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Black on the Timeline: Social Media, Misinformation, and the Mental Health of Black Emerging Adults

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Key Findings

1. **Social Media is Central to Daily Life and Relationships**
   Over 70% of Black emerging adults report that social media plays an important role in their relationships. Nearly all respondents have integrated social media into their daily routine, with around 69% expressing disappointment at the idea of losing access to these platforms.

2. **Online Racial Discrimination is Pervasive**
   A vast majority of respondents (>80%) reported experiencing racial discrimination online in the past six months. This includes being excluded from digital spaces (87%), receiving threats (83%), and routinely witnessing racist content (96%).

3. **Gender-Diverse Emerging Adults Face Elevated Mental Health Challenges**
   Nonbinary and transgender respondents reported higher levels of distress across numerous symptoms of depression and anxiety. For example, 59% of nonbinary and 52% of transgender participants reported difficulty focusing on most or several days in the past week prior to taking the survey, compared to about 41% of their cisgender peers.

4. **Racist Content is Common Across Multiple Platforms**
   Respondents most frequently encountered racist content on Facebook (66%), X/Twitter (62%), and Instagram (45%), with substantial exposure also reported on YouTube, TikTok, Reddit, and Snapchat.

5. **Mental Health Information is Actively Sought Online**
   Nearly half of respondents searched for online content related to depression (47%), anxiety (47%), and stress (46%). Platforms like WebMD, YouTube, and TikTok were among the top sources.

6. **High Exposure to Misinformation Online**
   Nearly 3 out of 4 participants reported seeing untrue or misleading content online multiple times per week. These patterns were consistent across content related to current events, politics, and social issues.

7. **Confidence in Identifying Misinformation is High, but Familiarity with Verification Tools is Not Universal**
    Over three-quarters of respondents (77%) reported feeling fairly or very confident in their ability to determine whether information on social media is true or false. While over 80% reported using fact-checking tools, at least occasionally, nearly one in five had never used them, and about 6% were unfamiliar with such tools entirely. This suggests that while many Black emerging adults feel capable of identifying misinformation, increased awareness and access to formal verification practices may help strengthen digital discernment.

8. **Unintentional Misinformation Sharing is Common**
    About 71% of respondents admitted to unintentionally sharing false content on social media, with 43% indicating they had done so multiple times.

9. **News and Political Content Drive Online Engagement**
    More than 97% of respondents viewed content related to news or current events in the week prior to taking the survey. Likewise, 88% had posted about news or politics on social media, highlighting their active civic engagement online.

10. **Symptoms of Emotional Distress are Widespread**
    More than half of participants reported experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety within a week of taking the survey. These include persistent sadness, difficulty concentrating, feeling overwhelmed, and crying spells, underscoring the mental health burden this population faces.

Introduction

Emerging adults in the United States are experiencing a profound and urgent mental health crisis. "Emerging adults" refers to those in the developmental period spanning from the late teens through the mid-twenties, where individuals explore possibilities and establish a foundation for their adult lives. It is a time of identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling "in-between" adolescence and adulthood, and a sense of possibility, distinct from both adolescence and formal adulthood.[i] In recent years, rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and psychological distress have risen sharply among Black youth and young adults, with suicide now among the leading causes of death for Black individuals aged 10–24.[ii] While structural racism, economic instability, and access barriers to culturally responsive care are well-established contributors to these outcomes, another powerful influence has emerged in the last decade: the digital landscape in which young people live, connect, and form their identities.

Social media plays an outsized role in the daily lives of Black emerging adults, who are among the most active users of platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter).[iii] These platforms are not just sources of entertainment. They also serve as spaces to seek information, build community, and express identity, particularly for those navigating the intersections of race, gender, and age.[iv] For Black young people, social media often becomes a space to learn about mental health, share experiences, and gain affirmation that is otherwise lacking in traditional institutions. However, these same spaces are also fraught with risk. Exposure to online racism, including racial slurs, stereotyping, and violent imagery, is widespread, and research consistently shows that such exposure contributes to trauma, anxiety, and symptoms of depression among Black users.[v,vi]

Compounding this harm is the rampant spread of misinformation on social media platforms. False or misleading health information, often culturally targeted or algorithmically reinforced, disproportionately reaches and misinforms Black communities. During crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Americans were both more likely to encounter misinformation and more likely to be harmed by its consequences due to longstanding health disparities and institutional mistrust.[vii] The convergence of digital racism and misinformation creates a uniquely precarious online environment for Black emerging adults. Such precarious online environments can amplify psychological distress while distorting access to reliable support and services.

While research on race and mental health often treats Black Americans as a single demographic category, doing so can obscure meaningful within-group differences. Black emerging adults are not a monolithic group. They represent a spectrum of national origins, cultural identities, gender expressions, sexual orientations, and class backgrounds. These identities shape how individuals experience mental health, use social media, and interpret online content. For example, Black LGBTQ+ young adults face distinct forms of online harassment and misinformation that interact with both their racial and gendered identities. Without disaggregating experiences within the broader category of "Black young adults," interventions risk missing the nuances that matter most to those affected.

A within-group approach also acknowledges the diversity of digital literacy and trust in institutions across subgroups of Black emerging adults. Social media is not used uniformly, nor is misinformation believed or rejected in the same way across all communities. By centering the voices and experiences of Black emerging adults from varied backgrounds, this report aims to contribute to a more precise understanding of Black young people's experiences with social media and mental health outcomes.

The purpose of this report is to examine the role social media plays in both supporting and undermining mental health among Black emerging adults, with particular attention to the impacts of online racism, misinformation, and community-building. Drawing on original survey data of Black emerging adults aged 18-25 collected in spring 2025, this report explores patterns of social media use, perceptions of mental health content, and experiences of digital harm. It also seeks to identify areas where policy interventions, institutional support, and culturally informed digital literacy efforts are most needed. By elevating the lived experiences of Black emerging adults, this report provides timely insights for educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers working to advance equity in both digital and public health spaces.

Part 1: Black Emerging Adults' Attachment to Social Media

To better understand the extent to which social media is embedded in the daily lives of Black emerging adults, participants responded to items assessing both behavioral and emotional dimensions of platform use. This captured how frequently individuals engage with social media, the degree to which it is part of their routines, and how connected they feel to their online communities. Given the centrality of digital spaces in the lives of young adults, and particularly for Black emerging adults navigating community, identity, and information-seeking online, these findings provide important context for interpreting subsequent analyses related to mental health and misinformation. The following section offers a snapshot of how participants integrate social media into their daily lives.

## Nearly 66% of respondents are on social media for four or more hours each day.

The majority of Black emerging adults surveyed spend a substantial portion of their day on social media, with **43% reporting four to six hours** of use and another **23.1% spending seven or more hours** daily. One percent reported using social media for less than an hour per day. In total, about 66% of respondents are on social media for four or more hours each day, reinforcing the platforms' centrality to their daily lives. These usage patterns align with other indicators of integration, suggesting that for many, social media is not just a periodic activity but a sustained and immersive part of their everyday experiences.

Almost three out of four Black emerging adults surveyed say that social media plays an important role in their relationships.

Nearly three quarters (72%) of Black emerging adults age 18-25 reported that social media plays an important role in their relationships, underscoring how deeply these platforms are woven into the fabric of connection and communication.

When disaggregated by gender, the data reveal relatively similar trends across groups:

IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN RELATIONSHIPS BY GENDER
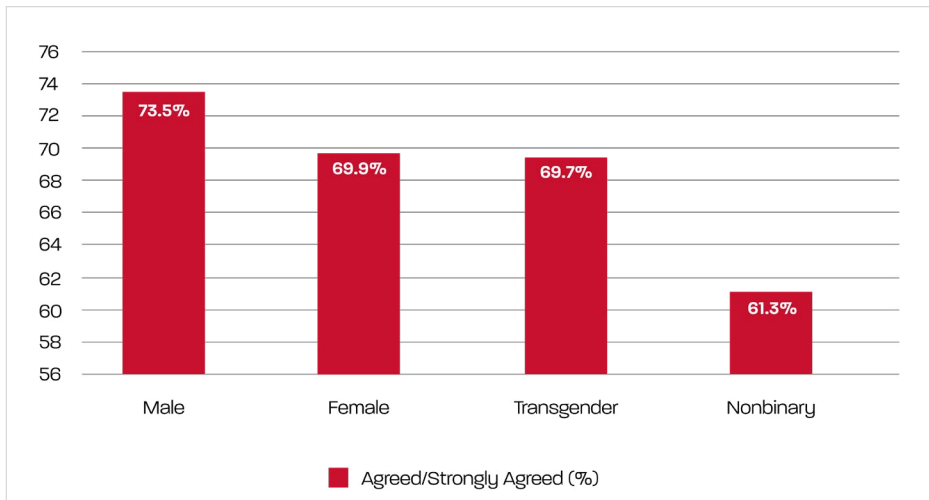
Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that social media plays an important role in relationships.

The emerging adults surveyed also reported emotional reliance on social media, measured by feelings of disconnection when not logged on across all gender groups, with modest variation.

