

Adolescents' Encounters with Hate on Social Media

January 2026

Key Takeaways

We analyzed responses to survey data gathered from over 28,000 students in grades 5-12 in 10 states participating in school assemblies about social media safety.

- Nearly all teens (94%) reported using social media daily, with more than three-quarters (78%) spending 3+ hours per day.
- Almost half (47%) have been cyberbullied over social media.
- Eight in ten (79%) have seen hate speech on social media in the last month.
- Those spending more time on social media were more likely to report hate speech encounters and cyberbullying.
- Thirty percent of students reported feeling “no emotion” the last time they saw hate speech on social media followed by feeling upset (18%), confused (14%) or angry (13%) when exposed to such content.
- Older students and those spending more time on social media were more likely to feel “no emotion” in comparison to others.

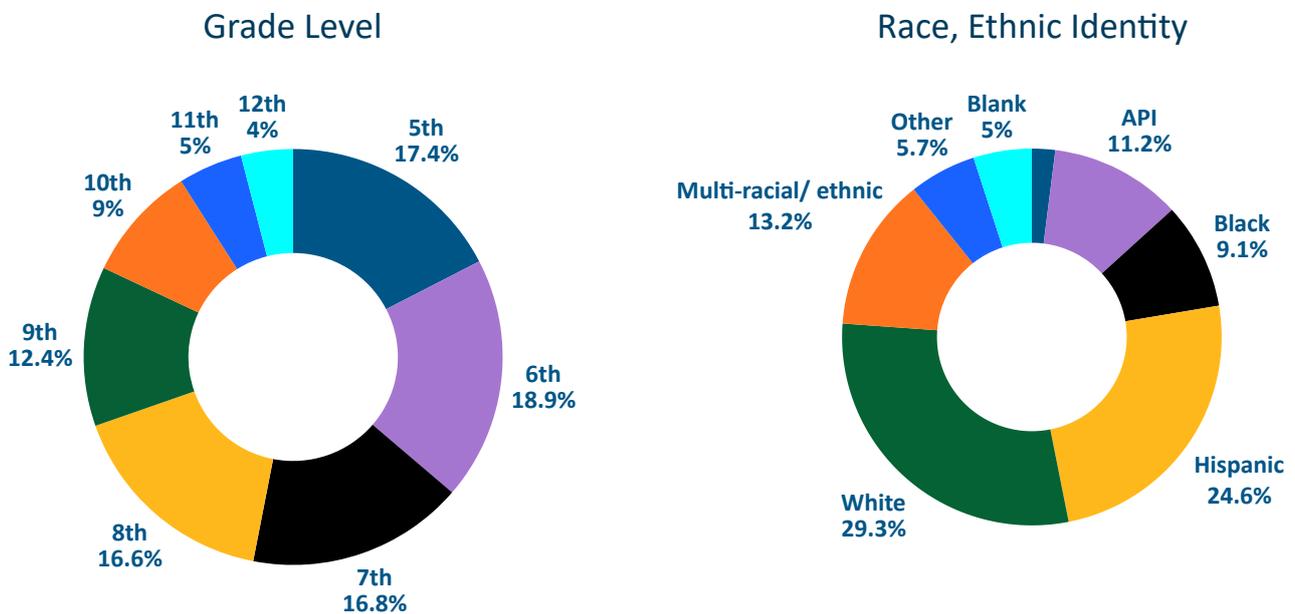
Overview

Social media plays an integral part in many lives, especially young people. According to a recent Pew Research study, one-third of teens report using social media apps like YouTube, TikTok or Instagram *almost constantly*.¹ Young people frequently report encountering harmful content such as cyberbullying and hate in social media spaces. Researchers, for example, have found that underlying algorithms used by TikTok and YouTube Shorts can recommend misogynistic content targeting young men within minutes on the app.² While estimates vary, a recent study from the Cyberbullying Research Center estimates that as many as 58% of young people have been cyberbullied at some point in their lives.³ Studies have connected cyberbullying with increased anxiety, depression, and even suicidality.⁴ The Anti-Defamation League found about 50% of teens had experienced online harassment in the prior year, with 36% indicating that online harassment led to offline harassment.⁵ There is also evidence to suggest that hate speech exposure desensitizes or impairs an individual's capacity to understand another's perspective and pain.⁶ Given the prominent role that social media plays in many adolescents' lives and potential risks present, it is imperative to explore their exposure to hate and harm.

