, and seek out professional and peer-based support across websites, social media platforms, and apps. The study also documents the experiences that young people have with online content—including hateful content that denigrates, as well as affirming and supportive content, and the steps that young people take to curate and manage the information they see and their time on social platforms.

Additionally, while the study reports differences by demographic groups such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, and depressive symptoms, such findings should not be interpreted as applicable to all youth in such groups. Youth—and subgroups of youth—are not a monolith. The impact that media, including social media, has on specific young people depends on their developmental level, individual dispositions, and contextual aspects (e.g., school, peer groups, family, socioeconomic status, etc.).<sup>25,26</sup>

Furthermore, while oversampling techniques allowed for deeper analysis of youth who are LGBTQ+, youth of color, and youth who report depressive symptoms, certain smaller subgroups (such as nonbinary youth) were still too small to be meaningfully included in the analysis. It is essential to continue investment in studies such as these that present high-quality, nationally representative data paired with qualitative responses that reflect the lived experiences and views of teens and young adults as we seek to understand the complex interplay between young people's use of technology and their well-being.

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<sup>25</sup>Valkenburg, P. M., & Peter, J. (2013). The differential susceptibility to media effects model. *Journal of Communication*, 63(2), 221–243. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119011071.iemp0122>

<sup>26</sup>Beyens, I., Pouwels, J. L., van Driel, I. I., Keijsers, L., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2020). The effect of social media on well-being differs from adolescent to adolescent. *Scientific Reports*, 10(1), Article 10763. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-67727-7>



# Methodology

This survey was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago on behalf of Hopelab and Common Sense Media. The survey was funded by Hopelab, with additional data reporting support from Common Sense Media.

Data was collected using both probability-based and nonprobability-based sample sources. The survey was conducted from October 4 through November 14, 2023, with a nationally representative sample of young people age 14 to 22 representing the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. The study featured 1,274 survey participants, including 517 teens (age 14 to 17) and 757 young adults (age 18 to 22). The survey was conducted on the web only in both English and Spanish, depending on respondent preference. A total of two respondents took the survey in Spanish.

Two previous data collections in 2018 and 2020, both directed by Hopelab, shared a number of questions with this survey. Comparative data from both previous iterations of the survey is included in this report. All waves of the survey were fielded by NORC.

## **Sample.**

The 2023 sample includes U.S. residents age 14 to 22. Parental permission was obtained for all 14- to 17-year-old participants. Oversamples of Black, Latino, and LGBTQ+ respondents were conducted to generate a total unweighted sample of  $n = 346$  Black,  $n = 375$  Latino, and  $n = 251$  LGBTQ+ respondents. For analyses among the general population, Black, Latino, and LGBTQ+ respondents were weighted down to their representative proportion, according to the most recent U.S. Census. Participants were offered a small monetary incentive (\$7) for completing the survey. Starting in November, the incentive was increased to \$10 for those age 14 to 17.

The probability sample source is the AmeriSpeak® Panel, NORC's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected U.S. households were sampled with a known, nonzero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame. Adult panel members age 18 to 22 were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak, and 441 completed the survey. Teen panel members age 14 to 17 were drawn from AmeriSpeak Teen, and 517 completed the survey.

Dynata was contracted to collect additional data to increase representation of respondents at the intersection of age, race, ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ status using nonprobability-based sampling. Dynata provided data from 316 nonprobability survey completions by young adults age 18 to 22.

## **Weighting.**

To incorporate the nonprobability sample, NORC used TrueNorth calibration, a hybrid calibration approach developed at NORC, based on small area estimation methods in order to explicitly account for potential bias associated with the nonprobability sample. The purpose of TrueNorth calibration is to adjust the weights for the nonprobability sample to bring weighted distributions of the nonprobability sample in line with the population distribution for characteristics correlated with the survey variables. Such calibration adjustments help to reduce potential bias, yielding more accurate population estimates.

## **Data cleaning.**

Quality assurance checks were conducted to ensure data quality. In total, 44 survey responses were removed for nonresponse to at least 50% of the questions asked of them, for completing the survey in less than one-third the median time for the full sample, or for straight-lining all grid questions asked of them. These participants were excluded from the data file prior to weighting.

