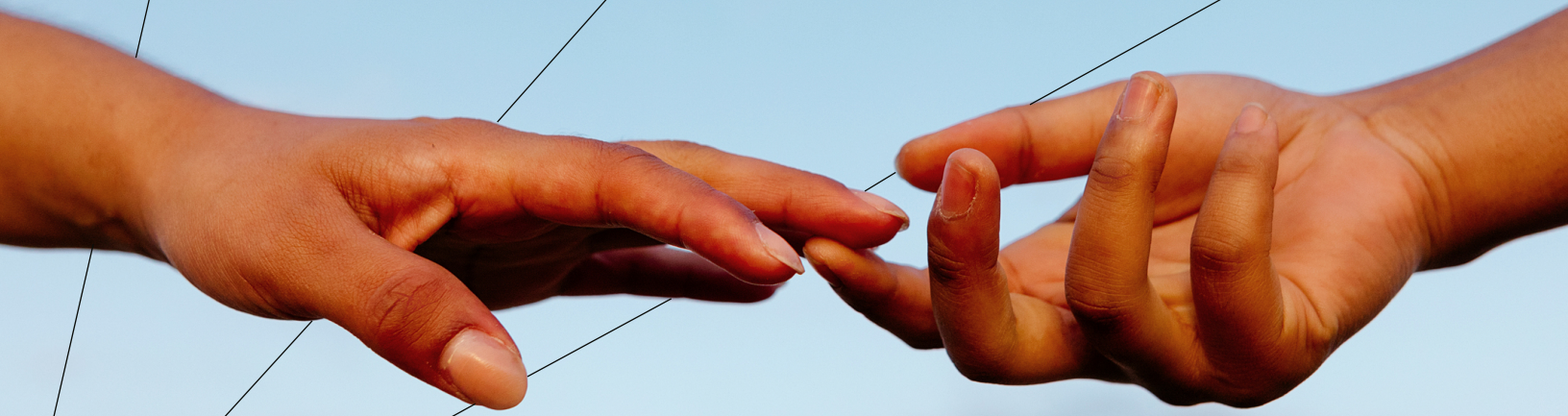


A Place
to Be Seen:
*Mental Health &
Online Support
Among Southern
Youth in the U.S.*



OCTOBER 2025

HOPELAB

Introduction

Young people today are growing up in a time of constant connectivity, where digital tools and social platforms shape how they communicate, learn, and thrive. For young people living in the Southern United States, these digital spaces interact with unique cultural and structural factors that influence their mental health and well-being. Online environments can serve as lifelines, offering connection, support, and information, while also reflecting and sometimes intensifying broader challenges.

The South is home to nearly 40% of the nation's young people¹—a diverse population shaped by varied histories, identities, and experiences. Many young people in the region face barriers such as economic inequality, gaps in education and health care access, and persistent community stigma around mental health.^{2,3,4} These challenges are intensified by regional disparities in the availability of mental health resources and providers.⁵ As a result, young people in the South often experience distinct pressures and fewer avenues for support than their peers in other parts of the country.

Despite multifaceted hurdles, Southern young people continue to find ways to express themselves and build support networks. Digital spaces play an important role in fostering

self-exploration, connection, and access to mental health resources — especially in places where offline support may be limited.

In this brief report, Hopelab explores the online behaviors, mental health, and well-being among young people ($n = 1,274$) living in the Southern U.S. (36% of those surveyed) compared to their peers living in other regions (64%). The terms “Southern,” “Southern U.S.,” and “South” refer to participants who reported living in a Southern state, based on U.S. Census region classifications. In contrast, “other U.S. region” refers to those living in the Northeast, Midwest, or West. Additional information on regional classification can be found in the methodology section.

Importantly, this project was developed using youth co-design practices and centered the voices and experiences of young people living in the South. Co-distillation interviews with youth participants helped interpret and contextualize the findings.⁶



¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). *American Community Survey 1-year estimates: South Region profile*. Census Reporter. <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/02000US3-south-region/>

² Haynes, T. F., Cheney, A. M., Sullivan, J. G., Bryant, K., Curran, G., Olson, M., Cottoms, N., & Reaves, C. (2017). Addressing mental health needs: Perspectives of African Americans living in the rural South. *Psychiatric Services*, 68(6), 573–578. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201600208>

³ Castro-Ramirez, F., Al-Suwaidi, M., Garcia, P., Rankin, O., Ricard, J. R., & Nock, M. K. (2021). Racism and poverty are barriers to the treatment of youth mental health concerns. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 50(4), 534–546. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2021.1941058>

⁴ Showalter, E., Klein, R., Johnson, J., & Hartman, S. L. (2017). *Why rural matters 2015–2016: Understanding the changing landscape*. The Rural School and Community Trust. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED590169>

⁵ Shelton, A. J., & Owens, E. W. (2021). Mental health services in the United States public high schools. *Journal of School Health*, 91(1), 70–76. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12976>

⁶ Winer, E., Bruehlman-Senecal, E., Lara, E., Weinstein, E., & Green, A. (2024). Demystifying youth-engaged research: Practical insights and lessons learned from two case studies. *Hopelab*. <https://hopelab.org/stories/demystifying-youth-engaged-research>

Key Finding 1: Southern young people, compared to peers in other regions of the U.S., *are more likely to view social media as an important mental health resource.*

Compared to peers in other U.S. regions, young people from the South are significantly more likely to report that social media is important for finding information or resources about mental health or well-being (57% vs. 47%) and connecting with others who have similar mental health concerns (63% vs. 56%). They are also more likely to describe social media as important for expressing themselves creatively (64% vs. 58%), connecting with family (66% vs. 61%), learning about professional or academic opportunities (66% vs. 57%), and finding relatable content (81% vs. 75%).