Study Methods

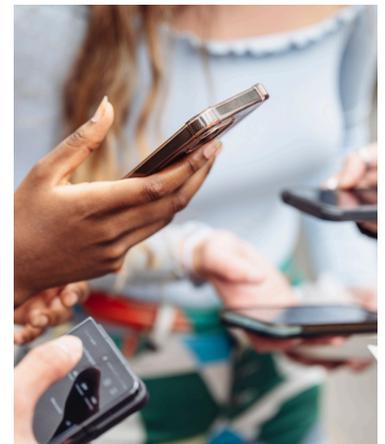
Findings highlighted in this brief come from the Social Media and Spread of Hate (SMASH) study, a collaboration between researchers in UCLA's School of Education and Information Studies and our non-profit partners, the Organization for Social Media Safety (OFSMS). They are based on data gathered by OFSMS, as part of in-school educational programming. During presentations, students answer a series of anonymous questions using digital handheld devices about their demographic characteristics (grade and race/ethnicity), average hours spent on social media on a given day, encounters with and reactions to harms such as real-life violence, cyberbullying, and hate speech. The terms *cyberbullying* and *hate speech* are defined before asking these questions and tailored for different ages/grade levels.⁷ For most questions, results are shared with the audience in real time to promote engagement.

Our sample includes 28,503 respondents in grades 5-12 from 111 schools in 10 states that participated in OFSMS assemblies from February 2023 to June 2025 and did not opt out of the research study.⁸



This brief highlights descriptive results. More study details as well as results from more rigorous statistical modeling of these data can be found in other SMASH publications.⁹ Qualitative data based on focus group discussions and input from teen advisors is underway.

Social Media and the Spread of Hate (SMASH) is an interdisciplinary project funded by the UCLA Initiative to Study Hate that brings together researchers from the School of Education and Information Studies and the Organization for Social Media Safety (OFSMS), a national nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting social media safety through educational programming. SMASH studies the perceptions of hate speech on social media among youth in grades 5 to 12 in the United States. The study aims to examine youth's self-reported exposure to such speech and its personal and educational impact in order to develop strategies to counter hate speech and cyberbullying targeting youth on social media platforms.

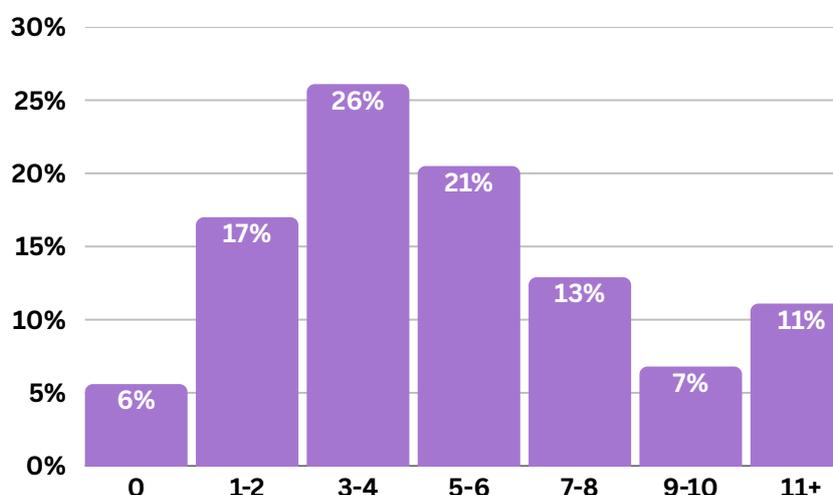


Key Findings

Nearly all young people spend time on social media daily. Many spend extended amounts of time.

- 94% of respondents said they spent an hour or more on average on social media per day.
- 78% reported that they used social media for three or more hours per day; 31% reported spending seven or more hours.
- The most commonly used apps were TikTok (30%), YouTube (22%), and Instagram (12%).
- Even the youngest students (i.e., 5th graders) commonly reported spending time on social media even though many of them are likely under the minimum age (13 years) for popular apps such as TikTok and Instagram.