Once the sample was selected and fielded, and all the study data was collected and finalized, a raking process was used to adjust for any survey nonresponse in the probability sample, as well as any noncoverage or under- and oversampling in both probability and nonprobability samples resulting from the study-specific sample design. Raking variables for both the probability and nonprobability samples included age, gender, race/ethnicity, education (parental educational attainment was used for the teen sample), census region, and LGBTQ+ identity (for young adults only).

### **Margin of error and response rates.**

The overall margin of error for the combined sample is  $\pm 5.9$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups.

Among the young adult sample age 18 to 22, the final stage completion rate is 25.5%, the weighted household panel response rate is 21.5%, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 78.9%, for a cumulative response rate of 4.3%. Among the teen sample age 14 to 17, the parent screener rate is 30.4%, the final stage completion rate is 51.8%, the weighted household panel response rate is 20.7%, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 79.1%, for a cumulative response rate of 2.6%.

### **Statistical significance.**

Where relevant, differences among subgroups and/or over time have been tested for statistical significance. Unless otherwise noted, these findings are described in the text in a comparative manner (e.g., more than, less than) only if the differences are statistically significant at the level of  $p < .05$ . In tables where statistical significance has been tested, superscripts (using letters such as *a*, *b*, and *c*) are used to indicate whether results differ at a statistically significant level ( $p < .05$ ) within a set of columns or rows (e.g., by age groups or by year). Means that share a common superscript and means that have no superscript are not significantly different from each other.

### **Comparisons over time.**

Many items in the survey repeat questions that were administered to two separate cross-sectional samples: one in 2018 titled [Digital Health Practices, Social Media Use, and Mental Well-Being Among Teens and Young Adults in the U.S.](#)<sup>27</sup> and one in 2020 titled [Coping with COVID-19: How Young People Use Digital Media to Manage Their Mental Health.](#)<sup>28</sup> Where possible, results have been compared to explore changes over time. Where question wording was changed sufficiently to render comparisons unreliable, a note has been included. In addition, one series of questions in the current survey repeats an item from a 2018 Common Sense survey, [Social Media, Social Life: Teens Reveal Their Experiences.](#)<sup>29</sup> This study interviewed 13- to 17-year-olds and, as such, the results are presented as trend data to compare with the 14- to 17-year-old respondents in our current survey.

Changes over time have been tested for statistical significance. In the survey conducted in 2018, the sample was not supplemented with nonprobability participants, as the 2020 and 2023 surveys were. The use of TrueNorth calibration in 2020 and 2023 was designed to reduce any possible bias from the inclusion of opt-in respondents (see *Weighting*, above). Nonetheless, changes over time should still be interpreted with caution.

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<sup>27</sup> Rideout, V., & Fox, S. (2018). *Digital health practices, social media use, and mental well-being among teens and young adults in the U.S.* Hopelab. <https://hopelab.org/insight/national-survey-2018/>

<sup>28</sup> Rideout, V., Fox, S., Peebles, A., & Robb, M. B. (2021). *Coping with COVID-19: How young people use digital media to manage their mental health.* Common Sense and Hopelab. <https://www.common sense media.org/research/coping-with-covid-19-how-young-people-use-digital-media-to-manage-their-mental-health>

<sup>29</sup> Rideout, V., & Robb, M. B. (2018). *Social media, social life: Teens reveal their experiences.* Common Sense Media. <https://www.common sense media.org/research/social-media-social-life-teens-reveal-their-experiences-2018>

### **Open-ended responses.**

The survey included several open-ended questions that invited respondents to describe, in their own words, their experiences and how they felt about them.

The responses were read and hand-coded to look for patterns and themes. All statistical findings presented in the report are from the quantitative items, but insights gained from the review of open-ended responses are included in the text. Throughout the report, a selection of verbatim quotes from those open-ended questions is included. These quotes have been lightly edited to correct misspellings, punctuation, capitalization, and typos. In the sections of the report devoted to specific topics (e.g., how social media affects youth well-being when they are already feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious), quotes were selected from young people with those attributes.