**EMOTIONAL RELIANCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA BY GENDER**
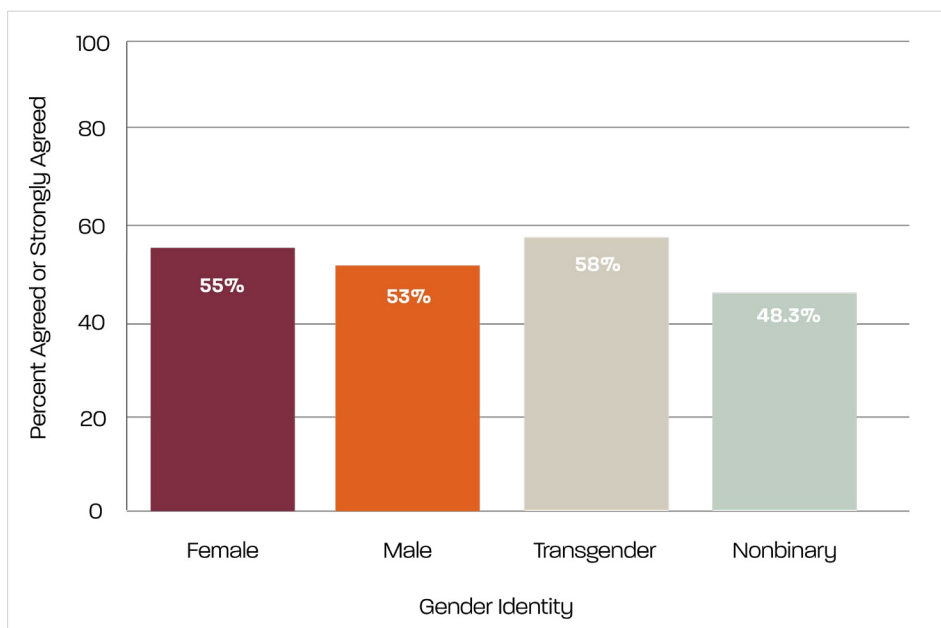
These findings suggest that while emotional dependence on social media is broadly shared, gender-diverse respondents, particularly transgender individuals, may experience this sense of disconnection even more acutely, underscoring the role these platforms may play in sustaining connection and belonging.

Nearly 63% Black emerging adults indicated a preference for using social media as a primary mode of communication.

Specifically, **62.4%** of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "*I prefer to communicate with others through social media.*"

PREFERENCE FOR COMMUNICATING THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA
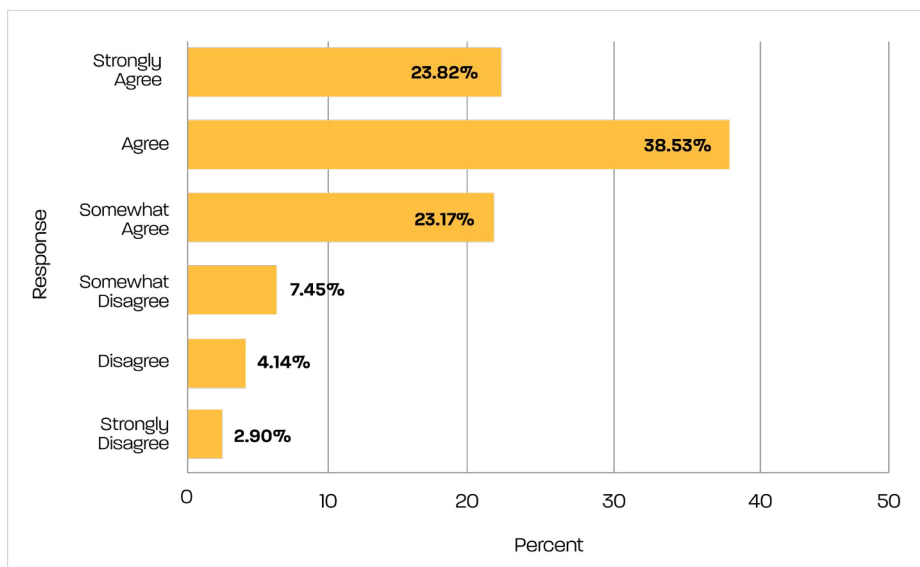
These results suggest that social media is not only embedded in daily routines and relationships but is also a favored channel for interpersonal interaction. Black emerging adults' widespread reliance on these platforms for communication has important implications for understanding social norms, information exchange, and mental health dynamics among this demographic. Black emerging adults reported a strong preference for communicating through social media across both age and gender groups.

PREFERENCE OF COMMUNICATING THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA BY GENDER
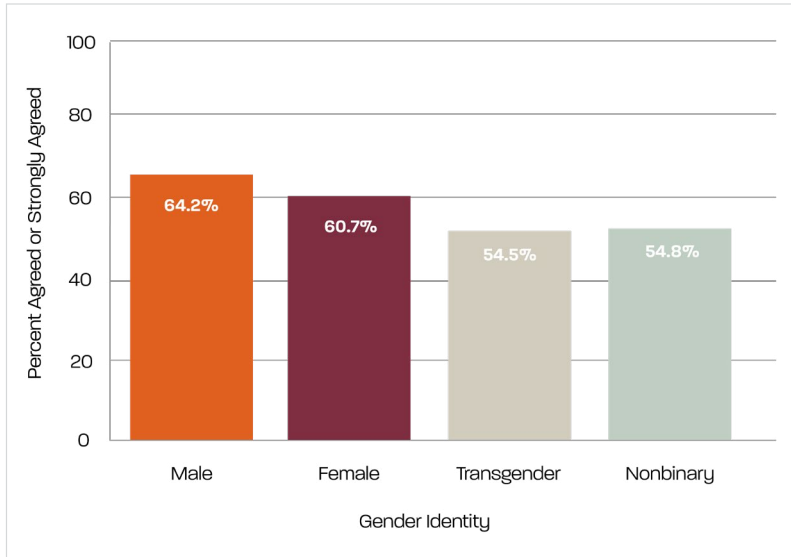
These findings underscore the centrality of social media as a preferred mode of interpersonal connection across identities, reflecting its embedded role in how Black emerging adults build and maintain relationships.

> **Daily social media use is deeply ingrained in the lives of Black emerging adults, with an overwhelming 67.4% agreeing or strongly agreeing that using social media is part of their everyday routine.**

An additional **21.3%** somewhat agreed, meaning nearly **89%** of respondents identified some level of habitual use. This level of integration highlights how social media functions not merely as a tool for occasional engagement, but as a central and consistent part of daily life. Such habitual use has important implications for understanding how information is consumed, relationships are maintained, and identity is shaped among this demographic.

Lastly, a striking **69%** of Black emerging adults expressed that they would be disappointed if they could not use social media, with **31.1% agreeing** and **37.8% strongly agreeing** with the statement. An additional **18.4%** somewhat agreed, bringing the total to over **87%** of respondents who reported at least some level of disappointment at the thought of losing access to these platforms.

This level of emotional investment highlights how social media use has evolved from a functional tool to a meaningful and emotionally significant aspect of daily life, shaping not just how individuals connect, but how they experience absence and disconnection.

Taken together, the data paint a vivid picture of just how deeply social media is woven into the lives of Black emerging adults. From routine daily use to emotional dependence and relational significance, social media is not merely a communication tool; it is a central hub for connection, expression, and identity. Nearly **90%** of respondents reported using it as part of their everyday routine, over two-thirds said they would feel disappointed without it, and a majority prefer it as a primary means of communication. These findings underscore the profound social integration of digital platforms, highlighting the need for nuanced understanding of both the benefits and risks of such engagement in shaping mental health, community belonging, and digital literacy in this generation.

Part 2: Exposure to Racism Online

As social media platforms have become central to daily life, they have also exposed users to frequent and often unmoderated racialized content. Here, data are presented on how often respondents encounter racial slurs, stereotypes, and other forms of discriminatory language and imagery in digital spaces. By quantifying these experiences, this section establishes a baseline understanding of how widespread online racial discrimination is among Black emerging adults, setting the stage for further analysis of its implications in subsequent sections.
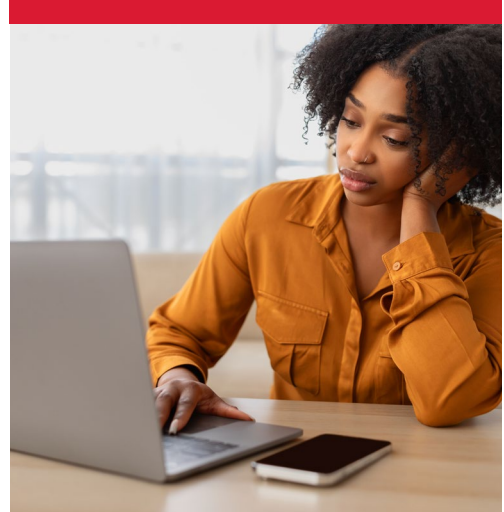
> **Nearly 9 out of 10 of Black emerging adults surveyed reported experiencing online racial discrimination at least once in the last six months.**

The majority of Black emerging adults surveyed reported experiencing racially targeted hostility online in the past 6 months. Approximately **8%** encountered someone saying something mean or rude to them because of their race *once during* this period. Notably, **35%** experienced such incidents a *few times*, and **24.4%** reported this occurring *a few times per month*. More frequent exposure was also common, with **14.4%** encountering racial rudeness *a few times per week* and **6.6%** facing it daily. Only **11.5%** reported never having this experience in the last 6 months. These findings underscore the regularity with which Black emerging adults are subjected to racially charged interpersonal attacks online, highlighting the persistent and pervasive nature of online racial discrimination in digital spaces.