Reasons why social media is important to young people

● SOUTHERN U.S. ● OTHER U.S. REGIONS

Finding information or resources about mental health or well-being



Connecting with people who share similar concerns about mental health or well-being



Expressing themselves creatively



Connecting with family



Learning about professional or academic opportunities



Finding relatable content



Note. Differing superscripts reflect significant differences between groups at $p < .05$. Data reflect responses to the item, "How important is social media to you for:" Values represent the proportion of participants who selected "Very important" or "Somewhat important."

Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense, conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 social media users aged 14–22 nationwide.

In co-distillation interviews, Southern young people noted how social media is a lifeline, especially when mental health topics are stigmatized or avoided in their communities.

“Finding information [on mental health] is big. I can talk about mental health with my family, but there’s still a stigma, especially because I am Indian, and it’s not as talked about. *So for me, it’s easier to turn online to figure out mental health resources.*”

ASIAN, STRAIGHT, CISGENDER YOUNG WOMAN

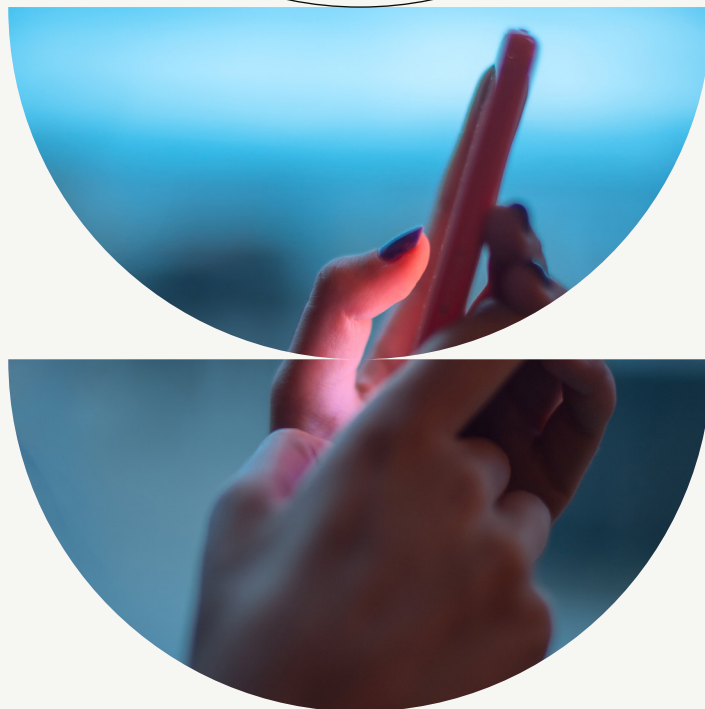
Others spoke about using social media to access relatable content and find community beyond their immediate environment.

“Social media is somewhere that you can go and feel a sense of community, where in real life, sometimes you might not be able to find that. As a young person in the South, I go on social media and look for who’s going through the same thing as me, so I could talk to this person or I could relate.”

BLACK, LESBIAN, CISGENDER YOUNG WOMAN

“Not a lot of places in the South have the same ideas as me. *Social media allows people in the world or in the United States to connect so you get a better world view, and you tend to connect with people more because you have more access to community.*”