### **Youth engagement.**

Although young people's use of technology and its impact on their mental health is a common topic of inquiry in national surveys,<sup>30,31,32,33</sup> little of this research has been co-created by the young people it aims to understand. Directly engaging young people in research co-creation and interpretation can strengthen its validity by better capturing the nuances and realities of young people's online lives, and can ultimately better inform policies and practices. Hopelab and Common Sense Media developed this research by collaborating closely with young people (age 14 to 22) across the United States, to design and disseminate a survey that reflected their priorities and lived experiences. The survey instrument was developed using an iterative design process that drew on individual interviews, prioritization activities, focus groups, and asynchronous feedback from young people.

After the survey data was collected, Hopelab engaged a separate group of young people to help interpret the results, provide perspective on which key findings to emphasize in the report, and offer advice on how these findings should be presented. In total, we spoke directly with 39 young people age 14 to 22 in semi-structured focus groups and interviews, and received written feedback on survey drafts from another group of 25 young people. We intentionally sought out input from LGBTQ+, Black, and Latino youth in order to elevate underrepresented perspectives in conversations about digital technology and youth mental health. Throughout the report, young people's perspectives are represented in the topics that are prioritized, the wording of the survey items, and the framing and interpretation of survey results.

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<sup>30</sup> Ito, M., Odgers, C., & Schueller, S. (2020). *Social media and youth wellbeing: What we know and where we could go*. Connected Learning Lab. <https://clalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Social-Media-and-Youth-Wellbeing-Report.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Vogels, E. A., & Gelles-Watnik, R. (2023). *Teens and social media: Key findings from Pew Research Center surveys*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/04/24/teens-and-social-media-key-findings-from-pew-research-center-surveys/>

<sup>32</sup> Coe, E., Doy, A., Enomoto, K., & Healy, C. (2023). *Gen Z mental health: The impact of tech and social media*. McKinsey Health Institute. <https://www.mckinsey.com/mhi/our-insights/gen-z-mental-health-the-impact-of-tech-and-social-media>

<sup>33</sup> Rideout, V., Peebles, A., Mann, S., & Robb, M. B. (2022). *Common Sense census: Media use by tweens and teens, 2021*. Common Sense. [https://www.common Sense Media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web\\_0.pdf](https://www.common Sense Media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web_0.pdf)

# Definitions

Findings have been analyzed by various subgroups throughout the report. Definitions of groups are provided below. We were not able to include a consistent and accurate measure of household income because of the disparate circumstances in this age group (e.g., living with their parents, at college, working and supporting families of their own).

## Age.

The survey was conducted among 14- to 22-year-olds. Throughout the report, we refer to this population collectively as *teens and young adults*. We also use the terms *youth* and *young people* interchangeably to refer to this 14- to 22-year-old age group. We also discuss two developmentally distinct subpopulations of this broader group: *teens* (age 14 to 17) and *young adults* (age 18 to 22).

## Depressive symptoms.

The survey employed a previously validated scale for assessing depressive symptoms, the Patient Health Questionnaire Depression Scale (PHQ-8). The PHQ-8 (which replicates the PHQ-9 except for the omission of a question about suicide) has been validated for use among adolescents, and the PHQ-8 has been validated among the general population as a measure of current depression.<sup>34</sup> In accordance with the scale protocol, responses were coded numerically and summed so that each respondent was given a total score from zero to 24 points. Respondents who were missing data on scale items were excluded from these analyses.

The scale identifies cutoff points of levels of depressive symptoms: *none* (0 to 4), *mild* (5 to 9), *moderate* (10 to 14), *moderately severe* (15 to 19), and *severe* (20 to 24). The scale protocol indicates that a score of 10 or greater is considered a "yellow flag," drawing attention to a possible clinically significant condition warranting further attention. Therefore, for purposes of data analysis, in this report respondents were classified into three groups by level of depressive symptoms: *none* (0 to 4), *mild* (5 to 9), and *moderate to severe* (10 or higher).

Throughout the report, we refer to respondents who score 5 or higher on the scale as youth "with depressive symptoms." However, it should be recognized that there is an important difference between a score of 10+ on the PHQ-8 and a clinical diagnosis of depression, which is a diagnostic assessment made by a trained, licensed medical or mental health practitioner.

