Where Teens Find Belonging:
Adolescent Connection and Support in Online and Offline Spaces

Date of Release: December 2025

**Boston Children's
Digital Wellness Lab**

PULSE SURVEY

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Executive Summary

This Pulse Survey explores the nuanced relationships between teens' technology use, their sense of belonging online, and their sources of offline social support. We examine how young people experience belonging across both their offline and online lives, and where these experiences diverge or align.

We investigate three core questions:

1. **How do teens experience belonging in their offline and online lives?**

2. **How do young people use virtual spaces to maintain existing offline relationships and to build new online connections, and how do these uses relate to their overall sense of belonging?**

3. **How does the offline support teens receive from friends, family, and school relate to the way they use online platforms and experience belonging in digital spaces?**

HOW WE DEFINE BELONGING

Belonging is the feeling of having a meaningful place in the world, reflecting one's sense of connection, acceptance, and inclusion.

Our findings reveal how young people are navigating belonging across multiple worlds. While teens draw strength from family and friends in their face-to-face interactions, they also turn to digital spaces to maintain existing relationships and forge new ones. These patterns suggest that the relationship between offline support and online belonging and connection, varies by gender, and on the specific platforms teens use and the people they connect with through them.

Key Findings

#1

Teens are connected to others and experience belonging, but many still report feelings of exclusion.

72%

of teens feel they "have a place at the table with others"

70%

say they "have a sense of belonging"

Over 50%

of teens report feeling like an "outsider" (56%) or a "stranger" (52%) when around other people

#2

Most young people experience a strong foundation for belonging from their friends and family, and to a lesser degree from people at school.

3 in 4

teens feel socially supported by friends and family

75%

feel "safe" and "comfortable" at home

57%

reported feeling accepted by others at school

#3

Teens believe they are finding meaningful relationships online, with boys (57%) more likely than girls (43%) to report close online friendships.

1 in 2

teens have "friends" who they know from online spaces, but have never met in person

67%

agree that their friends online are just as important as the friends who they know in person

#4

Teens find different aspects of belonging in different online spaces.

77%

of teens feel connected to others when using messaging or video chat

53%

of teens report feeling emotionally supported when playing games

#5

Offline support is linked to online belonging.

The stronger a teen's friend connectedness and school belonging, the stronger their sense of belonging online, and the more socially active they are in virtual spaces.

Teens who report the lowest levels of offline support consistently have the lowest level of online belonging.

Topline Takeaways

These findings reveal that online spaces are an extension, not a replacement, for offline connection. Teens with strong support systems offline are better positioned to find meaningful belonging online, while those lacking offline support also lack online support. As young people's online and offline worlds continue to merge, families, educators, and platform designers must work together to ensure that digital spaces strengthen, rather than substitute for, the relationships and communities that help teens thrive.

Young people appear to have strong support systems, though levels of connection vary across contexts.

Online friendship seems to be an important aspect of how teens build and maintain connection.

Adolescents' online and offline lives are deeply interconnected, and they experience belonging in both spaces.

As teens build meaningful relationships both online and off, ensuring their safety and wellbeing in digital spaces is critical.

Gendered experiences of what it means to belong across online and offline contexts require further research to be better understood.

INTRODUCTION

Making Sense of How Teens Experience Belonging in Their Online and Offline Lives

The past few years have brought on an intense discussion about loneliness, social connection, and isolation. From the U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on the American Loneliness Epidemic (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023) to the WHO Commission's recent report on the state of loneliness and social connection worldwide (World Health Organization, 2025), it is clear that the ways in which individuals are coming together, or not, is of major concern to those who monitor and care for our mental and physical health. These reports paint a picture of populations whose communities are isolated, anxious, and struggling to connect with each other. This matters because loneliness and social isolation have been shown to increase the risk of stroke, heart disease, diabetes, cognitive decline, and premature death (World Health Organization, 2025). And globally, the prevalence of loneliness is highest among teenagers (World Health Organization, 2025). These converging reports demonstrate the need to focus on fostering belonging and social connection as a key prevention effort for adverse health outcomes.

The role of technology is often emphasized in these conversations, particularly when young people are involved. Digital tools are framed as both an aid to alleviate isolation and a distraction from creating connection. Media coverage often focuses on the potential negatives of these devices, presenting a powerful narrative of technology as a root cause of youth isolation. However, the full impact of online communication on young people's sense of connection is complicated. Research suggests that adolescents' use of social media may support a sense of belonging, social interaction, and validation, but can also cultivate ostracism, social isolation, and exclusion (Allen et al., 2020). The research to date has found links between digital media use and youth wellbeing in both directions, and it is difficult to say with certainty which has a greater impact on the other (Orben, 2020).

Adolescents naturally form in-person connections in school, clubs, and community settings. However, online platforms may provide additional opportunities for developing social support systems, for both adults and young people (Domahidi, 2018). Teens claim that tools for online communication are beneficial for their relationships with friends (e.g., West et al., 2021; Mittmann et al., 2022); however, it remains unclear whether these platforms support meaningful relationships, particularly for youth who face structural and social barriers to connection in offline contexts.

A recent report from the Pew Research Center further illustrates this uncertainty at a national level (Faverio et al., 2025). While some teens in this study (43%) said social media had no effect on their friendships, more reported that using these platforms makes them feel more connected to their friends' lives (74%) and more accepted by others (52%) (Faverio et al., 2025). Young people also cited feeling overwhelmed by drama, pressured to post content, and excluded by friends (Faverio et al., 2025). These results reflect a growing need to better understand the underlying mechanisms of adolescents' belonging, social support, and wellbeing that may drive their relationships across online spaces.

The aim of this Pulse survey is to unearth the nuanced relationships of young people's use of technology, their sense of belonging online, and how these relate to sources of social support. We also investigated how young people experience belonging across their offline and online lives, and how these may differ from one another.

Research Questions & Methods

The survey asked teenagers about aspects of their lives, connections, and belonging across offline and online environments. Participants responded to questions about their overall wellbeing, quality of life, and sources of social support, as well as how they use different online platforms to interact with content and others. Teens also answered items regarding their sense of belonging overall and specifically in virtual spaces.

We define belonging as the extent to which a young person feels they have a meaningful place in their world, reflecting their sense of connection, acceptance, and inclusion.

Our approach was guided by three core research questions:

1. **How do teens experience belonging in their offline and online lives?**

2. **How are young people using virtual spaces to connect with their existing offline networks and build online relationships? And, how are these patterns of connection in online and offline spaces related to their sense of belonging?**

3. **How does adolescents' offline support from friends, family, and school relate to the way they use online platforms, and their sense of belonging across these spaces?**

A nationwide sample of 1,598 adolescents (ages 13-17) were surveyed between July 16 and August 8, 2025, using the Alchemer online research platform. After a set of demographic questions, participants completed items that assessed their belonging, loneliness, and connection to different groups, including friends, family, and school. Participants then answered questions about online friendships and use of different digital media apps and platforms.

A full description of methods along with our survey questions can be found in the Appendix.

INTRODUCTION

Notes About the Findings

Throughout this report, we will discuss several concepts of belonging, connectedness, and social support. These are largely derived from validated measures whose scales have been tested to ensure that each reliably measures its intended topic. We will reference the following concepts:

General Sense of Belonging: An individual's overall sense of connectedness across various contexts. This is measured by the General Belongingness Scale (GBS), a 12-item validated scale designed to be a brief and global instrument that captures a sense of achieved belonging (acceptance/inclusion) and a lack of not belonging (rejection/exclusion) in a balanced manner. The scale accesses belongingness across multiple levels of specificity ranging from "close friends and family, to societal others, to an overarching sense of belonging that transcends interpersonal relationships" (Malone et al., 2012). For the purposes of this survey, we used 11 of the 12 items (Cronbach's α = .85).

Need to Belong: The strong desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments. We measured a Need to Belong with a validated single item that assesses one's motivation to be accepted by others and avoid being shunned (Nichols & Webster, 2013).

Friend Connectedness: Perceived quality of adolescents' relationship and sense of belonging with their friends. This measure of Friend Connectedness is a subscale within the Hemingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness (adolescents' caring for and involvement in specific relationships and contexts within their social ecology) (Karcher, 2001). It contains 6 items (Cronbach's α = .84).

Family Support: Perceptions of emotional and social support afforded by parents and/or caregivers. Family Support is a dimension within the Winchester Adolescent Wellbeing Scale, a person-based and comprehensive measure of adolescent wellbeing (Gennings et al., 2024). This subscale consists of 7 items (Cronbach's α = .86).

School Belonging: Students' perceptions of themselves as being meaningful, important, and valuable within their respective schools. The School Belongingness Scale assesses "an accomplished sense of school belonging and the absence of school belongingness in an impartial way" (Arslan & Duru, 2017). For the purposes of this survey, we based our inquiry on the social acceptance subscale, using 6 items (Cronbach's α = .87).

Online Friendship: The relationship(s) that an individual forms with someone they met online (e.g., gaming, social media, and messages apps). This construct is measured through the Online Friendship Support Scale, which captures the presence and quality of friendship developed in digital spaces (Rose et al., 2025). This scale includes 5 items (Cronbach's α = .92).

For ease of reporting and visualization, we have sometimes combined responses from five-point scales to simplified, three-point scales. For example, "strongly disagree" and "disagree" are combined into "disagree," while "almost always" and "often" are combined into "often." Throughout this report, numerical values might not sum precisely to 100% due to rounding, the presence of multiple response options, or instances of skipped questions or responses.

