HOPELAB

Parasocial Relationships, AI Chatbots, and Joyful Online Interactions

Among a Diverse Sample of LGBTQ+ Young People

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Contributions

This project represents the work of Hopelab and Dr. Bradley Bond. Below, we detail each part of the project and its contributors.

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Introduction

Young people navigate a media-saturated society in which they have more access to screens than any prior generation. Access has led to consumption, as U.S. young people spend more than eight hours a day using screens for entertainment.[1] Screen time primarily takes place on social media—more young people report spending time on social media than watching television, playing video games, or listening to podcasts.[1] Scrolling, posting, and engaging on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram have become woven into the daily routines of young people, dominating how they acquire information and entertainment. Though social media is frequently consumed by and highly valued among adolescents and young adults generally, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and nonbinary (LGBTQ+) young people rely on social media even more than their cisgender heterosexual peers to satisfy a wider variety of needs related to identity and social connection.[2] In a large national study of U.S. teens and young adults ages 14-22, LGBTQ+ young people—more so than heterosexual and cisgender young people—reported that social media is a source of identity-affirming content and is important to help them feel more supported and less alone.[3]

Young people developing, accepting, and integrating LGBTQ+ identities into their lives face additional obstacles to their socialization that social media may help to address. For example, many LGBTQ+ individuals report that they felt isolated when coming to terms with their sexual or gender identities because they did not know anyone in their in-person communities who also held these identities and, subsequently, lacked role models and peers. The need for companionship with similar others may be fulfilled, at least in part, through media. Social media platforms can serve as windows to the world in this regard, providing LGBTQ+ young people with opportunities to see other LGBTQ+ individuals with whom they might identify or feel connected.[4] The concept that audiences might develop connections with media figures, such as social media content creators, is defined as **parasocial relationships.**

> ***Parasocial relationships are the social and emotional bonds that audiences develop with fictional characters and real-world celebrities.***

Parasocial relationships are the social and emotional bonds that audiences develop with fictional characters and real-world celebrities (i.e., media figures).[5] Parasocial relationships are more than

1 Rideout, V., Peebles, A., Mann, S., & Robb, M. B. (2022). Common Sense census: Media use by tweens and teens, 2021. San Francisco, CA: *Common Sense.* https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web_0.pdf

2 Gomillion, S. C., & Giuliano, T. A. (2011). The influence of media role models on gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity. *Journal of Homosexuality, 58(3),* 330–354.

3 Common Sense Media. (2024). *A double-edged sword: How diverse communities of young people think about the multifaceted relationship between social media and mental health.* Hopelab. https://assets.hopelab.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2024-double-edged-sword-hopelab-report_final-release-for-web-v2.pdf

4 Bond, B. J. (2018). Parasocial relationships with media personae: Why they matter and how they differ among heterosexual, lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents. *Media Psychology, 21(3),* 457–485. https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2017.1416295

5 Tukachinsky, R. (2010). Para-romantic love and para-friendships: Development and assessment of a Multiple Parasocial Relationships Scale. *American Journal of Media Psychology,* 3(1/2), 73-94.

just liking; audience members perceive them as meaningful connections wherein they feel solidarity with the media figure, care about the media figure, perceive the media figure as part of their social network, and desire to learn more about the media figure. Parasocial relationships stand in contrast to fans. While fans enjoy a media figure, individuals with parasocial relationships feel as if they are in a social bond with a media figure.

Parasocial relationships have been argued to exist within two dimensions: parasocial communication and parasocial support. Parasocial communication is the feeling of disclosure, seeking advice from media figures, and engagement. Parasocial support is trust, sharing, and perceived helpfulness of the connection to the media figure.[6] Developing parasocial relationships is a normative behavior; moreover, these perceived connections tend to manifest and are maintained similarly to real-life social relationships. However, lack of reciprocity has traditionally distinguished parasocial relationships from social relationships. One might feel a sense of friendship with their favorite television character, but the feeling is not likely mutual. Social media platforms have expanded the opportunities for parasocial communication and parasocial support.

Thirty years ago, a young person may have felt a strong social connection to a media figure, such as a musician. This connection was maintained by listening to music and potentially seeing the musician appear in a magazine spread or on a late-night talk show sporadically. Today, young people can access more frequent glimpses into their favorite musician's personal life, preferences, and lived experiences by following them on social media platforms. Social media platforms have vastly increased young people's access to their favorite media figures and eased entry for content creators. Anyone can create a YouTube account and potentially reach millions of people. The frequent peeks into the personal lives of media figures and other content creators via social media can increase feelings of parasocial relationships with these individuals.[7]

Parasocial relationships were once thought to compensate for a lack of real-life social relationships, but research has suggested that this is not true.

Parasocial relationships were once thought to compensate for a lack of real-life social relationships, but research has suggested that this is not true. For the general public, parasocial relationships tend to complement their social networks. However, some research suggests that LGBTQ+ young people may use parasocial relationships to compensate for a lack of real-life social connection.[8] For LGBTQ+ young people of color, additional obstacles related to cultural and environmental factors may increase the difficulties of developing and understanding LGBTQ+ identities, consequently increasing the importance of media as resources for LGBTQ+ information, entertainment, and companionship.[9]

6 Tukachinsky, R. (2010). Para-romantic love and para-friendships: Development and assessment of a Multiple Parasocial Relationships Scale. *American Journal of Media Psychology, 3*(1/2), 73-94.

7 Bond, B. J. (2016). Following your "friend": Social media and the strength of adolescents' parasocial relationships with media personae. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 19*(11), 656–660. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2016.0355

8 Bond, B. J. (2018). Parasocial relationships with media personae: Why they matter and how they differ among heterosexual, lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents. *Media Psychology, 21*(3), 457–485. https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2017.1416295

9 Parmenter, J., Galliher, R. V., Yaugher, A. C., & Maughan, A. D. A. (2022). Intersectionality and identity configurations: A qualitative study exploring sexual identity development among emerging adults within the United States. *Emerging Adulthood, 10*(2), 372-385. https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696820946597

Artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots are an emergent media technology that, like parasocial relationships, may be used by LGBTQ+ young people to support social needs that may not be met in their in-person lives. AI chatbots allow users to have ongoing conversations with a computer program that mimics human conversation. AI chatbots can be pre-set to have specific parameters, or users can adjust some parameters to customize the chatbots' responses. For example, AI chatbots could imitate responses from peers or a therapist.

AI chatbots may afford unique opportunities to LGBTQ+ young people to form relationships, build communication skills, and understand themselves better.[10] For example, AI chatbots could be used to rehearse the possibly stressful process of disclosing sexual or gender identities to family and friends. Rehearsing the coming out experience with AI chatbots might allow young people to explore their identity in a low-risk setting. For young people unable to come out due to family or community circumstances, AI chatbots may offer a lower-risk way to engage in self-exploration and identity exploration. Other LGBTQ+ young people may not have anyone who shares their identities within their offline community, and an AI chatbot could emulate a conversation with someone who shares similar identities to help the young person explore their own identities.