This survey is not intended as a comprehensive assessment or analysis of the extent and severity of depressive symptoms among teens and young adults. The primary purpose of including such measures is to explore how those young people who report current depressive symptoms describe a wide range of digital health and social media behaviors and experiences, and whether their experiences are different from those without current depressive symptoms. The findings presented are descriptive and cross-sectional only; they cannot be interpreted as implying causality. Indeed, the purpose of this particular survey is not to assess what is causing depression, but rather to give voice to young people's experiences and provide data to help those working with or providing services to teens and young adults to better meet their needs.

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<sup>34</sup> Allgaier, A., Pietsch, K., Fruhe, B., Sigl-Glockner, J., & Schulte-Korne, G. (2012). Screening for depression in adolescents: Validity of the Patient Health Questionnaire in pediatric care. *Depression and Anxiety*, 29(10), 906–913. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/da.21971>; Kroenke, K., Strine, T. W., Spitzer, R. L., Williams, J. B., Berry, J. T., & Mokdad, A. H. (2009). The PHQ-8 as a measure of current depression in the general population. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 114(1–3), 163–173. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18752852/>; Richardson, L. P., McCauley, E., Grossman, D. C., McCarty, C., Richards, J., Russo, J. E., Rockhill, C., & Katon, W. (2010). Evaluation of the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) for detecting major depression among adolescents. *Pediatrics*, 126(6), 1117–1123. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2010-0852>

**Gender.**

The terms *men and boys* and *women and girls* include participants who identified as such and are inclusive of people who are trans men or boys and trans women or girls.

It should be noted that there were not enough nonbinary respondents in the study to demonstrate variation, and, as such, we did not include data on these participants in the report.

**LGBTQ+.**

The LGBTQ+ category includes respondents whose sexual orientation is lesbian, gay, bisexual or pansexual, or asexual, rather than straight/heterosexual, or who are transgender or nonbinary. Participants were excluded from analyses related to LGBTQ+ identity if they answered "I don't know" or skipped any survey questions on sexual orientation, transgender identity, or gender identity.

**Race/ethnicity.**

The survey used the standard U.S. Census measures for identifying respondents' race and ethnicity. In the report, the term *Latino* refers to anyone who self-identified as "Hispanic." The term *White* refers to any respondents who identified as "white, non-Hispanic." The term *Black* refers to respondents who self-identified as "black, non-Hispanic." Where findings are broken out by race/ethnicity, results are presented only for White, Black, and Latino respondents. Respondents in other categories, such as Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native American, are included in all findings based on the total sample, but not in the results that are broken out by race/ethnicity, due to smaller sample sizes.

## Hopelab

Hopelab is a transformative social innovation lab and impact investor working to support the mental well-being of adolescents age 10 to 25, especially Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and LGBTQ+ young people. Through philanthropic funding, collaborations, and intergenerational partnerships, Hopelab works at the intersection of tech and mental health alongside entrepreneurs, funders, researchers, and young change-makers to create systems of change and build a thriving future for underserved young people. For more information, visit [hopelab.org](https://hopelab.org).

## Common Sense Media

Common Sense is the nation's leading nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of all kids and families by providing the trustworthy information, education, and independent voice they need to thrive in the 21st century. Our independent research is designed to provide parents and caregivers, educators, health organizations, and policymakers with reliable, independent data on children's use of media and technology and the impact it has on their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development. For more information, visit [commonsensemedia.org/research](https://commonsensemedia.org/research).

## NORC at the University of Chicago

NORC at the University of Chicago is an independent research institution that delivers reliable data and rigorous analysis to guide critical programmatic, business, and policy decisions. Since 1941, NORC has conducted groundbreaking studies, created and applied innovative methods and tools, and advanced principles of scientific integrity and collaboration. Today, government, corporate, and nonprofit clients around the world partner with NORC to transform increasingly complex information into useful knowledge. NORC conducts research in five main areas: Economics, Markets, and the Workforce; Education, Training, and Learning; Global Development; Health and Well-Being; and Society, Media, and Public Affairs. For more information, visit [norc.org](https://norc.org).



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