REALITY BITES:
TEENS AND SCREENS 2024

Authors

Atlas Burrus
Alisha Hines, PhD
Stephanie Rivas-Lara, ACSW
Yalda T. Uhls, MBA, PhD

Affiliation

Center for Scholars & Storytellers
University of California, Los Angeles

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FAST FUNDERS FOR ADOLESCENT SCIENCE TRANSLATION

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Center for Scholars & Storytellers (CSS), based in the Psychology Department at the University of California, Los Angeles, designed Teens and Screens to investigate American adolescents' perspective about the media they engage with and consume. This yearly study aims to elevate the voices of adolescents, hoping to have an impact on the media landscape that's a part of their daily lives. We are grateful to the Funders of Adolescent Science Translation (FAST), the Walt Disney Company, and Roblox for their support of this independent research.

In August of 2024, 1,644 adolescents (ages 10-24) were asked about their perceptions of various types of popular media, including TV shows, movies, video games, and social media. To compare data from previous years, questions included in prior surveys were asked again this year. More questions were added to better understand new trends and ideas in the adolescent media space. **Survey questions regarding romance and sex were not shown to younger adolescents (ages 10-13)**. Definitions for certain phrases/words were included to ensure participants that participants understood the intended meaning of each question. The demographic makeup of participants closely reflects the U.S. Census in regards to race and gender. Descriptive statistics were calculated for the full sample, with further analysis investigating differences within various demographics, including age groups, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, neurodiversity, and geographic location. Please see the methods section for more information and a complete description of the sample

This year for the first time, we asked questions about gaming. In order to ensure those findings are easily located, we created a pull out section here to share these important results.

ABOUT CSS

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a developmental stage of change and opportunity. Unfortunately, the common perception of adolescence lags behind scientific research, and popular media often reinforces harmful stereotypes. Between the ages of 10 to 24, young people are changing rapidly — physically, emotionally and cognitively. [1] This stage of development is critical for identity development as it is a period of cognitive flexibility (thus, when brains are most receptive to change). During this time of great change, adolescents are discovering who they are through their environment. The messages come from their family, culture, hometown, friends, school, and increasingly, from media, which is sometimes referred to as the new third space.

An alarming proportion of today's adolescents are facing unprecedented mental health challenges, and they are inundated with storytelling media that exerts a powerful influence. Media is more present than ever before, with many estimates indicating that youth spend up to 9 hours on screens outside of school. Screens and the internet touch every aspect of a young person's life — school, communication with friends, and leisure activities. Adolescents learn from these images and messages; thus, storytellers can and should be mindful of the social-emotional influence they have on the next generation.

Adolescents have their own voices, and desperately want to use them. Too often, adults make assumptions on what is best for youth based on their personal memories, or their own perception and casual conversational understanding. **Ask adolescents what they wish to see, because they have answers for you. Adolescents now yearn for content that's more than stereotypes. They want nuanced stories of hope, exploration, and friendship, as this report shows.**

At the Center for Scholars & Storytellers, we are trying to uplift youth to use their own voices. This report consists entirely of insights gleaned directly from America's youth. We use their own words and tell you exactly what they've told us.

Want to see more from the Gen Z author about their interpretation of these findings? Read more here.

See teen reactions to these findings here.

DEFINITIONS

The following terms were explained to participants as listed below.

Diverse: The representation of individuals within marginalized groups, such as People of Color, the LGBTQIA+ community, the disability community, and more.

Media and/or Entertainment Media: Content that users see on TV, streaming services (Netflix, Disney+, etc.), social media (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, etc.), video games, and more. Specifically, we are referring to media content that is used outside of school for non-educational purposes.

Original Content: Films or shows that are new and unique, and are not based on an existing piece of media.

Streaming Platforms: Platforms that deliver content for TV shows and/or movies such as Netflix, Disney+, and more.

Throughout this report, you will see participants grouped into the following categories.

Younger Adolescents: Adolescent participants that are between 10-13 years old.

Middle and Older Adolescents: Adolescent participants that are between 14-24 years old.

Gender-Nonconforming Adolescents: Inclusive of participants who identified as neither male nor female. This includes participants who identified as nonbinary or genderfluid.

People of Color (POC) Adolescents: Participants who identified as Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, Latine, Middle Eastern/North African (MENA), Native American/Indigenous, and Other (non-White and non-Caucasian).

