

A young woman with long, dark, wavy hair is looking at her smartphone. She is wearing a light-colored long-sleeved shirt. The background is a simple indoor setting with a white wall and a colorful abstract painting on the right.

SOCIAL MEDIA & YOUNG PEOPLE IN AUSTRALIA

FINDINGS FROM THE 2024
MISSION AUSTRALIA
YOUTH SURVEY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



We acknowledge the traditional custodians of lands throughout Australia and we pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future for they hold the memories, culture and dreams of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and continual relationship with the land.

This report was developed by Orygen in partnership with Mission Australia. The work was led by Louise La Sala, Kate Filia, Caroline Gao, Shu Mei Teo, David Baker, Vivienne Browne from Orygen, and Naheen Brennan, Tamara Freeburn and Bronwyn Boon from Mission Australia. The expert input of other contributors from Orygen and Mission Australia who provided helpful insights, feedback, design and support were crucial in shaping the work.

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A sincere thank you to the young people who contributed to this report by sharing their experiences through the 2024 Mission Australia Youth Survey. Their insights into current issues, particularly those concerning mental health, wellbeing, and social media use, have been instrumental in shaping the findings and analysis presented in this report.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Mission Australia *Youth Survey* has been conducted annually since 2002, providing critical insights into the views, concerns and experiences of young people aged 15–19 across Australia. The survey captures data on a wide range of topics, including mental health, social issues, education, and future aspirations. In 2024, the *Youth Survey* was completed by 17,480 young people nationwide, offering valuable perspectives that help shape services, policies, and supports to better meet the needs of young people and address emerging challenges.

Social media is a defining part of life for young people in Australia. With 97% of young people using social media daily, and nearly 40% spending three or more hours online each day, **the relationship between social media use and youth mental health has become one of the most pressing and widely debated public health and policy challenges of our time.** This report explores the nuanced and often complex relationships between social media use, youth wellbeing, and mental health.

Our findings reveal a pattern of both opportunities and risks. While moderate use of social media was often associated with greater support networks and higher engagement in face-to-face activities, high social media use was associated with elevated psychological distress, feelings of loneliness, and a diminished sense of control and optimism. The 2024 *Youth Survey* (1) also indicated that gender diverse, female, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were more likely to be high users of social media — and more likely to experience negative mental health outcomes.

Despite public concern, most young people report low levels of personal concern about social media use. Much like other environments that young people regularly navigate, it appears that social media is experienced in markedly different ways. **At times, social media can be beneficial and supportive, and at other times, it can be a source of distress or harm.** There is no one size fits all.

As you read through this report, you will see that **there is a critical need to empower young people to make informed choices about the way they engage with social media.** At the same time, we need to ensure that the social media platforms that young people use are safe, developmentally appropriate, and support youth wellbeing. Key recommendations include targeted digital literacy education, co-designed mental health supports, and policy responses that address harmful content.

Understanding and supporting the way young people navigate online spaces is critical to fostering a digital environment where all young people in Australia can thrive.



Australia legislated significant changes introducing

a world first minimum age requirement for social media access.

In 2024, the use of social media by young people was an emotionally charged policy issue in Australia, sparking international debate regarding online safety, youth wellbeing, and the responsibilities of technology companies and governments worldwide. As a result, Australia legislated significant changes introducing a world first minimum age requirement for social media access. Due to come into effect from late 2025, those under the age of 16 will be restricted from accessing certain social media platforms. As it is currently described, YouTube, as well as platforms deemed to be a health care and/or education service, will not be age restricted.

The *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age)* Act 2024 aims to strengthen protections for young users. These changes reflect a national shift toward prioritising digital safety and mental wellbeing, while acknowledging significant concern held by many adults about the impact of social media on young people. However, many experts argue that this approach risks unintended harm (2), particularly to those who rely on social media for support, connection, and belonging (3). Critically, our own research indicated that some young people use social media for mental health support because they could not seek help elsewhere (4). Age-based digital exclusion may push young people toward less regulated platforms. Crucially,

this approach diverts attention from more impactful reforms, such as regulating harmful content, improving platform design, and addressing root causes of mental distress as identified by young people, such as financial insecurity, discrimination, and climate anxiety, through evidence-based and youth-informed policy (5–7).

While age restrictions will apply to those under 16 in Australia, it is important to recognise:

1. Young people may still find ways to access platforms that do not have adequate inbuilt safety features.
2. Many will continue using platforms exempt from restrictions, such as YouTube and online games. This means that young people will continue to have access to potentially harmful video content sharing, necessitating proactive steps to educate them and require platform accountability.
3. Digital literacy and online safety education, before and after age 16 years, is essential to equip young people with the skills to keep themselves, and others, safe online.
4. Young people, particularly those from disadvantaged and/or marginalised groups, face increased barriers to seeking mental health support. Those who rely on social media for connection and care must not be overlooked. Alternative, low or no-cost supports must be accessible.

Overview of key findings and implications



Finding

The 2024 *Youth Survey* findings reinforce previous findings that young people in Australia are very active users of social media, with almost all young people (97%) reporting daily social media use and nearly two in five young people (38%) spending three or more hours online per day.



Implication

Because almost all young people use social media platforms, there is an urgent need to equip young people with the skills to navigate these platforms safely, while guiding policy and platform design that supports healthy digital engagement.



Finding

Young people who were female, gender-diverse, and/or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander were more likely to be *high* users of social media (those who spend three or more hours per day on social media).



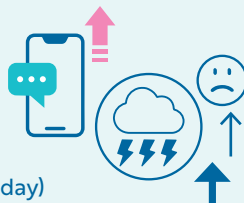
Implication

Understanding who is most likely to engage heavily with social media and the reasons why are essential for tailoring effective online safety interventions. Recognising that experiences differ by gender, culture, and identity helps ensure that digital literacy programs and mental health supports are appropriately targeted and inclusive.



Finding

We saw strong relationships between *high* social media use (three or more hours per day) and elevated psychological distress and loneliness, as well as a reduced sense of control and optimism for the future.



Implication

Heightened social media use appears to be associated with negative mental health outcomes and it may serve as an important marker of risk or potential point of intervention. However, it is important to recognise that young people with existing high levels of psychological distress and loneliness may use social media more than other young people.



Finding

Low and moderate social media users appeared to experience more positive mental health and opportunities, including participation in structured groups and activities and having a larger network of people from whom they feel able to seek support.



Implication

Balanced social media use should be actively promoted as part of digital wellbeing education. There is an opportunity to develop strategies that harness the social and emotional benefits of online platforms, such as connection, self-expression, and access to support, while mitigating potential harms.

Key recommendations for policy and practice

This report provides a comprehensive snapshot of how young people in Australia use social media, providing timely and evidence-based insights to inform policy and support interventions that promote youth mental health in a digital age. By addressing the digital realities of today's youth, policymakers, educators, and service providers can take meaningful action to support healthier online engagement and improve mental health outcomes for all young people in Australia.

It is critical that we understand how and why young people use social media so that we can:

- Best support young people to engage with social media in safe ways and empower them to make informed choices about their use of social media, and
- Advocate for safer social media platforms for young people – platforms that harness the benefits of social media, while mitigating known risks.



Digital literacy

Further develop, through co-design with young people, parents and carers, digital literacy programs to equip young people with skills to critically engage with online content. Educate young people, parents and carers, about responsible social media use, digital footprints, and online safety. Incorporate digital literacy into existing curricula to reach all students and their parents and carers.