LATINX, STRAIGHT, CISGENDER
YOUNG WOMAN

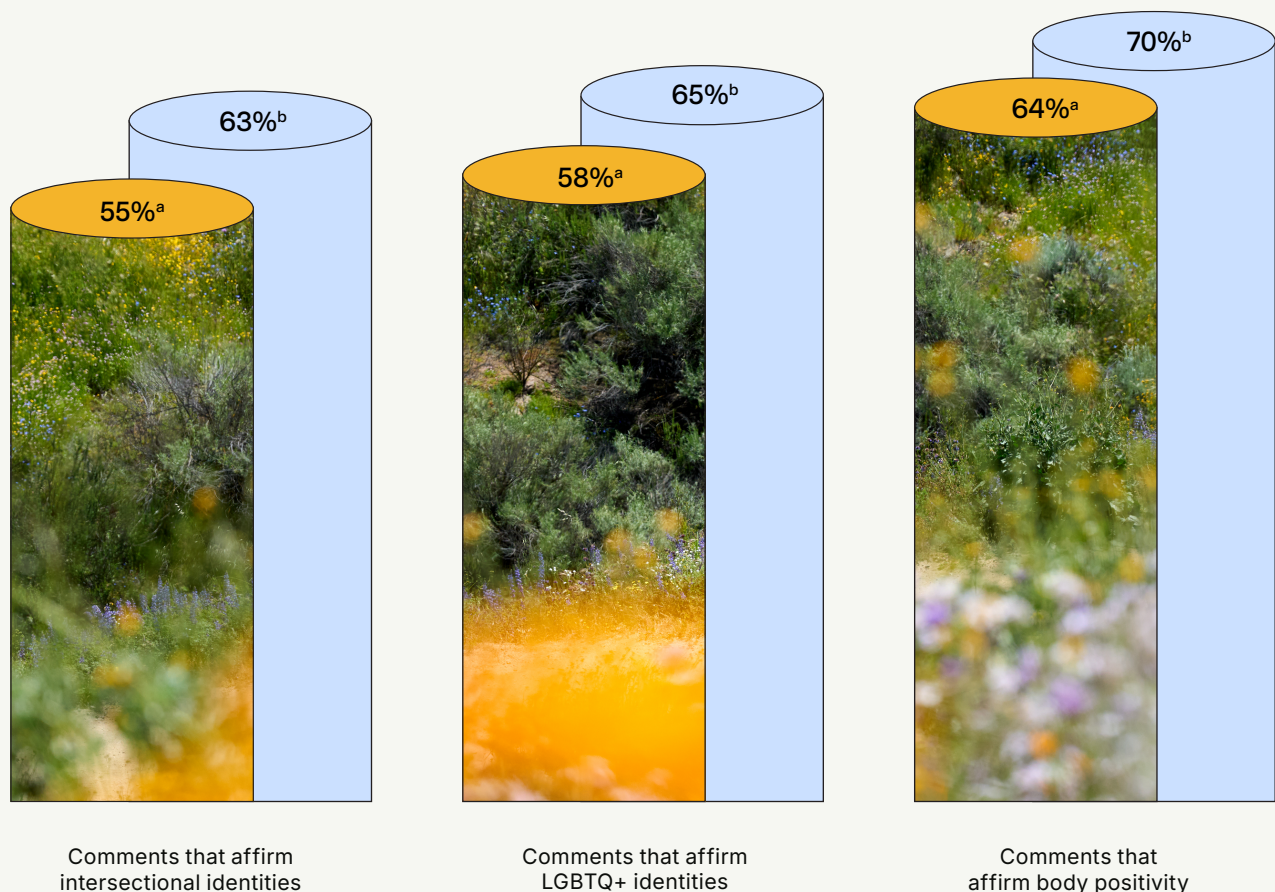


Key Finding 2: Southern young people are *less likely* *to see affirming content* on social media.

Compared to peers from other U.S. regions, young people in the South are significantly less likely to encounter comments on social media that affirm intersectional identities (55% vs. 63%), affirm LGBTQ+ identities (58% vs. 65%), and celebrate body diversity and body positivity (64% vs. 70%).

**Young people who encounter affirming
identity-based comments online**

● SOUTHERN U.S.
● OTHER U.S. REGIONS



Note. Differing superscripts reflect significant differences between groups at $p < .05$. Data reflect responses to the item, "How often, if ever, have you encountered the following types of comments in social media?" Values represent the proportion of participants who selected "Often" or "Sometimes."

Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense, conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 social media users aged 14–22 nationwide.

In co-distillation interviews, Southern young people noted that social media often mirrors the social norms and attitudes of the communities around them, which aren't always inclusive.

Others reflected on how criticism, especially around appearance and particularly toward women and girls, can be more intense in Southern communities.

“There is a big community of people in the South who don't enjoy the inclusion of other people. *They tend to say things that might be hurtful or might be less affirming or they don't affirm at all.* And social media is kind of localized where you live, so you see that non-inclusive content.”

LATINX, STRAIGHT, CISGENDER
YOUNG WOMAN

“Social media is tailored to your area, and generally speaking, *the South is a little more conservative and is not as open-minded and tolerant.* And so young people are gonna be less exposed to [diverse identity-affirming content] when they're in those areas.”

WHITE, GAY, TRANSGENDER YOUNG MAN



Key Finding 3: Southern young people *experience depression & anxiety at similar rates to their peers* in other U.S. regions.

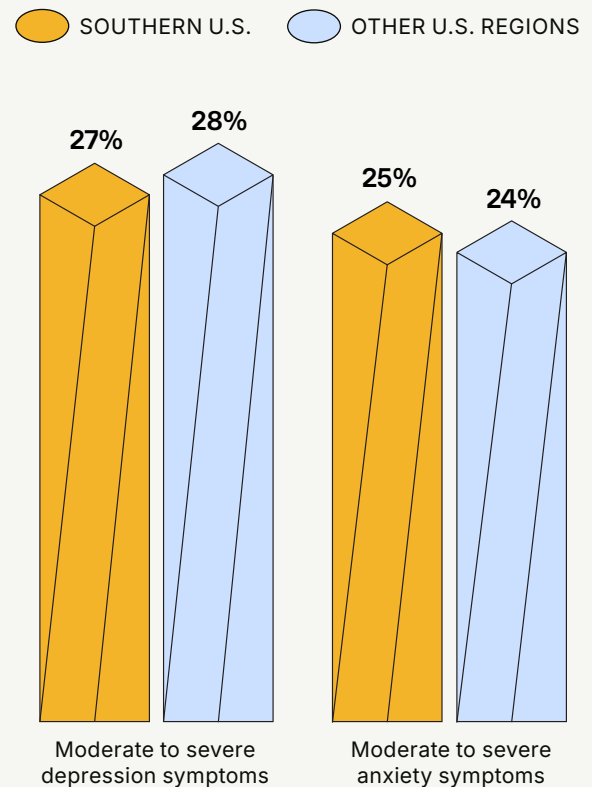
Southern young people report rates of moderate to severe mental health symptoms that closely mirror those of young people from other U.S. regions. Twenty-seven percent of Southern youth report moderate to severe depression symptoms, compared to 28% of those from other regions. Twenty-five percent of Southern young people report moderate to severe anxiety symptoms, similar to 24% of peers in other areas. When looking at either depression or anxiety symptoms, about one in three Southern young people (32%) report moderate to severe anxiety symptoms, similar to 24% of peers from other U.S. regions.