For ease of analysis and comparison, this report focuses on gender differences between teens who identified as a girl or a boy. Follow-up work that considers all gender and sexual identities is underway.

KEY FINDINGS

KEY FINDINGS

Teens' Sense of Belonging and Social Support

Adolescents live in a socially rich world with opportunities for connection and belonging in both online and offline spaces. To understand the full extent of this depth, it is important to examine social supports, wellbeing outcomes, and sense of belonging that provide the foundation for teens' relationships with others.
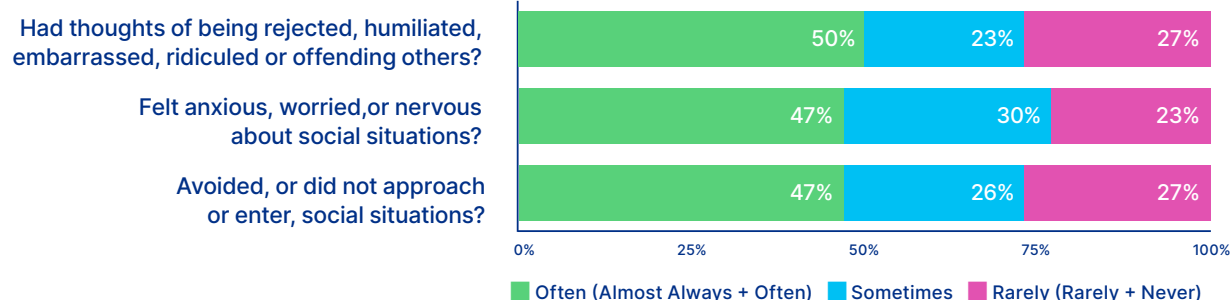
Overall Sense of Belonging and Social Support

By and large, adolescents feel included by others and connected to communities. The majority of participants agreed that they have close bonds with their family and friends (76%); teens also reported feeling that they have "a place at the table with others" (72%) and "a sense of belonging" (70%).

Young people also seem to experience purpose, joy, and life satisfaction. The majority of teens agreed that they are satisfied with their current life (76%) and that they are respected by peers (75%). They also reported having an optimistic outlook on life, with 81% of respondents expressing that they look forward to the future.

The full picture of adolescent connection, however, is more complicated. Over half of teens said they feel like an "outsider" (56%) and a "stranger" (52%) around other people, suggesting that even though young people may have existing social support, they can still experience isolation and loneliness.

Have you ever...

	Often (Almost Always + Often)	Sometimes	Rarely (Rarely + Never)
Had thoughts of being rejected, humiliated, embarrassed, ridiculed or offending others?	50%	23%	27%
Felt anxious, worried, or nervous about social situations?	47%	30%	23%
Avoided, or did not approach or enter, social situations?	47%	26%	27%

How often do you feel isolated from others?

- 21% Often
- 46% Some of the Time
- 34% Hardly Ever
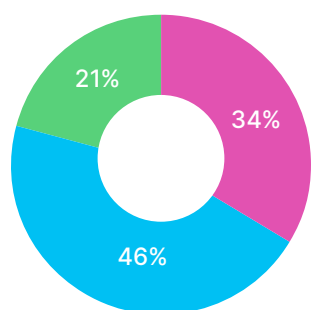
How often do you feel that you lack companionship?

- 16% Often
- 55% Some of the Time
- 29% Hardly Ever
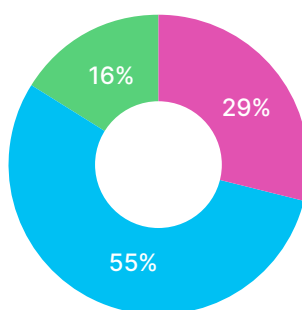
How often do you feel left out?

- 26% Often
- 41% Some of the Time
- 33% Hardly Ever
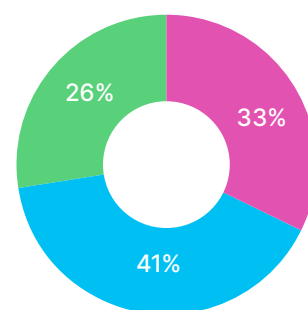
Legend: ■ Often ■ Some of the Time ■ Hardly Ever

KEY FINDINGS | TEENS' SENSE OF BELONGING AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

The social groups young people occupy, and the connections they form within these settings, can play a pivotal role in shaping and reinforcing their identities. Teens reported feeling connected to people in a variety of spaces, but particularly those relating to their extracurricular activities (69%), gender identity (64%), and religion or spirituality (64%). Interestingly, fewer adolescents feel connected to their neighborhoods than to other group settings.

I feel connected to people who are a part of...

	Agree (Strongly Agree + Agree)	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree (Strongly Disagree + Disagree)	N/A
My Extracurricular Activity or Activities	69%	18%	8%	5%
My Gender Identity Group	64%	22%	5%	9%
My Religion/Spirituality	64%	20%	6%	11%
My Race/Ethnicity	62%	22%	6%	10%
My Family's Nationality/Nationalities	58%	23%	8%	11%
My Neighborhood	51%	25%	15%	10%

Families, Friends, and School

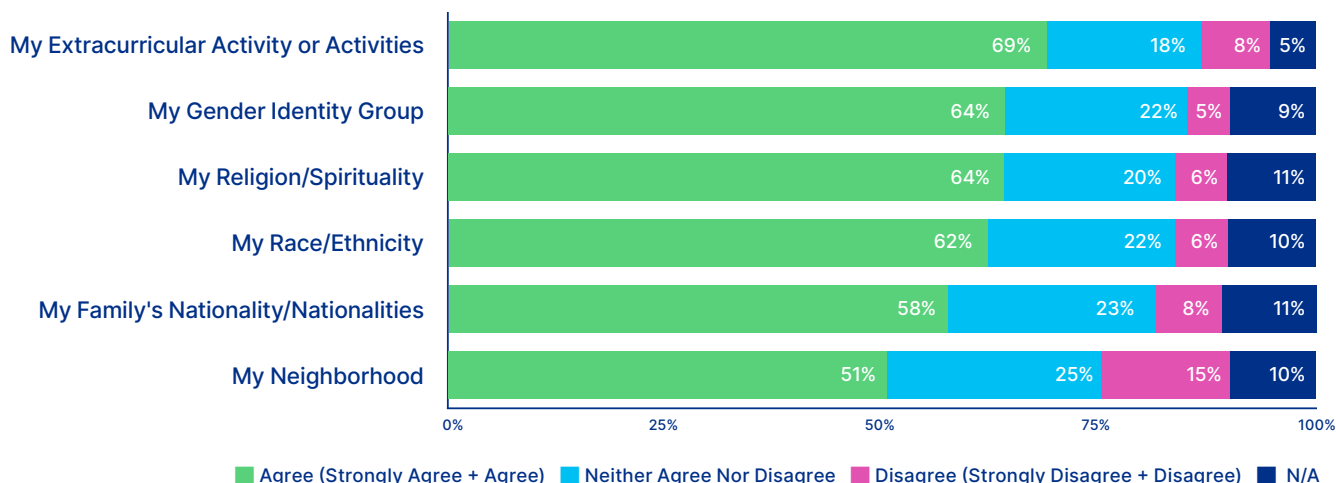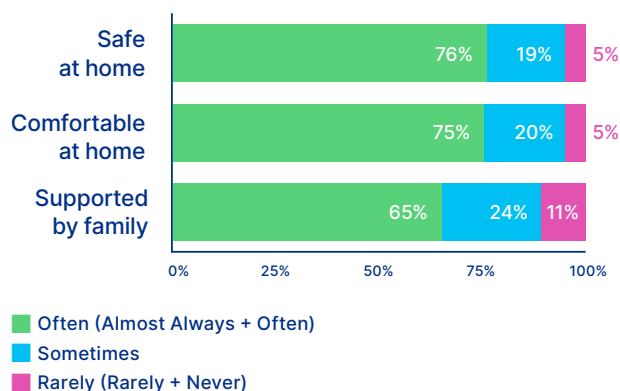Family, friends, and school are three well-documented areas of teens' lives where they create important connections and find crucial social support. Connection to people in these three areas establishes the baseline level of support that adolescents find in their everyday lives.

Teens report feeling strongly supported by their families. Roughly three in four respondents indicated that they often to always feel "safe" (76%) and "comfortable" (75%) at home. Equally important, teens are deeply connected to their friends. For example, more than 70% of participants shared that they have friends they are close to and trust completely (73%) and that spending time with their friends was the best part of their day (67%). Together, these findings point to a population of teens who are strongly supported and connected at home and among friends.

How much have you felt...

