

# Beyond the likes

**Social media use among  
BC youth**



**McCreary  
Centre Society**

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## Social media use among BC youth

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# Table of contents

Key findings	1
Background	2
BC youth's experiences with social media	5
Potential benefits of using social media	8
Nighttime social media use	10
Nighttime social media use in relation to health and well-being	11
✦ Sleep	11
✦ Eating behaviours	13
✦ Body image and eating disorders	14
✦ Life satisfaction and self-esteem	15
✦ Self-harm and suicidality	16
✦ Substance use	17
✦ Online victimization and perpetration	18
✦ In-person victimization and perpetration	19
✦ Problematic social media use	20
Youth at risk of problematic social media use	21
Supporting youth with their social media use	29
✦ Friendships	29
✦ Positive family relationships	30
✦ Supportive adults	31
✦ Monitoring of youth's time online	32
✦ Positive school experiences and education plans	33
✦ Physical activity enjoyment	34
✦ Meaningful engagement	35
✦ Community connection	36
✦ Connection to nature	37
✦ Recommendations for supporting youth with their social media use	38
Summary and conclusion	39
Resources	40
References	41

# Key findings

The 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) was completed by around 38,500 youth aged 12–19, and included questions about social media use. Survey results showed:

- Most youth scrolled through social media on their most recent school day, with females the most likely to do so (79% vs. 73% of non-binary youth vs. 69% of males). Females were also the most likely to use social media after their expected bedtime (74% vs. 67% of non-binary youth vs. 61% of males).
- Youth who were on social media after bedtime were more likely than their peers to report poorer health and well-being. For example, they were less likely to have slept for at least 8 hours the previous night (34% vs. 58%), and were more likely to have experienced extreme stress in the past month (15% vs. 9%). They were also more likely to have been cyberbullied (18% vs. 10%) and to have perpetrated cyberbullying (10% vs. 4%) in the past year.
- In-person victimization was also more common among youth who were on social media at night. For example, 29% had experienced physical sexual harassment in the past year, compared to 16% of those who were not on social media at night; and 9% had perpetrated in-person bullying in the past year (vs. 6%).
- Males and females who were on social media at night were more likely to report poor body satisfaction and an eating disorder compared to their same-gender peers who did not use social media after bedtime. For example, 24% of males who used social media at night reported the lowest levels of body satisfaction, compared to 17% of males who did not go on social media after bedtime.
- A potential benefit of using social media was enhanced social connections. For example, youth who accessed social media the previous school day were more likely than those who did not use social media that day to have at least one close in-person friend (94% vs. 92%) and online friend they had never met in person (37% vs. 32%).
- In the past year, 18% of youth reported their social media use had become problematic enough to need help (27% of non-binary youth vs. 22% of females vs. 14% of males). For youth of all gender identities, the factor most strongly associated with problematic social media use was reporting that their online gaming was also at a point where they needed help.
- There were some gender-specific factors associated with problematic social media use. For example, for males (but not females or non-binary youth) there was a strong link between regularly exercising at a gym or rec centre and needing help. For females, problematic alcohol use was strongly tied to problematic social media use, in a way not seen for males and non-binary youth.
- There were also some gender-specific protective factors that reduced the likelihood of problematic social media use. For youth of all genders, spending enough time with friends was important. However, the quantity of friends was particularly important for males, whereas for females it was having friends they could share their ups and downs with that was important.
- Other factors were protective for youth of all gender identities, including having caregivers who monitored their time online; experiencing supportive and understanding relationships with family; feeling connected to school; spending time in nature; and taking part in physical activities and other extracurriculars that youth found enjoyable and meaningful.

# Background



***“Social media overall has changed my mental health over the years. It has gotten better for most of the time that I have been using it for, but can bring it down when you’re feeling down.”***

14-year-old male



***“I want to learn more about the constant uses of social media and the damaging effects of the fake reality it creates.”***

17-year-old female

Social media use began to gain popularity in the early 2000s and has become pervasive. Previous studies have found both positive and negative effects of social media use on youth. Benefits can include access to social supports and reduced isolation (Knowles & Danzi, 2025; O’Reilly et al., 2023). However, social media may also negatively impact youth’s mental health (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Clark et al., 2017; Khalaf et al., 2023; Nesi, 2020; O’Reilly, 2020; O’Reilly et al., 2023), and increase their risk of experiencing cyberbullying (Craig et al., 2020) and in-person victimization (Li et al., 2024). It has been suggested that young people’s experiences using social media can both impact and reflect their offline experiences (American Psychological Association, 2023).