A plurality of respondents also reported experiencing exclusion from online groups due to race over the past six months. Only **13.7%** reported never having been excluded because of their race, meaning that **more than 86%** had faced some level of racial exclusion in digital spaces. About **13%** experienced this *once*, **31.6%** experienced this a *few times*, and **20.3%** encountered it *a few times per month*. Alarmingly, **14.6%** reported being excluded *a few times per week*, and **6.7%** faced such exclusion *daily*. These findings reveal that racial gatekeeping and exclusion are not isolated incidents but ongoing realities for many Black emerging adults navigating online communities.

Threats of violence due to race were a disturbingly common experience for Black emerging adults online.

Only **17.7%** reported never being threatened, while the remaining **82.3%** encountered such threats at least once. About **18%** reported experiencing threats *once* in the last six months. Nearly **28.3%** experienced these threats *a few times*, and **13.9%** faced them *a few times per month*. Notably, **18.5%** of respondents were threatened with violence *a few times per week*, and **6.8%** reported experiencing these threats *daily*. These figures underscore the severe and frequent racialized harassment many Black emerging adults face in digital spaces, pointing to an urgent need for platform accountability and stronger protective measures.

Exposure to racist imagery online was nearly universal in the past six months among Black emerging adults in the study. Only **3.4%** reported never encountering a racist image, while **13.1%** encountered a racist image *once*. A significant portion, **28.8%**, reported seeing such images *a few times*, with another **21.8%** encountering them *a few times per month*. More frequent exposure was also common: **20.2%** saw racist images *a few times per week*, and **12.7%** encountered them *daily*. These findings highlight the widespread and routine visibility of racialized content in digital spaces, pointing to the insidious nature of online racial discrimination that can shape users' everyday online experiences.

Racist joking targeting Black people was among the most frequently reported forms of online racial discrimination, with only **3.7%** reporting no exposure. Approximately **6%** saw racist jokes once. Nearly **31.2%** saw these jokes *a few times,* while **23.1%** encountered them *a few times per month*. Strikingly, **21.7%** reported seeing racist jokes *a few times per week*, and **14.3%** were exposed to them *daily*. These findings reveal the persistent normalization of anti-Black humor in digital spaces, contributing to a broader online climate where racial stereotypes and denigration are regularly circulated.

Lastly, witnessing others say mean or rude things about Black people online was a widespread experience among Black emerging adults. Only **3.8%** indicated they had never witnessed this behavior. About **10%** reported witnessing mean or rude remarks *once*. Nearly **30%** reported witnessing these comments *a few times,* while **25.1%** saw them *a few times per month*. High-frequency exposure was also prevalent: **20.5%** observed such behavior *a few times per week*, and **10.5%** witnessed it *daily*. These findings highlight the persistent presence of anti-Black commentary in digital spaces, reinforcing a hostile online environment that many young Black users must regularly navigate.

Overall, these high prevalence rates underscore the routine nature of racial discrimination in digital environments. The data point to an online landscape where Black users are regularly exposed to both interpersonal hostility and ambient anti-Black content, reinforcing the need for more responsive content moderation, digital safety measures, and culturally informed mental health support.

PREVALENCE OF ONLINE RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN THE PAST 6 MONTHS
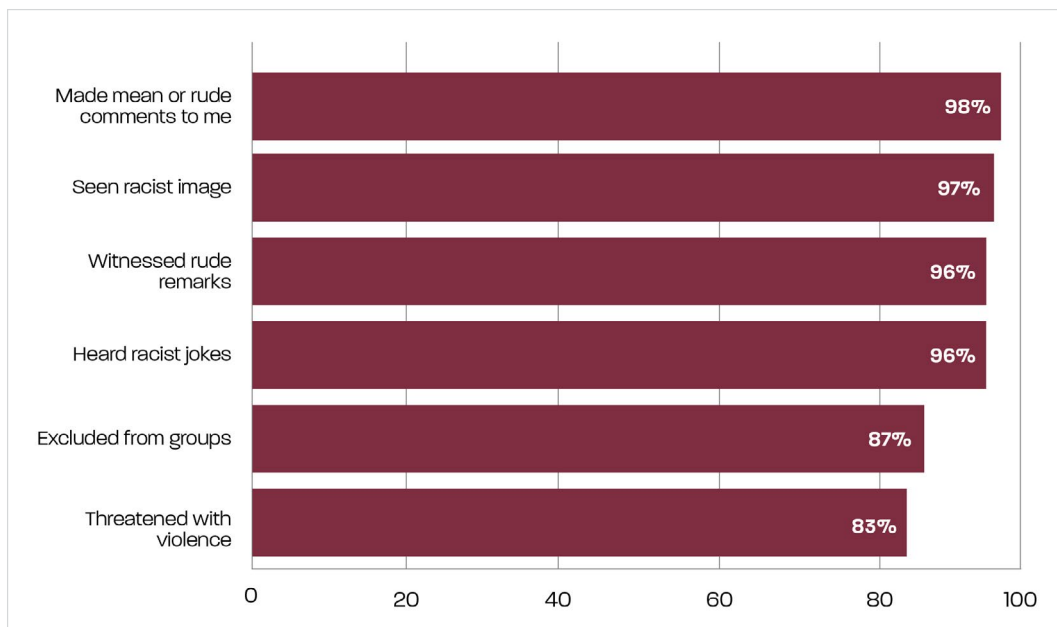
Black emerging adults reported seeing racist content on Facebook (66%) and X (formerly Twitter; 62%) most often.

REPORTED EXPOSURE TO RACIST CONTENT BY PLATFORM (ROUNDED)
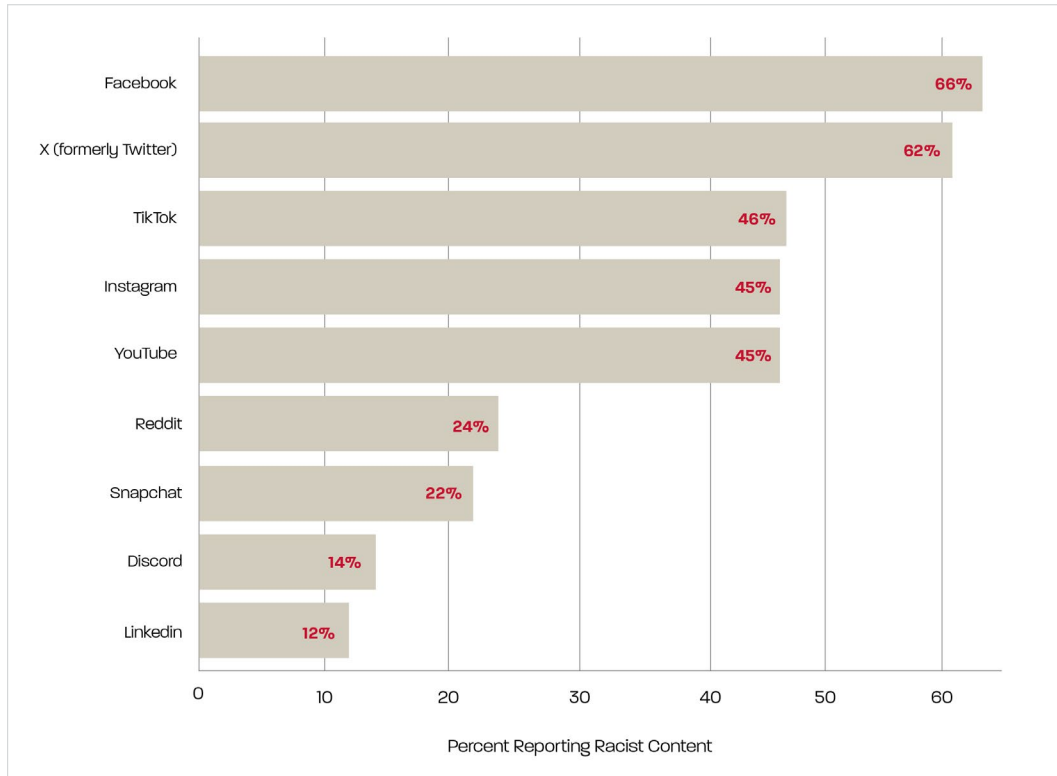
These findings underscore the persistent exposure Black emerging adults face to racialized harm in digital spaces, often without adequate recourse or support. As social media platforms roll back moderation policies and scale down trust and safety teams, the risk of encountering unaddressed discrimination has only intensified. This erosion of safeguards threatens to deepen the emotional toll of online racial discrimination and highlights the urgent need for policy responses that center the safety of marginalized users.