In co-distillation interviews, young people in the South emphasized that depression and anxiety are widespread challenges—regardless of location.

“Southern people feel the *same exact stresses as the majority of the young people* in the United States.”

ASIAN, STRAIGHT, CISGENDER YOUNG WOMAN

Young people's reported depression and anxiety symptoms



Note. Data reflect responses to the PHQ-8 and GAD-7, and values represent above-cutoff scores. Cutoffs for the scales were 3 for both the PHQ-8 and GAD-7.

Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense, conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 social media users aged 14–22 nationwide.

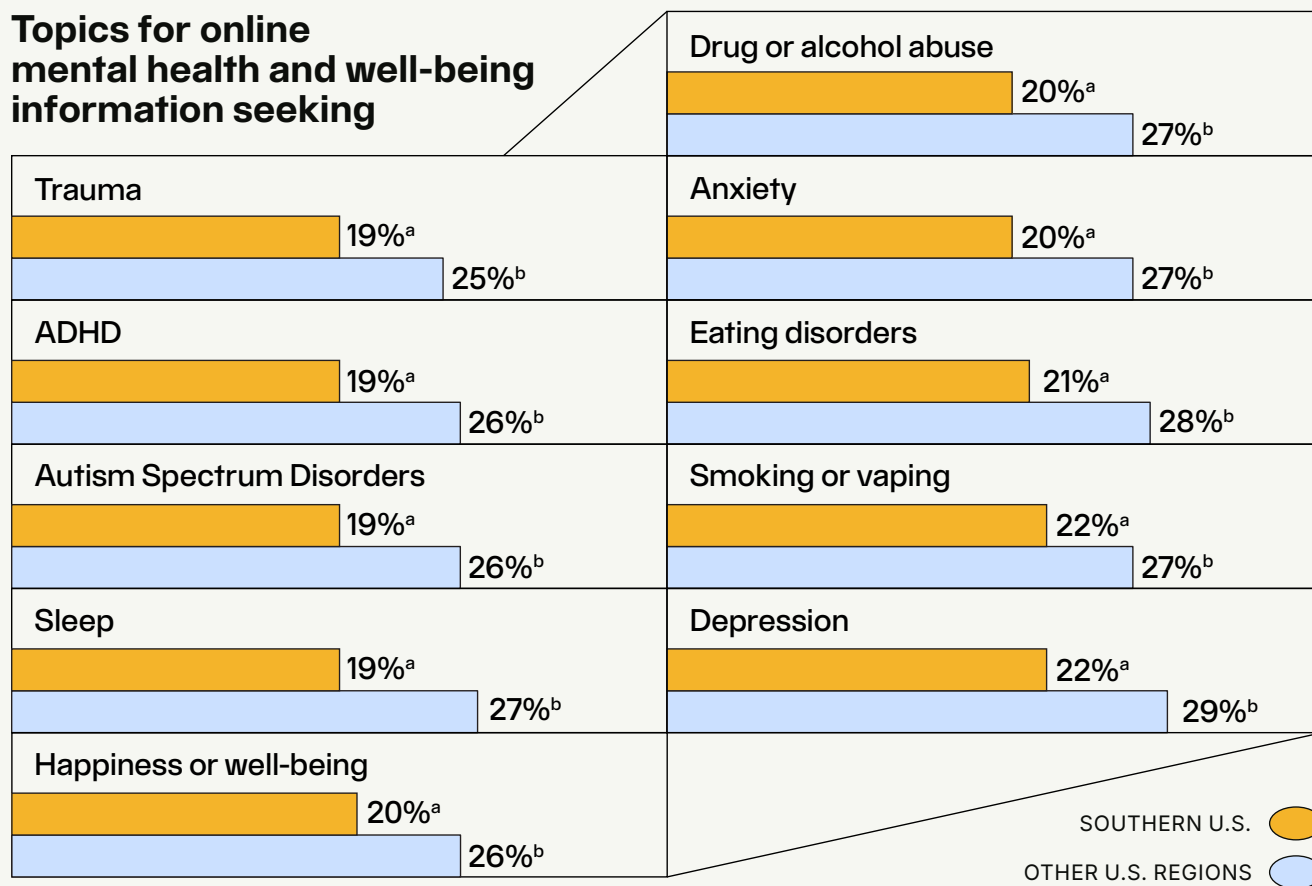
“Everyone struggles. I believe that *it’s not just one group of people who are struggling*, but there are a lot of people who are struggling. It’s a problem that *needs to be solved as a whole community together.*”

BLACK, STRAIGHT, CISGENDER YOUNG MAN

Key Finding 4: Young people from the South are *less likely to go online to find information* on well-being and mental health topics.

Despite reporting similar rates of depression and anxiety symptoms as their peers from other parts of the U.S., young people in the South are significantly less likely to go online to look up information related to mental health and well-being. Compared to their peers in other U.S. regions, they are less likely to seek information online about depression (22% vs 29%), anxiety (20% vs. 27%), eating disorders (21% vs 28%), ADHD (19% vs. 26%), autism spectrum disorders (19% vs. 26%), trauma (19% vs. 25%), sleep (19% vs. 27%), happiness or well-being (20% vs. 26%), drug or alcohol abuse (20% vs. 27%), and smoking or vaping (22% vs. 27%).

Topics for online mental health and well-being information seeking



Note. Differing superscripts reflect significant differences between groups at $p < .05$. Data reflect affirmative responses to the item, "Have you ever gone online, whether through a website, a search engine, an app, or any other means, to look for information on any of the following health topics?"

Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 social media users aged 14–22 nationwide.

In co-distillation interviews, Southern young people offered insight into why these disparities exist. Many spoke to a culture of silence and stigma surrounding mental health that discourages help-seeking behaviors. A white, asexual, cisgender teen girl described how young people in her community tend to ignore mental health, often internalizing distress or minimizing it. Others echoed that symptoms like anxiety or depression often go unacknowledged and untreated, creating harm through prolonged isolation or self-doubt.

Although young people in the South are generally less likely to seek out mental health information online, they are significantly more likely than their peers from other U.S. regions to use YouTube for that purpose (46% vs. 34%).

“I think that young people are *scared to ask for help because it’s taboo or they don’t have access to ask for help*. But also maybe they don’t know that they’re suffering from depression. When you feel a certain way, you tend to assume that everybody feels this way, and so you think you’re normal.”

WHITE, GAY, TRANSGENDER YOUNG MAN

“One of the main things is the stigma in talking about [mental health and well-being]. *If you’re not used to talking about it or if you don’t feel as though you can talk about it*, it’s not something that you view as a problem or as an issue that you could be facing. You’re not gonna be likely to look it up.”

LATINX, STRAIGHT, CISGENDER YOUNG MAN

Use of YouTube to find mental health and well-being information



● SOUTHERN U.S.

● OTHER U.S. REGIONS

Note. Differing superscripts reflect significant differences between groups at $p < .05$. Data reflect responses to the item, “Where have you looked online for mental health information or advice?” Values represent the proportion of affirmative responses to the item, “YouTube.”

Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense, conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 social media users aged 14–22 nationwide.

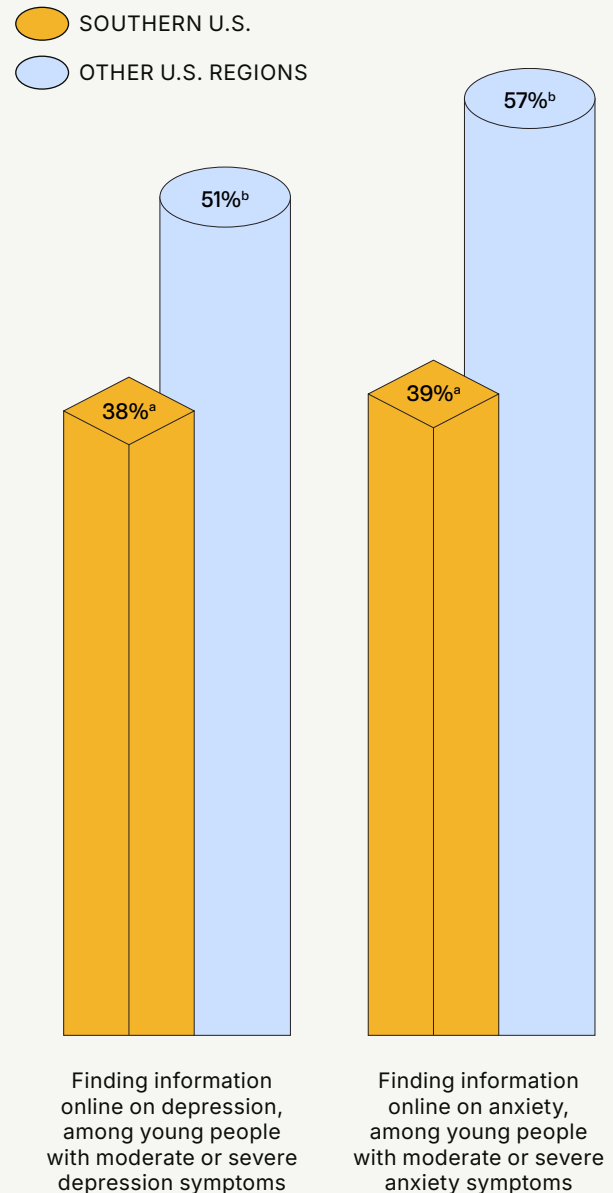
Among young people with moderate to severe symptoms, online information seeking remains lower in the South. Just 38% of Southern young people with moderate to severe depression reported going online to look up information about depression, compared to 51% of peers from other U.S. regions. The same pattern emerged for anxiety: 39% of Southern youth with moderate to severe anxiety symptoms looked up information online, compared to 57% of their peers from other U.S. regions.

In co-distillation interviews, Southern young people described how cultural stigma discouraged seeking support—even when young people are experiencing depression and anxiety. A multiracial, bisexual teen girl explained that in the South, if you experience depression or anxiety, people might perceive that something is wrong with you. Because of this stigma, many young people avoid acknowledging their symptoms or seeking treatment out of the fear of being judged.

“I enjoyed being able to see people. It was a comfort in knowing that it’s not just an article. *This is a real person’s lived experiences and their real opinions, and that was really nice.*”

WHITE, GAY, TRANSGENDER YOUNG MAN

Online information seeking about depression and anxiety among young people above the depression and anxiety cutoffs



Note. Differing superscripts reflect significant differences between groups at $p < .05$. Data reflect affirmative responses to the item, “Have you ever gone online, whether through a website, a search engine, an app, or any other means, to look for information on any of the following health topics?” This analysis includes only participants above the cutoff for depression or anxiety; cutoffs for the scales were 3 for both the PHQ-8 and GAD-7.

Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense, conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 social media users aged 14–22 nationwide.

