



Representation Matters

Exploring Social Media Experiences and Mental Health of Youth and Young Adults of Color

Background

Social media is an integral part of the lives of young people, with up to 95% engaging in various platforms (The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health, 2023). Amongst these platforms, TikTok emerges as a favorite, with 33.8% of Youth of Color identifying it as their personal choice for social media (Breland-Noble & The AAKOMA Project, 2023).

However, despite widespread use, many Youth and Young Adults of Color experience challenges online and via social media. According to our [State of Mental Health for Youth of Color](#) report from 2022, a whopping 44% of youth and young adults think they do not see enough people on social media who look like them, and nearly 25% report being bullied online about their race. Furthermore, 26% of youth and young adults report trying to cut down on social media without success.

Existing studies have contributed insights into the mental health experiences of young people on social media (Berryman et al., 2017; Ehmke, 2023). However, there is a notable lack of research specifically focused on mental health and Youth and Young Adults of Color in relationship to social media meaning that the experiences of Young People of Color have been overlooked in prior research. To address this gap, the current brief utilizes data from our full report, [State of Mental Health for Youth of Color 2022](#), to enhance our understanding of mental health, Youth and Young Adults of Color and social media.

The **AAK**  **MA** Project

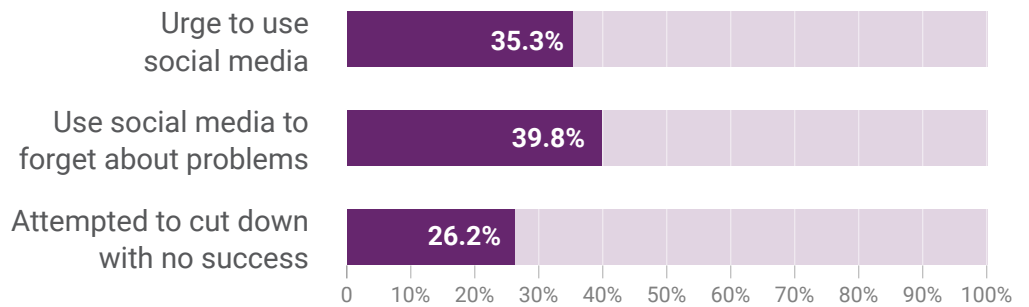
Results

SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION

Social media is deeply ingrained in the lives of Youth and Young Adults of Color, with many experiencing urges to use it frequently. Our data reveals that **35.3% of the youth and young adults in our sample reported often or very often feeling the urge to use social media**. Moreover, social media serves as an escape for many, as 39.8% of young people report using it to forget about their problems. It is also important to note that 26.2% of Youth and Young Adults of Color have attempted to cut down on their social media use but have been unsuccessful in their efforts.

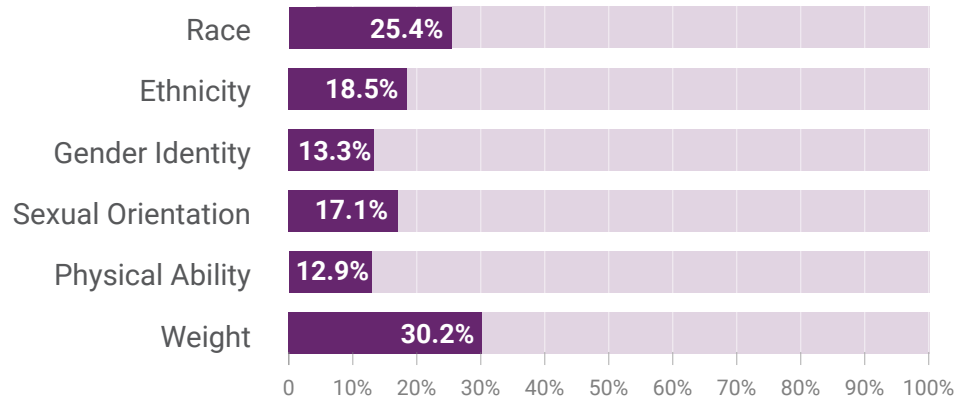


Respondents who replied often/very often



ONLINE BULLYING

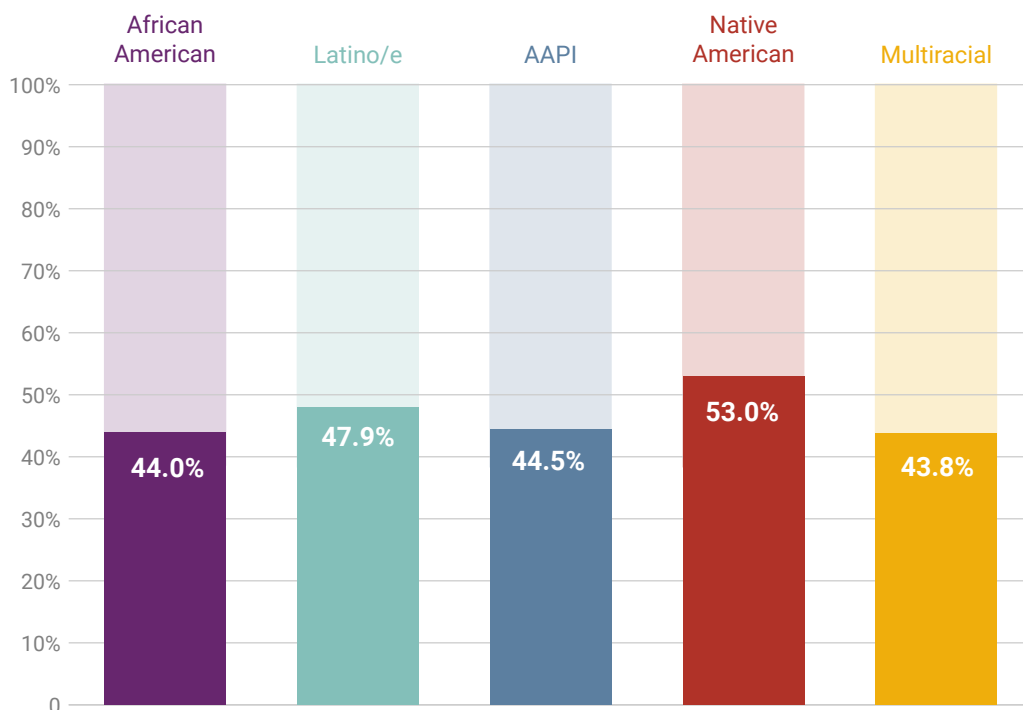
Online bullying is an alarming issue. According to our survey results, a significant portion of Youth and Young Adults of Color report experiencing various forms of online bullying. Specifically, **25.4% of youth and young adults report being bullied online about their race**, while 18.5% report online bullying related to their ethnicity. Regarding gender identity, 13.3% of Youth and Young Adults of Color experienced bullying online, with 17.1% reporting bullying based on their sexual orientation. Furthermore, 12.9% of Youth of Color report facing bullying related to their physical ability. Weight-related bullying was also prevalent, affecting 30.2% of young people.