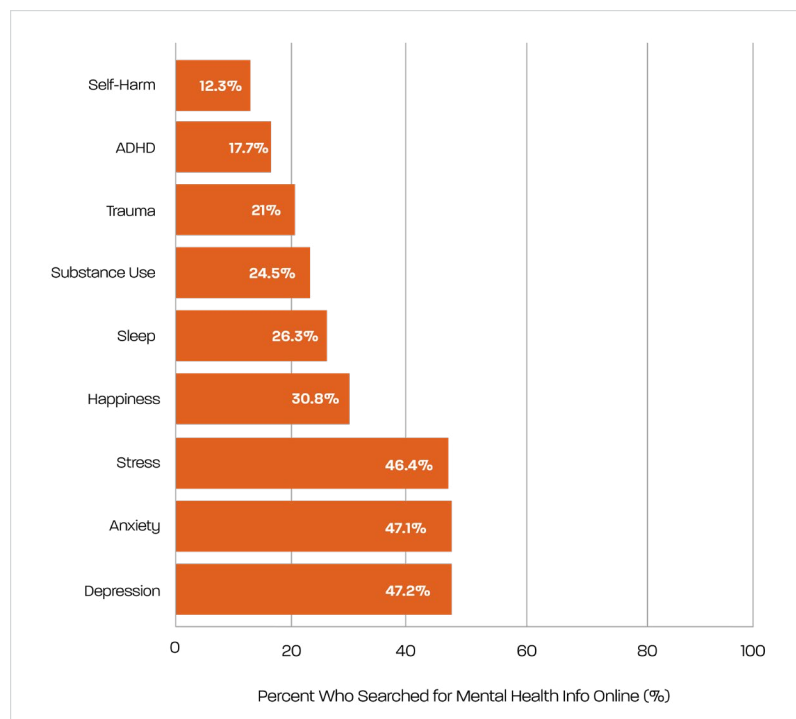# Part 3: Using Social Media for Mental Health Information

While digital platforms can be sources of harm, they also serve as critical spaces for learning, connection, and coping, particularly for those navigating structural and interpersonal stressors. This section highlights Black emerging adults' frequency of seeking mental health content on social media, the types of information being accessed, and the platforms that they used most often.

Nearly half of respondents reported searching for content related to depression, anxiety, and stress, underscoring the prevalence of these concerns.

The data show that Black emerging adults actively use social media and online platforms to seek out information on mental health across a range of topics.

MENTAL HEALTH TOPICS SEARCHED ONLINE BY BLACK EMERGING ADULTS

Topic	Percent
Self-Harm	12.3%
ADHD	17.7%
Trauma	21%
Substance Use	24.5%
Sleep	26.3%
Happiness	30.8%
Stress	46.4%
Anxiety	47.1%
Depression	47.2%

Percent Who Searched for Mental Health Info Online (%)

Nearly half of respondents reported searching for content related to **depression (47.2%)**, **anxiety (47.1%)**, and **stress (46.4%)**, underscoring the prevalence of these concerns. A smaller yet significant proportion looked for information on **happiness (30.8%)**, **sleep (26.3%)**, and **substance use (24.5%)**, while fewer searched about **trauma (21%)**, **ADHD (17.7%)**, or **self-harm (12.3%)**. These patterns suggest that Black emerging adults are using digital platforms not only to understand common emotional struggles, but also to access knowledge and coping strategies for a range of mental health issues, many of which may be shaped by racialized life experiences.

Across all gender groups, Black emerging adults reported turning to social media for a wide range of mental health concerns, most notably depression, anxiety, and stress, with nearly half of both men and women seeking information on these topics. Transgender and nonbinary participants showed particularly elevated interest in anxiety and happiness-related content. While sleep, trauma, and ADHD drew moderate attention across groups, topics like substance use and self-harm were more commonly searched by men than women. These patterns highlight both shared and distinct mental health interests shaped by gender identity, emphasizing the need for inclusive and affirming mental health resources online.

MENTAL HEALTH TOPICS SEARCHED ONLINE BY GENDER
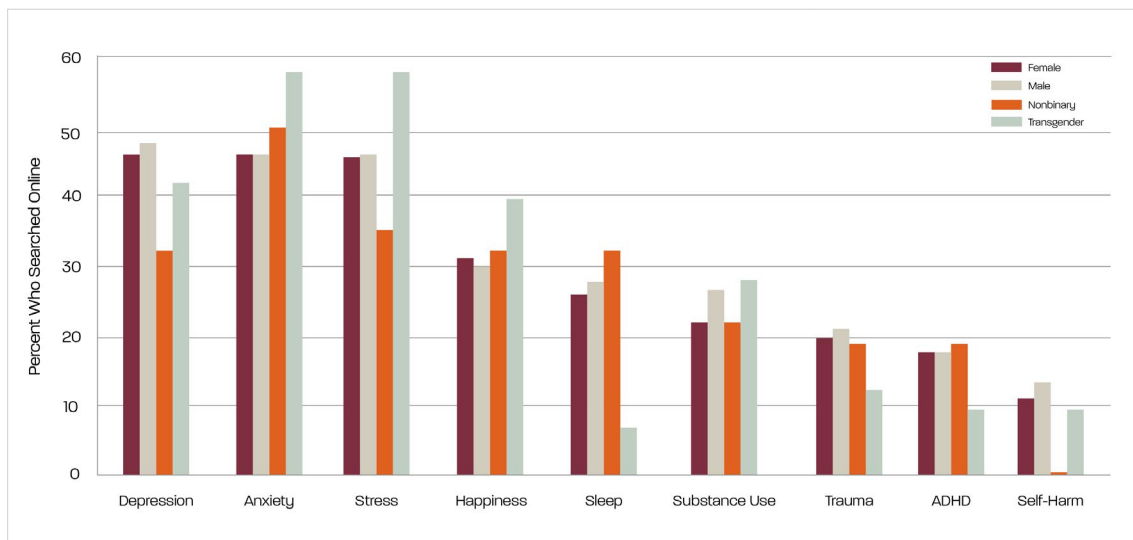
Nearly half of Black emerging adults reported using reputable sites such as WebMD, Psychology Today, or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (47.9%), followed closely by YouTube (44.1%) and X (formerly Twitter) (43.5%) to find mental health content online.

PLATFORMS USED TO SEEK MENTAL HEALTH INFORMATION
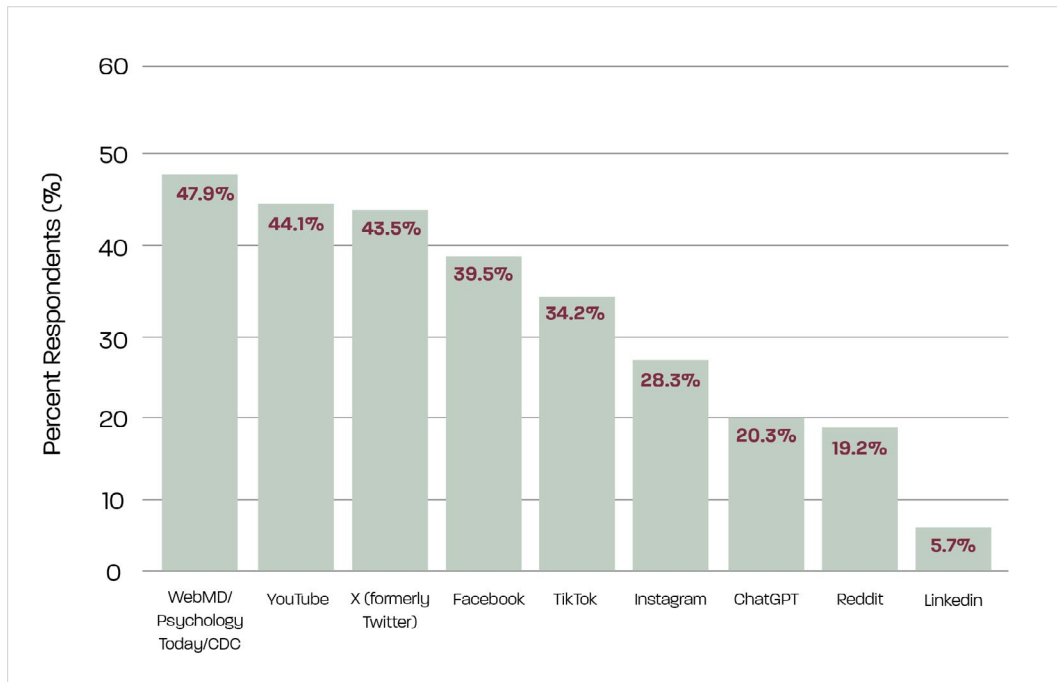
The chart illustrates which platforms Black emerging adults use to seek mental health information. Nearly half reported using reputable medical sites such as **WebMD, Psychology Today, or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (47.93%)**, followed closely by **YouTube (44.1%)** and **X (formerly Twitter) (43.5%)**. Social media platforms like **Facebook (39.5%)** and **TikTok (34.2%)** were also popular sources, while **Instagram (28.3%)**, **ChatGPT (20.3%)**, and **Reddit (19.2%)** were used by a smaller but notable portion of respondents. LinkedIn was the least used platform, with only **5.7%** of participants turning to it for mental health content. These patterns highlight a blend of formal health resources and informal social platforms in how young Black users navigate mental health support online. While many Black emerging adults actively seek out mental health resources on social media, these same platforms are also sites where misinformation can circulate rapidly and unchecked. The overlap between support-seeking and exposure to false or misleading content raises important questions about how users navigate credibility, trust, and harm online.