	Often (Almost Always + Often)	Sometimes	Rarely (Rarely + Never)
Safe at home	76%	19%	5%
Comfortable at home	75%	20%	5%
Supported by family	65%	24%	11%

Teen Friend Connectedness

	True (Very True + True)	Sort of True	Not Really (Not Really + Not At All)
I have friends I am close to and trust completely.	73%	19%	7%
My friends and I talk about things that are important to us.	72%	21%	7%
My friends and I spend a lot of time talking about things.	72%	20%	8%

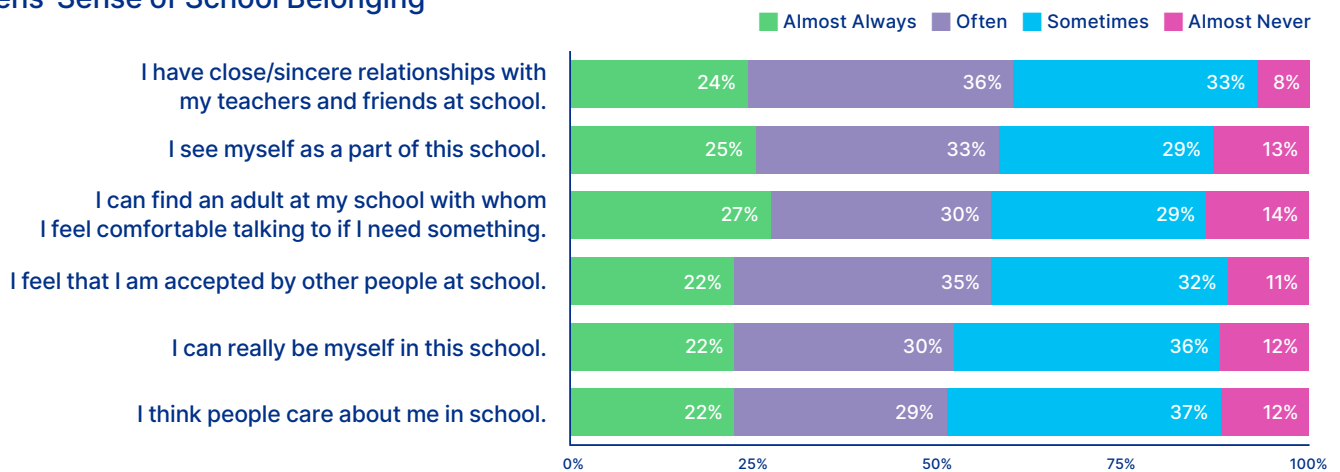**KEY FINDINGS | TEENS' SENSE OF BELONGING AND SOCIAL SUPPORT**

School is a primary social environment where teens build connections among peers and trusted adults; it serves as a key protective factor for young people's wellbeing (Goetschius et. al., 2023). Our findings show that adolescents experienced belonging within their school settings, though potentially to a lesser extent than with their friends and family. For instance, 60% of respondents often to almost always felt like they had close/sincere relationships with their teachers and friends at school. When examining the breakdown by school type, more teens who attended public school (15%) felt like they almost never saw themselves as a part of their school communities compared to those who attended private school (5%). Students in public schools may feel less supported and experience a weaker sense of belonging within their school community compared to their peers in private school. When teens don't feel as strongly supported within their school settings and aren't able to build meaningful connections, they may seek them elsewhere.

Teens' Sense of School Belonging

Legend: Almost Always, Often, Sometimes, Almost Never

Statement	Almost Always	Often	Sometimes	Almost Never
I have close/sincere relationships with my teachers and friends at school.	24%	36%	33%	8%
I see myself as a part of this school.	25%	33%	29%	13%
I can find an adult at my school with whom I feel comfortable talking to if I need something.	27%	30%	29%	14%
I feel that I am accepted by other people at school.	22%	35%	32%	11%
I can really be myself in this school.	22%	30%	36%	12%
I think people care about me in school.	22%	29%	37%	12%

Gender Differences in Perceived Support

While our overall results depict a group of young people who feel connected, optimistic, and supported by their friends and family, there are significant differences between boys and girls.

For example:

- Boys reported a significantly higher need to belong and connection to social groups than girls.

- Girls reported slightly higher levels of loneliness than boys.

- Boys are more satisfied with the number of friends they have and feel more connected to their friends than girls.

- Boys feel a stronger sense of belonging in their schools and generally report more robust connections than girls to people who share aspects of purpose or identity, including extracurricular activities, family nationality, gender identity, sexual identity, race, and religion.

Legend: Girls, Boys

Level of Statistical Significance: (*) = $p < .05$, (***) = $p < .001$

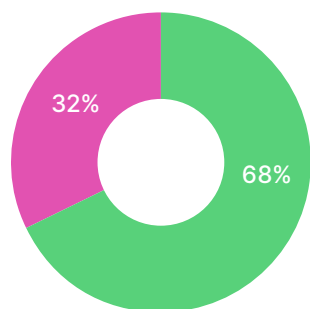|	Girls	Boys
Satisfaction with number of friends***	3.72	3.93
Friend connectedness*	3.84	3.95

Online Worlds, Online Friends
Forging Online Friendships

Friendship is foundational to young people's sense of belonging. In addition to learning about adolescents' overall strength of connection to their friends, we asked teens questions about their online friendships specifically.
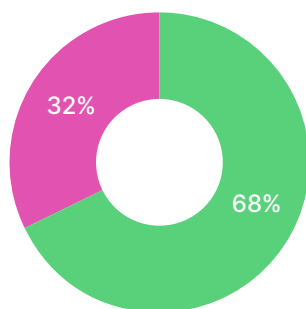
Our findings show that adolescents have close online friendships. Half of the teens who responded to our survey (50%) indicated that they have close friends who they know from online spaces, but have never met in person. There is, however, a noticeable gender difference: more boys report having close online friends than do girls (57% vs. 43%, p < .001).

Online friendships matter to young people. Participants report that these relationships fulfill real social needs, bringing meaning and support to their lives. When asked about all the various types of friendships they cultivate through online platforms, 71% agree that they have developed meaningful relationships online, and most (67%) agree that their friends online are just as important as the friends who they know in person—indicating that they receive social, emotional, and practical support from these relationships.
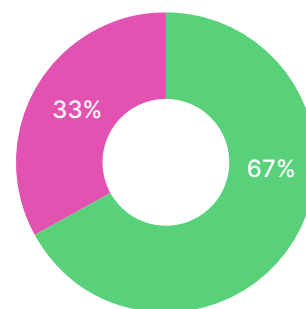
I have friends online that I can talk to, who give good suggestions and advice about my problems.	I have friends online that I can talk to, who care about my feelings and what happens to me.	I have friends online who help me with practical problems, like how to get somewhere or help me with a project.
32% / 68%	32% / 68%	33% / 67%

■ Agree (Strongly Agree + Agree)   ■ Disagree (Strongly Disagree + Disagree)

Furthermore, boys reported higher levels of satisfaction with their online friendships than girls across all elements of support. This suggests that not only are boys more open to forming close relationships online, but that when they do so, they also gain more meaning from these types of connections than girls. It is also worth noting that **boys indicated that they were significantly more open to forming parasocial relationships with Artificial Intelligence (Boys M = 3.46, Girls M = 2.95)** further illustrating an overall trend of boys being more open to online connections.

Together, these findings suggest that teens feel their online friendships can fulfill the same wants and needs that are traditionally ascribed to in-person friendships. These relationships appear to hold real value to young people, challenging the idea that online relationships are limited by context and channels to be solely surface-level connections.
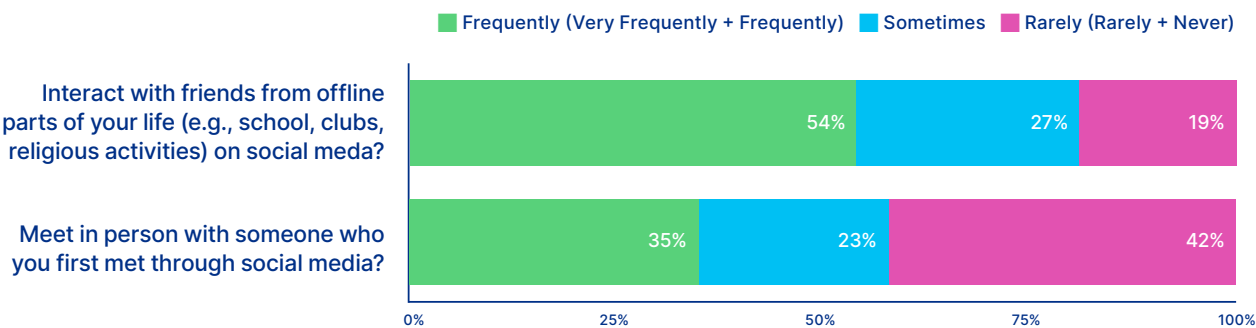
Navigating Digital Environments

Certain online spaces offer many opportunities for interacting with others, both in terms of extending offline friendships and generating new ones. Available activities include posting to discussion boards or forums, sending messages, voice and video calls, and other similar tools for interaction. For online spaces that are designed to provide these opportunities, we asked teens questions about how they meet others and how they maintain those relationships. This information can help us better understand how online relationships develop.

Overall, we found that teens are actively finding new people through interactive online spaces who they consider to be their friends, and they are meeting these individuals in person. For example, **half (51%) of teens who use social media reported that they have met someone on social media who they consider to be their friend.** A noticeable 35% shared that they frequently meet in person with someone who they first met on a social media platform, blending online and offline contexts. (For this survey, we defined social media as: "spaces where people can share photos, videos, and information about themselves or others with audiences in a variety of ways, e.g., TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat." Often, these apps contain multiple ways of interacting with each other, allowing users to customize their experiences.)

Online spaces also serve as touchpoints for teens to maintain friendships with those who they know from their offline lives, such as friends from school, clubs, or religious activities. Over half (54%) of participants indicated that they frequently interact with offline friends online.

How frequently do you...