SOCIAL MEDIA REPRESENTATION

Among Youth and Young Adults of Color, our data shows that **almost half (44%) report not seeing enough individuals on social media who resemble them**, indicating significant underrepresentation. When examining the data by race, consistent patterns emerge with African American (44%), Latino/e (47.9%), Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) (44.5%), Native American (53%), and Multiracial (43.8%) young people, reporting lack of representation.



Discussion

Social media is a powerful tool shaping our perceptions, connecting communities, and influencing the lives of Youth and Young Adults of Color. Unfortunately, the lack of diverse representation online remains a significant issue illuminated by our study findings — a pressing issue that must be addressed to support the mental health of diverse young people. When nearly half of Youth and Young Adults of Color report not seeing individuals who resemble them within the context of platforms they use daily, it raises concerns about underrepresentation and its associated consequences.

The addiction-like urge to use social media reported by 35% of our participants, echoes findings from the U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory and raises the question of how we as the parents, caregivers and advocates must show up to support Youth and Young Adults of Color, their social media use and their mental health.

These concerns are amplified when one considers the increasing reliance of young people on social media, as reflected by our data, which indicates that **44% of Youth of Color report not seeing enough individuals who resemble them**. These findings highlight an incredibly important issue with how people of diverse racial backgrounds are represented online. The steady increase in social media use by diverse young people, who do not see themselves positively reflected online, raises the specter of the propensity for vulnerable teens to succumb to the negative effects of online racial bullying.

This is evidenced in our study which shows that **25.4% of our participants experience online bullying about their race**. Online bullying in turn has demonstrated negative mental health effects including anxiety, depression, physical pain, and sleep disturbance (Alhajji et al., 2019). If we as the adults, in the lives of young people of diverse backgrounds, fail to act to help secure online safety for youth with marginalized identities, we open the door to increasing emotional harm.

Finally, it is important to note that **39.8% of Youth and Young Adults of Color in our study turn to social media as a temporary escape or source of relief** when facing various stressors or difficulties. These findings underscore the urgency of addressing the lack of diverse representation online, and the need for securing safe online spaces for Young People of Color particularly considering social media’s profound influence on their lives.

Looking Forward



Recognizing the urgent need to address the lack of representation online and the addictive nature of the platforms, one potential strategy is to foster collaboration between social media platforms, Youth and Young Adult Consumers of Color, and diverse content creators.

Platforms should consider ways to gain insights from young people and content creators from marginalized backgrounds, focusing on inclusivity and belonging. Such collaborations can involve featuring the art and creative talents of diverse creators, learning from Young People of Color, amplifying their voices for solutions, empowering young people to tackle the conversation of social media use and mental health in their communities, and providing support and other resources. By showcasing diverse perspectives and experiences, platforms can contribute to a more inclusive and representative online environment; one that is culturally responsive and seeks to welcome a wide range of users.

Through events like “Revelations,” we facilitated collaborations between influencers, Youth of Color, academics, and others, creating a space that promotes diversity, inclusivity, belonging and representation. Such initiatives can play a crucial role in challenging the existing underrepresentation of some groups of Youth and Young Adults of Color, and fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment among this group of youth and young adults online. You can also learn more through our full report, [*The State of Mental Health for Youth of Color 2022*](#).

About The AAKOMA Project

Through our three pillars: 1) Raising Consciousness, 2) Empowering Communities, and 3) Changing Systems, The AAKOMA Project seeks to achieve the vision of co-creating a world where every child, inclusive of all points of diversity, feels the strength to live authentically and unapologetically within an environment that allows them to rise and thrive, and we are constantly striving to empower Youth and Young Adults of Color to lead meaningful conversations focused on positive change.

By providing culturally relevant research that embraces the intersectionality of Young People of Color, we shed light on the unique challenges and experiences faced by these communities. Additionally, we are dedicated to ensuring accessible and inclusive mental health support for those in need, and our Free Virtual Therapy program serves as a valuable resource for psychotherapy initiation eradicating traditional barriers to mental healthcare.

Through our ongoing efforts, we are constantly creating a more equitable and inclusive world for Youth and Young Adults of Color and their mental health.

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