Part 4: Encounters With Misinformation

As trusted sources of news and health information become increasingly intertwined with user-generated content, misinformation has become both more accessible and more difficult to detect. Respondents reported on the types of misinformation they have encountered, ranging from topics like health and politics to race and social justice, alongside their perceptions of credibility, patterns of engagement, and the platforms where misinformation is most commonly encountered. Understanding these dynamics is critical for informing strategies to promote digital literacy, strengthen critical consumption skills, and support the well-being of young Black users navigating complex and often misleading digital information ecosystems.

> **When encountering questionable content on social media, nearly half of Black emerging adults surveyed reported that their most common response is to do a quick search to check its accuracy.**

While **48.7%** of respondents indicated that their first response to encountering questionable content on social media was to do a quick search for accuracy, another **17.2%** said they utilize **fact-checking tools or software**, indicating that roughly two-thirds engage in some form of verification. However, **16.3%** said they **ignore** such posts, and **7.3%** admitted to **sharing content without verifying it.** A smaller group (**10.6%**) reported that they **ask friends or family for their thoughts**. These findings highlight that while most respondents attempt to assess the credibility of social media content, informal or passive approaches are still fairly common, and a subset of users circulate potentially false information without checking it.

Most Black emerging adults in the sample expressed a sense of confidence in their ability to determine whether information on social media is true or false. A combined **76.8%** reported feeling either *fairly confident (45.6%) or very confident (31.2%)* in discerning accurate content from misinformation. However, nearly one in five (**19.9%**) said they were minimally confident, and a small but notable **3.3%** reported being *not confident at all.* These findings suggest that while the majority feel equipped to critically assess content online, a significant minority may be more vulnerable to the influence of misinformation due to lower self-perceived evaluation skills.

Although the majority of respondents expressed confidence in their ability to assess the accuracy of content on social media, the frequency with which they use fact-checking tools reveals more variation. Over **81%** reported using fact-checking tools or websites to verify information on social media, **52.9% occasionally** and **28.6% regularly**. However, nearly one in five respondents (18.5%) said they have never used these tools, including 5.6% who were not familiar with them at all. These findings indicate that while confidence in identifying misinformation is generally high, a smaller subset of respondents may benefit from increased awareness and support in using available verification resources.

Fact-checking tool awareness and usage varies notably by education level, with more advanced education generally associated with more frequent and regular use. Among those with a **bachelor's degree**, over **88%** reported using fact-checking tools at least occasionally, including nearly **28%** who used them regularly. Respondents with a **master's degree** showed an even stronger trend toward regular use (**38%**), while those with doctoral or professional degrees (less than **1%** of the sample) were overwhelmingly occasional users (**77%**), though regular use was lower (**8%**). Participants with **high school diplomas** or **some college** reported balanced engagement, with around **40%** and **52%** respectively using tools occasionally, and an additional **32%** and **16%** using them regularly. In contrast, respondents with only some high school were less familiar overall, with **29%** reporting they were unfamiliar with such tools. These findings suggest that while digital skepticism is present across all educational backgrounds, more advanced education correlates with greater awareness and routine use of fact-checking practices.

### FACT CHECKING TOOL USAGE BY EDUCATION LEVEL
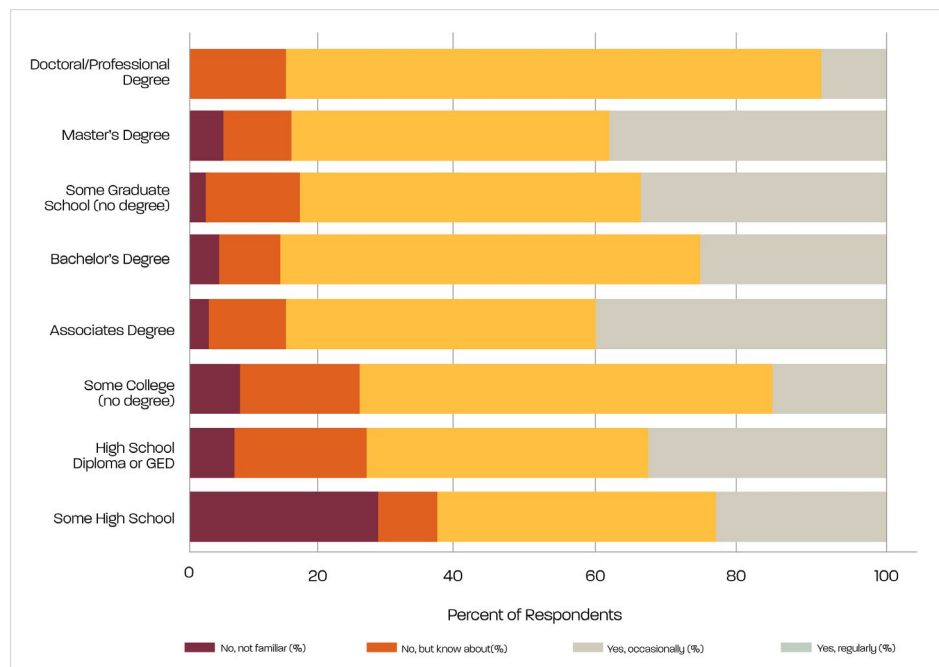
Unintentional sharing of misinformation is a common experience among Black emerging adults.

A combined **71.4%** of respondents reported having shared misinformation **at least once,** with **43.3%** admitting they had done so **multiple times** and **28.1%** saying it had happened once. Another **11%** were not sure whether they had shared false content, suggesting some uncertainty around identifying misinformation. Only **17.6%** confidently stated they had **never** shared misinformation. These findings underscore the challenges of navigating digital information and the ease with which false or misleading content can be unintentionally circulated, even by those who strive to verify what they consume.

Conversations about misinformation are common in the digital and real-world environments of Black emerging adults, though frequency varies by setting. Over half (**51%**) reported discussing misinformation **frequently on social media**, with only **1.5%** saying these conversations never occur in that space. In contrast, conversations in **community settings** occurred frequently for only **21.2%**, and in **school settings** for **20.1%**, with most respondents describing these discussions as **occasional or rare** in both contexts. Conversations within families were less frequent overall: only **15.0%** reported them as frequent, while **31.4%** described them as **rare** and **8.0%** said they never occur. These findings suggest that while misinformation is a prevalent topic in online environments, it is discussed more sporadically in offline settings. This highlights a gap between digital exposure and interpersonal engagement around media literacy and critical evaluation.