Key Finding 5:

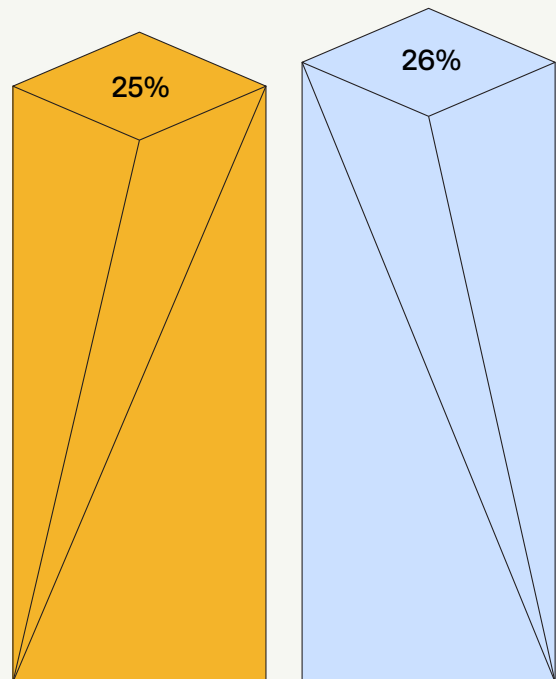
One in four Southern young people have used online therapy—
similar to their peers from other U.S. regions.

Roughly one in four young people in the Southern U.S. report having used online therapy (25%), a rate nearly identical to their peers from other U.S. regions (26%).

In co-distillation interviews, Southern young people shared how online therapy offered a lifeline—especially in areas where mental health stigma remains high or local options are limited. They also reported that online therapy reduced barriers to access. One multiracial, bisexual, teen girl explained that online therapy was especially helpful on days when she didn't want to leave the house or might otherwise talk herself out of attending an in-person session. Having the option to connect with a therapist virtually made it easier to access support when she needed it.

Young people who have ever attended online therapy

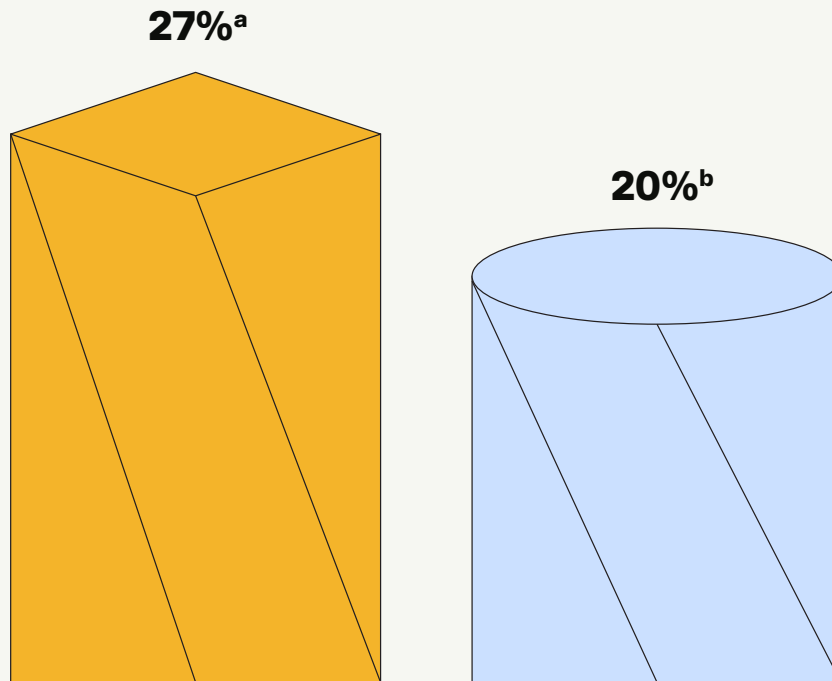
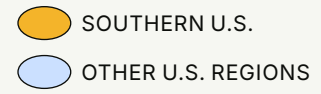
● SOUTHERN U.S. ● OTHER U.S. REGIONS



Note. Data reflect affirmative responses to the item, "Have you ever attended online therapy—that is, connected with a therapist remotely by computer or phone—to support your mental health and well-being?"

Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense, conducted, Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 social media users aged 14–22 nationwide.

Did not attend online therapy because of not wanting to speak to a therapist



Note. Differing superscripts reflect significant differences between groups at $p < .05$. Data reflect responses to the item, "Why haven't you attended online therapy -- that is, connected with a therapist remotely by computer or phone?" Values represent the proportion of affirmative responses to the item "I don't want to speak to a therapist."

Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense, conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 social media users aged 14–22 nationwide.

While Southern young people report attending online therapy at similar rates to their peers in other U.S. regions, those who have not used online therapy are more likely to say it's because they don't want to speak to a therapist (27% vs. 20%).

In co-distillation interviews, young people described how cultural stigma around therapy continues to shape attitudes in the South.