LGBTQIA+ Adolescents: Those who identified as part of the community that includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual/aromantic/agender, and others.

EXTENDED ADOLESCENCE

Extended adolescence, which includes ages 10-24, is a critical period of development where young people gain independence and form their values.[2]

MAIN FINDINGS

1 REALITY BITES: TEENS SEEK RELIEF FROM REALITY THROUGH FANTASY

- When asking what content adolescents preferred, **36.2%** wanted to see fantasy worlds.

- In a long list of specific topics, **hopeful, uplifting content with people "beating the odds"** came in first place for the third year in a row.

2 THE GREATLY EXAGGERATED "DEATH" OF THE MOVIE BUSINESS

- When asked to rank preferred activities, regardless of time or money spent, **visiting a movie theater** was adolescents' first choice.

3 NOMANCE STILL BEATS ROMANCE

- **63.5%** of adolescence say they want to see more content that focuses on platonic relationships/friendships.

4 SOCIAL MEDIA IS THE MOST AUTHENTIC

- As in past years, social media was reported by nearly a third of adolescents as the most authentic media space (**31.1%**).

GAMING PULL OUT

Check out our findings on gaming in our Gaming pull out section here.

REFRAMING ADOLESCENCE

Learn more about the research on adolescence in our Reframing Adolescence series in partnership with Frameworks.

FINDING ONE

10-24 YEAR OLDS

REALITY BITES: TEENS SEEK RELIEF FROM REALITY THROUGH FANTASY

This year, **fantasy** was their top choice, with **36.2%** saying this is what they most wanted to see. This jumped nearly **16%** from last year, a growth of **56%** more!

NOT MY THING, SORRY

Adolescents do not want to see stories about the rich and famous. For the 3rd year in a row, this was the least popular thing they wanted to see. Only **7.2%** want to see these kinds of stories.

WHAT ADOLESCENTS WANT TO SEE

Category	2024	2023
Fantasy worlds	36.2%	20.3%
Personal life/ relatable issues	24.2%	29.6%
No preference	15.2%	12.1%
Real life issues that impact society	13.9%	26.5%
Stories about the rich and famous	7.2%	10.5%
Other	3.3%	1%
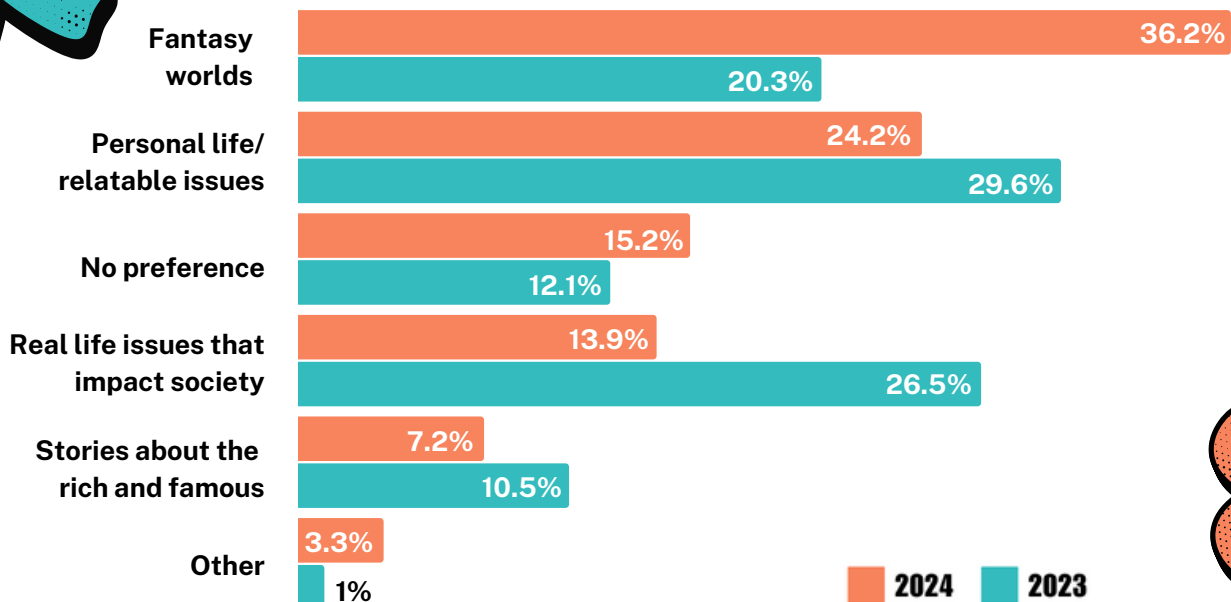
Question asked was "Some TV shows and/or movies are not true to real life, while others address issues that mirror real life. Which kind of TV shows and/or movies do you most like to watch?" Participants then chose from the options shown in the graph above.