FREQUENCY OF CONVERSATIONS ABOUT MISINFORMATION BY SETTING
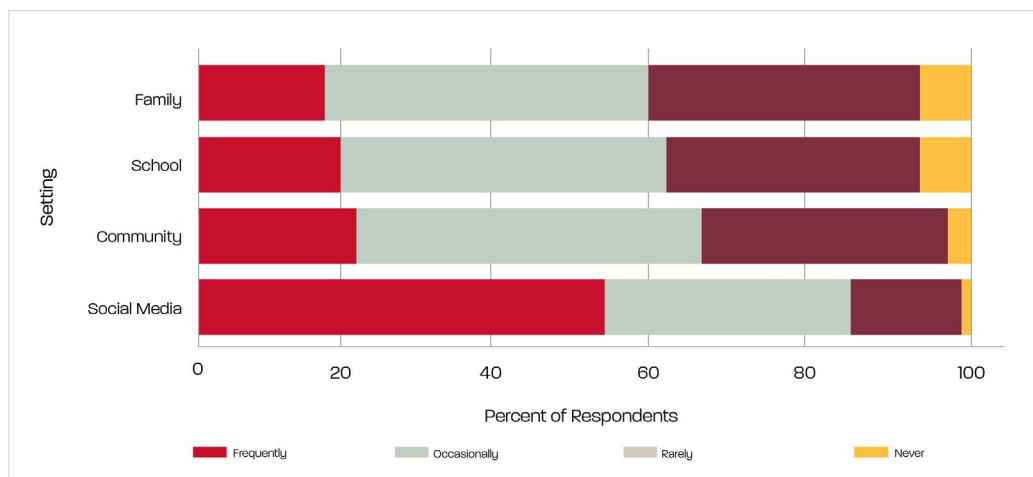
**WEEKLY EXPOSURE TO NEWS POLITICS AND MISINFORMATION**
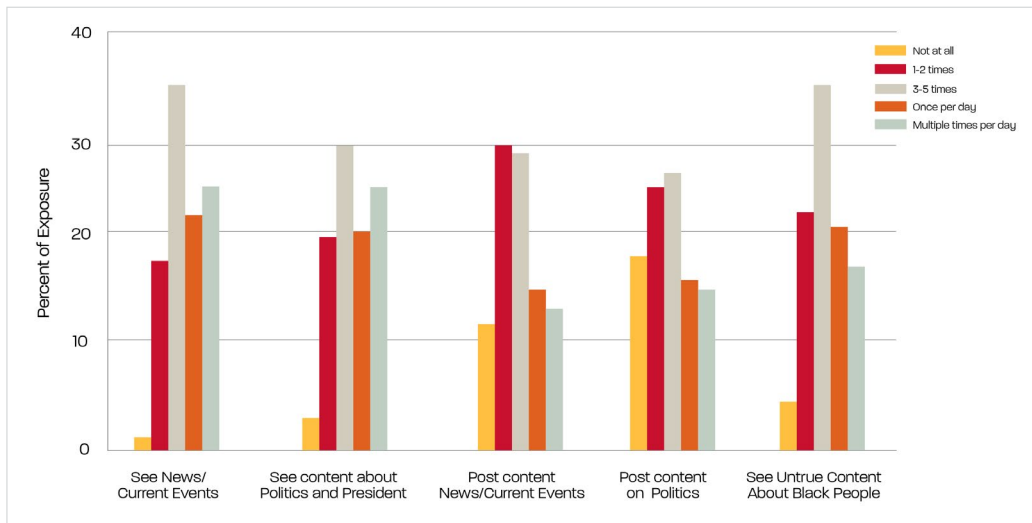
To understand how Black emerging adults interact with social media as an informational space, participants shared how frequently in a week they see or post about current events and political topics, as well as how often they encounter false or misleading content, particularly content that misrepresents or harms Black communities. Most respondents reported seeing content about **news (98%)** and **politics (95%)** at least once in the week leading up to the survey. About one in four reported seeing such content *multiple times per day,* with **34% viewing news** and **30% viewing politics** *3–5 times per week.* This indicates that digital news and political commentary are consistently present in participants' online environments. While viewing rates were high, *posting activity was lower but still substantial.* Around **88% posted about news** and **82% posted about politics** *at least once within a week* of taking the survey. The majority did so *1–5 times per week,* with *fewer posting daily* or *multiple times per day*.

A substantial majority of Black emerging adults, over 95%, reported encountering false or misleading statements online about Black people in the week leading up to the survey.

More than one-third **(34.5%)** saw such content *3–5 times*, and nearly one in five **(18.6%)** encountered it *multiple times per day*. Another **20.6%** saw it *once per day*, and **21.8%** saw it *1–2 times*. Only **4.4%** reported not seeing any such content.

These findings underscore how pervasive race-based misinformation is in participants' digital environments, reinforcing that online racism and stereotype-driven content remain a regular and visible part of the online experience for Black emerging adults.
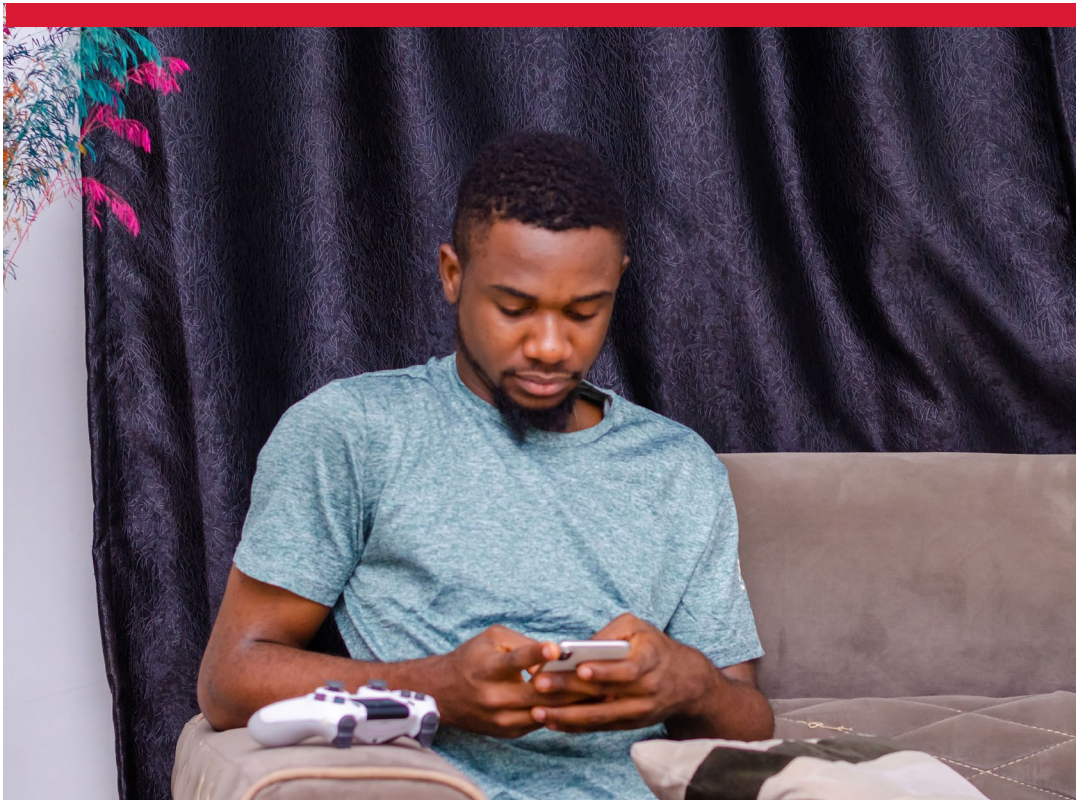
Part 5: Reported Mental Health Over the Past Week

Social media can offer connection and affirmation, but it can also expose users to harmful content, societal stressors, and overwhelming information. These are factors that may contribute to emotional strain over time. Self-reported symptoms of **depression** and **anxiety** experienced over the **course of a week** provide a snapshot of participants' psychological well-being during that period and help contextualize how online environments intersect with emotional health. By exploring these mental health patterns, we gain a deeper understanding of the broader implications of digital life for Black emerging adults.
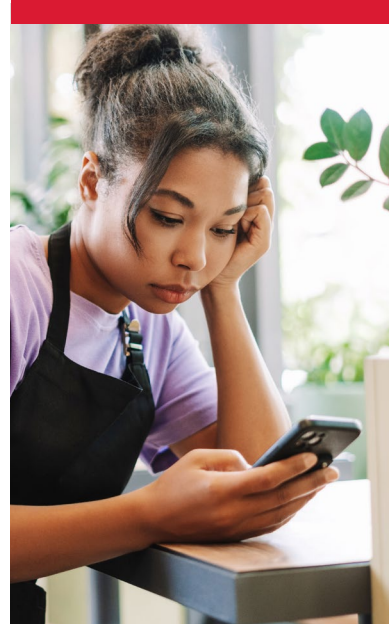
Self-reported data indicate that many Black emerging adults experienced symptoms associated with depression in the week leading up to taking the survey. Common symptoms included **trouble focusing, feeling bothered by things that normally wouldn't, restless sleep, and feeling down or depressed**. Across nearly every indicator, a majority of respondents reported experiencing these symptoms at least once during that seven-day period.

For example, more than **35%** reported experiencing trouble focusing and **40%** reported feeling depressed for 1–2 days during the week, while another **32%** experienced those symptoms for 3–4 days or more. Approximately **10–12%** reported experiencing these symptoms on most or all days of the week.

A significant percentage of respondents also reported other symptoms, such as **loneliness, crying spells, feeling fearful, and talking less than usual.** Around **38% felt lonely** and **40% talked less** than usual during at least three days that week. Nearly **10%** reported daily crying spells or fear. These patterns suggest emotional fatigue, withdrawal, and mood fluctuations are common among respondents.

Despite these challenges, some participants also reported positive experiences. Roughly **25%** said they felt **happy** or **hopeful** most or all of the time, and nearly **47%** reported enjoying life at least 3–4 days during the week. However, these positive emotions often coexisted with distress, pointing to the complexity of emotional well-being in the face of daily stressors.

Overall, these findings reflect a concerning but nuanced picture: many Black emerging adults are managing significant emotional strain over short time spans.

SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY IN THE WEEK LEADING UP TO THE SURVEY.

| SYMPTOM	Most/All of the Time (%)	Occasionally (3–4 days) (%)	Some (1–2 days) (%)	Rarely (<1 day) (%)
Bothered by things	9.81	25.95	42.73	21.51
Poor appetite	9.99	21.16	35.58	33.27
Feeling blue	8.45	26.89	42.97	22.70
Felt just as good as others	19.98	40.0	29.37	10.64
Trouble focusing	11.94	29.55	35.40	23.11
Felt depressed	9.99	21.75	40.07	28.19
Felt hopeful	29.14	41.31	22.22	7.33
Felt fearful	9.52	23.05	43.03	24.41
Restless sleep	9.93	23.40	41.19	25.47
Felt happy	24.82	44.62	23.70	6.86
Talked less than usual	10.64	28.07	40.43	20.86
Felt lonely	11.76	25.53	39.89	22.81
Enjoyed life	20.69	47.04	25.59	6.68
Crying spells	9.57	20.15	33.98	33.98

The data reveal consistent patterns of heightened emotional distress among nonbinary and transgender participants compared to their male and female peers.