There are also many ways beyond parasocial relationships and AI chatbots that LGBTQ+ young people interact online and find joy in online interactions. This can include supportive interactions with peers, access to queer resources and content, and consuming relatable queer content that helps them feel less alone.[11] Youth perspectives regarding these types of positive experiences online are crucial to efforts that aim to minimize the harms of social media while retaining the benefits it may have for LGBTQ+ young people.

Rehearsing the coming out experience with AI chatbots might allow young people to explore their identity in a low-risk setting.

This report examines social media use and parasocial relationships among LGBTQ+ young people to garner a more comprehensive understanding of how parasocial relationships contribute to the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ young people. Additionally, given the growth of generative AI tools and the ways chatbots may address some communicative needs among LGBTQ+ young people, we explored the use of these tools by the LGBTQ+ young people in our sample. Further, to provide more nuance about how young people find joy in their online relationships, we summarize open-ended responses to a question about how these young people find joy in their online interactions.

10 Bragazzi, N., Crapanzano, A., Converti, M., Zerbetto, R., & Khamisy-Farah, R. (2023). The impact of generative conversational artificial intelligence on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community: Scoping review. *Journal of Medical Internet Research, 25,* e52091. https://doi.org/10.2196/52091

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

Summary of Methodology

Data were collected as part of a national survey of 1,715 U.S.-based teens and young adults, ages 13-22. The analytic sample for this report consists of 1,526 individuals who provided a clear and valid response to an item about having a single favorite content creator. Data were collected in the Qualtrics survey tool in November and December 2023 via social media ads on TikTok and Instagram. All participants self-reported being part of the LGBTQ+ community.

After data analysis was completed, we engaged in co-distillation and sense-making sessions with nine LGBTQ+ young people to help us better understand and add additional content to our findings. Summaries of findings from those interviews are integrated throughout the report to provide context to the data.

In the report, “teens” refers to participants 17 years old and younger; “young adults” refers to participants 18 years old and older. The term “young people” refers to the entire sample. Boys/men and girls/women are used to refer to those who identified their gender in this way regardless of whether they were transgender or cisgender. In subgroup testing, differences were tested for bivariate statistical significance at $p < .05$.

For additional details, please see the **Methodology section** of the Appendix on page 43.

Key Findings

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01 Key Finding

LGBTQ+ young people report having strong parasocial relationships on social media.

Note

Source: Hopelab Parasocial Relationships and Social Media Survey. Data were collected in November and December 2023. Responses represent data from 1,526 young people who provided a clear and valid response to the item about having a single favorite content creator.

Parasocial relationships are generally strong among the young people sampled, suggesting that many LGBTQ+ young people form strong, meaningful bonds with social media content creators.

Parasocial support is especially strong among white and Latinx young people compared to Black young people, teens compared to young adults, and rural compared to suburban young people.

02 Key Finding

Content creators who are not major celebrities are more often listed as favorites among LGBTQ+ young people.

Twitch: Ranboo
4.4 million subscribers
4.3% of sample

Ranboo [they/he] is a U.S.-based non-binary and gay creator whose work primarily focuses on live video gameplay and vlogs.

YouTube: Cavetown
2.2 million subscribers
1.6% of sample

Robin Daniel "Robbie" Skinner [he/they] is a U.K.-based transgender singer-songwriter and YouTuber.

TikTok: Mattie Westbrouck
11.4 million subscribers
1.2% of sample

Mattie Westbrouck is a U.S.-based nonbinary creator whose content focuses on comedy, daily life, style, and LGBTQ+ topics.

Young people in the survey listed their favorite LGBTQ+ social media content creators. These creators have substantial followings but are not major celebrities. Their accounts were described as more relatable, less curated, and more frequently updated. Their content often centers on personal growth or LGBTQ+ identity more than major celebrities.

The strong parasocial relationships formed with social media content creators suggest that influencers on social media platforms do not have to be major traditional media figures (e.g., professional actors, musicians, athletes) to attract audiences and potentially benefit the well-being of others. These content creators, specifically known for their social media presence, may be seen as more authentic, more accessible, and more similar to young people than major celebrities known primarily through television, film, music, or other traditional media.

03 Key Finding

Parasocial relationships are especially important for transgender and nonbinary young people.

Parasocial relationships may provide transgender and nonbinary young people with important access to personal stories from other people who are similar to them. We found support for parasocial relationships being linked to higher levels of transgender pride and higher levels of transgender community connectedness among transgender and nonbinary young people.

Transgender Young People with Strong Parasocial Relationships have Higher Levels of Transgender Pride

Transgender Young People with Strong Parasocial Relationships have Higher Levels of Transgender Community Connectedness

Note

Source: Hopelab Parasocial Relationships and Social Media Survey. Data were collected in November and December 2023. Responses represent data from 1,526 young people who provided a clear and valid response to the item about having a single favorite content creator.

04 Key Finding

Social media allows for increased interaction with content and potentially with content creators, which could strengthen parasocial relationships for LGBTQ+ young people.

Contact with traditional media figures is very limited in traditional media, such as television and movies. In contrast, on social media, anyone can comment on content creators' posts or send messages to them.

Most of the young people in the survey (61%) had interacted with their favorite content creator's posts in some way, and parasocial relationships were stronger among those who had reached out to the content creator at least once.

Content creators may also respond on social media. Of the young people who had reached out to their favorite content creator, 38% received some form of reply–and parasocial support was stronger among those who got a reply.

The above values represent the percent of the sample who had strong parasocial communication or strong parasocial support

Note

Items with different superscripts differ significantly within each category ($p < .05$). Source: Hopelab Parasocial Relationships and Social Media Survey. Data were collected in November and December 2023. Data on responses for reaching out to favorite content creators represent data from 1,526 young people who provided a clear and valid response to the item about having a single favorite content creator. Data on content creator responses represents data from 907 participants who reported that they had ever interacted with their favorite content creator via social media.

05 Key Finding

AI chatbot use is more common among transgender and nonbinary young people than among cisgender LGBTQ+ young people.

Note

Source: Hopelab Parasocial Relationships and Social Media Survey. Data were collected in November and December 2023. Responses represent data from 1,526 young people who provided a clear and valid response to the item about having a single favorite content creator.

AI chatbots allow people to have ongoing conversations with a bot, similar to conversations with a human. AI chatbots may be more available and less likely to provide contrasting viewpoints compared to human friends.[12, 13]

Four in 10 young people in our sample reported using chatbots to have ongoing conversations (40%). A smaller number (16%) reported that they had yet to have ongoing conversations with a chatbot but may do so in the future, while 44% reported never engaging or intending to engage in an online conversation with an AI chatbot.

Boys/men were more likely than girls/women to report having had ongoing conversations with a chatbot. In contrast, girls/women were more likely than boys/men and nonbinary young people to report never using and intending never to use chatbots. Using an AI chatbot was more common among transgender and nonbinary young people than among cisgender LGBTQ+ young people and among teens than young adults. At the same time, never using and intending to never use AI chatbots was more common among cisgender LGBTQ+ young people than transgender young people, young adults than teens, and urban than rural young people.