FINDING ONE
10-24 YEAR OLDS

THE TOPICS TEENS SAY THEY WANT TO SEE

For the third consecutive year, adolescents want to see **"hopeful, uplifting content with people beating the odds"** over twenty other topic options.

Rankings for all Adolescents

1. Hopeful, uplifting content with people "beating the odds"
2. Action and/or fight scenes (may include guns and violence)
3. People with lives like my own
3. Superheroes **(tied)**
5. Friendships and social groups (popular, unpopular, etc.)
6. Crime/ true crime
7. People with lives unlike my own
8. Content that doesn't include sex or romance
9. Family life and relationships with parents
10. Racial minorities
11. Mental health/illness
11. Dystopian and/or apocalyptic **(tied)**
13. Lifestyles of the working class and/or low socioeconomic class
14. Sports
15. Romance and/or sex
16. Lifestyles of the super rich or famous
17. Systemic injustice
18. Current events (e.g., political and social issues, etc.)
19. Climate change
20. Immigration
20. Partying and/or drugs and drinking **(tied)**
21. Nonbinary and LGBTQIA+ Identities

Rankings for LGBTQIA+ Adolescents

1. Nonbinary and LGBTQIA+ Identities
2. Racial minorities
3. Mental health/illness
4. Hopeful, uplifting content with people beating the odds
5. People with lives like my own

Rankings for POC Adolescents

1. Action
2. Superheroes
3. Racial minorities
4. Hopeful, uplifting content with people beating the odds
5. Friendships and social groups (popular, unpopular, etc.)

REPRESENTATION MATTERS

Although Nonbinary and LGBTQIA+ Identities were ranked last by the full sample, it remains **the topic ranked first** for LGBTQIA+ adolescents. Both POC and LGBTQIA+ Adolescents ranked **racial minorities in their top three.**

FINDING TWO

THE GREATLY EXAGGERATED "DEATH" OF THE MOVIE BUSINESS

When asked to rank activities regardless of time or money, **visiting a movie theater** was adolescents' first choice.

WHAT ACTIVITY DO ADOLESCENTS PREFER?

1. Go see a movie during opening weekend
2. Go to a music concert
3. Play a new video game as its released
4. Stream a movie premiere on my own device as soon as it is released
5. Binge a new show as its released
6. Attend a live sports event

> "I love the movies, and there's nothing like the buzz of an audience watching a new movie on opening weekend."
>
> -Latine female, 22

Survey Question: Imagine you have a completely free weekend, money isn't an object, and you're able to easily get to one of the following events. Rank the following activities from most interesting to least (the top selection should be the activity you would like to attend most and the last one should the activity you would like to do least).

SOCIAL MEDIA VERSUS MOVIES/ TV

The number one reason that adolescents preferred watching TV shows/ movies was **to entertain themselves (56.7%)** — a big jump from 2023 when only **33.9%** gave this answer. The top reason for using social media was to **escape and take their minds off of things.**

The majority (**48.1%**) say they talk about **TV shows and/or movies more than they talk about social media.**

FINDING TWO
10-24 YEAR OLDS

HOW THEY DECIDE WHAT TO WATCH

When deciding what to watch, adolescents reported the two most important factors being the **plot of the story** and **how easy the content is to access.** They believed the two least important factors to be **influencer recommendations** and **advertisements**.

HOW THEY DECIDE WHAT TO WATCH

1. Plot of story
2. Accessibility
3. Genre
4. Based on an existing piece of media
5. Friend's recommendation
6. Relevant to my life
7. Animated
8. Social issues I care about
9. Studio who created it
10. Representation of my identity group
11. People talk about it on social media
12. Diversity of cast
13. Diversity of creators
14. Popularity of cast
15. Reviews
16. Advertisements
17. Influencer recommendation

LIVE ACTION VS ANIMATION?

Out of all adolescents who indicated whether a movie was live action or not as a factor in how they choose to watch a TV show and/or movie, **58%** said they prefer live action. This leaves a large **42%** who prefer animation!