Social media use may impact youth of different gender identities in different ways. For example, the link between social comparisons and poorer mental health has previously been found to be strongest among females (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). However, males may be more likely than females and non-binary youth to engage in social comparisons on social media (Coyne et al., 2023). There has also been specific concern about males interacting with targeted gendered social media content, which can increase the likelihood they will engage in toxic and abusive communication online, as well as potentially in their life offline (Tanner & Gillardin, 2025). For gender diverse youth, social media can potentially offer safe spaces and social acceptance which may be missing in their offline life. This experience of inclusion may mitigate some of the negative impacts of social media on mental health often seen among cisgender youth (Coyne et al, 2023).

## About this report

The report uses data from the 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) to take an in-depth look at the role of social media in the lives of males, females, and non-binary youth in BC, and whether there are gender differences in young people's experiences. Around 38,500 students from 59 of BC's 60 school districts participated in the 2023 survey, and the findings are considered representative of over 98% of students in Grades 7–12 in mainstream public schools across the province.

This report describes BC youth's social media use, including their use after bedtime and on their most recent school day. It considers links between social media use and health and well-being, as well as potential benefits and challenges of using social media. The report identifies youth who may be more likely to need help for their social media use, and ways that youth may be supported with their use.

Throughout the report, reflections are included from 570 youth, aged 12–19, who reviewed the 2023 BC AHS findings. These youth identified social media use as one of the most prominent issues impacting their health and well-being, and a topic they would like to receive more education and support around. For more details, see [mcs.bc.ca/pdf/2025\\_the\\_whole\\_picture.pdf](https://mcs.bc.ca/pdf/2025_the_whole_picture.pdf).



**Quotes from students who completed the 2023 BC AHS are included throughout the report.**



In a workshop about BC AHS findings, youth participants prioritized social media as the issue most impacting their health and well-being.

### Please note:

- All reported comparisons and associations are statistically significant at least at  $p < .05$ . This means there is less than a 5% likelihood that results occurred by chance.
- Where it is not obvious, a note is added to a table or chart if there is no statistically significant difference between percentages.
- Reported percentages may not always total 100% due to rounding.
- For readability, the terms 'students' and 'youth' are used interchangeably, as are 'in the past year' and 'in the past 12 months', and 'in the past month' and 'in the past 30 days.'

## Limitations

As a broad health survey, the BC AHS may not have captured all of youth's experiences with social media.

The survey results do not necessarily reflect the social media experiences of youth who were not attending public school or who were not in school on the day the survey was administered. Youth with certain disabilities and learning challenges may also have been unable to participate in the BC AHS.

The report provides associations, and does not imply causation. For example, having a mental health condition is associated with problematic social media use, and the BC AHS data cannot tell us which of these may have come first. Based on other research, it is likely that both experiences influence one another (e.g., Flannery et al., 2023; Todorovic et al., 2025).

As older youth were more likely to use social media, analyses were carried out to ensure that youth's age was not driving the reported results. However, it is unclear if other unidentified factors may have influenced the findings.

Non-binary youth were included in all gender analyses. However, due to the relatively small number of youth who identified as non-binary, the results could not always be reported. Findings for non-binary youth generally followed a similar pattern to males and/or females unless otherwise noted.

## Glossary

**Care experience** includes youth who had ever been in government care (e.g., foster care), as well as an alternative to care (e.g., on a Youth Agreement). It also includes youth who had received such services through an Indigenous Child and Family Service Agency.

**In-person bullying** refers to youth who were bullied at school or on the way to or from school in the past year.

**Low/lower body satisfaction** refers to youth who scored 1 or 2 on a 5-point scale, with 1 indicating not at all satisfied and 5 very satisfied with their body.

**Nighttime social media use, on social media at night, and on social media after bedtime** refer to youth who were scrolling on social media after the time they were expected to be asleep.

**Non-binary youth** refers to those who did not identify as male or female.

**Problematic social media use** refers to youth feeling or someone telling them that they needed help for their social media use in the past 12 months.

**Recent social media use** refers to using social media on the previous school day.

**Sexual minority youth** includes those who did not identify as straight (e.g., they identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, queer).