12 Brandtzaeg, P. B., Skjuve, M., & Følstad, A. (2022). My AI friend: How users of a social chatbot understand their human–AI friendship. *Human Communication Research, 48*(3), 404–429. https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/hqac008

13 Johns Hopkins University. (2024, May 13). Chatbots tell people what they want to hear. *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved July 29, 2024 from www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2024/05/240513193035.htm

06 Key Finding

LGBTQ+ young people find joy on social media through access to supportive conversations and relationships, via connections to those with shared identities, and by providing a relatability that lessens the impact of in-person isolation.

To gain a more detailed understanding of ways online interactions facilitate joy for LGBTQ+ young people, we asked participants to answer the following prompt: "Tell us about ways you've experienced joy from interactions you've had on social media." The top three emerging themes were online conversations and relationships, shared identity, and feeling less alone.

Online conversations and relationships

Young people reported that social media could be a source of meaningful friendships and support in difficult circumstances.

> "Sometimes when I feel like I have no one to talk to or when I get bullied for being trans, I go onto social media and talk to random people and they make me feel a little better than before."
>
> LATINX GAY TRANSGENDER TEEN BOY

> "I think social media can definitely be a dangerous place but watching people band together and unite over one common goal has been incredible to watch over the years. In some ways, I'd consider that alone to outweigh the negatives of social media."
>
> WHITE BISEXUAL/PANSEXUAL YOUNG ADULT WOMAN

Share identity

LGBTQ+ young people noted that social media was a way to find people with whom they shared important identities, which can be a source of hope, especially for those with limited in person contact with others who share their identities.

> "I feel more accepted by people online who are trans like me than my own family."
>
> ASIAN BISEXUAL/PANSEXUAL TRANSGENDER TEEN BOY

> "When reading about other POC transmasc experiences, especially from older trans people, I feel joyed that one day that could be me. One day I can be a thriving trans man as an adult."
>
> BLACK TRANSGENDER TEEN BOY

Share identity (cont'd)

"I have struggled a lot over the past couple years with my identity and and have had an extremely hard time accepting myself, and the lack of queer people surrounding me didn't help. I felt so alone and really didn't see a point in living. However, queer people on social media was really what got me through it. Knowing that these people were not only surviving but thriving in the most queer way possible truly saved my life, and I am incredibly thankful everyday for the queer creators who changed my life because I don't know where I would be without them."

WHITE BISEXUAL/PANSEXUAL TEEN GIRL

Feeling less alone

Young people reported that social media lessens the impact of in-person isolation and allows for finding people with backgrounds and experiences similar to oneself; young people noted that these benefits are especially relevant to young people who live in smaller towns.

"When you are isolated socially in real life, there is comfort in finding other people like you that you can turn to when your situation is fraught. I met my best friend of 7 years this way."

BLACK GAY/LESBIAN NONBINARY YOUNG ADULT

"I don't want to be special and unique, and with social media, I find others who are a lot like me in life experiences, whereas when I talk about it to others in real life, I'm treated like a weird circus animal or something. Social media helps me feel like a real human being and not some alien trying to fit in."

WHITE TRANSGENDER NONBINARY YOUNG ADULT

"It makes me feel less isolated to know that I'm not the only one who doesn't 'fit into the mold.' I live in a small town that treats pride and being gay like a disease, so getting reassurance that it's ok makes it better."

WHITE ASEXUAL TRANSGENDER NONBINARY TEEN

Section 1

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LGBTQ+ Young People Have Strong, Beneficial Relationships with Content Creators

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

Note

Items with different superscripts differ significantly within each category ($p < .05$). Source: Hopelab Parasocial Relationships and Social Media Survey. Data were collected in November and December 2023. Responses represent data from 1,526 young people who provided a clear and valid response to the item about having a single favorite content creator.

Social media use, in general, is ubiquitous among young adults. Recent research has indicated that most teens and young adults use some form of social media platform daily.[14, 15] Social media platforms facilitate the development of parasocial relationships with content creators. LGBTQ+ young

14 Anderson, M., Faverio, M., Gottfried, J. (2023). *Teens, Social Media and Technology 2023*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2023/12/11/teens-social-media-and-technology-2023/

15 Common Sense Media. (2024). *A double-edged sword: How diverse communities of young people think about the multifaceted relationship between social media and mental health*. Hopelab. https://assets.hopelab.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2024-double-edged-sword-hopelab-report_final-release-for-web-v2.pdf

people in the present study similarly reported very frequent use of social media; 93% of the sample reported that they use social media “several times a day” (57%) or “almost constantly” (36%).

Nonbinary participants were more likely than girls/women to report “almost constantly” using social media (38% vs. 32%). Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ young people were more likely to report being on social media “almost constantly” compared to white LGBTQ+ young people (42% and 40% vs. 31%, respectively). LGBTQ+ teens were more likely to report being on social media “almost constantly” compared to young adults (37% vs. 31%). There were no differences in reporting “almost constant” use of social media by cisgender and transgender/nonbinary identity and no differences by location.

LGBTQ+ young people use TikTok and YouTube to follow their favorite content creators

All participants in the study reported having a favorite LGBTQ+ content creator. The most popular platforms for following favorite creators were TikTok and YouTube, both used by over half of LGBTQ+ young people to follow their favorite content creators.

With regard to gender, TikTok is more popular among girls/women than boys/men (62% vs. 55%) for following a favorite content creator. More popular among nonbinary participants than girls/women were YouTube (61% vs. 52%), Twitter/X (15% vs. 11%), Twitch (11% vs. 5%), and Discord (10% vs. 4%) for following favorite content creators.

With regard to cisgender and transgender/nonbinary identity, transgender/nonbinary participants had higher rates of following favorite content creators on YouTube (60% vs. 52%), Twitch (9% vs. 6%), and Discord (8% vs. 5%). Among cisgender LGBTQ+ participants, Instagram (37% vs. 32%) was more popular.

SOCIAL MEDIA LOGOS KEY

Tiktok | YouTube | Instagram | Twitter/X | Twitch | Discord

Regarding race/ethnicity, Black young people were more likely than white young people to use Instagram to follow their favorite creators (43% vs. 30%). In comparison, white young people were likelier than Black or Latinx young people to follow their favorite creators on Twitch (11% vs. 6% and 6%).

Teens were more likely than young adults to follow their favorite content creator on TikTok (63% vs. 47%), whereas young adults were likelier to follow their favorite content creators on Instagram (44% vs. 29%).