Legend: ■ Frequently (Very Frequently + Frequently)   ■ Sometimes   ■ Rarely (Rarely + Never)

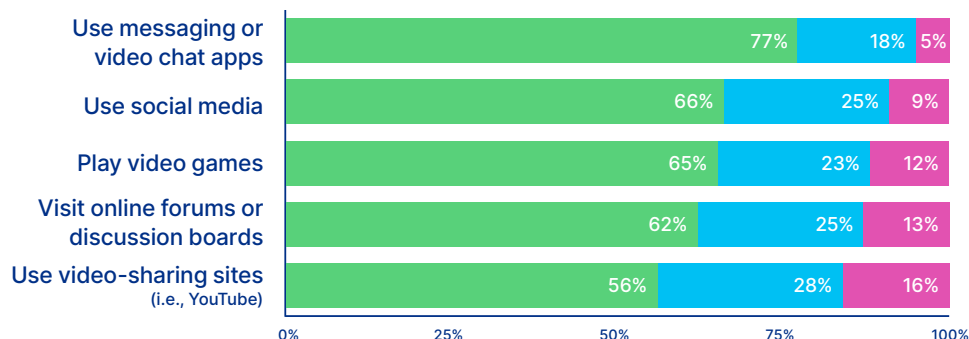|	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely
Interact with friends from offline parts of your life (e.g., school, clubs, religious activities) on social meda?	54%	27%	19%
Meet in person with someone who you first met through social media?	35%	23%	42%

Experiencing Belonging in Virtual Spaces

Friendships, however, are just one aspect of teens' overall sense of belonging. What about the context: are certain online spaces, functions, and features more conducive to generating connection than others?
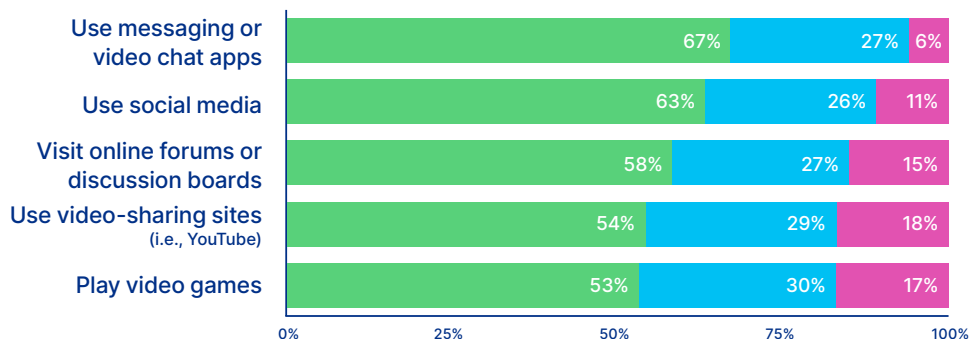
To answer this question, we investigated the ways in which adolescents interact with five domains of online life: video-sharing sites (i.e., YouTube); video games; social media; online forums and discussion boards; and messaging and video chat apps. These domains of online environments reflect the types of activities, functionalities, and connection points that each space offers.

Overall, it is clear that young people find connection, emotional support, and community online, with more than half of participants finding each of these components of belonging across all online platforms. It is also clear, however, that this sense of belonging is not uniform: different environments and functionalities lend themselves to strengthening different aspects of belonging. Adolescents seem to find the most belonging through using messaging or video chat apps and social media, and the least through video sharing sites.

I feel connected to others when I...

Platform	Agree	Neither	Disagree
Use messaging or video chat apps	77%	18%	5%
Use social media	66%	25%	9%
Play video games	65%	23%	12%
Visit online forums or discussion boards	62%	25%	13%
Use video-sharing sites (i.e., YouTube)	56%	28%	16%

I feel emotionally supported by others when I...

Platform	Agree	Neither	Disagree
Use messaging or video chat apps	67%	27%	6%
Use social media	63%	26%	11%
Visit online forums or discussion boards	58%	27%	15%
Use video-sharing sites (i.e., YouTube)	54%	29%	18%
Play video games	53%	30%	17%

I feel like I am part of a community when I...

Platform	Agree	Neither	Disagree
Use social media	66%	25%	9%
Use messaging or video chat apps	65%	28%	7%
Play video games	63%	26%	12%
Visit online forums or discussion boards	62%	26%	11%
Use video-sharing sites (i.e., YouTube)	58%	29%	13%

■ Agree (Strongly Agree + Agree) ■ Neither Agree Nor Disagree ■ Disagree (Strongly Disagree + Disagree)

KEY FINDINGS | ONLINE WORLDS, ONLINE FRIENDS
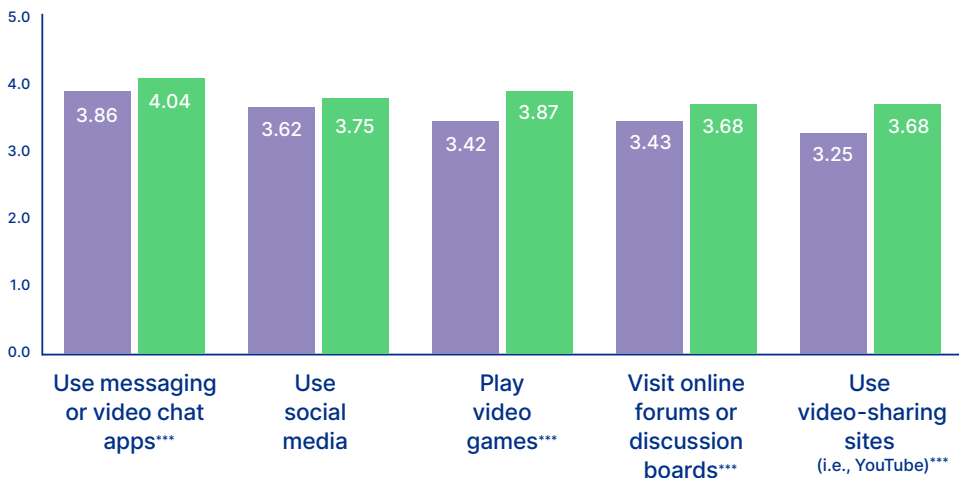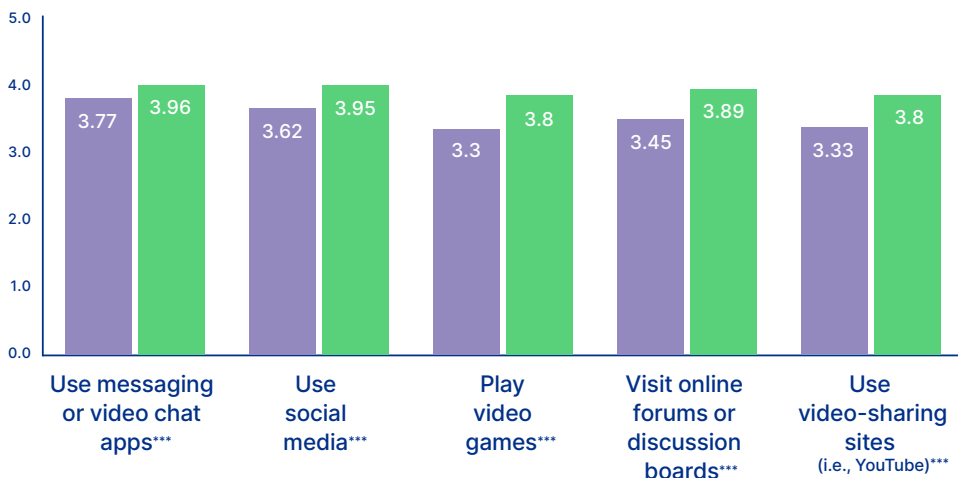
Consistent with our other observed gender differences, boys consistently find stronger connection, emotional support, and community in online spaces than girls. This difference was consistent across domains, and was particularly strong for video games.
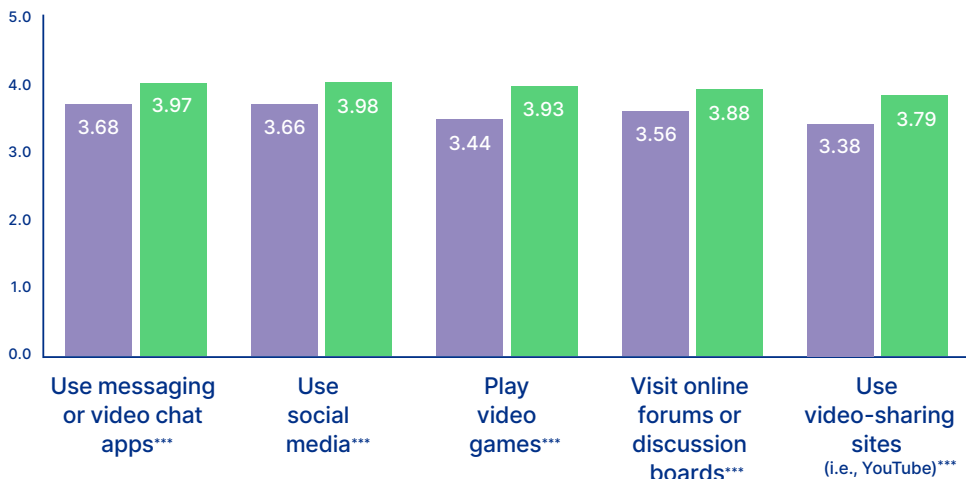
I feel connected to others when I...

	Girls	Boys
Use messaging or video chat apps***	3.86	4.04
Use social media	3.62	3.75
Play video games***	3.42	3.87
Visit online forums or discussion boards***	3.43	3.68
Use video-sharing sites (i.e., YouTube)***	3.25	3.68

I feel emotionally supported by others when I...