**Supportive friends** refers to friends whom youth could share their ups and downs with.

**Usually feeling lonely** refers to youth who reported often or always feeling lonely.

**Youth Deprivation Index** is an 11-item index that measures experiences of material deprivation and was co-developed with BC youth aged 12–19 (see Smith et al., 2022 for more details).

# BC youth’s experiences with social media

Youth who reviewed the BC AHS data were in agreement with previous research that there are ways that social media can support mental health. However, youth of all gender identities more commonly noted that engaging with social media had a negative impact on their well-being, including through cyberbullying from peers and strangers, exposure to upsetting and offensive content, encouraging unhealthy comparisons, and replacing in-person connections. They also described how social media often consumed so much of youth’s time that they felt too busy to take part in offline activities, such as physical activity and other health-promoting behaviours.

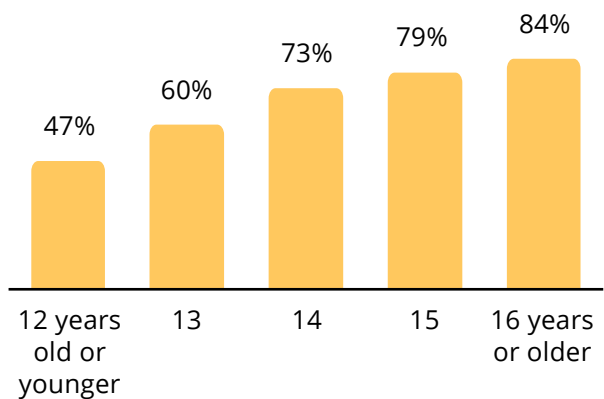
**“Spending too much time on social media and watching too much TV are what stop me from being more physically active.”**

## Used social media the previous school day

Around three quarters of BC youth aged 12–19 (74%) had used a phone or tablet to scroll through social media on the previous school day (79% of females vs. 73% of non-binary youth vs. 69% of males). For youth of all gender identities, scrolling through social media was the most common activity for which they had used a phone or tablet that day.

Scrolling through social media was more common among youth aged 16 or older than among younger youth, and was lowest among those aged 12 or younger.

**Youth who used a phone/tablet to scroll through social media on their last school day**



Among youth who had been on social media the previous school day, a minority had used a phone or tablet exclusively for this purpose, while 85% had also engaged in other activities (with similar rates for youth of all gender identities). The most common other activity youth engaged in was connecting with friends and family. Males were the most likely to be gaming in addition to using social media, and females were the least likely to also be watching pornography, sexting, and gambling.

<b>Additional activities youth engaged in on a phone/tablet the previous school day (<i>among those who had scrolled on social media that day</i>)</b>				
	<b>Overall</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Non-binary youth</b>
Connecting with friends and family	75%	70%	81%	72%
Gaming other than esports	29%	43%	16%	38%
Playing/watching esports	20%	33%	8%	12%
Watching pornography	6%	9%	2%	10%
Sexting	2%	3%	2%	5%
Gambling	2%	4%	1%	4%
None of these (i.e., scrolled on social media exclusively)	15%	15%	16%	15%

Note: For 'connecting with friends and family' and 'watching pornography,' the differences between males and non-binary youth were not statistically significant. For 'none of these,' the differences between males, females, and non-binary youth were not statistically significant.