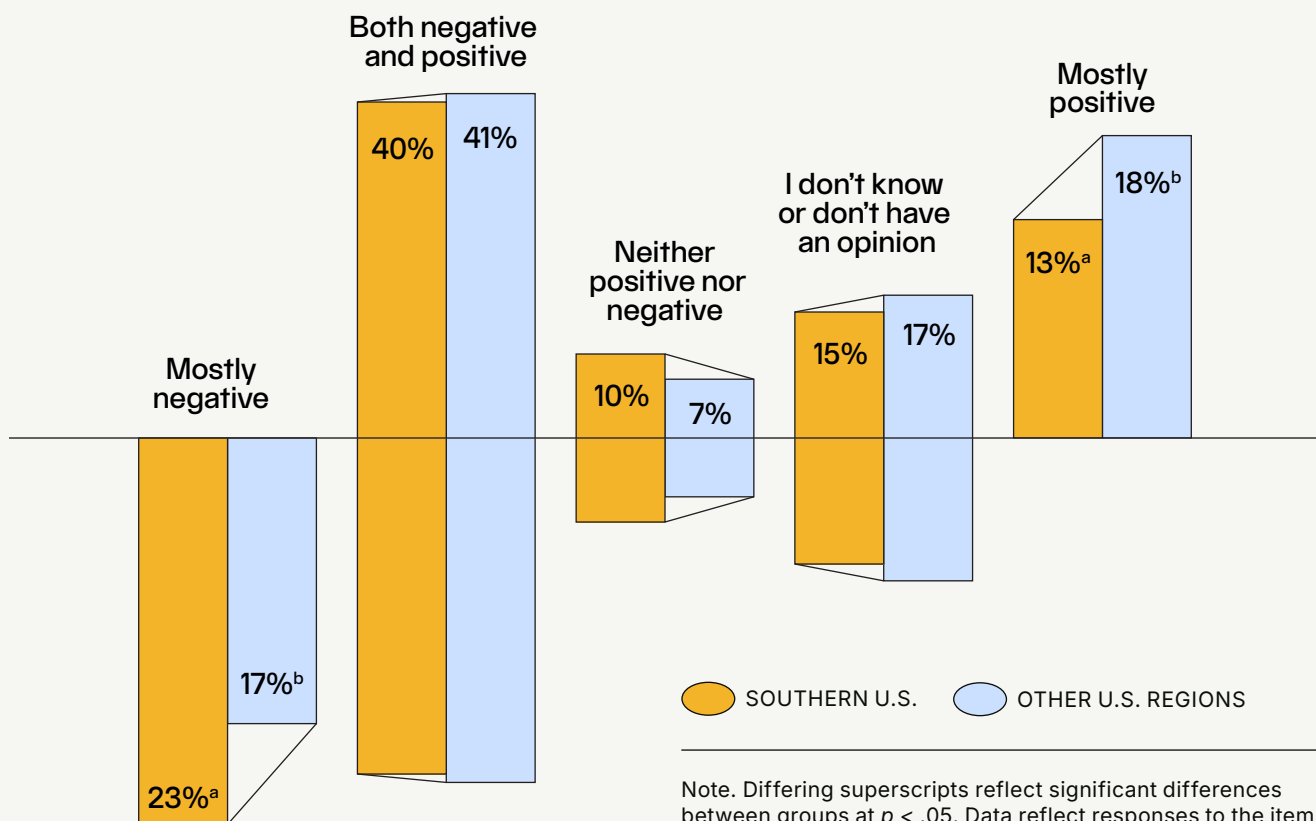
"There's a culture in the South that I have to deal with this myself because I'm strong. And people push that onto other people, saying it's not okay to get therapy [...] Not only have I been told it, but a lot of other young people who I have interacted with have felt that they are discouraged from seeking therapy, or they just feel like they don't need it and that they'll be fine."

LATINX, STRAIGHT, CISGENDER YOUNG WOMAN

Key Finding 6: *Southern young people are more pessimistic about the future impact of generative AI* than their peers in other regions of the U.S.

Young people in the Southern U.S. express more skepticism about the long-term effects of generative AI compared to their peers in other regions. They are more likely to believe that AI will have a mostly negative impact on their lives over the next decade (23% vs. 17%) and less likely to expect a mostly positive impact (13% vs. 18%).

Young people's perspectives on the impact of generative AI on their lives in the next ten years



Note. Differing superscripts reflect significant differences between groups at $p < .05$. Data reflect responses to the item, "Do you think generative artificial intelligence (AI) will have a positive or negative impact on your life in the next 10 years?"

Source: NORC survey for Hopelab and Common Sense, conducted Oct. 4–Nov. 14, 2023, with 1,274 social media users aged 14–22 nationwide.

In co-distillation interviews, Southern young people described how a more traditional regional culture—often shaped by the attitudes of their parents or older adults—affects how young people think about new technologies. Many voiced concerns about job loss and the broader social impacts of generative AI.

Southern young people also discussed some of the negative regional impacts that generative AI has had on their lives, including the impact data centers affect the environment in Southern states.

“People in the South are more prone to the negative environmental aspects of generative AI. For example, *[in Southern states] the air is polluted because of all the processing plants that they need to power AI. They feel the effects more.*”

WHITE, GAY, TRANSGENDER YOUNG MAN

“It’s the traditional aspect of the South. *People down here are less open to AI than people elsewhere.* People elsewhere look at AI like, how can it benefit me? But I think in the South, it’s more looking at the negatives. It’s gonna take the jobs.”

BLACK, LESBIAN, CISGENDER YOUNG WOMAN

Conclusion

Young people in the South engage with digital technologies in ways that differ meaningfully from their peers in other U.S. regions. These differences shape how they connect, seek mental health support, and plan for the future. This report shows that although Southern young people report similar rates of depression and anxiety as their peers in other U.S. regions, they are likely to search for mental health information and tend to view emerging technologies less positively.

While online communities offer important source of connection and support, Southern young people described using social media in distinct ways. Compared to their peers in other U.S. regions, they emphasized how using social media platforms help them build community, find relatable content, and seek out important information—especially in environments where these opportunities may be limited offline.