In interviews with LGBTQ+ young people, they noted that TikTok seem more accessible in that content is typically presented in a simpler format than content on YouTube (i.e., in simple, selfie-style videos on

TikTok rather than more-produced videos common on YouTube), allowing easy entry onto the platform for new content creators. They noted that simpler-format content creates a sense of authenticity and makes the platform more accessible to new creators. They also reported that TikTok's algorithm may be more effective than other platforms at pushing them to the kinds of content they want to see. Young people indicated that YouTube's longer video format may facilitate parasocial relationships because the longer videos lend themselves to providing more information and nuance about the content creators. Young people noted a perception that TikTok and YouTube were more open in general and to LGBTQ+ people in particular than other platforms. They also noted that Instragram might be less popular

SOCIAL MEDIA LOGOS KEY

Tiktok | YouTube | Instagram | Twitter/X | Twitch | Discord

for connecting to content creators despite being similar in format to TikTok because Instagram is primarily still-photo-based rather than video-based; they noted that photo-based content is less effective in facilitating parasocial relationships than video content. They also noted that Instagram may be more popular to use to keep up with people they also know in person rather than using it to keep up with their favorite content creators.

Note

The survey included options for selecting Pinterest, Tumblr, Snapchat, Reddit, Facebook, and BeReal as platforms used to follow favorite LGBTQ+ content creators. Each of these options was selected by less than 5% of the total sample. These options were not included in this table. Items with different superscripts differ significantly within each category ($p < .05$). Source: Hopelab Parasocial Relationships and Social Media Survey. Data were collected in November and December 2023. Responses represent data from 1,526 young people who provided a clear and valid response to the item about having a single favorite content creator.

SOCIAL MEDIA LOGOS KEY

Tiktok | YouTube | Instagram | Twitter/X | Twitch | Discord

LGBTQ+ young people's favorite content creators are smaller-scale creators seen as more relatable and authentic

LGBTQ+ young people in the study were asked to list their favorite LGBTQ+ content creators. The table below lists the top 10 content creators listed by participants as their favorites. The content creators listed primarily use TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitch as their main content platforms. Types of content created included comedy, activism, personal stories, and music.

Twitch: Ranboo
4.4 million subscribers
4.3% of sample listed as favorite

Ranboo [they/he] is a U.S.-based non-binary and gay creator whose work primarily focuses on live video gameplay and vlogs.

TikTok: Funkyfrogbait
2.5 million subscribers
2.0% of sample listed as favorite

Kal [they/them] is a U.S.-based creator whose content primarily focuses on comedy and cultural/political commentary.

YouTube: Jammidodger
1.1 million subscribers
2.0% of sample listed as favorite

Jamie Raines is a U.K.-based transgender bisexual creator whose content focuses on LGBTQ+ topics, gender transition, and general lifestyle commentary.

TikTok: Alluringskull
2.5 million subscribers
1.9% of sample listed as favorite

Jory [she/they] and Max [she/they] are two U.S.-based transgender content creators whose content mainly focuses on politics, social justice, and gender and sexuality topics.

YouTube: Cavetown
2.2 million subscribers
1.6% of sample listed as favorite

Robin Daniel "Robbie" Skinner [he/they] is a U.K.-based transgender singer-songwriter and YouTuber.

TikTok: Dylan Mulvaney
9.6 million subscribers
1.5% of sample listed as favorite

Dylan Mulvaney [she/they] is a U.S.-based transgender creator whose content focuses on comedy, her gender transition, and politics.

YouTube: Melanie Martinez

15.8 million subscribers
1.4% of sample listed as favorite

Melanie Martinez [she/they] is a U.S.-based bisexual singer-songwriter.

YouTube: Noah Finnce

947K subscribers
1.4% of sample listed as favorite

Noah Finn Adams is a U.K.-based transgender, bisexual singer-songwriter and YouTuber.

TikTok: Mattie Westbrouck

11.4 million subscribers
1.2% of sample listed as favorite

Mattie Westbrouck is a U.S.-based nonbinary creator whose content focuses on comedy, daily life, style, and LGBTQ+ topics.

TikTok: Girl in Red

2.9 million subscribers
1.2% of sample listed as favorite

Marie Ulven Ringheim is a queer Norwegian singer-songwriter and record producer.

Note

Creators' main platform was determined by the platform on which each creator had the most followers as of July 22nd, 2024. Creator identity and pronoun information were obtained from the creators' profiles on July 24, 2024. Source: Hopelab Parasocial Relationships and Social Media Survey. Data were collected in November and December 2023. Responses represent data from 1,526 young people who provided a clear and valid response to the item about having a single favorite content creator.

Of note, the content creators listed as favorites most often by LGBTQ+ young people in the study were popular but not exceptionally well-known creators. For example, in terms of the number of subscribers, it is not uncommon for major LGBTQ+ media figures (e.g., popular actors and musicians) to have subscribers numbering into the hundreds of millions. The individuals listed most often as favorites were not the LGBTQ+ media figures with the largest overall audiences, suggesting that relatively smaller-scale content creators are the ones with whom young people form the strongest parasocial relationships.

In interviews, young people noted the makeup of the influencer list to be unsurprising. They noted that content creators who are not major traditional media figures are more relatable, that they post more often and their posts are less curated, that followers get to witness the content creators' natural personal growth, that the content creators are more likely to manage their own social media presence, and that the content creators may center LGBTQ+ identities more than major celebrities.

Most LGBTQ+ young people have a strong parasocial relationship with a digital content creator

Note

Source: Hopelab Parasocial Relationships and Social Media Survey. Data were collected in November and December 2023. Responses represent data from 1,526 young people who provided a clear and valid response to the item about having a single favorite content creator.

After young people entered the name of their favorite LGBTQ+ content creator, this name was then piped into the items about parasocial relationships, such that each item was customized to refer to the content creator named by each young person.

Two facets of parasocial relationship strength were measured: parasocial communication and parasocial support. Themes of disclosure and advice-seeking characterize parasocial communication, while themes of trust, sharing, and assistance characterize parasocial support.

Parasocial relationships were strong among the LGBTQ+ young people in the study. The scale midpoint for both parasocial communication and parasocial support was 2.5. For both scales, the average scores among our sample of LGBTQ+ young people were significantly ($p < .05$) higher than the midpoint (3.7 for parasocial communication and 4.0 for parasocial support). For parasocial communication, 87% of participants scored above the midpoint in parasocial communication, while 94% scored above the midpoint for parasocial support. When the scales were divided into weak, medium, and strong scores (see appendix for scoring information), only 5% of participants had weak parasocial communication scores, and only 2% had weak parasocial support scores. In contrast, 38% of young people had strong parasocial communication scores, and 54% had strong parasocial support scores. Thus, across both measures, participants in the study had generally strong parasocial relationships.