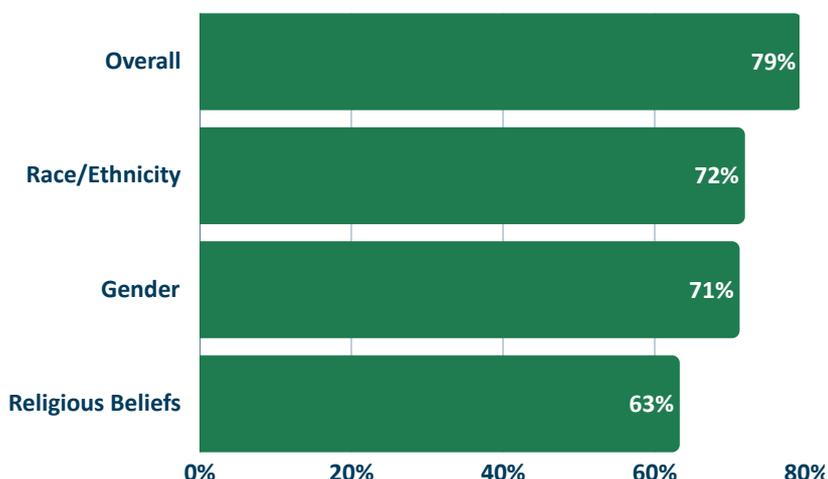
Daily Social Media Use (in Hours)



Young people commonly encounter cyberaggression on social media.

- Nearly half (47%) report they have been cyberbullied.
- 79% reported that they have encountered hate speech in the last month via social media, with a majority viewing hate speech related to race/ethnicity, gender, and/or religious beliefs.
- Slightly more than half (57%) report that they have observed hate speech on social media directed at someone they know personally.
- Broadly speaking students in higher grades (i.e., grades 8-12) were more likely to encounter hate speech than younger grades.

Types of Hate Speech Observed in the Last Month

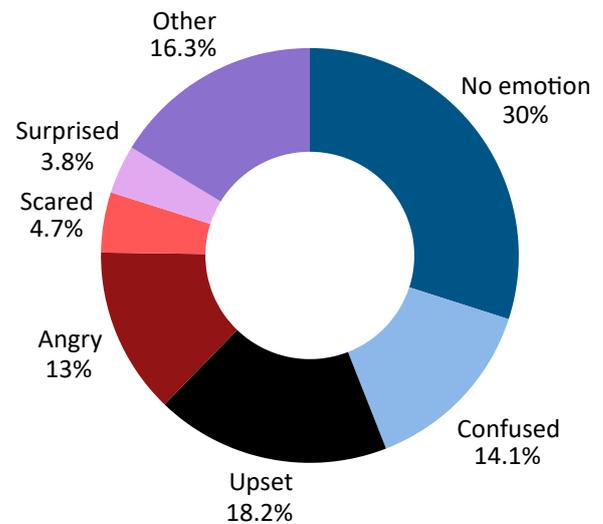


Scrolling by is a common reaction to hate speech.

- Roughly a third (30%) reported “no emotion” the last time they saw hate speech, followed by feeling upset (18%), confused (14%), or angry (13%).
- Older students and those spending more time on social media were more likely to report feeling “no emotion” the last time they saw hate speech.

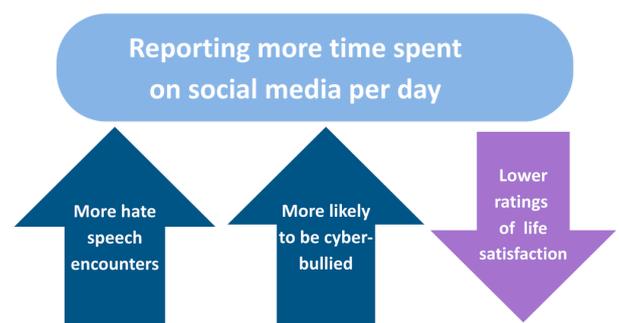
These findings support the theory that repeated exposure to hate speech on social media may lead to desensitization and reduced empathy. While there is some evidence to support this hypothesis, more research is needed.