Across multiple symptoms associated with depression and anxiety, gender-diverse respondents reported more frequent experiences of emotional difficulty over the past week.

For example, nearly **47% of nonbinary** and **49% of transgender** respondents said they *felt like they couldn't shake the blues* most or several days during the week, markedly higher than rates among female **(34.9%)** and male **(33.8%)** respondents. Similar patterns emerged for **trouble focusing,** with **59% of nonbinary** and **52% of transgender** participants reporting difficulty, compared to around **40–42%** among cisgender respondents.

Rates of **poor appetite**, **feeling depressed**, and **feeling fearful** also followed this trend, with nonbinary and transgender participants consistently reporting higher levels of distress. For instance, **40% of nonbinary** and **36% of transgender** participants reported loss of appetite most or several days during the week, compared to around **30–32%** of cisgender respondents. Likewise, **feeling depressed** was reported by **37% of nonbinary** and **33% of transgender** participants, which was also higher than the **32%** range for others.These disparities suggest that nonbinary and transgender young adults are experiencing a disproportionately high mental health burden.

### SYMPTOM PREVALENCE BY GENDER (MOST + 3-4 DAYS)
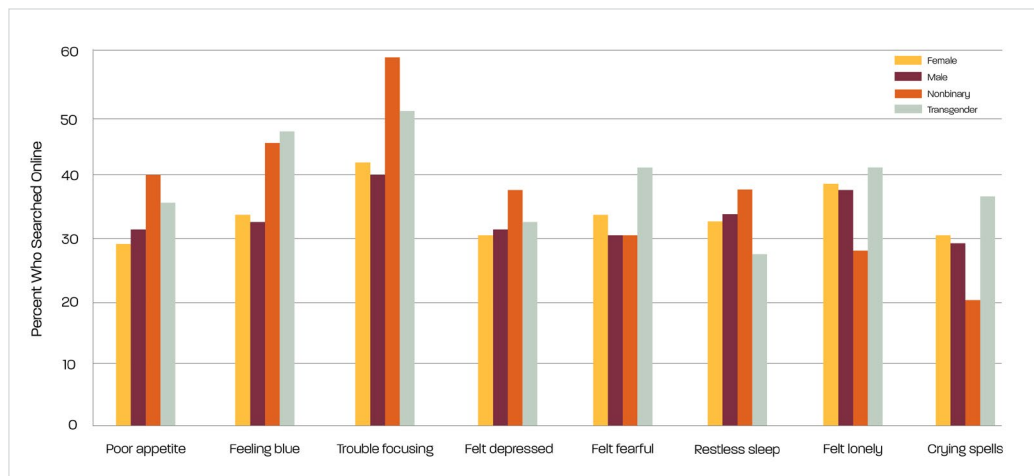
Overall, the data suggest that many respondents experienced notable emotional strain in the week leading up to the survey. While the severity and frequency varied, symptoms such as feeling down, anxious, or disconnected were common, pointing to a broader pattern of psychological distress that warrants attention and support.

Policy Landscape

The findings of this report arrive at a critical juncture. Technology and health policy are deeply entwined, and their intersection is shaping the mental health outcomes of Black emerging adults in unprecedented ways. This research surfaces amid a rapidly evolving policy environment, one in which both protective regulations and vital health supports are under threat. As young people increasingly turn to social media for community, identity formation, and health information, the absence of robust policy safeguards only amplifies their vulnerability.

At the heart of this tension lies the <u>H.R.1, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act</u>, a sweeping reconciliation package enacted into law on July 4, 2025. While framed as a broad tax and budget bill, H.R. 1 carries serious implications for both <u>health equity and the governance of emerging technologies</u>. Most notably, it proposes nearly $1 trillion in cuts to Medicaid and other mental health supports designed for young people, which would severely limit access to care for millions of children and young adults. <u>Medicaid is the nation's largest payer of mental health care</u>, and the proposed cuts risk dismantling the very infrastructure that undergirds school-based mental health services, community care, and safety nets for low-income and marginalized populations. For Black emerging adults, who often face systemic barriers to accessing culturally competent care, these rollbacks could be catastrophic.

An earlier version of H.R. 1 also included a provision that would have introduced a federal moratorium on state-level regulation of artificial intelligence (AI), packaged within proposed changes to the <u>Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program</u>. While this provision was ultimately removed from the final bill due to insufficient votes and pushback from state leaders, it reflected a growing federal effort to limit state action on AI accountability. Such restrictions would have threatened progress on laws already in place in states like Colorado, Washington, and Virginia that address algorithmic bias, biometric surveillance, and data privacy. These are all issues that disproportionately impact Black communities.
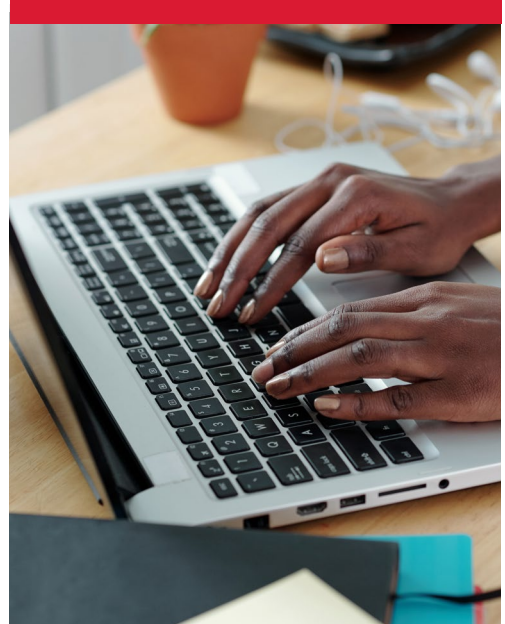
This federal inaction on meaningful AI regulation mirrors other failures to act, such as the stalling of the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA). These gaps leave Black children and families vulnerable to the unchecked harms of digital platforms. As mental health resources shrink, more young people may be driven to seek support, advice, and information online.

Yet without regulatory guardrails, digital platforms may continue to expose them to harmful content, medical misinformation, and algorithmically amplified material that exacerbates distress rather than alleviates it. The result is a compounding of risk: fewer offline resources, coupled with unregulated online ecosystems.

This policy moment underscores the urgency of comprehensive, equity-centered approaches to both tech and health policy. As the federal landscape becomes more constrained, it is essential to advocate for regulatory protections that shield users from algorithmic harm and misinformation, while also ensuring sustained investment in mental health infrastructure for young Americans.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

The findings from this study underscore urgent gaps in federal and state responses to the digital experiences and mental health needs of Black emerging adults. Despite their deep engagement with social media, this population faces persistent exposure to racialized harm, misinformation, and emotional distress, particularly among gender-diverse individuals. The current federal policy landscape reflects a troubling shift away from protections that have historically supported mental health and safeguarded against technological harms. Efforts to dismantle existing regulatory frameworks, through both funding rollbacks and preemptive federal bans on state-level governance, signal a departure from the bipartisan momentum that once prioritized young people's well-being and tech accountability.

Despite these challenges, the recommendations that follow represent evidence-informed, forward-looking strategies that, if adopted, could significantly improve the digital and mental health landscape for Black emerging adults. These are best-case scenario policy directions, grounded in the realities our research participants shared and in the values of public safety, equity, and mental health. Policymakers and decision-makers at all levels should consider these approaches as part of a broader effort to protect and promote the well-being of Black youth.

1. **Establish Federal Guidelines for Platform Accountability in Racism and Misinformation**
   Nearly 90% of respondents have experienced racial discrimination online, and 76% have witnessed misinformation frequently. Social media platforms must be held accountable for the environments they create and the harms they perpetuate. Federal guidance can promote greater accountability without stifling speech. Guidance should mandate that social media platforms develop transparent reporting and enforcement mechanisms for racist content and health misinformation, especially content targeting Black communities.

   Without a national framework for addressing algorithmic harm and online misinformation, young people remain vulnerable to the unchecked influence of opaque and profit-driven technologies. In the current climate, where a federal moratorium threatens to silence state-level innovation, there must be continued vigilance. Over the last several years, Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) members have actively addressed the impacts of AI on Black communities. Most recently, <u>Rep. Ayanna Pressley</u> (MA-07) emphasized the urgent need for AI regulation to "prevent exploitation of Black and marginalized communities" in response to proposed provisions in the Reconciliation Bill. Although the federal moratorium on state-level AI regulation was ultimately removed from the final bill, the attempt signaled a concerning trend toward limiting public oversight. Congressional leaders and state legislators who support data privacy, algorithmic transparency, and equitable tech design must remain vigilant and continue advancing protections. Their efforts are critical to building on existing momentum and ensuring that communities most impacted by technological harms are not left behind.