	Girls	Boys
Use messaging or video chat apps***	3.77	3.96
Use social media***	3.62	3.95
Play video games***	3.3	3.8
Visit online forums or discussion boards***	3.45	3.89
Use video-sharing sites (i.e., YouTube)***	3.33	3.8

I feel like I am part of a community when I...

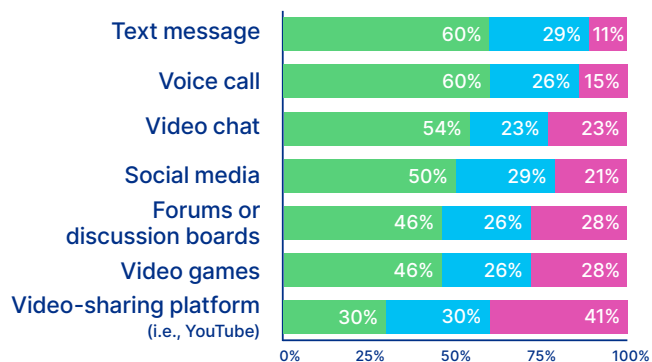|	Girls	Boys
Use messaging or video chat apps***	3.68	3.97
Use social media***	3.66	3.98
Play video games***	3.44	3.93
Visit online forums or discussion boards***	3.56	3.88
Use video-sharing sites (i.e., YouTube)***	3.38	3.79

■ Girls ■ Boys
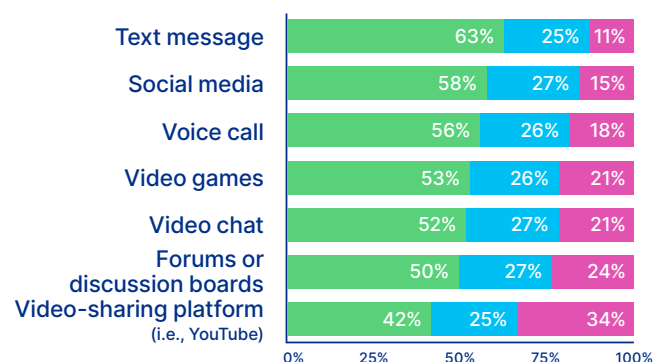Level of Statistical Significance: (***) = $p < .001$

KEY FINDINGS | ONLINE WORLDS, ONLINE FRIENDS

Teens consistently showed that they most often use online tools to communicate with family, close offline friends, and other offline peers, indicating that these spaces play an important role in the ways that young people deepen and maintain these relationships.
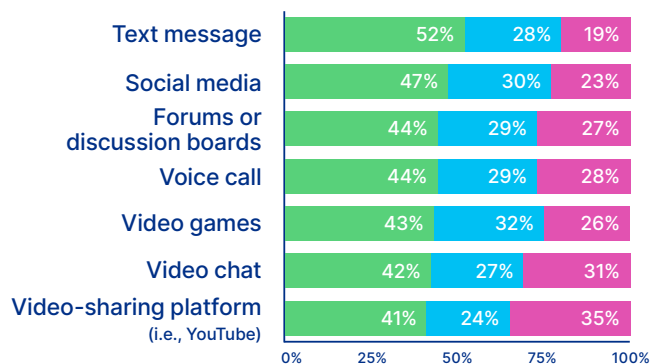
How often do you interact with **family** using...

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
Text message	60%	29%	11%
Voice call	60%	26%	15%
Video chat	54%	23%	23%
Social media	50%	29%	21%
Forums or discussion boards	46%	26%	28%
Video games	46%	26%	28%
Video-sharing platform (i.e., YouTube)	30%	30%	41%

How often do you interact with **close friends** from your offline life when using...

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
Text message	63%	25%	11%
Social media	58%	27%	15%
Voice call	56%	26%	18%
Video games	53%	26%	21%
Video chat	52%	27%	21%
Forums or discussion boards	50%	27%	24%
Video-sharing platform (i.e., YouTube)	42%	25%	34%

How often do you interact with **other friends or peers** from your offline life when using...

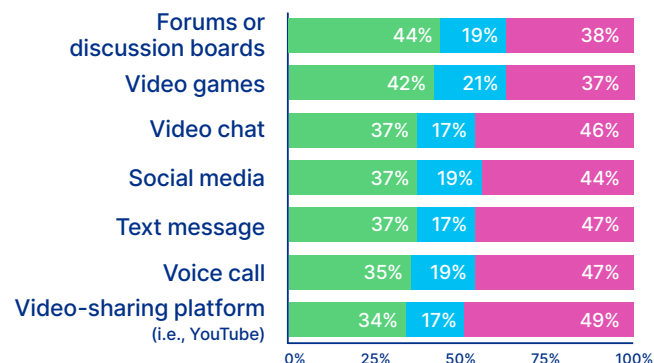|	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
Text message	52%	28%	19%
Social media	47%	30%	23%
Forums or discussion boards	44%	29%	27%
Voice call	44%	29%	28%
Video games	43%	32%	26%
Video chat	42%	27%	31%
Video-sharing platform (i.e., YouTube)	41%	24%	35%

Not only are virtual spaces important for maintaining offline relationships, but they offer chances to connect with online friends and strangers. It is worth noting that, across online environments, over a third of participants indicated that they interact often with both online friends and strangers.

How often do you interact with **online friends** when using...

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
Social media	44%	22%	34%
Forums or discussion boards	43%	25%	32%
Text message	43%	23%	34%
Video games	42%	25%	33%
Voice call	41%	22%	38%
Video chat	38%	21%	41%
Video-sharing platform (i.e., YouTube)	36%	24%	40%
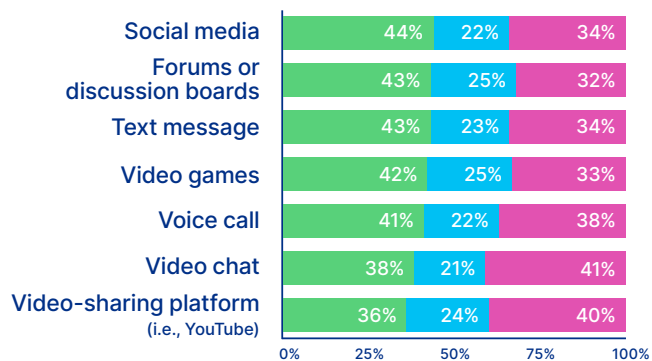
How often do you interact with **strangers** when using...

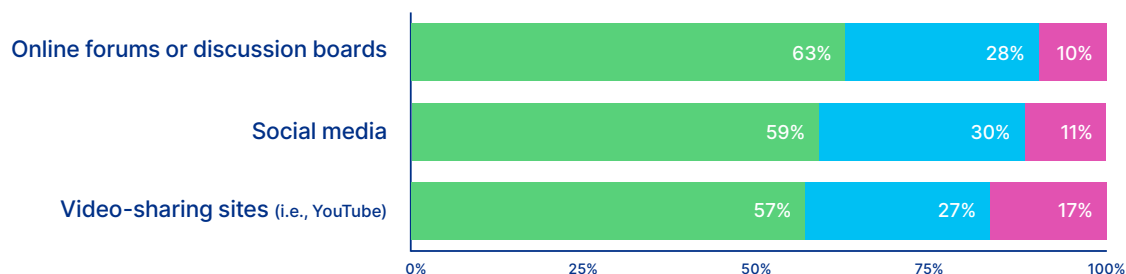|	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
Forums or discussion boards	44%	19%	38%
Video games	42%	21%	37%
Video chat	37%	17%	46%
Social media	37%	19%	44%
Text message	37%	17%	47%
Voice call	35%	19%	47%
Video-sharing platform (i.e., YouTube)	34%	17%	49%

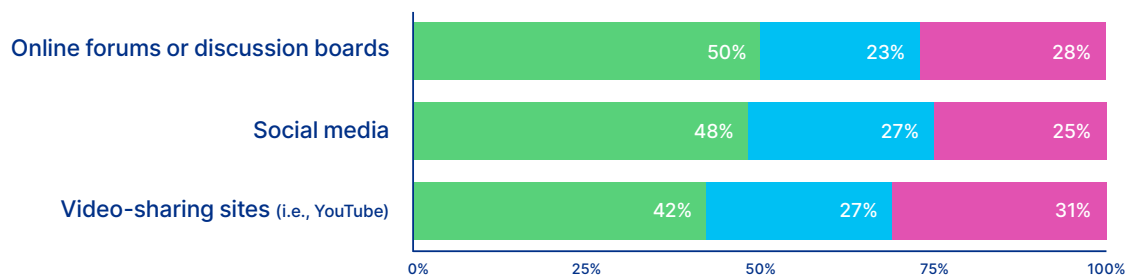■ Often (Almost Always + Often) ■ Sometimes ■ Rarely (Rarely + Never)

KEY FINDINGS | ONLINE WORLDS, ONLINE FRIENDS

Teens use different online platforms to explore aspects of their identity such as their gender, hobbies, or interest groups. Our results show that young people use online spaces, specifically video-sharing sites, online forums, and social media, to engage with content and communities related to these elements of who they are.

How often do you engage with content related to specific interest groups (e.g., fandoms, hobbies, gaming, sports)?

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
Online forums or discussion boards	63%	28%	10%
Social media	59%	30%	11%
Video-sharing sites (i.e., YouTube)	57%	27%	17%

How often do you engage with content related to your identity (e.g., your gender identity, ethnicity, religion, culture)?