Increase access to support

Reaching young people where they are means that social media can provide an opportunity for informal and peer based mental health support. Mental health content should be co-designed with young people and social media content creators to provide safe, evidence-based advice and links to reputable online and offline supports.



Limiting access to harmful content

The implementation of age-based restrictions requires digital literacy programs prior to turning 16, to prepare young people for using social media. For young people (aged over 16 years) using social media, platforms need to provide easy access mechanisms that allow users to control the kinds of content they see. Young people should not be solely responsible for keeping themselves safe when using social media. Regulatory instruments being developed by the eSafety Commissioner under the Social Media Services Online Safety Code need to be enforced to ensure social media platforms are moderating and responding to harmful content.



Further research

To effectively address the impacts of social media on youth mental health, further research is essential to inform policy, service delivery, and program design. This must include longitudinal studies and measures sensitive to real-world and real-time experiences, to capture how young people engage with social media and the effects on their mental health over time.

2. INTRODUCTION

Background on social media trends among youth

Social media plays a central role in the lives of young people in Australia. On average, teenagers spend around 14 hours per week online, engaging with multiple platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok (8). For the most part, young people in Australia report that their social media interactions are positive, and that social media has a helpful impact on their life. However, for others, their experiences are more complex, and at times distressing (8,9).

Academic research reflects this duality. Healthy engagement with social media promotes identity exploration, peer support, and a sense of belonging. However, excessive use, especially when involving passive scrolling or exposure to harmful content, has been linked to elevated risks of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. **The relationship between youth mental health and social media use is complex and likely bidirectional, with young people experiencing pre-existing mental health challenges more likely to use social media intensively.**

Researchers often categorise social media use as low, moderate, or high. Low use (less than one hour per day) is generally associated with neutral or positive wellbeing outcomes, while moderate use (one to three hours) presents mixed effects. High use (three or more hours daily) has consistently been associated with negative mental health outcomes, including sleep disruption, body dissatisfaction, and increased rates of distress.

Importantly, **the amount of time spent online is less relevant than how and why social media is used (10).** Factors such as the nature of the content consumed, whether engagement is active or passive, and

individual vulnerability all influence the impact of social media on mental health.

Young people are also increasingly exposed to graphic or harmful online content, often through algorithm-driven feeds that prioritise engagement over safety. Exposure to self-harm imagery, disordered eating trends, and violent footage is deeply concerning. Many young people lack the digital literacy to navigate or report this content (11), and parents or carers often feel ill-equipped to support them (12).

This report does not measure individual online behaviour but offers population-level insights into how social media use is associated with the wellbeing of young people in Australia. Understanding this relationship requires more than tracking screen time and it is important to consider context, purpose, and content. As young people's digital lives continue to evolve, so must our approaches to supporting them.



Important note:



It is crucial to recognise that this dataset, like most cross-sectional survey data, can only establish relationships or associations between variables. It cannot definitively determine whether one thing causes another.

The data presented here reveal several important associations between patterns of social media use (low, moderate, or high) and various mental health related outcomes. However, it must be understood **that these associations do not necessarily imply that high social media use directly causes poor mental health outcomes.**

The relationships observed in the data are likely to be far more complex and could represent the opposite direction of influence, with individuals experiencing pre-existing mental health challenges more likely to engage in higher levels of social media use.

Young people may use social media as a coping mechanism, an attempt to seek social connection, or a way to escape from distressing thoughts and emotions, and for some young people their experiences of poor mental health may even be alleviated by their social media use.

While we cannot observe these relationships within the data presented here, these complexities highlight the importance of cautious interpretation and the need for further longitudinal research to better understand causality and context.

Footnote: The purpose of this report is to better understand the experiences of young people who use social media, and to explore how their usage relates to their mental health and perceptions of wellbeing. Drawing on data from the 2024 Mission Australia Youth Survey this analysis explores patterns of usage and associated psychological outcomes. The 2024 Mission Australia Youth Survey Full Report includes detailed information on the study design, methodology, and results of the full survey, and is publicly accessible for further reference (1).



3. KEY FINDINGS

Social media usage trends

This section looks at how often young people in Australia use social media and who uses it the most.

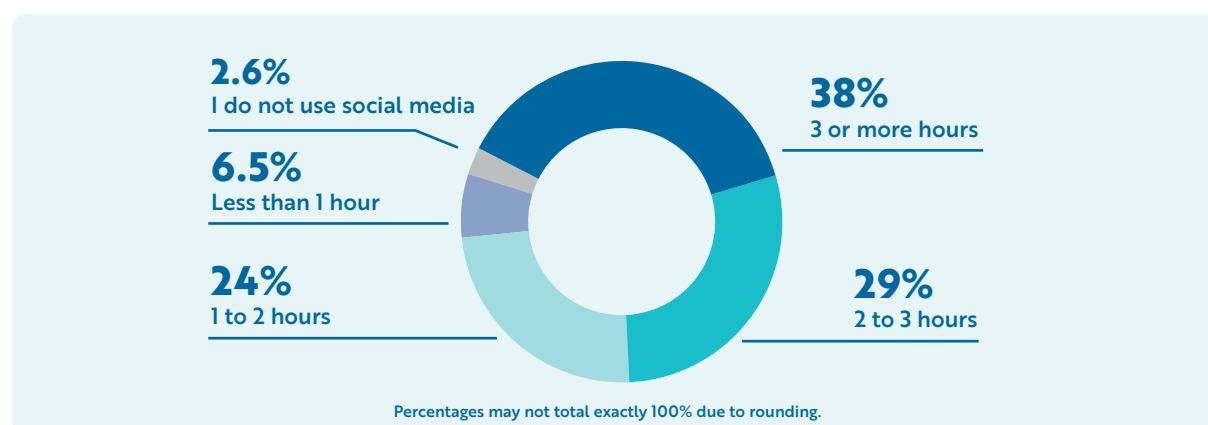
In this report, social media usage has been reported as:

LOW Less than one hour per day **MODERATE** One – three hours per day **HIGH** Three or more hours per day

How often do young people in Australia use social media?

Almost all young people who took part in this survey (97%) reported using social media every day. More than two thirds reported spending more than two hours on social media each day.

Figure 1. Frequency of social media use by young people in Australia.



Important note: We do not know what platforms young people were using, or how they were spending their time online. Most research that measures time spent online, including this survey, provides pre-determined response options (e.g., one to two hours, three or more hours). Very few studies ask young people to report the actual amount of time spent online. We also know that individuals are typically poor self-reporters of time spent online, so those who select 'three or more hours' could, in fact, be spending five, eight, or more hours online. It is likely there is large variation in the amount of time spent online that we have not been able to capture here.

Who uses social media the most?

The 2024 *Youth Survey* showed us that high social media use was significantly more prevalent among certain demographic groups, highlighting the potential relationships between demographic factors and social media use patterns.

High social media use was most commonly reported by gender diverse (48%) and female (42%) young people, compared to males (35%).



There are **gender-based differences** in online behaviours, preferences for social media features, and the outcomes of social media use.

Gender diverse young people often use social media in uniquely meaningful ways, including as a space for identity exploration, community support, and connection with peers who share similar lived experiences (13,14).



However, this group also faces heightened exposure to online harassment, negative content, and platform-based discrimination (15).