The average scores for both scales are relatively high; average scores for both Parasocial Communication (3.7) and Parasocial Support (4.0) were higher (at $p < .05$) in this study than in a prior study of U.S. adults;[16] in that study, averages for communication and support were 3.3 and 3.5, respectively. However, the parasocial support score was not statistically different from a prior sample of LGBTQ+ young adults, in which the average was 3.9.[17]

16 Tatem, C. P., & Ingram, J. (2022). Social media habits but not social interaction anxiety predict parasocial relationships. *Journal of Social Psychology Research*, *1*(2), 198-211. https://doi.org/10.37256/jspr.1220221496

17 Woznicki, N., Arriaga, A. S., Caporale-Berkowitz, N. A., & Parent, M. C. (2021). Parasocial relationships and depression among LGBQ emerging adults living with their parents during COVID-19: The potential for online support. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, *8*(2), 228–237. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000458

Proportionately more white and Latinx young people than Black young people had strong parasocial support (57% and 57% vs. 44%). More teens than young adults reported strong parasocial support (56% vs. 44%), as did more rural than suburban/urban young people (58% vs. 51%). There were no differences in parasocial support by gender, and no differences by any demographic variable emerged with regard to parasocial communication.

Note

Items with different superscripts differ significantly within each category ($p < .05$). Source: Hopelab Parasocial Relationships and Social Media Survey. Data were collected in November and December 2023. Responses represent data from 1,526 young people who provided a clear and valid response to the item about having a single favorite content creator.

SYMBOLS KEY

Strong Parasocial Communication

Strong Parasocial Support

More than half of LGBTQ+ young people have interacted with their favorite content creator

A unique feature of parasocial relationships that are maintained on social media platforms is the ability to engage in episodic platform-mediated communication with content creators. When an individual has a parasocial relationship with a media figure solely through traditional media such as movies and television, there is very limited opportunity for interaction with the media figure; indeed, the definition of a parasocial relationship hinges on a lack of reciprocity from the media figure. To have a momentary interaction with a traditional media figure, one would have to attend a book signing or buy tickets to a show featuring the parasocial other, for example. In contrast, social media platforms offer opportunities to have episodic platform-mediated interactions with media figures. For example, a fan may "like" or comment on posts created by the media figure. Moreover, content creators may reciprocate some degree of contact (e.g., by "liking" or responding to a fan's comment). Such momentary platform-mediated interactions may increase the perception of "knowing" the media figure and, thereby, strengthen an audience member's parasocial relationship.

We asked LGBTQ+ young people about their online

The above values represent the percent of the sample who had strong parasocial communication or strong parasocial support

Note

Items with different superscripts differ significantly within each category ($p < .05$). Source: Hopelab Parasocial Relationships and Social Media Survey. Data were collected in November and December 2023. Data on responses for reaching out to favorite content creators represent data from 1,526 young people who provided a clear and valid response to the item about having a single favorite content creator. Data on content creator responses represents data from 907 participants who reported that they had ever interacted with their favorite content creator via social media.

behaviors on social media platforms, including commenting on posts or sending direct messages to their favorite social media content creator. We also asked if any online behaviors resulted in a response from their favorite content creator. More than half of the young people in the survey (61%) had interacted with their favorite creator's content in some way. Of those who interacted with content, 38% received some form of response from the creator.

Reaching out to and getting responses from content creators was linked with parasocial relationship strength. Compared to individuals who had never reached out to content creators, individuals who reached out to content creators had stronger parasocial communication (46% vs. 29%, respectively) and strong parasocial support (61% vs. 45%, respectively). More of the individuals who received responses from content creators had strong parasocial support scores versus those who did not get replies (68% vs. 56%). However, getting responses from content creators was not linked to differences in strong parasocial communication strength.

The findings regarding online reciprocity may be at least partially explained by the findings regarding the scale of celebrity status among those most often listed by LGBTQ+ youth. As noted in our interviews with LGBTQ+ young people, smaller-scale content creators may be much more likely than major media figures to operate their own social media accounts. In contrast, major media figures may have staff who curate their social media accounts. As such, communication with smaller-scale content creators may be seen as more genuine than communication with major media figures.

We interviewed LGBTQ+ young people about their feelings about receiving a response from a content creator. They reported that those responses made them feel seen and heard and that it was exciting to be noticed by the content creator.

We interviewed LGBTQ+ young people about their feelings about receiving a response from a content creator. They reported that those responses made them feel seen and heard and that it was exciting to be noticed by the content creator.

Parasocial relationships may be beneficial to some aspects of well-being for transgender/nonbinary young people

Prior research has linked LGBTQ+ individuals' parasocial relationships with reduced loneliness and reduced depression in the face of low family support.[18] We examined strong parasocial relationships across five other variables: flourishing, transgender pride, transgender community connectedness, loneliness, and depression (see appendix for measurement tool information).

18 Woznicki, N., Arriaga, A. S., Caporale-Berkowitz, N. A., & Parent, M. C. (2021). Parasocial relationships and depression among LGBQ emerging adults living with their parents during COVID-19: The potential for online support. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, 8*(2), 228–237. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000458

Both strong parasocial communication and strong parasocial support were linked with transgender pride. Almost half (47%) of the participants who scored above the midpoint on the transgender pride measure had strong parasocial relationship communication, compared to 32% who scored below the midpoint. More than half (62%) of the participants who scored above the midpoint on the measures of transgender pride had strong parasocial relationship support, compared to 46% who scored below the midpoint.

Regarding transgender community connectedness, 58% of the participants who scored above the midpoint on the measure had strong parasocial support, compared to only 44% of those who scored below the midpoint.

Despite those associations with positive transgender pride and transgender community connectedness, having strong parasocial relationships was also linked with higher levels of depression. Of those who scored above the cut-off for depression, 42% had strong parasocial communication compared to 36% among those who scored below the cut-off. Of those who scored above the cutoff for depression, 57% had strong parasocial support compared to 51% among those who scored below the cutoff.

During our interviews, we asked LGBTQ+ young people about the connection between parasocial relationships and depression. These young people noted that parasocial relationships may be especially strong among young people who are dealing with depression because posts by content creators could be something to look forward to and could uplift their mood when they are feeling down. They also noted that, for young people dealing with depression, parasocial relationships may offer a low-risk and low-effort way to feel connected to someone else rather than having to manage challenges with in-person relationships.

Note

Items with different superscripts differ significantly within each category ($p < .05$). See the appendix for additional information on the classification of low and high scores. Source: Hopelab Parasocial Relationships and Social Media Survey. Data were collected in November and December 2023. For the Transgender Pride and Transgender Community Connectedness variables, responses represent data from 1003 young people who identified as transgender and/or nonbinary; for other variables, responses represent data from 1,526 young people who provided a clear and valid response to the item about having a single favorite content creator.

SYMBOLS KEY

- Strong Parasocial Communication
- Strong Parasocial Support

COLOR KEY

- Low
- High

Section 2

Section 2
Section 2

LGBTQ+ Young People Are Split on AI Chatbot Use

LGBTQ+ Young People Are Split on AI Chatbot Use

In addition to online parasocial relationships, we asked participants to respond to items regarding AI chatbots. First, we asked if they had ever engaged in an ongoing conversation with an AI chatbot over several days or longer as if chatting with a human friend. We also asked if they would consider doing so in the future. Finally, to gauge how common it might be to disclose AI chatbot use among their peer group, we asked if they had at least one friend who had engaged in ongoing conversations with an AI chatbot.