Despite identifying social media as an important tool for learning about mental health, Southern young people were less likely to seek out mental health information online. This gap points to ongoing barriers, including stigma around acknowledging mental health symptoms and reluctance to seek help. While rates of online therapy engagement were similar across regions, differences emerged among those who had not used online therapy—highlighting cultural factors that may discourage speaking with a therapist in the South.

Southern young people also expressed more skepticism about AI's future impact on their lives. Compared to their peers in other regions, they were less likely to view AI as a positive force. These differences in optimism suggest important regional differences in how young people may approach technologies in the future.



**“It may seem like
the South is a big
conservative bubble.
But, *there are people here
who are scared, people
here who are depressed
and have anxiety and
need help just as much as
young people anywhere
else. We’re all people.*”**

WHITE, BISEXUAL, CISGENDER
YOUNG MAN

In co-distillation interviews, Southern young people emphasized that support from others should focus on shared experiences rather than regional divides.

Speaking to the importance of recognizing regional disparities one Black, straight, cisgender young man explained:

“Young people in the South are less likely to seek out online mental health resources where they can find comfort, people who are willing to support them, and people who are willing to relate to them and to make them feel better. I feel people should know young people are struggling down here as well. It’s important to lend a helping hand.”

Young people also pointed to the need for older adults to approach them with openness. As one white, lesbian, genderfluid young person advised:

“Older adults need to just be more kind of open-minded about things and more focused on helping the people around them instead of judging them. Older people are more close-minded than younger people because they’ve grown up around that mentality for so long... It’s much harder for them to really listen.”

Speaking to the power of listening and reaching out, one Latinx, straight, cisgender young man shared:

“The biggest thing is just having those conversations. Checking in on the younger people you interact with and making them feel comfortable and asking questions. How are you feeling? How are you doing? Is there anything on your mind or bothering you? Making it feel like you can share what you’re going through and how you’re feeling.”

Summary of Methodology

A complete summary of the research methodology can be found in the [full report](#).

Instrument development

Following IRB approval, this survey was fielded by NORC at the University of Chicago on behalf of Hopelab and Common Sense Media. Hopelab funded the survey, with additional data reporting support from Common Sense Media.

Participants

The racial and ethnic breakdown of the Southern sample was: white (46%), Black (22%), Latinx (26%), and another racial or ethnic identity (6%). For participants from other U.S. regions, the breakdown was: white (55%), Black (8%), Latinx (24%), and another racial or ethnic identity (14%).

Procedure

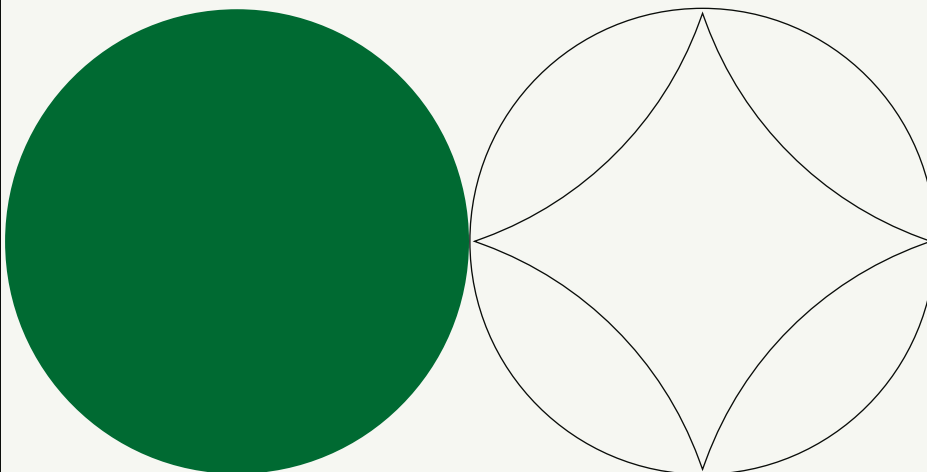
Data was collected using both probability-based and nonprobability-based sample sources. The survey was conducted from October 4 through November 14, 2023, with a nationally representative sample of 1,274 survey participants, including 517 teens (aged 14 to 17) and 757 young adults (aged 18 to 22).

Data analyses

This report segments data by U.S. region (South⁷ vs. other U.S. regions). Regional designation was based on participants' self-reported state of residence and coded according to the U.S. Census Bureau's Regions and Divisions of the United States. The three-region comparison group includes the Northeast, Midwest, and West. The research team confirmed that observed differences between the South and other regions were not driven by outlier results in any single non-Southern region. All reported differences are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Co-distillation

After initial data analysis, the research team conducted co-distillation interviews with 11 young people, ages 16 to 22, who currently live or have previously lived in a Southern state. These interviews were used to contextualize and prioritize findings. Select quotes from participants—lightly edited for length and clarity—are included throughout the report to reflect lived experiences.



⁷ U.S. Census Regions and Divisions of the United States denotes Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington DC, and West Virginia as the South

Acknowledgments

We extend our deep gratitude to all the young people who shared their time, expertise, and lived experiences to shape this study, complete the survey, and contribute to the interpretation and presentation of the findings.

About

Hopelab envisions a future where all young people have equitable opportunities to live joyful and purposeful lives. As a funder, connector, and science translator, Hopelab supports and builds equity-centered solutions for the mental health of Brown, Black, and Queer young people. For more information, visit hopelab.org.

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