A higher proportion of CALD youth (41%) reported *high* social media use compared to non-CALD youth (38%).



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people reported a higher proportion of high social media use (50%) compared to young people who did not identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (38%).

Important note: One limitation of this survey was that the demographic items on gender identity used the terms male and female, which are sex-based terms. The inclusion of terms relating to both sex and gender identity in a single question may have led to misclassification, as some trans young people who selected male or female may not have been identified as trans in the results.



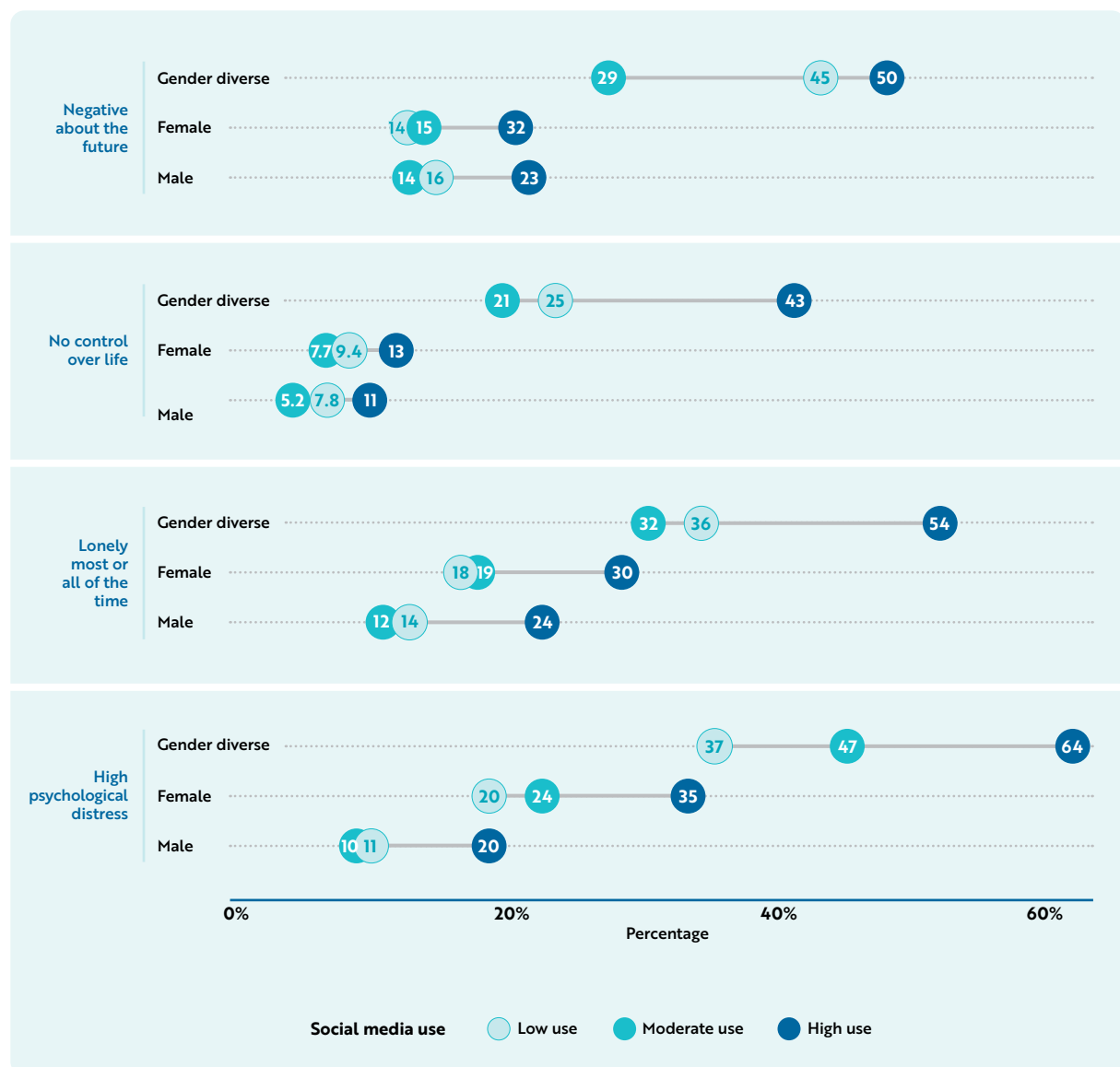
Relationships between social media use and youth mental health and wellbeing

This section looks at how young people in Australia are feeling – whether they're hopeful about the future, feel in control of their lives, or experience loneliness or psychological distress – and how that relates to social media use.

Young people who reported higher social media use consistently reported worse mental health and wellbeing (see Figure 2).

Gender diverse young people reported significantly higher levels of distress and social challenges compared to their cisgender peers – and the gap widens significantly among high social media users.

Figure 2. Psychological outcomes and associations with low, moderate and high social media use for male, female, and gender diverse young people.



Hope for the future

In the 2024 *Youth Survey national report*, nearly **half of all young people in Australia felt positive or very positive about their future (47%)**, while **one in four reported feeling negative or very negative about their future (19%)**.

As shown in Figure 2, there was a significant relationship between social media use and young people's feelings about their future.

High social media use appears to be associated with more negative feelings about the future, while low social media use is associated with more positive feelings about the future.

Gender diverse young people reported more negative feelings about their future overall, and those who were high users of social media felt most negative.

Sense of control over life

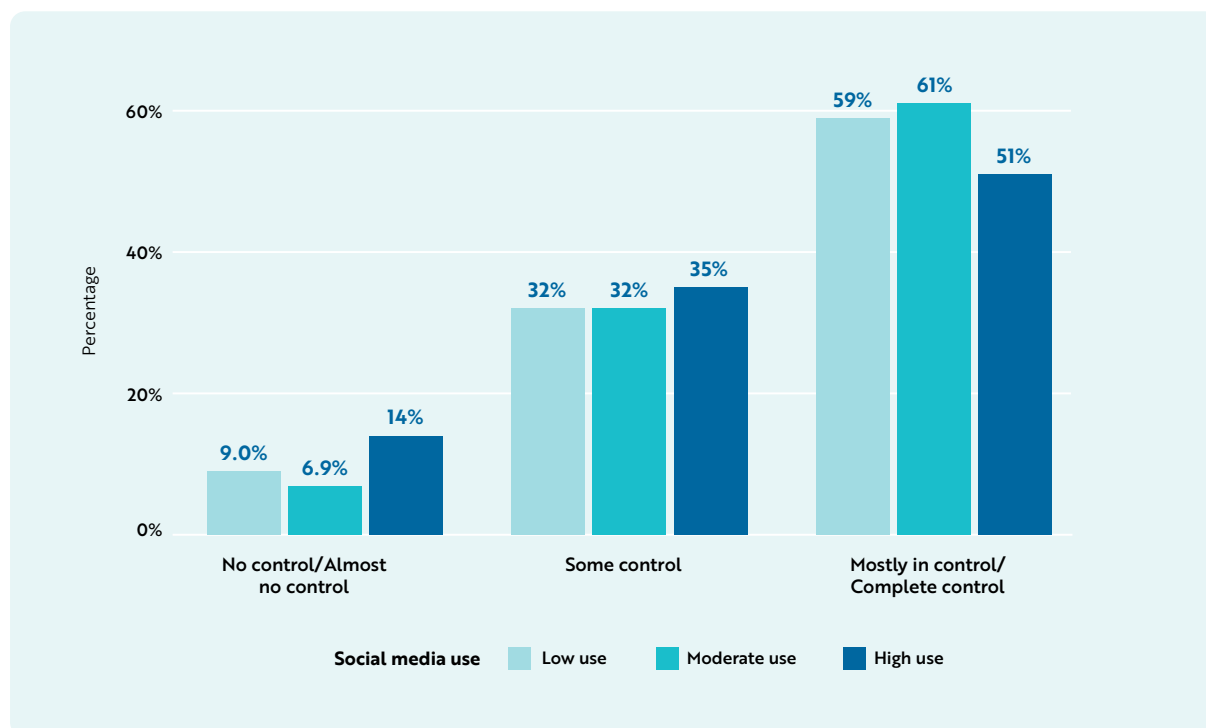
In the national report, **more than half of young people in Australia (57%) indicated feeling a strong sense of control over their life**, while a third (33%) reported **having some control**, and one in ten (10%) reported **almost no/no control**.