## Did not use social media the previous school day

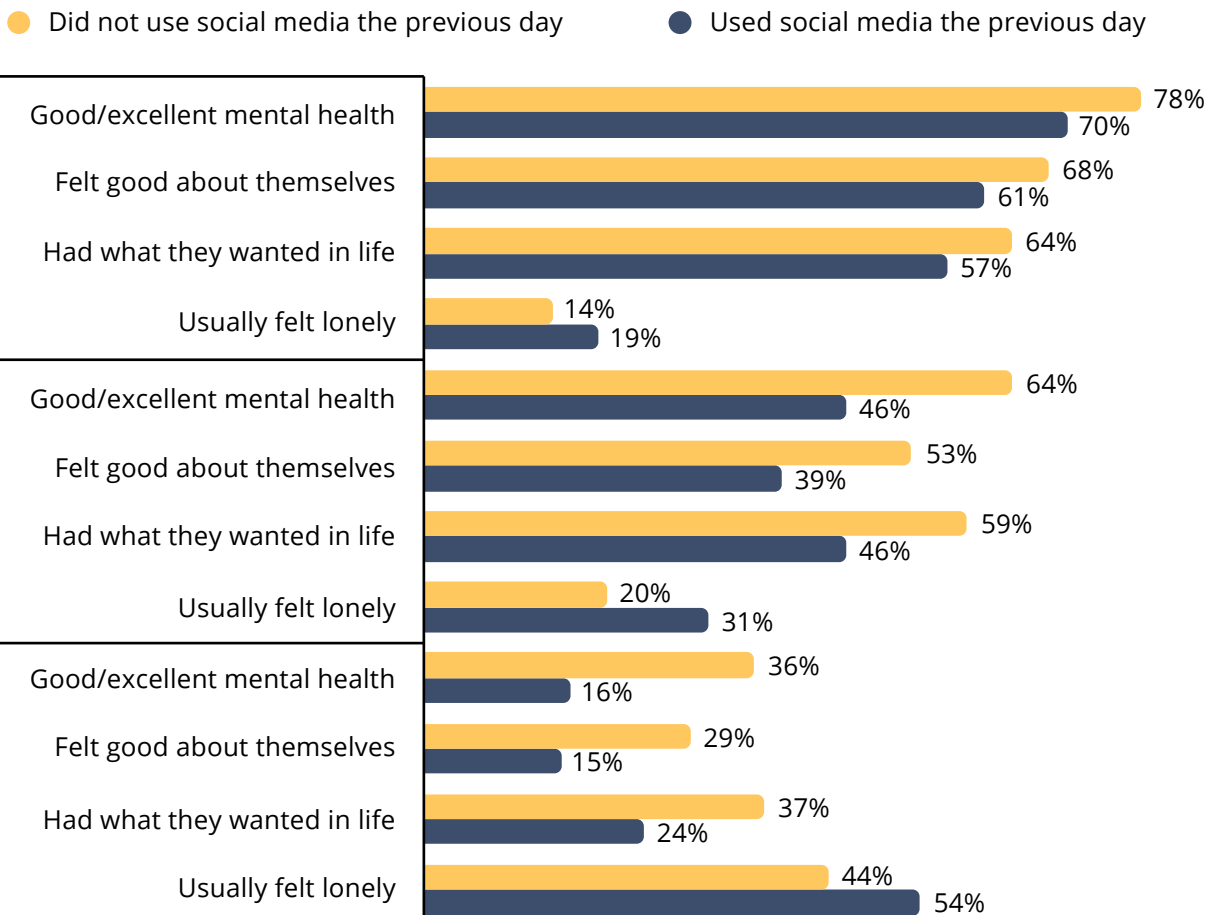


**“I don’t have social media, which is a good and bad thing. Good because I avoid many problems that social media brings, and bad because I miss out on a lot of things, and since most use them, sometimes I can’t communicate too easily.”**

14-year-old male

Around a quarter of youth (26%) had not accessed social media on their most recent school day. Regardless of their age or gender identity, youth who did not use social media that day were more likely than those who had used it to report positive well-being. For example, they were more likely to report good or excellent mental health (71% vs. 56%); to feel satisfied with their life, including that their life was going well (73% vs. 63%) and they had what they wanted in life (61% vs. 50%); and to usually feel good about themselves (61% vs. 48%). They were also less likely to usually feel lonely (18% vs. 27%).

### Youth who did not use social media the previous school day were more likely to report positive well-being



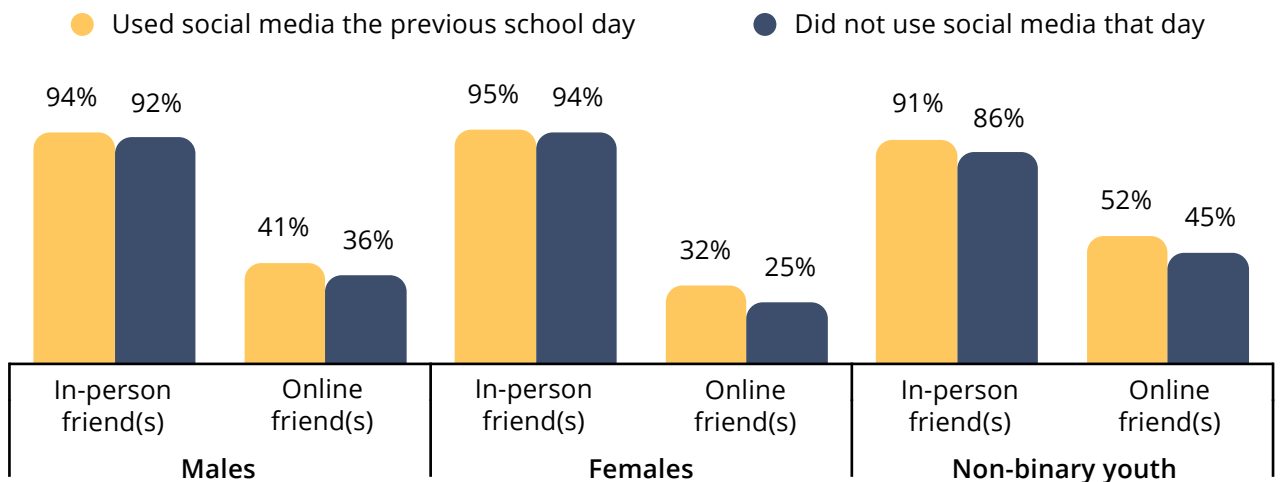
# Potential benefits of using social media