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FINDING THREE
14-24 YEAR OLDS

NOMANCE STILL BEATS ROMANCE

Last year, **51.5%** of adolescents desired content that focuses on platonic relationships and friendships. This year, the number rose to **63.5%**!

62.4% of participants said that sex and sexual content are not needed to advance the plot of TV shows and/or movies. In 2023, this number was **47.5%.**
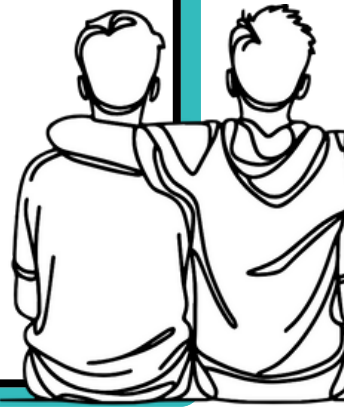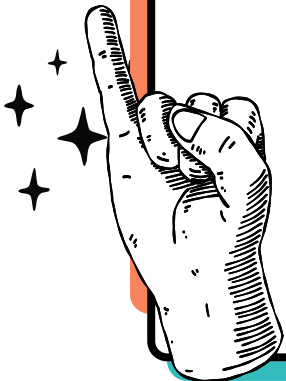
"I think more friendships should be shown. And just because boys and girls are friends doesn't mean they have to be romantic."

-White Female, 12

THE BOYS TIP SHEET

Check out our boys tip sheet with tips on how to portray authentic friendships.

""I want to see more content that focuses on platonic relationships/friendships."

	2024	2023
Strongly Agree/Agree	63.5%	51.5%
Strongly Disagree /Disagree	10.5%	15.17%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	26%	33.3%
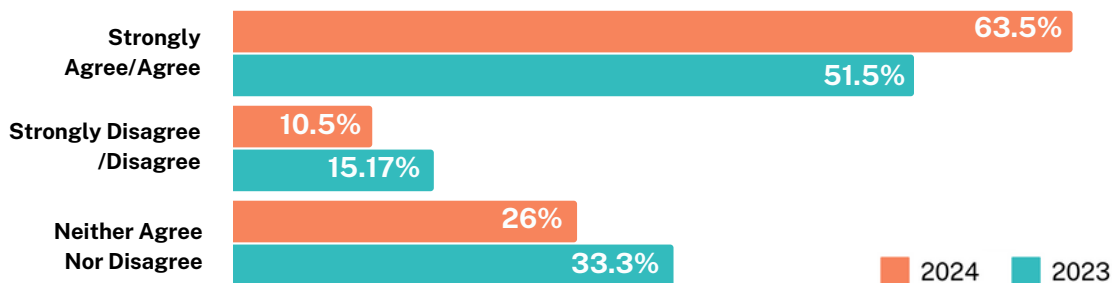
"I feel that sex and sexual content is not needed for the plot of most TV shows and movies."

	2024	2023
Strongly Agree/Agree	62.4%	47.5%
Strongly Disagree /Disagree	16%	23.33%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	21.6%	29.2%

"The romance doesn't need to be the biggest part of the plot. The relationships need to involve less jealousy and the plot shouldn't fixate so much on the relationship being formed. They really aren't that dramatic. It would also be awesome to see more diverse groups such as queer people in romantic relationships. That's more realistic for the real world and I like seeing more representation.