Gender-diverse young people experienced the lowest levels of control over their life, and this was also associated with social media use. In the high usage groups, 43% of gender-diverse young people reported "no/almost no control".

As can be seen in **Figure 3**, there was a significant relationship between social media use and young people's sense of control over their life:

- High social media users were more likely to report a lower sense of control over their life.
- Moderate social media users were more likely to report a higher sense of control over their life, with 61% of moderate social media users reported "*mostly/completely in control*", which was higher than high users (51%) and just slightly higher than low users (59%).

Figure 3. Sense of control over one's life and its association with low, moderate and high social media use for all young people.



Loneliness

Despite being one of the most connected generations, there are significant concerns regarding the impact of social media on feelings of loneliness among young people.




The 2024 Youth Survey showed that **over three quarters of young people reported some feelings of loneliness over the past four weeks (79%),**


with **1 in 5** young people (21%) reporting feeling lonely *all or most of the time*.

Of the young people who reported feelings of loneliness in the past four weeks:

66% 
indicated that social media had no impact on their feelings of loneliness



21% 
indicated that social media made them feel less lonely

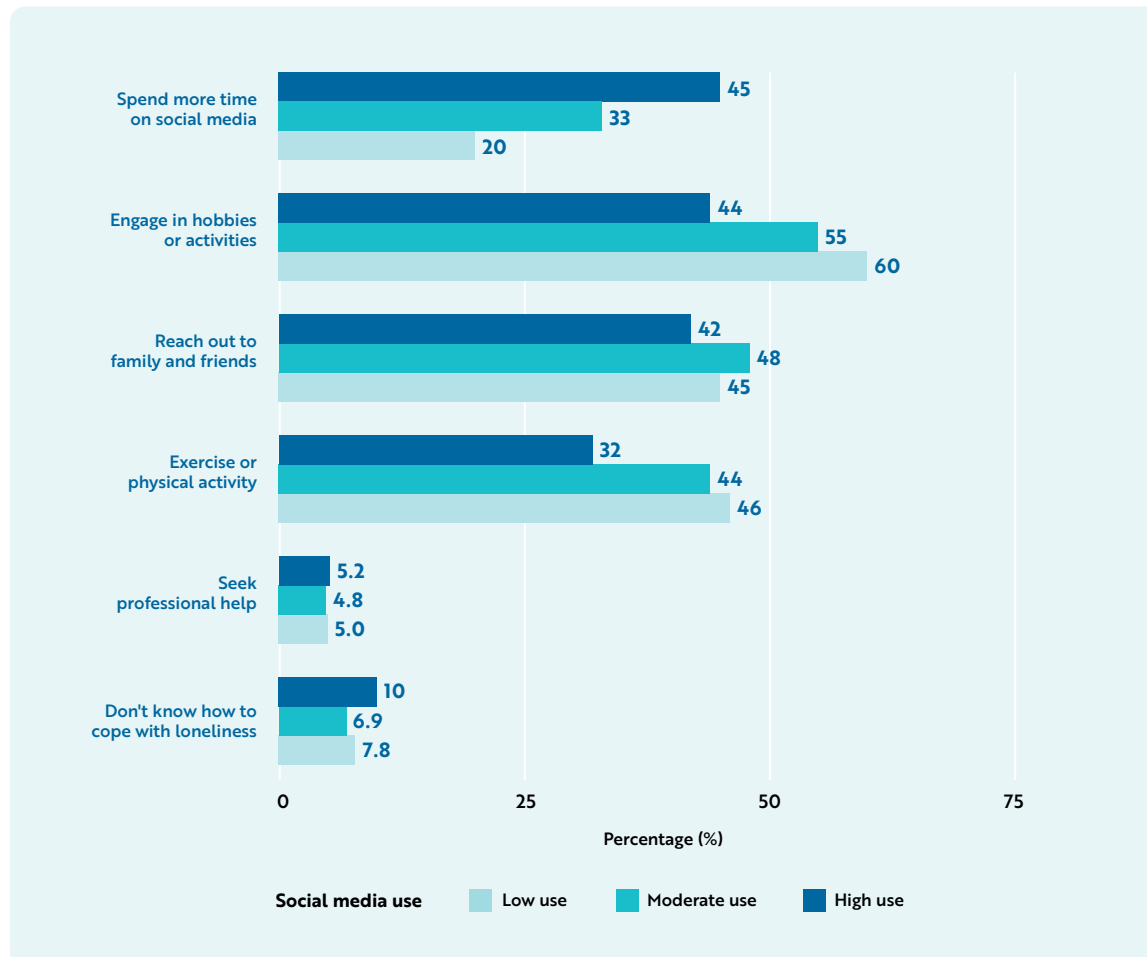
13% 
indicated that social media made them feel more lonely

What are young people doing to cope with their loneliness?

One in five (26%) young people reported spending more time on social media.

- High users were more likely to use social media more when feeling lonely (and report not knowing how to cope).
- Moderate users were more likely to reach out to family or friends.
- Low users were more likely to engage in hobbies, exercise or physical activities.

Figure 4. Ways of coping with loneliness among low, moderate and high social media users



Psychological distress

In the 2024 *Youth Survey*, young people reported mental health as the 4th most important issue in Australia today.

While most young people reported low levels of psychological distress (50%), over one in five young people reported high psychological distress (22%) and over one in four reported moderate psychological distress (29%).

High social media use was significantly associated with higher levels of psychological distress, especially among gender diverse and female young people.

- Two thirds of gender diverse high users (64%) reported high psychological distress, compared to less than one third of non-gender diverse high users (28%).
- The rate of psychological distress for high social media users (30%) was almost twice as high as it was for moderate (18%) and low (16%) users.