2. **Fund Community-Centered Critical Digital and Media Literacy Initiatives**
   Misinformation disproportionately affects Black communities, especially in <u>health</u> and <u>electoral</u> contexts. In the absence of strong regulatory frameworks, equipping young people with the tools to critically engage with/in digital environments is essential. Community-centered digital and media literacy programs offer a promising, culturally grounded strategy for promoting online safety, countering misinformation, and supporting mental health.

   State and local governments have an essential role to play in sustaining and expanding these efforts. In cities, where digital equity remains a public priority, education departments, mental health agencies, and youth development offices can fund and implement culturally responsive digital and media literacy curricula, particularly through partnerships with trusted community-based organizations.

One notable example is Baltimore's Digital Equity Fund, launched in 2023 as a partnership between the City of Baltimore's Office of Broadband and Digital Equity and the Baltimore Civic Fund, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. This initiative provides grants to Baltimore-based nonprofits to close the digital divide by enhancing internet access and promoting digital literacy. It has awarded resources to organizations like Code in the Schools, Wide Angle Youth Media, and the Latino Economic Development Center, enabling them to offer access to technology, targeted digital skills training, and workforce pathways in under-resourced neighborhoods. A second round of grants focused on building tech hubs in recreation centers, delivering IT certification programs, and fostering digital creativity through makerspaces. By rooting support within community-led organizations, the fund ensures programming aligns with local needs and broadens the pipeline of digitally literate residents equipped for both personal and professional success.

3. **Integrate Digital Mental Health Support into Federal Youth Wellness Programs**
   Over half of respondents reported symptoms of depression and anxiety in the week leading up to the survey, and nearly half sought mental health information online in the six months prior to taking the survey (October 2024-April 2025). Mental health support must meet young people where they are: on digital platforms, with content that is affirming, accurate, and accessible. Federal policies should expand the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) mental health initiatives to include online coping strategies, social media wellness education, and identity-affirming digital tools. This includes expanding access to culturally responsive mobile apps, online peer support platforms, and teletherapy services that reflect the lived experiences of Black young people.

   Notable examples include The Safe Place, a mental health app created specifically for the Black community, and BEAM (Black Emotional and Mental Health Collective), which offers online mental health toolkits and virtual healing circles. Additionally, platforms like Therapy for Black Girls and Innopsych connect users with culturally competent therapists, often through digital interfaces. Federal initiatives such as the SAMHSA's grant program Project AWARE (Advancing Wellness and Resiliency in Education) and others can serve as vehicles for embedding these digital supports into broader infrastructures serving youth and young adults. Integration efforts should prioritize not only access to technology, but also trust-building, cultural relevance, and training for professionals serving youth and emerging adults. In a context where many young people are more likely to seek support online before turning to formal systems, digital mental health represents a scalable, stigma-reducing strategy for advancing equitable wellness.

4. Require Disaggregated Data Collection on Online Harms

Nonbinary and transgender Black emerging adults in particular reported high levels of emotional distress. Without disaggregated data, these patterns remain invisible in policy and public discourse, hindering equitable intervention. While sweeping federal legislation may not be feasible in this moment, significant progress can still be achieved by empowering existing and new taskforces focused on tech accountability and equity. While the current federal climate may limit the continuation of initiatives like the White House Task Force to Address Online Harassment and Abuse, its previous work provides a valuable blueprint. Policymakers can build on the task force's insights by codifying its best practices into agency-level guidelines or reconstituting similar bodies through Congressional oversight or independent federal commissions.

Members of the CBC) can champion the creation of a **Digital Equity and Safety Taskforce for Black Youth and Young Adults** with a specific mandate to collect and report disaggregated data on digital harms. Leaders such as **Reps. Yvette D. Clarke (NY-11) and Shontel Brown (OH-11)** known for their work on algorithmic accountability and broadband equity, and **Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman (NJ-12)**, who has elevated the mental health needs of Black young people, are well positioned to advance this work. By institutionalizing data collection mechanisms and aligning them with community-informed priorities, Congress can ensure that protective digital policies are grounded in evidence and equity, even amid shifting federal landscapes.

5. Support a National Research Agenda on the Digital Lives of Black Youth and Young Adults

The digital lives of Black young people are under-researched and underfunded, despite their high engagement and vulnerability to online harm. Rigorous, representative research is essential for effective policy and program design. Policymakers should advocate to fund research through the National Science Foundation (NSF), National Institutes of Health (NIH), and the CDC to study the mental health, civic and social impact of Black emerging adult's engagement with social media.

A national research agenda focused on the digital lives of Black youth and young adults, with particular attention to how platform design, content exposure, and algorithmic systems impact mental health, identity development, civic engagement, and safety is critical.

This agenda should be interdisciplinary, community-informed, and equity-centered, funding both large-scale longitudinal studies and qualitative inquiry that captures lived experience. It would also strengthen infrastructure for collecting and sharing disaggregated data, identifying platform-specific risks, and designing interventions that reflect the social and cultural realities of Black young people. In the absence of such a coordinated federal agenda, philanthropic foundations, academic consortia, and congressional allies can play a vital role in moving this work forward.

Pioneering efforts by initiatives such as Nicole Turner Lee's AI Equity Lab at the Brookings Institution, which examines algorithmic bias and digital safety, and nonprofit organization Children and Screens'work on tech use and health provide critical models for how research can be both community-responsive and policy relevant. Building on these foundations, federal agencies and philanthropic partners should support long-term, intersectional research that tracks platform impacts, evaluates emerging risks, and informs culturally responsive interventions.

Together, these policies offer a comprehensive approach to safeguarding the digital and emotional well-being of Black emerging adults. From regulatory oversight and public investment to disaggregated data collection and research funding, these recommendations reflect the multi-layered nature of the challenges identified in this study. A coordinated policy response, rooted in equity and informed by the lived experiences of young adults, is essential for building healthier digital ecosystems and fostering long-term community resilience.

Conclusion

This report reveals the complex and deeply intertwined realities of social media engagement, racialized online experiences, and mental health among Black emerging adults. The data shows that for many in this population, social media is not simply a leisure activity but a central feature of daily life. It is where relationships are formed, identities are explored, information is sought, and, too often, harm is encountered.

The findings paint a sobering picture. A majority of respondents reported frequent exposure to online racial discrimination, misinformation, and emotional distress. These experiences are not evenly distributed. Gender-diverse emerging adults in particular face disproportionate mental health burdens, compounding the risks they navigate in digital spaces. At the same time, Black emerging adults are actively using these platforms to search for mental health support and stay informed. Their digital engagement is both a vulnerability and a tool for agency and survival.

What emerges from this report is a clear call to action. Public systems, including mental health, education, and technology policy, must evolve to better reflect the realities of today's youth and emerging adults. Policymakers must prioritize not only the regulation of digital spaces but also the creation of supportive infrastructures that affirm the dignity, safety, and well-being of Black young people. Centering the voices and needs of Black emerging adults is not an optional consideration in our efforts to promote digital and mental health equity. It is an urgent necessity that is critical to the future of public health, civic engagement, and racial justice.

APPENDIX A

Participants

A total of 1,692 respondents participated in the study. The average age of participants was approximately 22 years, with just over 60% (1,042) between the ages of 22 and 25. Participants reflected a range of gender identities: 41% (700) identified as female, 55% (927) as male, 1.9% (33) as transgender, and 1.8% (31) as nonbinary. In terms of sexual orientation, 83% (1,399), identified as heterosexual 4.7% (80) as bisexual, 4.5% (77) as gay, and 3.4% (58) as lesbian. An additional 3.5% (59) identified as either queer, pansexual, demisexual, or asexual, and 1.1% (19) preferred not to say.

Respondents had varied educational backgrounds. Nearly half (47.28%) held a bachelor's degree, while others reported some college experience (16.07%), a high school diploma (17.02%), an associate's degree (11.3%), a master's degree (3.84%), some graduate school (2.4%), some high school (1.24%), or a doctoral/professional degree (0.7%). Approximately 50% identified as first-generation college students, 49% did not, and 1% were unsure. Geographically, the sample was concentrated in key states, including California (18%), New York (8.8%), New Jersey (6.75%), Florida (5%), and Texas (4%).

Data Collection

Data were collected through an online survey administered in spring 2025. The survey items can be viewed here. Recruitment was conducted primarily through the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's social media channels. The overwhelming majority of participants reported learning about the study through social media platforms, which has important implications for interpreting the data. Specifically, the findings may be most applicable to young Black adults who are active on social media and engaged with culturally relevant digital content.

The survey included a mix of closed- and open-ended questions that explored respondents' social media habits, exposure to online content, experiences of racial stress and misinformation, and related impacts on mental health. Several items used in the survey were adapted from established instruments and reports to align with the focus of this study. Items measuring social media engagement were adapted from the *Social Media Integration Scale*.[viii] Items addressing online racial discrimination experiences were adapted from the *Online Victimization Scale*.[ix] Measures related to exposure to health misinformation were informed by Getting help online: How young people find, evaluate, and use mental health apps, online therapy, and behavioral health information report by Common Sense Media and Hopelab.[x] All adaptations were made to reflect the experiences of Black emerging adults and the specific digital contexts explored in this study.

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