-White Nonbinary, 17

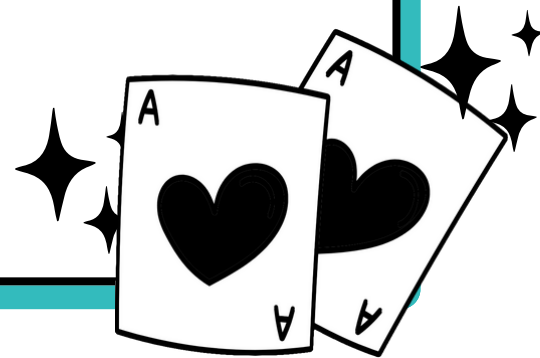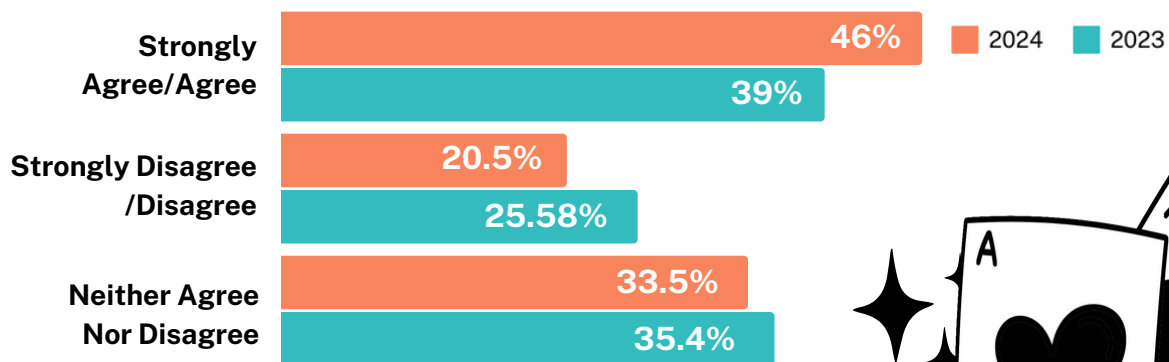Additionally, **46%** of participants indicated they would be interested in seeing more portrayals of characters that **lack sexual and/or romantic attraction.** Again, another big jump from **39%** in 2023.

I want to see more portrayals of characters that lack sexual and/or romantic attraction to others (asexual and aromantic) in the media I consume.

	2024	2023
Strongly Agree/Agree	46%	39%
Strongly Disagree /Disagree	20.5%	25.58%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	33.5%	35.4%

DEFINING ASEXUALITY

The Trevor Project defines asexuality as the orientation of someone who "may have little interest in having sex, even though they desire emotionally intimate relationships." This is different from aromantic, which describes folks who may not feel romantic attraction. Both of these identities operate on a spectrum, with multiple ways people can identify under the umbrella of aromantic or asexual.

FINDING FOUR

10-24 YEAR OLDS

SOCIAL MEDIA IS THE MOST AUTHENTIC

As in past years, **social media** is reported by nearly a third of adolescents as the **most authentic media space** (**31.1%**).

EWW: SOCIAL MEDIA IN MOVIES AND TV

Adolescents find social media to be authentic, but that's not the case for social media *in* TV shows and/or movies where the majority of all adolescents (**45.1%**) say that **they cringe watching its portrayal.** Yet teens also say that fictional portrayals of social media can influence how people use social media in real life (**59.9%**). This provides an opportunity for positive impact from legacy storytellers.

ASK THE AUDIENCE!

Adolescents were **7.5 times more likely** to agree than disagree that creatives could benefit from consulting with them to accurately portray how social media is used."

BORROW MY EYES

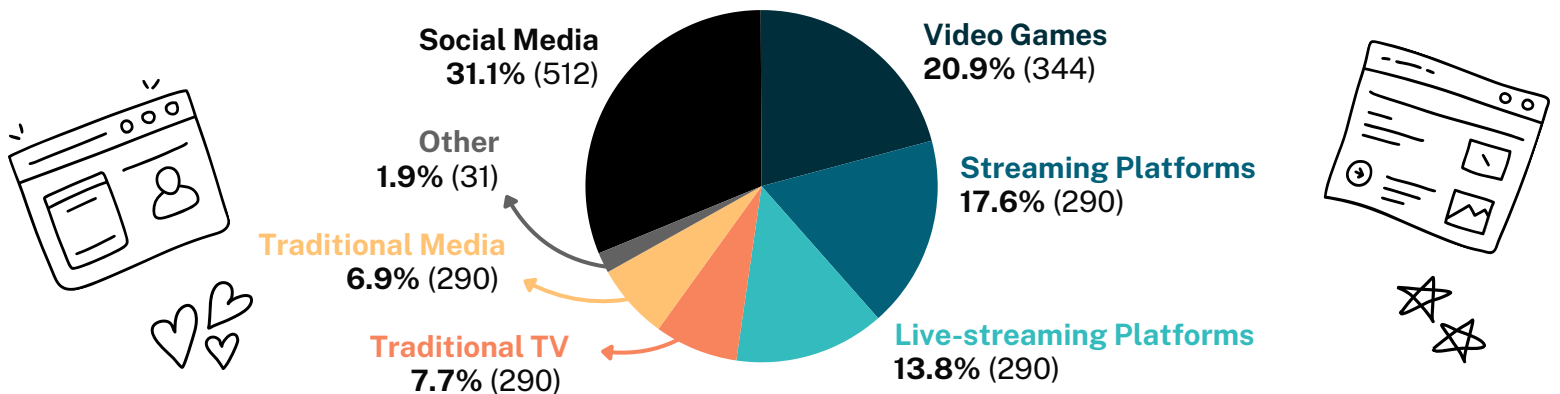See how adolescents are *really* connected to social media through our oral history series.