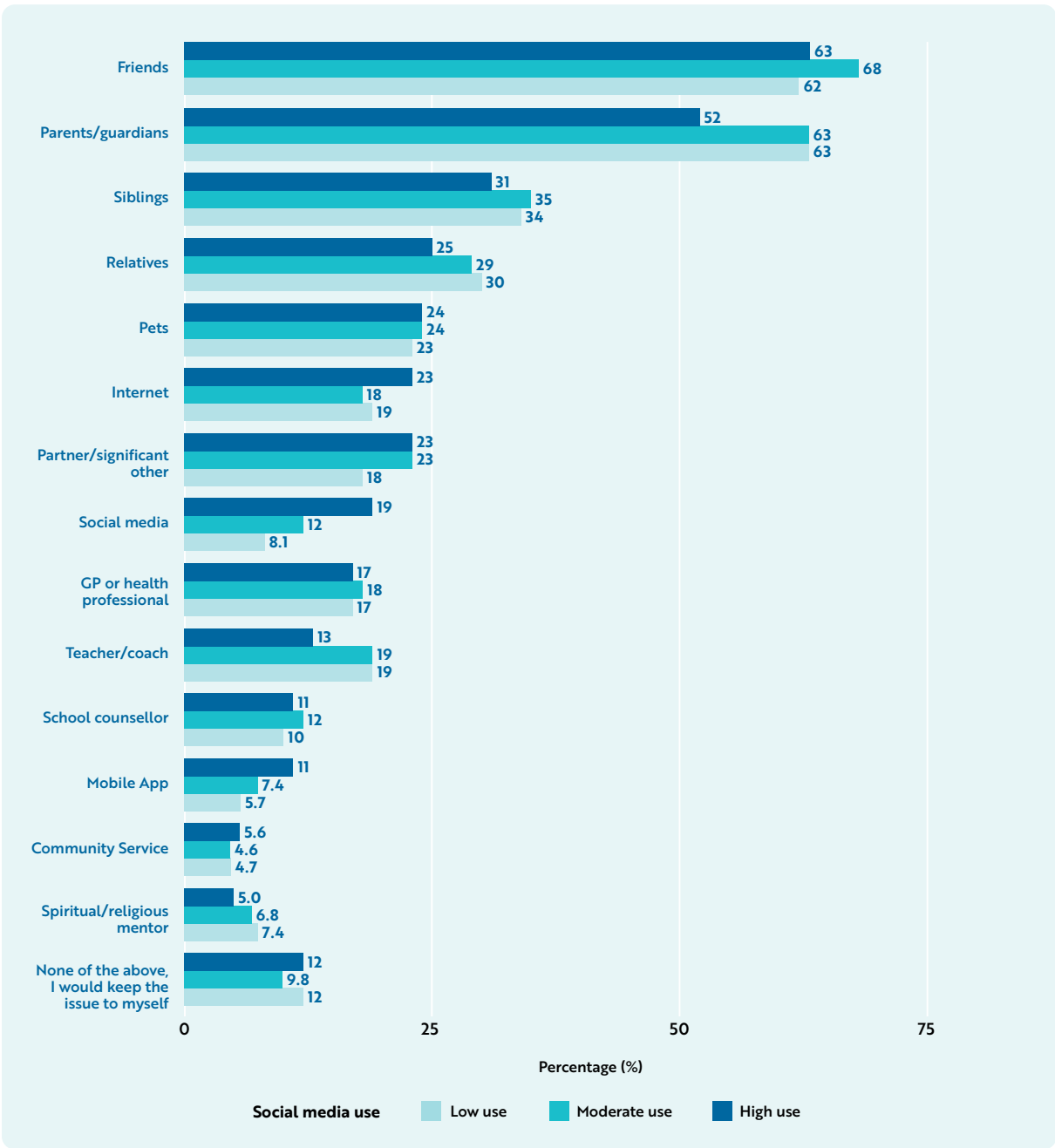
Support, connection, and family functioning

This section considers low, moderate and high social media users across other domains, such as where they would go for help, how involved they were in groups/activities, and their family functioning.

Seeking help

As shown in **Figure 5**, when asked where they would go for help with important issues in their life, high social media users were more likely to select the internet, social media, or a mobile application, whereas moderate and low social media users were more likely to select in-person supports (e.g., parents, friends, siblings, teachers/coaches).

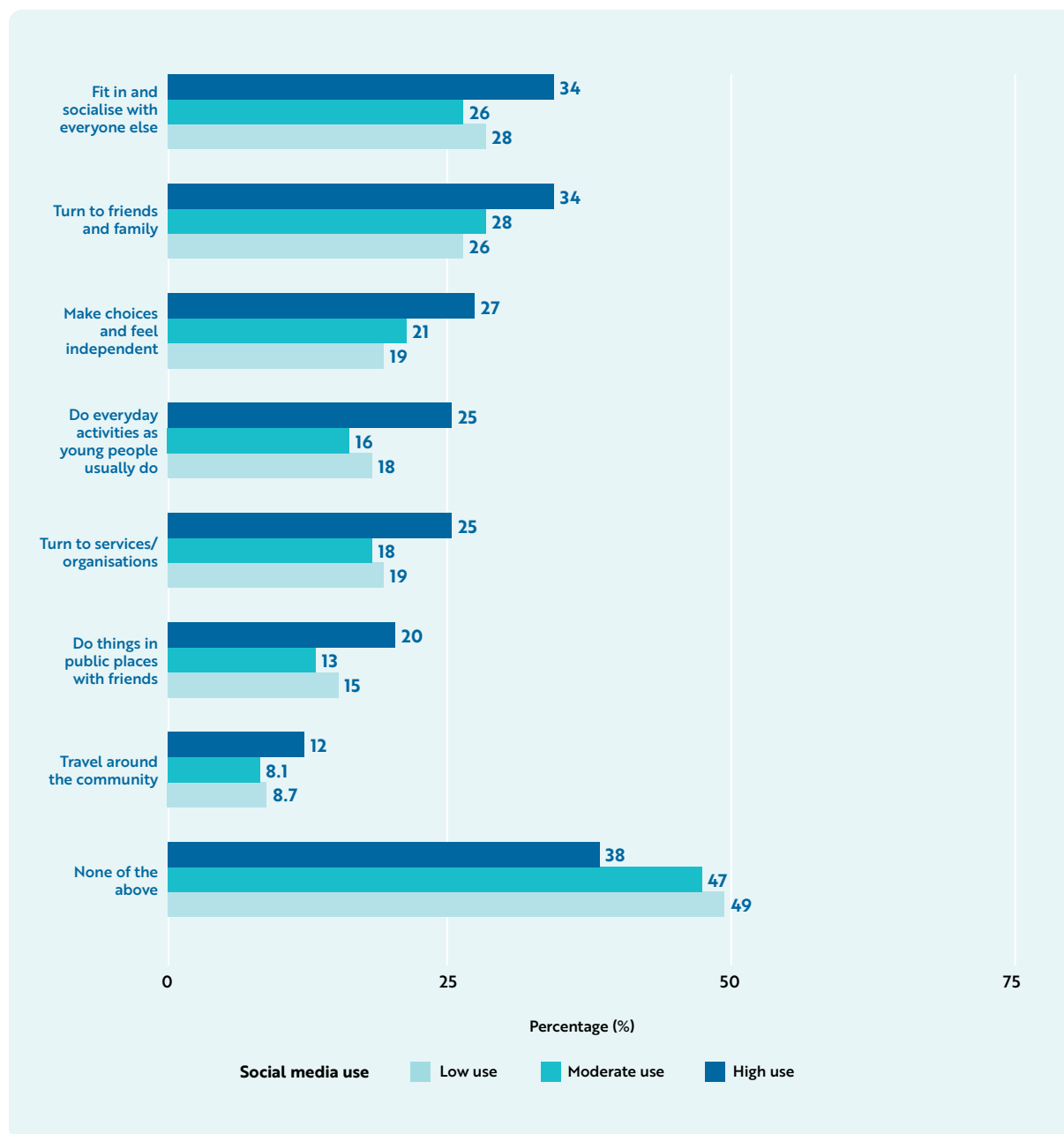
Figure 5. Proportion of low, moderate and high social media users and where they would go for help with important issues in their life.