Overall, 40% of LGBTQ+ young people reported that they had used an AI chatbot to engage in a conversation over several days as if they were chatting with a friend. Of the remaining 60% who had not had one of these conversations, 16% said that they would consider doing so in the future, while 44% said they would not consider doing so in the future.

SYMBOLS KEY

Yes | No, would in the future | No, would not in the future

Boys/men were more likely than girls/women to report using an AI chatbot in this way (44% vs. 37%), while girls/women were more likely than boys/men and nonbinary participants to report that they would not use one (50% vs. 39% and 43%).

Engaging in a continued conversation with an AI chatbot was more common among transgender and nonbinary participants than among cisgender LGBTQ+ participants (43% vs. 35%). In contrast, cisgender LGBTQ+ young people were more likely than transgender and nonbinary young people to say that they would engage in this type of conversation with AI chatbots (50% vs. 41%).

Teens were much more likely than young adults to report having conversed with an AI chatbot (45% vs. 26%), while young adults were also more likely than teens to report that they would not converse with an AI chatbot in the future (56% vs. 39%).

SYMBOLS KEY

Yes | No, would in the future | No, would not in the future

By location, suburban and urban-dwelling young people were more likely than those who lived in rural areas to report that they would not use an AI chatbot for ongoing conversations (48% vs. 41%). No differences emerged by race/ethnicity in regard to the use of personal AI chatbots.

Note

Values represent responses to the item "Have you chatted with an AI chatbot in an ongoing conversation over several days or longer, as if you were chatting with a human friend?"
Items may not sum exactly due to rounding. Items with different superscripts differ significantly within each category ($p < .05$).
Source: Hopelab Parasocial Relationships and Social Media Survey. Data were collected in November and December 2023. Responses represent data from 1,526 young people who provided a clear and valid response to the item about having a single favorite content creator.

SYMBOLS KEY

Yes | No, would in the future | No, would not in the future

45%

"Yes, I have at least one friend who has had an ongoing conversation with an AI chatbot."

Overall, 45% of LGBTQ+ young people reported having a friend who had engaged in an ongoing conversation with an AI chatbot over several days as if it were a friend. This was more common among nonbinary young people and boys/men than girls/women (53% and 50% vs. 43%). It was also more common among transgender and nonbinary young people than cisgender LGBTQ+ young people (53% vs. 42%), more common among Latinx young people than white or

Note

Values represent responses to the item "Do you know if any of your friends have chatted with an AI chatbot in an ongoing conversation over several days or longer as if they were chatting with a human friend?"
Items may not sum exactly due to rounding. Items with different superscripts differ significantly within each category ($p < .05$).
Source: Hopelab Parasocial Relationships and Social Media Survey. Data were collected in November and December 2023. Responses represent data from 1,526 young people who provided a clear and valid response to the item about having a single favorite content creator.

Black young people (54% vs. 46% and 43%), and more common among teens than young adults (56% vs. 32%).

We interviewed young people with regard to AI chatbot use. They noted that AI chatbots always responded to messages, whereas human friends may not. At the same time, young people noted that AI chatbot use may reflect worsened social skills, allowing people to avoid having difficult conversations. Participants also commented on the overall rate of reluctance to use AI chatbots, citing young people's knowledge of the negative environmental impact of the computational processing power needed to power AI and other negative perceptions of AI, such as the potential to take away human jobs, as overall drivers of reluctance to engage with AI. Finally, participants noted that they felt that if they grew up seeing other LGBTQ+ people in their communities and if they had affirming people in their lives, they felt less interested in using AI chatbots. They noted that they felt that individuals using AI chatbots for ongoing conversations seemed to live in more rural and less affirming areas or with families who were not supportive.

We also asked young people about the higher rate of use of AI chatbots among transgender and nonbinary young people. Interview participants noted that AI chatbots may be more accepting than family members, providing an opportunity for young people who lack affirming relationships to engage in affirming conversations with AI-generated surrogate family members or peers.

Section 3

Section 3
Section 3

LGBTQ+ Young People Feel Connected and Find Joy in Online Interactions

LGBTQ+ Young People Feel Connected and Find Joy in Online Interactions

To gain a more detailed understanding of ways online interactions facilitate joy for LGBTQ+ young people, we asked participants to answer the following prompt: "Tell us about ways you've experienced joy from interactions you've had on social media." The top three emerging themes were **online conversations and relationships, shared identity,** and **feeling less alone.**

The online conversations and relationships that LGBTQ+ young people engage in through social media are an important source of joy, especially when dealing with challenges like mental illness, bullying, and unsupportive families.

One young person explains that they receive emotional support by talking to others online:

"Sometimes when I feel like I have no one to talk to or when I get bullied for being trans, I go onto social media and talk to random people and they make me feel a little better than before."

— LATINX GAY TRANSGENDER TEEN BOY

Another teenager describes how interacting with others through social media helped them find reasons to live:

"Many creators that I've seen and/or interacted with have made me realize that my identity is not a problem and that sometimes others just won't see that. Other interactions I've had online have provided me with support when I couldn't move past something alone. Seeing people of different ages from all around the world doing what makes them happy has shown me that who I am can't be changed. Just a few years ago, I didn't think that I would live for much longer, and it's because of all of these people that I started looking for my own reasons to move on throughout life. I've had many people online show me just how much better I can make my life, and that made me so much happier than I ever thought I could be. I am forever grateful to all of them."

— WHITE ASEXUAL TRANSGENDER TEEN BOY

Beyond simply interacting with others, LGBTQ+ young people form meaningful relationships with the people they meet online. One young adult says:

"I've met some of if not my closest friends from social media. I met my best friends [on] Instagram almost four years ago, and we still talk every single day. I've also met someone who I'm super in love with on Twitter almost four years ago as well. I think social media can definitely be a dangerous place but watching people band together and unite over one common goal has been incredible to watch over the years. In some ways, I'd consider that alone to outweigh the negatives of social media."

— WHITE BISEXUAL/PANSEXUAL YOUNG ADULT WOMAN

Another young person opens up about how relationships with people online serve as a refuge from the difficulties in their life:

"2020 screwed up my mental state. I don't get joy from things anymore. I just feel empty. Like I'm not the happy and extroverted person I used to be. I feel like a husk. My mom treated me badly during and after that year. I think that's what caused it. And figuring out I wasn't like the

other kids was probably it too… But I met online friends and I liked talking to them. Talking to them is one of the closest things I have that somewhat resembles happiness. I actually have friends who care for me. And a boyfriend who I love. In real life, I don't have that many friends. I'm left out and alone. TikTok, Pinterest, discord, c.ai, Spotify, it all just gives me a distraction from my shitty life. Like my mom doesn't yell at me for the smallest mistake, and my feelings are cared for."

— MULTIRACIAL BISEXUAL/PANSEXUAL TRANSGENDER NONBINARY TEEN

Another way LGBTQ+ young people experience joy through social media is by finding people they share identity with.