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
Online forums or discussion boards	50%	23%	28%
Social media	48%	27%	25%
Video-sharing sites (i.e., YouTube)	42%	27%	31%

■ Often (Almost Always + Often)   ■ Sometimes   ■ Rarely (Rarely + Never)

A Closer Look at Offline Support and Online Belonging

To examine how offline belonging and support relate to online belonging and activity, we divided participants into three groups based on their scores in each offline measure of connection (e.g., general belonging, family support, school belonging, and friend connectedness). The bottom 25% represents adolescents with the lowest levels of the given type of offline belonging or support, the middle 50% includes those with moderate levels, and the top 25% includes those reporting the highest levels. This grouping allows for clearer comparisons across different degrees of offline support, revealing whether patterns of online belonging and activity increase linearly, peak in the middle range, or differ across contexts.

Offline Social Support and Online Belonging

The participants in the middle 50% of offline belonging (measured as general belonging in Figure A, family support in Figure B, friend connectedness in Figure C, and school belonging in Figure D) reported stronger feelings of platform-specific online belonging than other adolescents in Figures A and B. This was true across most platforms. Adolescents reporting the least offline belonging (lowest 25%) tended to report the lowest levels of platform-specific belonging with those reporting the highest (top 25%) falling in between.

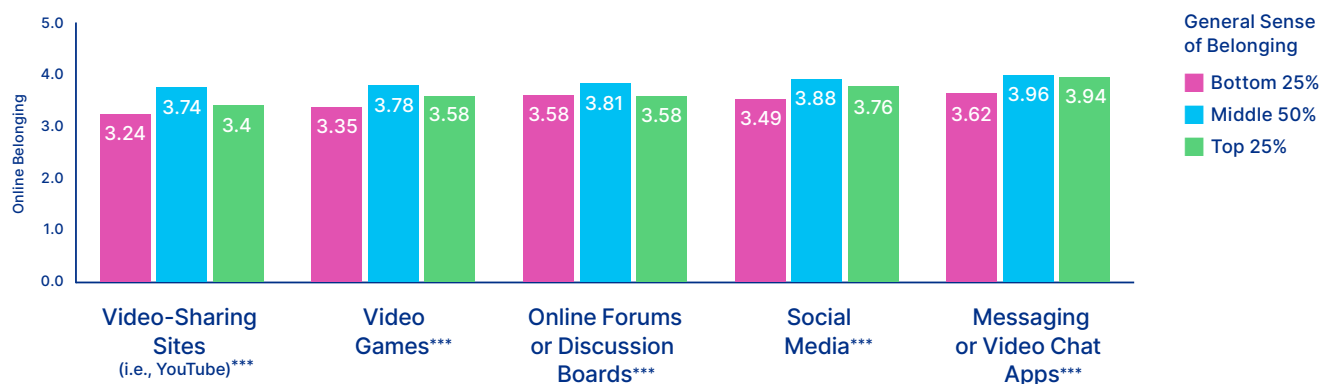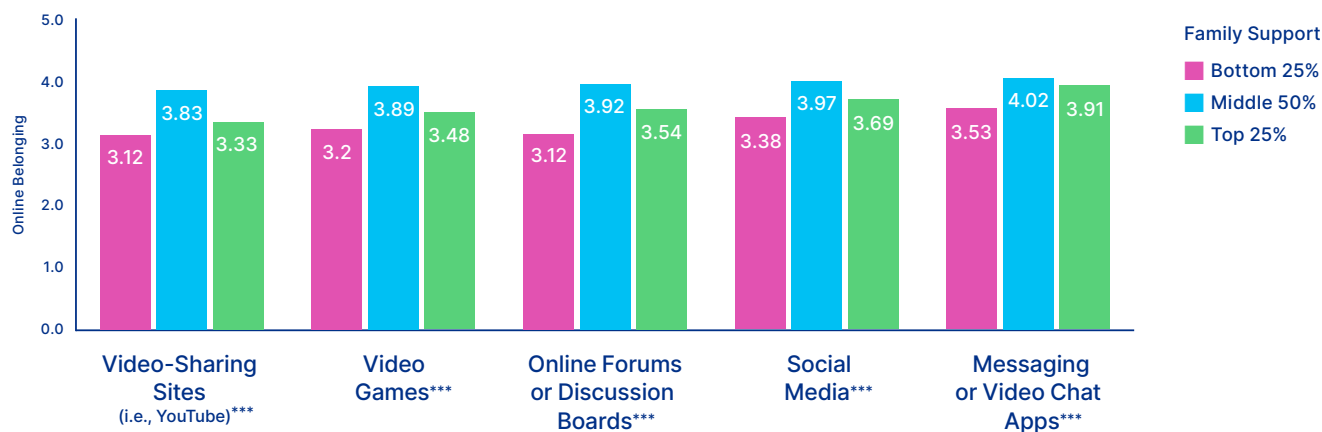### Figure A. **General Sense of Belonging** and Platform-Specific Belonging

General Sense of Belonging
- Bottom 25%
- Middle 50%
- Top 25%

Video-Sharing Sites (i.e., YouTube)***: 3.24 / 3.74 / 3.4
Video Games***: 3.35 / 3.78 / 3.58
Online Forums or Discussion Boards***: 3.58 / 3.81 / 3.58
Social Media***: 3.49 / 3.88 / 3.76
Messaging or Video Chat Apps***: 3.62 / 3.96 / 3.94

Figure B. **Family Support** and Platform-Specific Belonging

Family Support
- Bottom 25%
- Middle 50%
- Top 25%

Video-Sharing Sites (i.e., YouTube)***: 3.12 / 3.83 / 3.33
Video Games***: 3.2 / 3.89 / 3.48
Online Forums or Discussion Boards***: 3.12 / 3.92 / 3.54
Social Media***: 3.38 / 3.97 / 3.69
Messaging or Video Chat Apps***: 3.53 / 4.02 / 3.91

Level of Statistical Significance: (***) = p < .001

KEY FINDINGS | A CLOSER LOOK AT OFFLINE SUPPORT AND ONLINE BELONGING

While the "middle leads" pattern was common for general sense of belonging and family support, Figures C and D below show a different pattern for perceived school belonging and friendship connection. Here, adolescents with the highest friendship connection or school belonging (top 25% in either) reported the strongest experiences of belonging online, followed by those in the middle range, and then the lowest 25%.