As shown in **Figure 6**, high social media users consistently reported greater difficulties across a range of activities. Moderate social media users reported the lowest level of difficulty across activities that involved other people (e.g., fitting in with others, turning to services, spending time in public with friends etc.).

Data in Figures 5 and 6 suggest **some degree of isolation for high social media users**. However, it is important to note that **they are still actively seeking support**. Regardless of where that support is sought, it is imperative that young people are able to access help that is meaningful and age-appropriate.

Figure 6. Difficulties experienced by low, moderate and high social media users.

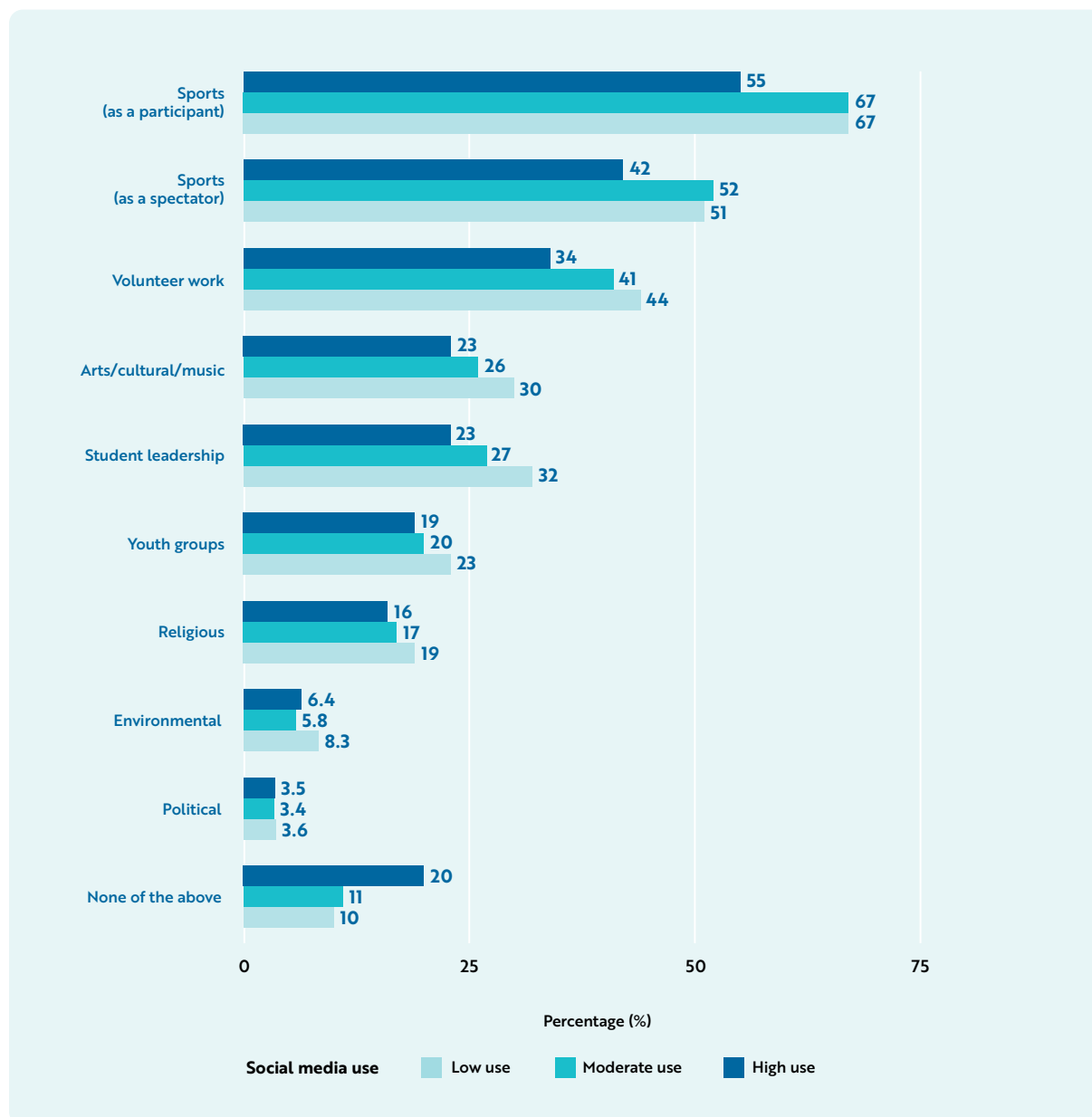


Participation in activities

Low, moderate and high social media users were also compared with respect to their participation in groups or organised activities.

Moderate and low social media users were more likely to be involved in groups or organised activities compared to high social media users (**Figure 7**).

Figure 7. Participation in activities by low, moderate and high social media users.



Family functioning

High social media users were more likely to report poor family functioning:

- 32% of high social media users reported poor family functioning, which is higher than moderate users (23%) and low users (22%).

Everything in moderation?

There is evidence to suggest that like many other things, **moderation is key when it comes to social media use**. In this study, moderate users tended to fall in the middle range for most variables when compared to high and low users (see Figure 2). However, at times, **moderate users seemed to fare better** or very similarly to low users, indicating that social media is not, in itself, a problem for all young people. Moderate users also indicated they were better supported by other people (e.g., friends, family, or services) and more likely to take part in face-to-face activities (e.g., sports or physical activities). This counters the narrative that social media detracts from or replaces meaningful connections.

The displacement hypothesis suggests that social media use replaces other activities. There is a common belief that restricting access will free up three or more hours daily for young people to play, socialise in person, or focus on study. However, this assumes all young people have access to appropriate face-to-face spaces and overlooks the reasons they engage with social media. Evidence shows that in-person socialising has declined by just ten minutes over the past 25 years, despite increasing screen time (16) offering little support for the displacement hypothesis.

These findings support social media being a magnifying glass for what is happening in the lives of young people in Australia.

"Rich Get Richer" Effect



Young people with strong social connections and good mental health

- ✓ Report more positive online experiences
- ✓ Use social media to enhance connection

"Poor Get Poorer" Effect



Young people facing adversity offline

- ✗ More likely to experience challenges online
- ✗ Greater exposure to harmful content
- ✗ More frequent and intense social media use

What this means

- ➔ Digital experiences often reinforce offline realities
- ➔ Those struggling offline need more support to navigate online environments





4. YOUTH PERSPECTIVES

This section includes some of the quotes provided by young people when completing the 2024 Youth Survey.

Biggest personal challenge

Young people were asked about their biggest personal challenge in the past year. Some responses included information about social media. Here's what they had to say:

IN THE PAST YEAR, WHAT IS THE BIGGEST PERSONAL CHALLENGE YOU HAVE FACED?



"Managing my time on social media and trying to reset my negative mindset about topics that I was very influenced by the media, such as beauty standards, trends that promoted materialistic values, and the discussion of what is the difference between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation"

Female, 16 (NSW)



"Peer pressure, social media/ bullying, fitting in with others who want to go to uni and no other options being available"

Male, 15 (VIC)



"Addiction to social media, since it stunted my study abilities and wasted my time"

Male, 15 (NSW)



IN THE PAST YEAR, WHAT IS THE BIGGEST PERSONAL CHALLENGE YOU HAVE FACED?