Previous studies have identified that youth's use of social media can be a positive distraction from stressful situations and can facilitate stress relief and relaxation. It can also enhance social connection and peer support, and reduce isolation (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; O'Reilly, 2020; O'Reilly et al., 2023). Similarly, social media can provide marginalized youth with access to social support, including youth who identify as a sexual minority (Knowles & Danzi, 2025).

Having found that there were benefits associated with not using social media recently, potential benefits of using it were also explored, and were considered separately for males, females, and non-binary youth. No links to positive physical or mental health were found (e.g., youth who used social media were less likely to report good or excellent mental health, as described in other sections of this report). However, social media use was associated with enhanced social connections.

Youth who accessed social media the previous school day were more likely than those who did not use it as recently to have at least one close friend in their school or neighbourhood (94% vs. 92%), as well as a close friend online whom they had never met in person (37% vs. 32%).

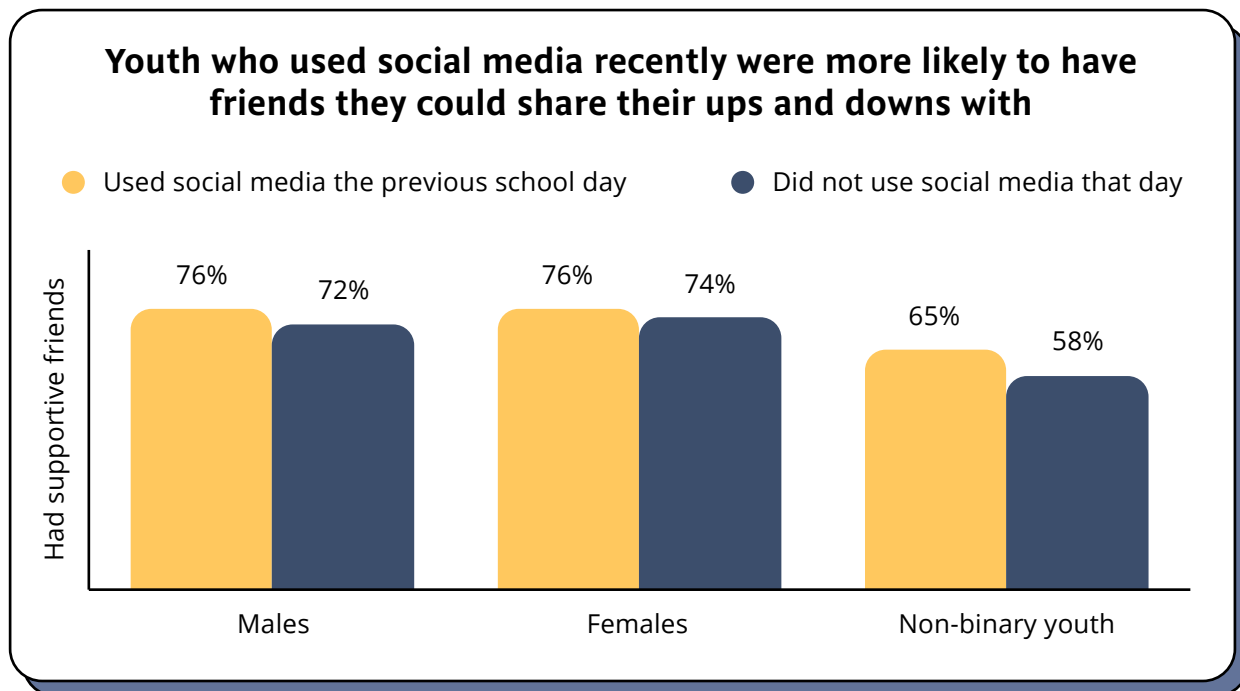
## Youth who used social media recently were more likely to have at least one close in-person friend and online friend whom they had never met in person



Recent social media use was also associated with youth having multiple online friends they had never met in person. For example, 20% of males who used social media on the previous school day had three or more close online friends (vs. 18% of those who did not use social media that day), as did 12% of females (vs. 10%). However, social media use was only associated with having three or more close in-person friends for males (73% vs. 69% of males who were not on social media recently).