Figure C: **Friendship Connection** and Platform-Specific Belonging
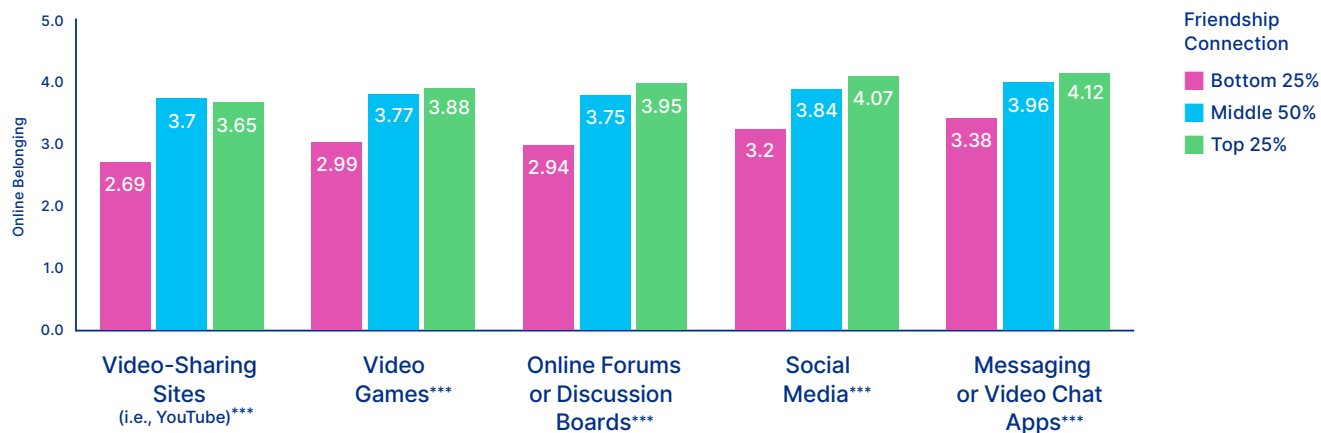
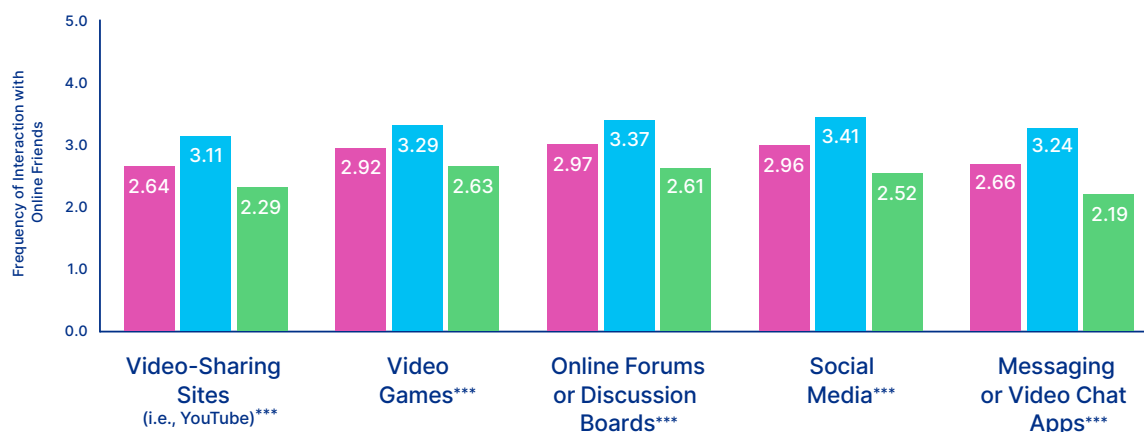
Figure D: **School Belonging** and Platform-Specific Belonging
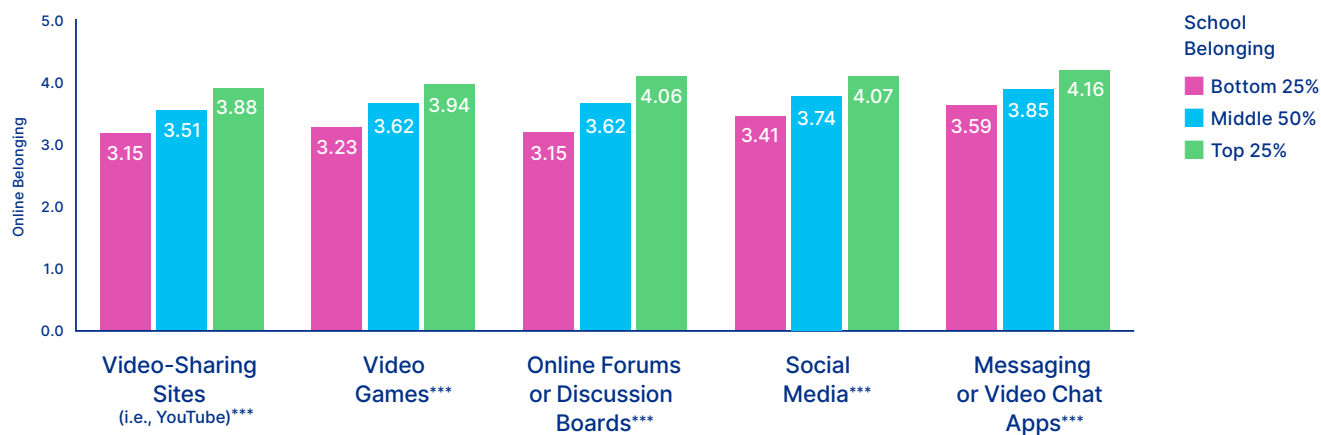
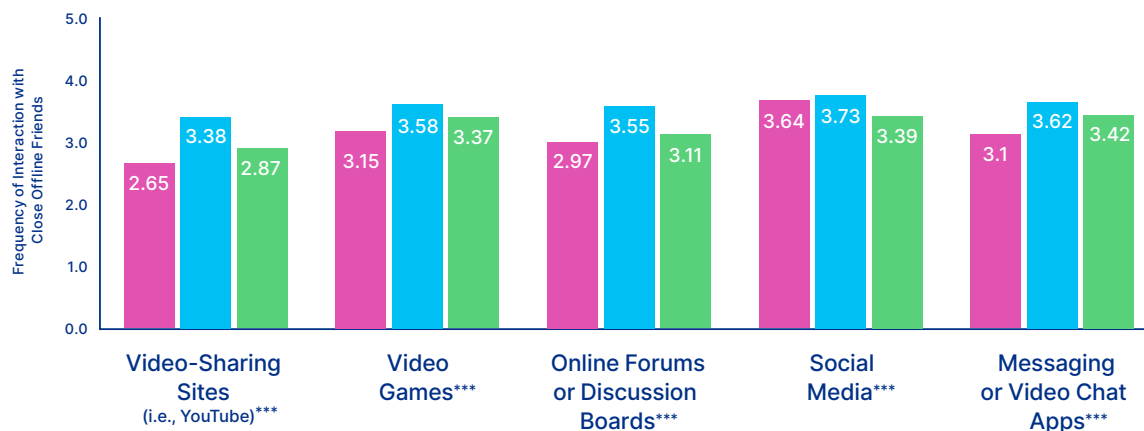Level of Statistical Significance: (***) = p < .001

Offline Social Support and Online Activities

The "middle leads" pattern also emerged when youths' online social activities were compared according to their levels of offline belonging or family support. Adolescents in the middle 50% of general belonging or family support tended to be the most socially active online. However, the differences between the top 25% and bottom 25% were less consistent. Notably, adolescents in the bottom 25% often reported higher engagement with their online friends, whereas those in the top 25% showed greater engagement with their offline close friends. The figures below demonstrate this trend between general belonging, and interacting with friends from different places in a young person's life.

General Sense of Belonging and Interacting with **Online Friends**

Frequency of Interaction with Online Friends

	Bottom 25%	Middle 50%	Top 25%
Video-Sharing Sites (i.e., YouTube)***	2.64	3.11	2.29
Video Games***	2.92	3.29	2.63
Online Forums or Discussion Boards***	2.97	3.37	2.61
Social Media***	2.96	3.41	2.52
Messaging or Video Chat Apps***	2.66	3.24	2.19

General Sense of Belonging and Interacting with **Close Offline Friends**

Frequency of Interaction with Close Offline Friends

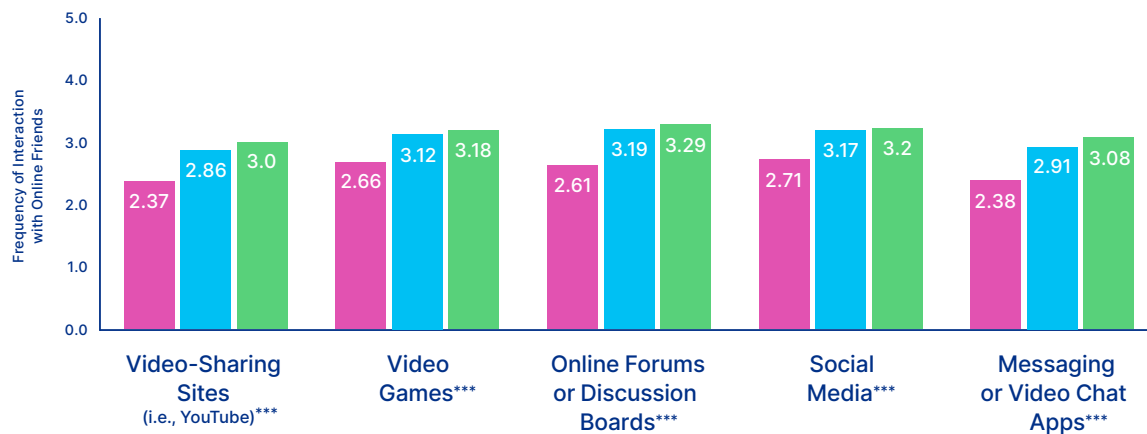|	Bottom 25%	Middle 50%	Top 25%
Video-Sharing Sites (i.e., YouTube)***	2.65	3.38	2.87
Video Games***	3.15	3.58	3.37
Online Forums or Discussion Boards***	2.97	3.55	3.11
Social Media***	3.64	3.73	3.39
Messaging or Video Chat Apps***	3.1	3.62	3.42

General Sense of Belonging: ■ Bottom 25% ■ Middle 50% ■ Top 25%

Level of Statistical Significance: (***) = $p < .001$
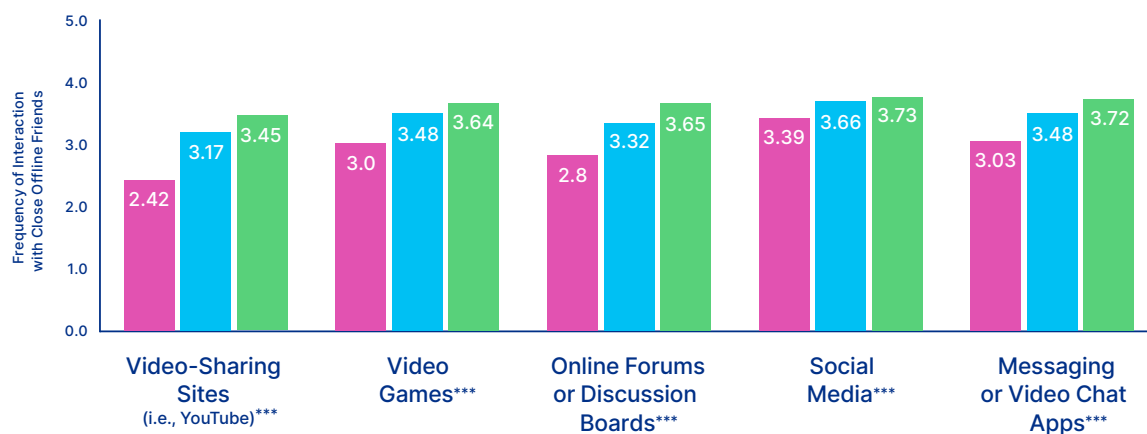
KEY FINDINGS | A CLOSER LOOK AT OFFLINE SUPPORT AND ONLINE BELONGING

A different pattern was evident when school belonging and friend connection was considered. Adolescents reporting the most of these types of connection (top 25%) were the most socially active online, followed by those reporting less connection (middle 50%), and, finally, those reporting the least (bottom 25%). As school belonging increases, teens report more video game co-play (with friends, online friends, strangers; in the same room or apart), more communication while playing (text/emojis and real-time voice/video), sharing content via video-sharing sites, interacting with others on social media, and messaging. As friend connection increases, so do social/interactive activities (e.g., playing with others, using in-game voice/chat, participating on video-sharing sites/forums/social media, group chats/servers, and messaging), and engagement with social content (liking, saving, commenting, posting, sharing). The two figures that follow show an example of this pattern, examining school belonging and interacting with friends from offline and online spaces.