"Friendship group drama, and the breakdown of friendships, due to arguments of somewhat petty issues. This involved misuse and disrespect on social media, and caused a lot of emotional turmoil. I felt guilty for betraying my friend and being mean to her. I wish I had acted kinder"

Female, 17 (NSW)



"Being excluded from friendship groups and watching them post on social media being together without me"

Female, 18 (VIC)



"I have struggled to force myself to focus on schoolwork, spending time on social media for hours after school instead of studying and not listening in class. I am smart enough to still pass and do well, but I know I'm wasting my potential and am a little concerned for my senior years"

Female, 15 (QLD)



"Getting the motivation to do school work and being afraid to ask questions because of social media"

Male, 15 (SA)



"Pressure of social media and school drama"

Female, 15 (WA)

"Being trolled and stalked online"

Female, 16 (NSW)

Overcoming challenges

What else would have helped overcome your challenge?

Young people were asked what would have helped them overcome their personal challenges, and some referenced social media in this context:

USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SUPPORT



"The thing that helped the most was following accounts on social media that focused on positive mindsets and thoughts. Social media, as we know, is one of the driving factors of my generations insecurities but by following the right accounts and blocking any negative ones made my mindset positive"

Female, 16 (SA)



"Social media, I feel like it'd be better for me if I interacted with people more over social media"

Female, 15 (VIC)

MANAGING SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE



"Taking a break off social media and not believing everything you see, made me realize it's not reality and improve on how I think in situations"

Female, 15 (QLD)



"Using social media less - it's easy to compare your lowlights to other people's highlights"

Male, 16 (SA)

Are young people concerned about social media?

Despite significant concern held by adults and policymakers regarding social media, most young people reported that they were only slightly or not at all concerned about social media use (84.6%).

One in seven (15%) reported feeling very or extremely concerned about social media use. These concerns were felt more strongly by high social media users (19%), compared to moderate (14%) and low (13%) users.

When we consider how best to support youth mental health and wellbeing, it is important that we recognise social media is only one component of young people's lives and there are many other global megatrends and social shifts that are also impacting youth mental health (17).

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE



Digital literacy

This report found that nearly two in five young people (38%) reported spending 3 or more hours on social media each day. Digital literacy would promote balanced and mindful social media use, especially among high users. This would require the development of messaging that speaks to particular groups of young people and acknowledges their online experiences.

Increased awareness of the potential negative impacts of excessive use on mental health and well-being would help young people identify the impact social media is having on them and take control over their online engagement. Digital literacy resources would

include tools for monitoring and managing screen time, navigating everyday online challenges, and guidance on where to seek help and support. Digital literacy resources would also support young people to mindfully engage in social media and understand the mechanisms designed to keep them engaged for longer. Digital literacy resources are also needed for parents and carers to equip them with digital parenting and online safety skills. These resources would include tools for open communication and dialogue about young people's online experiences and challenges, and provide guidance on setting appropriate boundaries and monitoring online activities.



Digital literacy

This report found that nearly two in five young people (38%) reported spending 3 or more hours on social media each day. Digital literacy would promote balanced and mindful social media use, especially among high users. This would require the development of messaging that speaks to particular groups of young people and acknowledges their online experiences.

Mental health support for young social Media users

This report found that high users of social media report higher levels of psychological distress and feeling lonely most of the time. A small, but significant proportion of young people seek help from informal sources, including social media, the internet and mobile apps. Young people who are high users of social media report being more likely to seek help for important life issues on social media. It is important that when seeking help from these sources, young people have access to high quality, age-appropriate and evidence-based digital supports.

High profile social media influencers can be a source of mental health-related information for young people, so engaging with influencers to provide evidence-based resources and links to reputable online and offline services could support young people. Mental health content for young people needs to be engaging, relatable and tailored to the

preferences and needs of different age groups and demographics. This would require co-design with young people and content creators (individuals and organisations) to build the credibility of youth-friendly supports.

The #chatsafe guidelines are an example of resources designed specifically for social media contexts (18).

The guidelines were developed to support young people to communicate safely online about self-harm and suicide. The #chatsafe resources and social media campaign have been co-created with young people, for young people.



Improve the quality of supports on social media

Reaching young people where they are means that social media can provide an opportunity for informal, peer-based and evidence informed mental health support. Mental health content should be co-designed with young people and social media content creators to provide safe, evidence-based advice and links to reputable online and offline supports.



Limiting access to harmful content

There is growing evidence to suggest that exposure to graphic, distressing and unsafe content is associated with a range of negative psychological outcomes for young people, however content on social media remains largely uncensored and unregulated. Social media platforms must be accountable for the content that is shared on their platform, must design their products for safety, not engagement, and provide greater transparency and user control over the content. This includes increasing algorithm transparency and giving users control of their algorithms.

The upcoming age-based restrictions on some social media platforms may have unintended consequences,

such as limiting access to mental health resources or pushing young people into less regulated online spaces. Age restrictions also lessen the responsibility of social media platforms to limit harmful content seen by young people.

Safety by design principles should inform the provision of developmentally-staged experiences for young people, ensuring online safety from childhood through to adulthood in age-relevant ways. These would include stronger content moderation, greater user control of social media feeds – including types of content – and the ability to clear or reset algorithmic and feed recommendations.



Limiting access to harmful content

The implementation of age-based restrictions requires digital literacy programs prior to turning 16, to prepare young people for using social media. For young people (aged over 16 years) using social media, platforms need to provide easy access mechanisms that allow users to control the content they see. Young people should not be solely responsible for keeping themselves safe when using social media. Regulatory instruments being developed by the eSafety Commissioner need to be enforced to ensure social media platforms are mitigating, moderating and responding to harmful content.

Further research needs

Most of the research on social media and youth mental health is a 'point in time' snapshot. This limits our ability to understand the bi-directional (and likely cyclical) relationship between social media and youth mental health. Furthermore, existing studies into the risks and benefits of social media have largely considered young people as a homogenous group.

Longitudinal research, as well as other methodologies that allow for measuring short-term fluctuations in experiences and outcomes, is needed. An increased understanding of the relationship between social media and mental health, including differences among young people, would better inform public health responses, online safety policy, and youth mental health interventions.



Further research

To effectively address the impacts of social media on youth mental health, further research is essential to inform policy, service delivery, and program design. This must include longitudinal studies and measures sensitive to short-term experiences, to capture how young people engage with social media and the effects on their mental health over time.

6. CONCLUSION

Summary of major findings

Time spent online:

Almost all young people in Australia use social media daily, with nearly 40% spending three or more hours online per day. While time spent online alone is not a reliable indicator of risk, high use has been associated with negative mental health outcomes. Policy responses must shift from simply regulating screen time to ensuring that time spent online is safe, meaningful, and balanced by investing in digital literacy and platform accountability.

Gender differences in social media use:

Gender diverse and female young people are more likely to be high users of social media and to report psychological distress, loneliness, and limited control over their lives. These patterns highlight the need for gender-responsive digital wellbeing strategies and for a more nuanced understanding of how and why certain groups of young people use social media differently. Policies must ensure that online safety interventions, platform safeguards, and mental health supports are inclusive, intersectional, and tailored to diverse identities and experiences.