Which media space does the best job of making content that feels authentic to you?

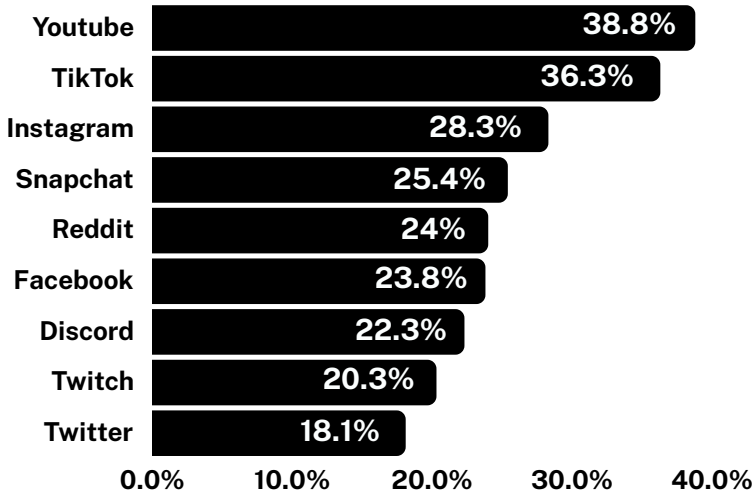

Social Media
31.1% (512)

Video Games
20.9% (344)

Streaming Platforms
17.6% (290)

Live-streaming Platforms
13.8% (290)

Traditional TV
7.7% (290)

Traditional Media
6.9% (290)

Other
1.9% (31)

FINDING FOUR
10-24 YEAR OLDS

This year, **YouTube** was ranked as **the most authentic** (**38.8%**) **social media platform**, unlike the previous year where TikTok ranked first.

MOST AUTHENTIC SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM

Platform	Percentage
Youtube	38.8%
TikTok	36.3%
Instagram	28.3%
Snapchat	25.4%
Reddit	24%
Facebook	23.8%
Discord	22.3%
Twitch	20.3%
Twitter	18.1%

"I think YouTube is the most realistic and is more reliable."

-White Male, 14

We asked our participants about characteristics of authentic content. Here's how they responded.

Black Female, 10
"To me authentic content shows something that reflects reality, whether it's a community, a family, or general societal issues. It has an honest, raw and realistic lens and doesn't try to clean it up but gives the viewers the truth."
👍 👎 Reply

White Male, 13
"People who are honest and have shown you can trust them."
👍 👎 Reply

Latine Female, 14
"Hearing about extremely raw and personal experiences, or speaking about a part of a situation that's not very likely to be heard."
👍 👎 Reply

Multiracial nonbinary, 22
"Presenting things as they really are."
👍 👎 Reply

CONCLUSION

The findings in this paper make one thing clear. **Adolescents are looking for content that is not only authentic, but mirrors their own values.** This is evident in teens' desire to see more friendships, more kindness, and more community. This is also evident in the juxtaposition between the want for escape from our world alongside the want for hope in our world.

We hope future work investigates more thoroughly *why* adolescents choose to use different media platforms and spaces. Different expectations and needs seem to influence different types of content consumption, and we believe further investigation may yield a beneficial understanding of the socio-emotional needs that media fulfills for adolescents.

Above all else, we urge storytellers of all varieties to help uplift adolescent voices. By bringing teens' lived experiences to the stories they craft, they will engage and inspire them. At the Center for Scholars & Storytellers, our Youth Media Representation (YMR) Program is focused on amplifying youth voices at the intersection of scientific research and the entertainment industry to promote inclusive and authentic representation. We encourage storytellers to connect with us to learn how they can bring diverse and authentic lived experience into storytelling.

For more information about YMR, follow here.