School Belonging and Interacting with **Online Friends**

	Video-Sharing Sites (i.e., YouTube)***	Video Games***	Online Forums or Discussion Boards***	Social Media***	Messaging or Video Chat Apps***
Bottom 25%	2.37	2.66	2.61	2.71	2.38
Middle 50%	2.86	3.12	3.19	3.17	2.91
Top 25%	3.0	3.18	3.29	3.2	3.08

School Belonging and Interacting with **Close Offline Friends**

	Video-Sharing Sites (i.e., YouTube)***	Video Games***	Online Forums or Discussion Boards***	Social Media***	Messaging or Video Chat Apps***
Bottom 25%	2.42	3.0	2.8	3.39	3.03
Middle 50%	3.17	3.48	3.32	3.66	3.48
Top 25%	3.45	3.64	3.65	3.73	3.72

School Belonging: ■ Bottom 25% ■ Middle 50% ■ Top 25%

Level of Statistical Significance: (***) = $p < .001$

Two Major Trends in the Links Between Online and Offline Belonging

Exploring how teens' offline social support structures relate to their online belonging and social activities reveals two major trends: a "middle leads" pattern in outcomes by general belonging and family support; and a positive, linear trend in outcomes by school belonging and friend connectedness.

One possible explanation for the "middle leads" pattern is a difference in social support and social motivation across different quartiles of teens. The top 25% of adolescents, having the most family support or sense of belonging, have high levels of social support that may diminish their need to seek belonging online. At the other extreme, the lowest 25% of teens may have a strong motivation to seek connection online but do not have the social structures or existing friend groups that may be necessary to satisfy that motivation. Finally, the middle 50% of teens have a level of social support that enables them to follow through on a motivation to grow connections in new spaces, such as online ones, resulting in the highest level of online belonging.

The two areas of offline social support that exhibit a positive, linear trend with online belonging and activity are domains that map closely onto teens' most relevant social spaces. Compared to family support, for example, school and friends represent groups in which teens directly connect with others. This trend reflects a conventional "more is more" model: the more friends or support one has offline, the more connection that a teen has online as well.

CONCLUSION & FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Conclusion & Future Implications

Overall, this report demonstrates that teenagers are finding belonging across many contexts and through multiple modalities.

Young people appear to have robust support systems; however, levels of connection vary across contexts.

Teens reported feeling socially connected to their families and friends, and to a slightly lesser degree within their school communities. This pattern suggests that while home and peer relationships provide a strong basis for support, school settings may offer a less consistent source of connection and community for teens. Strengthening school belonging through more inclusive practices, ensuring that students have trusted adult mentors, and providing opportunities for meaningful participation could help address this gap.

Our findings suggest that online friendships have become an important part of how teens build and maintain connections.

Digital spaces allow users to stay in touch with existing friends and form new ones; however, not all platforms foster the same sense of closeness or support. These differences suggest that certain online environments (e.g., messaging) are more conducive to belonging than others (e.g., video-sharing sites), and that boys and girls may engage with or benefit from these spaces differently. Supporting healthy online relationships means treating them as real and meaningful, and it is imperative to encourage safe, prosocial engagement while helping young people recognize the limits and risks of connecting with others digitally.

The identified links between offline social support and online belonging further illustrate how teens navigate online and offline spaces.

One of our most consistent findings was that young people with the lowest level of general belonging, family support, friend connectedness, or school belonging also had the lowest levels of online belonging. Such a pattern counters a compensatory model in which teens with little support in their offline lives turn to online spaces to fill these gaps. Furthermore, these findings do not support the idea that an adolescent lacking a specific aspect of offline support could compensate for it with online connections. This result, coupled with the linear, positive relationship we found between friends, school belonging, and online belonging, further positions online platforms as more effective for creating connections with those from offline networks than for forming new ones.

Finding belonging online comes with safety considerations.

As mentioned above, young people seem to take their online connections seriously, and a notable third of teens interact often with both online friends and strangers. With a motivation for connection comes a susceptibility to harm. Organizations creating online spaces should, therefore, take measures to ensure that adolescents have the tools to find authentic relationships that are also safe in both emotional and practical senses. These endeavors will be of particular import to teen boys, who seem significantly more open to finding friendship and community in online spaces when compared to girls.

CONCLUSION & FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The scope of this report set out to explore how teens connect with others across virtual and offline spaces, and how this relates to their structures of social support. However, more work is needed to examine the specific sentiments, emotions, and topics through which teens create community online, and whether these specific components of community lead to positive or negative wellbeing outcomes.

This report adds nuance to the prevailing narrative that teen boys are generally more lonely and disconnected from their peers when compared to girls.

Our findings consistently found that boys were more connected and active online than girls, yet there was no significant difference between their levels of offline, general sense of belonging. These results suggest that the experience of belonging online may have different conditions than belonging in offline contexts—and that these conditions meet gendered expectations of connectedness differently. A recent report by Common Sense Media, for example, found that half (52%) of adolescent boys agree that they can be themselves online without being judged, and fewer participants (less than 30%) agreed with statements that they had to be tough or mean to be accepted online (Robb & Mann, 2025). Would the same hold true for girls? More research is needed to better understand what belonging, in both a general and online sense, means across genders.

Overall, our results describe an adolescent population that is well-supported by family and friends and that experiences meaningful connection with others online across a range of virtual spaces. However, this view is complicated with indications that online connections are more fulfilling when they are with close, offline friends and family than with people who teens do not know, and that teen boys consistently find more and stronger belonging online. The findings point to opportunities to strengthen the ways in which young people across the United States find belonging online and open inquiries into who these existing systems, online and offline, are serving more successfully. As young people's online and offline worlds continue to merge, it will be important to consider how to best support their growth of deep, meaningful connections across contexts.

APPENDIX

Methodology

To explore teens' experiences and perceptions around the connections they form in their online and offline lives, the Digital Wellness Lab conducted a nationwide survey from July 16th through August 8th, 2025 of 1,598 U.S. teens, ages 13-17, representing a diverse range of identities and backgrounds. Prior to the main data collection phase, a preliminary survey was launched July 2-3, 2025 to assess completion rates and response patterns. This survey soft launch involved 101 respondents, whose data were subsequently excluded from the final analysis for any questions that were altered to reflect adjustments made after the soft launch. Three attention check questions were included in the survey to ensure that participants continued to read and respond appropriately to the items; those who answered these questions incorrectly (N = 597) were disqualified.

The final survey administered contained 113 multiple choice items largely consisting of likert-scale and matrix-style questions. All participants completed a series that covered demographic information, social support, and online friendship and AI use. Respondents were then piped through another series of questions regarding their digital media use, based on whether they used certain online platforms.

For the full questionnaire, click here. In case of item use, please use the citation for this Pulse Report. For items or measures developed by others, we have embedded citations within the survey for reference.

Demographic Breakdown

- **Age:** 13: 16.8% (N = 269); 14: 21.8% (N = 348); 15: 20.8% (N = 332); 16: 21% (N = 336); 17: 19.6% (N = 313)

- **Gender identity:**

  What is your gender identity? Female: 49.2% (N = 787); Male: 48.6% (N = 777); Non-binary: 1.2% (N = 19) ; Other identity: 0.5% (N = 8); Prefer not to answer: 0.4% (N = 7).

  Do you identify as transgender, or identify with a different gender than the one you were assigned at birth? Yes: 10.3% (N = 164); No: 88.4% (N = 1,411); Prefer not to answer: 1.3% (N = 21)

- **Race/ethnicity*:** Multi-racial: 3.5% (N = 56); American Indian/Alaskan Native: 1.3% (N = 21); Asian: 3.8% (N = 61); Black/African American: 8.1% (N = 130); Native Hawaiian: 6% (N = 10); Middle Eastern/North African: 0.8% (N = 12); White: 58.6% (N = 937); Hispanic: 22.1% (N = 354); Other: 0.5% (N = 8); Prefer not to answer: 0.1% (N = 2); (Missing, 0.5%)

- **School breakdown:** Public School: 72.9% (N = 1165); Private School (religious or secular): 22.2% (N = 355); Homeschool: 4% (N = 64); Prefer not to answer: 0.9% (N = 14)

**Respondents could choose as many categories as they wanted; in order to avoid counting participants twice, any respondent who selected "Hispanic/Latino" was included only in the Hispanic/Latino category regardless of other race/ethnicity selections they made. Those non-Hispanic participants who selected multiple ethnicity choices are included in the "Multi-racial" category. This approach results in the above-listed mutually exclusive categories.*

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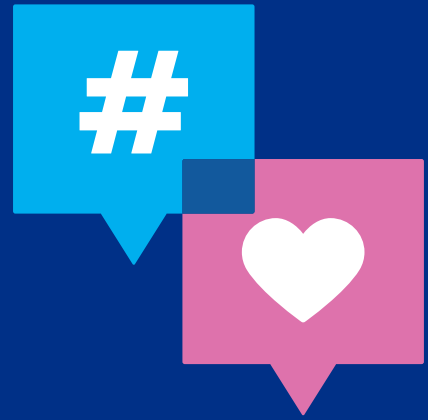
The Digital Wellness Lab at Boston Children's Hospital seeks to understand and promote positive and healthy digital media experiences for young people, from birth through young adulthood.

For more information about our work, please contact us at
dwl@childrens.harvard.edu or visit