One transgender teen shares how seeing other trans people exist happily online makes them feel accepted and joyful:

"I feel more accepted by people online who are trans like me than my own family. I spend time online because I hate spending it with family. I feel like I'm hated less online than [in] my own house because of my gender, and it's crippling; I enjoy talking to people and seeing their perspective, and I like seeing people happy about what I hate about my life, for example, top surgery, I don't have top surgery but seeing other people be happy about theirs is nice."

ASIAN BISEXUAL/PANSEXUAL TRANSGENDER TEEN BOY

Seeing people who share identity online can also provide hope to young people:

"When reading about other POC transmasc experiences, especially from older trans people, I feel joyed that one day that could be me. One day I can be a thriving trans man as an adult."

— BLACK TRANSGENDER TEEN BOY

For those who don't know any queer people in real life, the hope that seeing queer people online can be life-saving. One young person shares:

"Up until recently, I had never met another queer person in real life. Seeing queer people living and honestly just existing gave me more hope than I can ever describe. I have struggled a lot over the past couple years with my identity and have had an extremely hard time accepting myself, and the lack of queer people surrounding me didn't help. I felt so alone and really didn't see a point in living. However, queer people on social media [were] really what got me through it. Knowing that these people were not only surviving but thriving in the most queer way possible truly saved my life, and I am incredibly thankful everyday for the queer creators who changed my life because I don't know where I would be without them."

— WHITE BISEXUAL/PANSEXUAL TEEN GIRL

LGBTQ+ young people also feel less alone when using social media.

One participant shares how social media helps buffer the impact of in-person isolation:

"Some of my longest friendships stemmed from interactions in Wattpad DMs or on Tumblr. When you are isolated socially in real life, there is comfort in finding other people like you that you can turn to when your situation is fraught. I met my best friend of 7 years this way."

— BLACK GAY/LESBIAN NONBINARY YOUNG ADULT

Another young person shares the importance of finding people on social media who have similar backgrounds and experiences:

"Where I have lack of support and understanding at home, I can find people who have similar experiences as me, and I feel

less alone. I experience a lot of religious trauma, and I can't talk about that with my family without them trying to get me back in the religion, but I can find people on TikTok and Reddit who are also deconstructing their faith and not feel like a horrible person for questioning my beliefs. I can find people who question their gender and not feel like an abomination and alone in my dysphoria. I don't comment or interact a lot with people, but I do find a lot of help and comfort when the situation I'm in is so isolating. I don't want to be special and unique, and with social media, I find others who are a lot like me in life experiences, whereas when I talk about it to others in real life, I'm treated like a weird circus animal or something. Social media helps me feel like a real human being and not some alien trying to fit in."

— WHITE TRANSGENDER NONBINARY YOUNG ADULT

Social media can also be particularly important for LGBTQ+ young people who live in small towns and are dealing with isolation. One participant shares:

"It makes me feel less isolated to know that I'm not the only one who doesn't 'fit into the mold' I live in a small town that treats pride and being gay like a disease, so getting reassurance that it's ok makes it better."

— WHITE ASEXUAL TRANSGENDER NONBINARY TEEN

Conclusion

A greater understanding of ways LGBTQ+ young people interact, develop connections, and find community online is crucial to the development of programs and policies that can support LGBTQ+ young people and minimize exposure to harm. For example, this data can help inform social media literacy efforts focused on supporting LGBTQ+ young people as they navigate evolving modes of online connections, including how to leverage parasocial relationships and AI chatbots to develop greater self-understanding and facilitate self-exploration while constructing and maintaining boundaries.

Parasocial relationships may provide opportunities to find others and foster relationships with people with similar identities, allowing young people to feel less alone. These benefits may be especially important to transgender and nonbinary young people, who may have fewer personal, offline connections with people with similar shared identities. Parasocial relationships were also linked with depression. In interviews, LGBTQ+ young people noted that parasocial relationships might be especially important to those who are experiencing depression and who may feel less able to make connections with others. This finding warrants further exploration and may indicate both the potential for these content creators to share helpful evidence-based mental health information with their followers and the need to equip content creators with support around handling mental health crises.

Our data indicated that the most popular social media content creators were not major media figures

“

Parasocial relationships may provide opportunities to find others and foster relationships with people with similar identities, allowing young people to feel less alone.

but were content creators known specifically for their social media presence. Young people may see social media figures as less curated in terms of what they post, more authentic, and more likely to actually be the ones managing their social media accounts compared to celebrities known for their work in more traditional media. This finding also suggests that young people interested in making content can have substantial positive influences in the lives of their followers, even if they do not have millions of followers.

Social media content creators, in turn, have a unique opportunity to provide support to their followers via social media platforms. Young people who received responses from content creators, even if that response was just to “like” a comment by the young person on one of the creator’s posts, had stronger parasocial relationships. This form of platform-mediated communication allows for a moment of reciprocity that is much less likely to happen with traditional celebrities. Research may further explore

how contact with a media figure through platform intersections, such as commenting on and liking posts, can shape parasocial relationships.

Our work suggests that parasocial relationships among LGBTQ+ young people are strong and potentially healthy. Still, young people and adults may engage in conversations about young people's parasocial relationships and the content creators they follow when possible. Parasocial relationships may be sources of support and identity development for LGBTQ+ young people, though it is also important that those relationships have boundaries and do not develop into unhealthy obsessions, such as inappropriate communications with content creators or even tracking down a content creator and showing up at their home.[19, 20] Developing healthy boundaries in a parasocial relationship may also help young people create healthy boundaries in their personal relationships offline.

Although generative AI chatbots are a relatively new innovation, 40% of the LGBTQ+ young people we surveyed already had ongoing conversations with an AI chatbot, with an additional 16% indicating they are open to doing so in the future. AI chatbots may have some advantages, such as helping LGBTQ+ young people to practice conversation skills or to engage in self-reflection and self-exploration. However, AI chatbots may also be used in negative ways, such as reinforcing disengagement from social interactions with humans. Further research is needed on how young people use and interact with AI chatbots and the possible benefits and challenges of AI chatbot use. The benefits of AI chatbots, such as practicing difficult conversations or facilitating self-exploration, could then be intentionally enhanced. In contrast, risks, such as over-engagement with AI chatbots, could be addressed.

> ***Tech companies, mental health professionals, youth-serving organizations, and education developers can all benefit from including LGBTQ+ young people in their work early and often.***

Finally, this report emphasizes the importance of engaging with LGBTQ+ young people, especially those who are transgender and nonbinary, in discussions about their interactions online, including parasocial relationships and the use of AI chatbots. The experiences and perspectives of young people today are often divergent from those in charge of developing products and policies related to social media, AI, and technology more broadly. Tech companies, mental health professionals, youth-serving organizations, and education developers can all benefit from including LGBTQ+ young people in their work early and often. An inclusive co-creation process, such as was employed in the creation of this report, can help to guide decision-making and conversations and promote narratives that are accurate and reflect the experiences of young people.