CSS WORKSHOPS

Want to learn how to apply these findings to create more inclusive content?
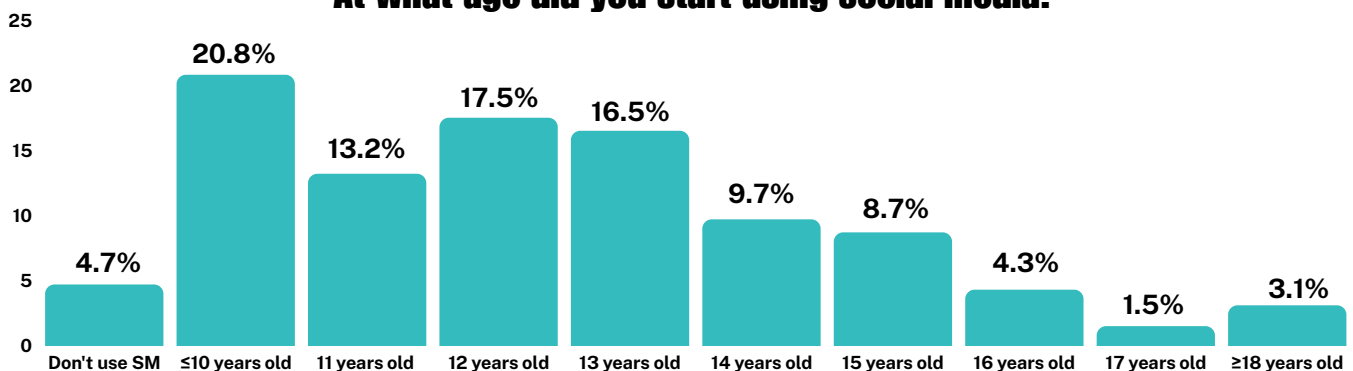Check out our media impact workshops!

METHODS

Sample:

To gather participants for this study, CSS used the data collection platform Alchemer. Adolescents were sampled from across the United States in early August of 2024. The final sample consisted of **1,644 adolescents, ages 10-24,** with each age group containing between 108-110 respondents. We split the sample into three groups: 26.6% were younger adolescents (ages 10-13), 73.5% were middle and older adolescents (ages 14-24). Regarding **gender**, 42.5% identified as female, 48.1% as male, 1.9% as nonbinary/gender non-conforming, and 0.8% indicated "not sure yet," "preferred not to say," or "prefer to self describe." In terms of **race,** the adolescents identified as either White and/or Caucasian (52.7%), Black/African American (21.4%), Hispanic and/or Latine (11.4%), Asian/Asian American (5.7%), Multiracial (6.2%), Native American (1.3%), Middle Eastern/North African (0.5%), Pacific Islander (0.1%), or "preferred not to say" and "prefer to self describe" (0.7%). Geographically, 46.2% of respondents were from the South, 20% from the Midwest, 19.2% from the Northeast, and 14.7% from the West.
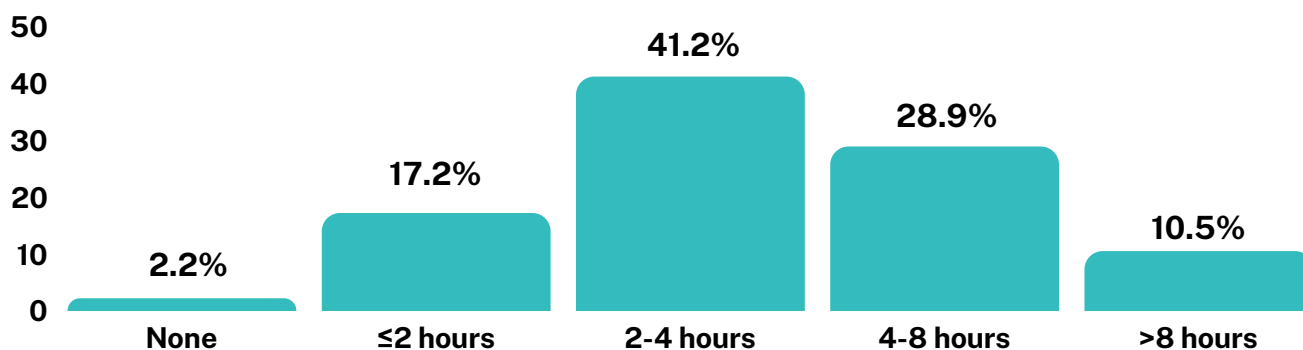
20% of participants reported having ADHD/ADD, 5.6% reported Autism/ASD, 2.7% reported dyslexia, 4.6% reported a combination of the above three neurotypes, while 63.7% did not identify with any of the above listed neurotypes. Separately from this, 71.8% of participants reported not having a physical or mental disability, and 17.1% reported having a physical or mental disability. In regards to sexual orientation, the majority of respondents identified as heterosexual/straight (74.9%), followed by bisexual (10%), not sure yet (4.1%), homosexual/gay/lesbian (3.4%), pansexual (2.5%), asexual (2.2%), prefer not to say (1.8%), or preferred to self describe (1.1%).