Overall, youth who used social media on their most recent school day were more likely to have friends they could share their ups and downs with (76% vs. 72% of those who did not use social media). However, this association was not statistically significant for females.

Social media use may be particularly important for creating and maintaining social connections for marginalized groups of youth. For example, among sexual minority youth, those who used social media the previous school day were more likely than those who did not use it that day to have at least one close in-person friend (94% vs. 90%), including three or more such friends (63% vs. 59%), and to have friends they could share their ups and downs with (72% vs. 67%). Similarly, among youth with care experience, using social media was linked to a greater likelihood of having at least one close in-person friend (93% vs. 86% of those who did not use social media the previous school day) and online friend (55% vs. 47%).



Note: For females, the difference was not statistically significant.

Youth who reviewed the BC AHS results identified positives of social media use beyond building and maintaining social connections with friends, family, and those who shared similar experiences. These included providing an accessible outlet for creative expression (e.g., to share their art), and accessing information and learning skills that might otherwise be unavailable to them (e.g., information and tips about managing mental health challenges).

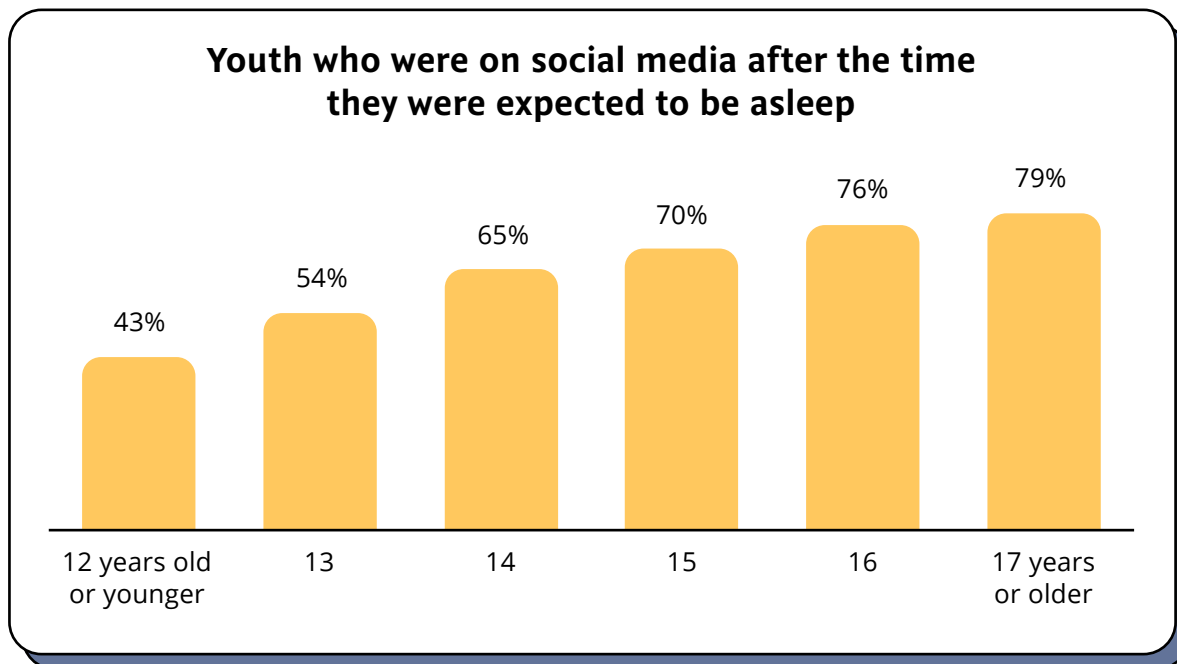
***“There’s a lot of content about mental health, ADHD, and autism on TikTok.”***

# Nighttime social media use

The previous sections showed that although recent social media use was linked to social connections, it did not appear to be positively associated with health and well-being in other ways. The next two sections focus specifically on nighttime use, and challenges to health and well-being that may be associated with youth using social media after they were supposed to be asleep.