Social media and youth mental health:

High social media use is associated with elevated distress, lower optimism, and reduced help-seeking through traditional channels. However, social media also serves as an informal support system for many young people, especially those from marginalised or disadvantaged communities. The impacts of social media on the mental health of young people in Australia will be lessened if we prioritise harm minimisation through co-designed mental health content, regulation of harmful material, and integration of the online world into youth mental health strategies.

Involving young people in the decisions that impact them:

Young people are the primary users of social media but are often excluded from policy development. Evidence shows they have clear and practical ideas for making online environments safer. Policy design must centre youth voices through co-design processes, ensuring that reforms are not only protective but also empowering, inclusive, and aligned with young people's lived experiences.

7. APPENDIX

Methods

Participants

The 2024 *Mission Australia Youth Survey* included 17,480 participants aged 15–19 years from across all Australian states and territories. Participants were recruited through multiple channels, including schools, local government organizations, Mission Australia services, and other community organizations. After providing informed consent, young people completed the survey either online or on paper between 4 April to 16 August 2024. No compensation was offered for participation. The study received ethics approval from the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (#2024-22721-52643-16) and from relevant State and Territory Education Departments and Catholic Education Offices.

Data Analysis

All analyses were conducted using R version 4.4.2 (2024-10-31). Descriptive statistics and graphical visualizations were used to summarise participant demographic characteristics and examine variations in participant profile across different levels of social media use.

To ensure representativeness of the Australian population aged 15–19 years, the data were weighted by gender, location (state/territory), and the Australian Bureau of Statistics Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) (19). Gender and location weightings were based on ABS Estimated Residential Population (ERP) statistics (20) which provide annual population estimates. Random iterative method weighting was applied, which iteratively adjusts the marginal distributions of each weighting variable until all factors converge within acceptable margins of their target distributions. Percentages are presented as whole numbers when greater than or equal to 10%, and rounded to one decimal place when less than 10%, to balance clarity and precision in reporting.

Measures

The 2024 *Youth Survey* was designed to capture young people's experiences and perspectives across a wide range of issues while gathering important socio-demographic information. The survey examined topics of national significance, personal challenges and concerns, mental health and wellbeing, and sources of support and community connections. Additional areas explored included education and employment, housing and finances, climate change, discrimination, social media usage, and attitudes toward alcohol and substance use. Specific measures used in this report are provided in Table A.

Table A. Variable definitions and items from the 2024 Youth Survey

Item	Survey question and characterisation
Social media use	
Social media use	On an average day, how many hours do you spend on social media? This includes social media apps, websites and chat. Options include <i>Less than 1 hour</i> , <i>1 to 2 hours</i> , <i>2 to 3 hours</i> , <i>3 or more hours</i> , and <i>I do not use social media</i> . We defined low use as less than 1 hour, moderate use as 1 to 3 hours, and high use as 3 or more hours. Participants who answered <i>I do not use social media</i> were excluded.
Demographics	
Gender	Self-identified gender options included <i>female</i> , <i>male</i> , <i>non-gendered</i> , <i>non-binary gender</i> , <i>transgender</i> , <i>not listed</i> and <i>prefer not to say</i> . <i>Non-gendered</i> , <i>non-binary gender</i> , <i>transgender</i> , and <i>not listed</i> were grouped as "gender diverse".
Cultural and linguistic diversity	Young people were grouped as culturally and linguistically diverse if they replied <i>Yes</i> to <i>Is there a particular cultural or ethnic group that you strongly identify with?</i> and/or <i>Do you speak a language other than English at home?</i>
Indigenous status	Young people were grouped as <i>Indigenous</i> if they replied identifying as <i>Aboriginal</i> and/or <i>Torres Strait Islander</i> .
Mental health and wellbeing	
Psychological distress	Psychological distress was assessed using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale – 6 item version (K6). A score of >18 is classified as high psychological distress.
Outlook on the future	Answers to <i>How would you describe your feelings when you think about the future?</i> were presented on a five-point scale from <i>very negative</i> to <i>very positive</i> . <i>Very negative</i> and <i>negative</i> were combined as being "negative about futures".
Control over life	Answers to <i>How much control do you feel you have over your life?</i> were presented on a five-point scale from <i>No control</i> to <i>Complete control</i> . <i>No control</i> and <i>almost no control</i> were combined as having no control over life.
Loneliness	Answers to <i>In the past four weeks, how much of the time did you feel lonely?</i> were presented on a five-point scale from <i>None of the time</i> to <i>All of the time</i> . <i>All of the time</i> and <i>most of the time</i> were combined as being lonely most of the time.

Item	Survey question and characterisation
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Other aspects/impacts

Ways of coping with loneliness	Young people were asked 'How do you cope with feelings of loneliness?'. They were instructed to 'Please tick all that apply' from a list of 7 possible responses.
Social media's impact on loneliness	Young people were asked 'If you use social media AND felt lonely in the past four weeks, how does social media affect your feelings of loneliness?'. Answers include <i>It makes me feel more lonely, It makes me feel less lonely, It has no effect on my feelings of loneliness, or I'm not sure.</i>
Help seeking	Young people were asked 'Where would you go for help with important issues in your life?'. They were instructed to 'Please tick all that apply' from a list of 16 possible responses.
Activities participation	Young people were asked 'In the past year, have you been involved in the following groups/activities?'. They were instructed to 'Please tick all that apply' from a list of 10 possible responses.
Difficulties experienced	Young people were asked "Do you find it hard to...". They were instructed to 'Please tick all that apply' from a list of 8 possible responses.
Concerns	Young people were asked 'In the past year, how concerned have you been about the following?'. They were instructed to 'Please tick one option per row' from a list of 18 items. Answers were presented on a five-point scale from <i>Not at all concerned</i> to <i>Extremely concerned</i> .



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Who is Mission Australia?

With more than 165 years of experience meeting human need, Mission Australia is one of the largest and most trusted for-purpose community service and housing providers in the country.

As a national non-denominational Christian charity, our values of respect, compassion, integrity, perseverance and celebration are at the heart of all we do.

Every day, we deliver homelessness services, provide social and affordable housing, help families, children and young people thrive, improve mental health and wellbeing, support people with disability, provide pathways to employment and financial stability, strengthen communities, offer alcohol and other drug support, and more.

Backed by our supporters, partners, funders and collaborators, we welcome and work alongside people and communities of all backgrounds, ages and beliefs who seek our support, providing excellent services and safe, secure homes that offer hope and lasting impact. With our evidence and courageous voice, we advocate for a fairer nation and better outcomes for the people and communities we serve.

Who is Orygen?

Leading the revolution in youth mental health

At Orygen, we believe that every young person deserves to grow into adulthood with optimal mental health. Everything we do is focused on delivering this outcome.

Orygen is Australia's Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health and the world's largest research and knowledge translation organisation focused on mental ill-health in young people.

We believe in treating early and focusing on recovery. Pioneering reform to deliver real-world practical solutions.

Our research is world-leading, impactful and creates change. Working directly with young people, their families and friends, we pioneer new, positive approaches to the prevention and treatment of mental disorders.

We advocate to make sure policymakers understand the need and cost of mental ill-health in young people.

And we educate to ensure our research and evidence-based practice is used to develop innovative training programs and resources.

Our goal is to see all young people with mental ill-health get well and stay well.

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