We also asked participants to report their income level by indicating which statement best described their families financial situation. The majority "meet needs with a little left over" (41.5%), followed by "just meet basic expenses with nothing left over" (24.5%), then "meet needs with a lot left over" (13.7%), "live comfortably, don't have to worry about expenses" (12.9%) and finally "don't meet basic expenses" (7.4%). 13.5% reported they were a first generation immigrant, 17.5% reported being a second generation immigrant, 3.8% reported being a temporary US resident, 62.4% reported being none of the prior options, and 2.7% preferred not to say.

At what age did you start using social media?

Don't use SM	≤10 years old	11 years old	12 years old	13 years old	14 years old	15 years old	16 years old	17 years old	≥18 years old
4.7%	20.8%	13.2%	17.5%	16.5%	9.7%	8.7%	4.3%	1.5%	3.1%

Approximately how many hours a day do you use entertainment media outside of school?

Bar chart showing responses:

Response	Percentage
None	2.2%
≤2 hours	17.2%
2-4 hours	41.2%
4-8 hours	28.9%
>8 hours	10.5%

Materials and Procedure:

UCLA's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved all materials and procedures of this study before data collection began. CSS created and programmed the survey questions prior to data collection, using some questions from previous years for the sake of comparison, and adding new questions based on relevant trends and theories regarding adolescents and media. In instances where adolescents may not find relevance or have experience to the questions being asked, the options "not sure" and "not applicable" were included to maintain accurate data. Questions about sexual and romantic content were not provided to younger adolescents (ages 10-14). Prior to launch, the full survey was piloted by CSS' Youth Media REPresentation (YMR) Program, made up of 20 adolescents. After survey finalization, participants were gathered via the data collection platform Alchemer, which recruited to fill CSS' quotas for gender, age, race/ethnicity, and U.S. region. The same quotas were used in previous Teens & Screens reports, allowing for data to be compared year to year. Participants were then presented with the full survey on Alchemer's user interface, on any device with internet access. The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The dataset was then cleaned and checked for missing or incoherent responses, allowing for analysis to take place.

Data Analysis:

For quantitative analysis, a large variety of descriptive statistics were conducted. Individual questions were compared to sample groups, including age groups, race, region, etc. These findings were also compared to previous Teens & Screens datasets. Quantitative analyses were conducted with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Version 29 (SPSS V29). For qualitative data, open-ended questions were sorted into various categories for thematic analysis. Corresponding data from open-ended questions was compared to quantitative, providing bases for the main findings of this study.

Limitations:

All data from this survey is self reported, which could lead to possible response bias or social desirability bias. The reported survey data here does not attempt to explain any causal relationships. Data from 2022 had a different sample size than 2023 and 2024, which had similar sizes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to those who wrote essays about this piece, **Jasmine Sorgen, Sarina Marzbani,** and **Bubba Harris.**

To our phenomenal graphic designer, **Irene Nguyen,** whose skill is what elevates this research to the next level.

To our amazing intern, **Annie Li,** who was a huge asset to our team, finding quotations and organizing qualitative findings.

To **our advisory council, Joy Gorman Wettels, Lauren Glaubach, Jamila Hunter,** and **Amy Glickman,** whose varied perspectives played a major role in the development of the survey.

To **Dr. Elly Pueschel**, whose sharp mind and eye ensured our survey was the best it could possibly be.

To the **staff of the Center for Scholars and Storytellers,** whose support on this project and passion for youth representation are unparalleled.

And finally, to **each and every youth participant** that took part in our survey. Your words are what guide us, and we couldn't be more grateful you chose to share your thoughts and opinions with our team. Remember how much power you have: we hope to make a difference that you are proud of.

For more information about the methods or details about this study, please contact us at info@scholarsandstorytellers.com.

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