Two thirds of youth (67%) reported they scrolled on social media after the time they were expected to be asleep. Older youth were more likely than younger ones to be on social media at night.

Females were the most likely to be on social media after their expected bedtime (74% vs. 67% of non-binary youth vs. 61% of males). For females, scrolling on social media was the most common activity they did after bedtime; while non-binary youth were equally likely to be scrolling through social media, chatting/texting, and doing other online activities such as watching videos; and males were more likely to be doing activities such as watching videos online (66%) than to be scrolling through social media (61%).



# Nighttime social media use in relation to health and well-being



***“[I want to learn more about] how social media affects your health.”***

14-year-old female



***“I always wondered if reading certain things online can affect one’s mental health.”***

18-year-old non-binary youth

Youth who were on social media after they were expected to be asleep were more likely to report poorer health and well-being than those who were not on social media after bedtime. For example, they were less likely to report good or excellent mental health (54% vs. 70%) and overall health (70% vs. 80%), and were more likely to experience extreme stress in the past month (15% vs. 9%).

Scrolling on social media after bedtime also appeared to be associated with other challenges to health and well-being, including in relation to sleep, self-image, mental health, and substance use.

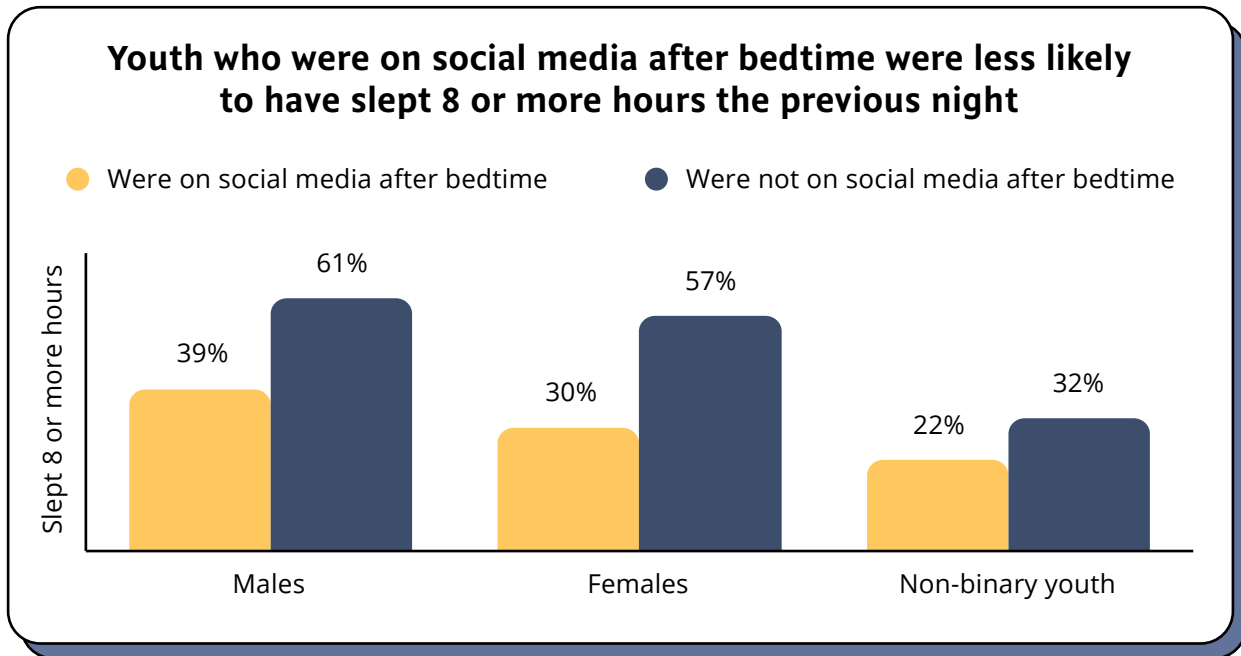
## Sleep

Previous studies have found a link between nighttime social media use and poorer sleep (e.g., Woods & Scott, 2016). BC youth who reviewed the data said that this was also their experience. They explained that social media usage often delayed them going to sleep, particularly if they had an unpleasant or disturbing interaction or viewed upsetting content online. However, they noted that nighttime was often the only free time they had to relax and to connect with friends over social media, especially if their friends were in different time zones. Youth also discussed not wanting to turn their phone off at night for fear of missing an important message.