19 Waheed, C. (2024, July 30). For influencers, online stalking is a real-life threat. *Daily Dot*. https://www.dailydot.com/irl/age-surveillance-influencer-stalking/

20 Dye, E. (2024, July 30). I'm an influencer and these are the things I never expected about the job - people turn up at my house and stop me in the street to ask how much money I make. *Daily Mail*. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-13301105/influencer-shocked-tiktok-fans-weight-house.html

About

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

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Appendix

Sample details

The participants ranged in age from 13 to 22. Almost three-quarters (73%) of respondents were 17 or younger, and 27% were 18 or over. The average participant age was 16.02 (*SD* = 2.55).

In terms of sex assigned at birth (SAAB), 70% of participants identified their SAAB as female, 26% as male, and 5% declined to answer. In terms of gender, 32% of participants identified as boys/men, 26% as girls/women, 22% as nonbinary, 19% as another gender, and 1% declined to answer. Just over half (51%) of participants identified as transgender; a further 14% indicated that they were not sure if they were transgender.

Participants identified as white (44%), Latinx (16%), Multiracial (15%), Black/African American (12%), Asian American (4%), American Indian/Native American (2%), or another identity (5%).

In terms of sexual orientation, participants identified as bisexual or pansexual (41%), lesbian or gay (29%), asexual (8%), heterosexual (transgender/nonbinary) (1%), another identity (15%), or unsure (6%), or declined to answer (less than 1%).

Over half of the participants reported that their income was sufficient to meet their needs (11% reported more than enough to live comfortably, 34% reported enough to live comfortably, and 23% reported enough to meet needs with a little money left over). A further 10% reported income sufficient to meet their basic expenses only, 9% reported struggling to meet basic expenses, and 4% reported being unable to meet basic expenses. A further 10 percent of participants declined to answer this question.

Regarding rural/urban living, just under half of the participants lived in either a large urban city (11%) or a suburban community (36%). A quarter (25%) lived in a small city. The remainder lived in a small rural town (18%) or a rural country home (4%).

Quotes in the “LGBTQ+ Young People Felt Connected and Find Joy in Online Interactions” section were collected within the main survey. Quotes in this section are directly from young people but have been lightly edited to correct misspellings, punctuation, capitalization, and typos.

Sense-making qualitative interviews were conducted with nine LGBTQ+ young people, via the dscout platform.

Method

IRB approval for the study was obtained from the University of San Diego, IRB-2018-442. Prior to the collection of quantitative data, items in the survey were reviewed in focus groups of young people, with a focus on participation by LGBTQ+ and BIPOC informants. Information obtained from focus groups was used to inform the refinement of the survey instruments. Data collection occurred from November through December 2023. Participants were recruited online through ads placed on social media, which were optimized for the recruitment of LGBTQ+ young people, especially those who were BIPOC, ages 13-22. The ads were visible only

on U.S. social media platforms. Individuals interested in participating could click through to the survey, hosted on Qualtrics, from the social media ad. The survey first presented the informed consent sheet for the project. Participants who consented to participate were directed to a series of items asking about demographic variables. Participants were excluded from the survey if they reported that they did not identify as LGBTQ+, if they reported that their age was under 13 or over 22, or if they reported never using social media. Through the course of data collection, the research team also used participation quotas to promote diversity in the sample; as quotas were met, participation was closed to individuals who selected specific demographic responses.

The initial data set contained responses from 1961 participants. We excluded participants who incorrectly answered a validity check item ("Please check the Strongly disagree button for this item") or who responded to an item about honest responses to survey items by answering that they responded honestly to "hardly any" or "only some of them." Of the remaining 1,715 participants, 1,526 provided a clear and valid response to the item about a single favorite content creator. Data included in this report represent responses from those 1,526 individuals.

Measures

Parasocial relationships

Parasocial relationship strength was measured using the Communication and Support subscales of Tukachinksky's Parasocial Relationships Scale.[21] Responses were made on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), and responses were averaged to create total scale scores. For this report, categories for the purpose of comparison were created by defining low parasocial relationship strength as mean scores of 1 through 1.99, medium parasocial relationship strength as scores of 2 through 4, and high parasocial relationship strength as scores greater than 4 to a maximum score of 5. For most analyses, individuals with high self-reported parasocial relationship strength were compared to those with medium and low parasocial relationship strength.

Transgender pride

Transgender pride was measured using the Pride subscale of the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure.[22] Responses were made on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), and responses were averaged to create total scale scores. For this report, categories for the purpose of comparison were created by dichotomizing the variable at the midpoint (3.0), defining low transgender pride as mean scores of 3.0 or less and high transgender pride as scores greater than 3.0.

Transgender community connectedness

Transgender community connectedness was measured using the Community Connectedness subscale of the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure.[22] Responses were made on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), and responses were averaged to create total scale scores. For this report,

21 Tukachinsky, R. H. (2010). Para-romantic love and para-friendships: Development and assessment of a Multiple-Parasocial Relationships Scale. *American Journal of Media Psychology, 3*(1/2), 73-94.

22 Testa, R. J., Habarth, J., Peta, J., Balsam, K., & Bockting, W. (2015). Development of the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, 2*(1), 65–77. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000081

categories for the purpose of comparison were created by dichotomizing the variable at the midpoint (3.0), defining low transgender community connectedness as mean scores of 3.0 or less and high transgender community connectedness as scores greater than 3.0.

Flourishing

Flourishing was measured using the Flourishing Scale.[23] Responses were made on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), and responses were averaged to create total scale scores. For this report, categories for the purpose of comparison were created by dichotomizing the variable at the midpoint (4.0), defining low flourishing as mean scores of 4.0 or less and high flourishing as scores greater than 4.0.

Loneliness

Loneliness was measured using the 3-item version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale.[24] Responses were made on a 3-point scale (1 = hardly ever to 3 = often), and responses were averaged to create total scale scores. For this report, categories for the purpose of comparison were created by dichotomizing the variable at the midpoint (2.0), defining low loneliness as mean scores of 2.0 or less and high loneliness as scores greater than 2.0.

Depression

Depression symptoms were measured using the 2-item version of the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-2).[25] Responses were made on a 4-point scale (not at all to nearly every day), and responses were summed to create total scale scores. For this report, categories for the purpose of comparison were created by dichotomizing the variable at the recommended clinical cutoff score of 3, defining low depression symptoms as mean scores of less than 3 and high depression symptoms as scores 3 or greater.

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24 Hughes, M. E., Waite, L. J., Hawkley, L. C., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2004). A short scale for measuring loneliness in large surveys: Results from two population-based studies. *Research on Aging, 26*(6), 655–672. https://doi.org/10.1177/0164027504268574

25 Kroenke, K., Spitzer, R. L., & Williams, J. B. (2003). The Patient Health Questionnaire-2: validity of a two-item depression screener. *Medical Care, 41*(11), 1284–1292. https://doi.org/10.1097/01.MLR.0000093487.78664.3C