Emotional Reaction to Hate Speech



More time on social media increases likelihood of encountering hate speech and cyberbullying.

- Young people who reported spending more time on social media were statistically more likely to report they had seen hate speech within the past month and to report that they have been cyberbullied.
- In contrast, those who spent less time on social media tended to have higher ratings of satisfaction “with your life these days”.



Implications and Next Steps

Our findings prompt several questions that SMASH is now exploring. For example, how do young peoples’ conceptions of what counts as hate speech and cyberbullying change as they mature and their social media habits change? How can we feasibly gather more nuanced data around social media use beyond time estimates? What role do specific social media features and larger societal forces play in the spread and impact of hate on social media? How might the introduction of school or statewide phone policies impact young people’s behaviors and potential harms? Perhaps more importantly, how can we collectively work together to make social media a safe(r) place for everyone? As a first step, educators and parents can help by engaging tweens and teens in ongoing conversations around how we can combat hate on social media (see ofsms.org for resources including a free, online course for parents).

SMASH has gathered one of the largest data sets to examine these issues and utilizes a unique methodological approach - embedding data collection into educational programming. Our findings add to the existing body of evidence and further demonstrate the need for immediate and creative solutions to minimize exposure to hate and harms. SMASH will continue our research, gathering perceptions and recommendations from school community members including students, faculty and staff, parents in addressing these issues.

To Learn More

- [Organization for Social Media Safety \(OFSMS\)](#)
- [Social Media and the Spread of Hate \(SMASH\)](#)
- [UCLA Initiative to Study Hate](#)

References:

1. Vogels, E., Gelles-Watnick, R. & Massarat, N. (2022). Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022. Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. United States of America.
2. Baker, C., Ging, D., & Andreasen, M.B. (2024). Recommending toxicity: The role of algorithmic recommender functions on YouTube Shorts and TikTok in promoting male supremacist influencers. DCU Anti-Bullying Centre Dublin City University. <https://www.dcu.ie/antibullyingcentre/recommending-toxicity-summary-report>
3. Patchin, J. W., & Hinduja, S. (2025). 2025 Cyberbullying data. Cyberbullying Research Center. <https://cyberbullying.org/2025-cyberbullying-data>
4. Pluta, A., Mazurek, J., Wojciechowski, J., Wolak, T., Soral, W., & Bilewicz, M. (2023). Exposure to hate speech deteriorates neurocognitive mechanisms of the ability to understand others' pain. *Scientific Reports*, 13(1), 4127. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-31146-1>
5. Anti-Defamation League Center for Technology & Society. (2023). Online hate and harassment: The American experience 2023. https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/2023-12/Online-Hate-and-Harassmen-2023_0_0.pdf
6. OFSMS defines *cyberbullying* as “repeatedly being mean to someone over the internet that includes: mocking or teasing, which is just simply making fun of someone in writing or on video; threatening a person with violence; spreading rumors or talking about someone on social media to make them look bad; leaving someone out on purpose; or sharing private information.” *Hate speech* is defined as “any form of expression through which speakers intend to incite hatred against a group or class of persons on the basis of race, religion, skin color, sexual identity, gender identity, ethnicity, disability, or national origin.”
7. Arnon, S., Klomek, A. B., Visoki, E., Moore, T. M., Argabright, S. T., DiDomenico, G. E., Benton, T. D., & Barzilay, R. (2022). Association of cyberbullying experiences and perpetration with suicidality in early adolescence. *JAMA Network Open*, 5(6), e2218746–e2218746. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.18746>; John, A., Glendenning, A.C., Marchant, A., Montgomery, P., Stewart, A., Wood, S., Lloyd, K. and Hawton, K., (2018). Selfharm, suicidal behaviours, and cyberbullying in children and young people: Systematic review. *Journal of medical internet research*, 20(4), e9044.
8. This study is approved by and conducted according to UCLA's Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements. All data collection is anonymous with no personally identifiable information gathered.
9. Ding, Z., Hansen, M. & Ong, C. (2025, April 23-27). Adolescents' exposure to cyberaggression and desensitization to cyberhate on social media [Poster session]. American Educational Research Association 2025 Conference, Denver, CO, United States. <https://doi.org/10.3102/IP.25.2197337>