***“Social media can really affect my sleeping pattern because I stay awake on my phone.”***

***“Toxic apps make it difficult to fall asleep.”***

Youth who were on social media after bedtime were less likely than their peers to get at least 8 hours of sleep the previous night (34% vs. 58% of those who did not scroll after bedtime). They were also more likely to report that their sleep was interrupted (27% vs. 23%).



## Eating behaviours

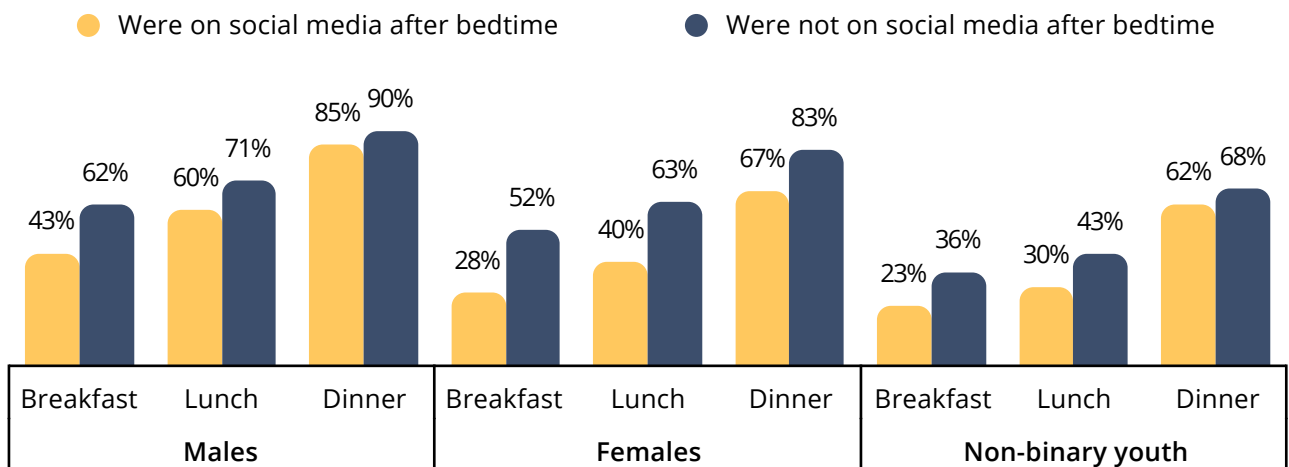
Youth who reviewed the 2023 BC AHS results spoke about social media use influencing their eating behaviours in healthy and less healthy ways. For example, some turned to social media when they lacked food literacy and food preparation skills, and when they did not have an adult in their life who modeled a healthy approach to food and eating. Others spoke about trying fad diets, viral food challenges, and other less healthy eating behaviours that they had learned about on social media.

***“Social media does have some positives. You can learn recipes and food hacks from TikTok.”***

BC AHS results showed that youth who were on social media at night were more likely than those not on social media after bedtime to have consumed sweets (80% vs. 75%), fast food (49% vs. 37%), and energy drinks (17% vs. 9%) the previous day. They were less likely to have eaten food prepared by their caregivers (82% vs. 86%), and were more likely to have eaten food from a restaurant, food court, or delivery service (38% vs. 26%).

Missing meals was also more common among youth who were on social media after bedtime. They were less likely than their peers to have eaten dinner (75% vs. 87%), as well as lunch (49% vs. 67%), and/or breakfast (35% vs. 57%) every day in the past week.

### Youth who were on social media after bedtime were less likely to have eaten meals every day in the past week



## Body image and eating disorders

Previous research has found that youth who engage in high levels of social comparison on social media, and particularly appearance-specific comparisons, are at greater risk of experiencing disordered eating and poor body image (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Nesi, 2020).

Youth who reviewed the BC AHS results described viewing social media content that offered a filtered view of reality and left them with unrealistic expectations about how they should look. For females, content included messages about thinness and anti-aging, and males described content that encouraged obsessive bodybuilding.

***“We only see the ‘ideal’—we’re always comparing to a certain ideal.”***

***“There’s a lot of pressure for guys to look a certain way.”***



***“Body image is a big thing that I struggle with and I believe many others struggle with due to societal pressures and social media.”***

16-year-old female



***“Social media has created unrealistic expectations for our bodies.”***

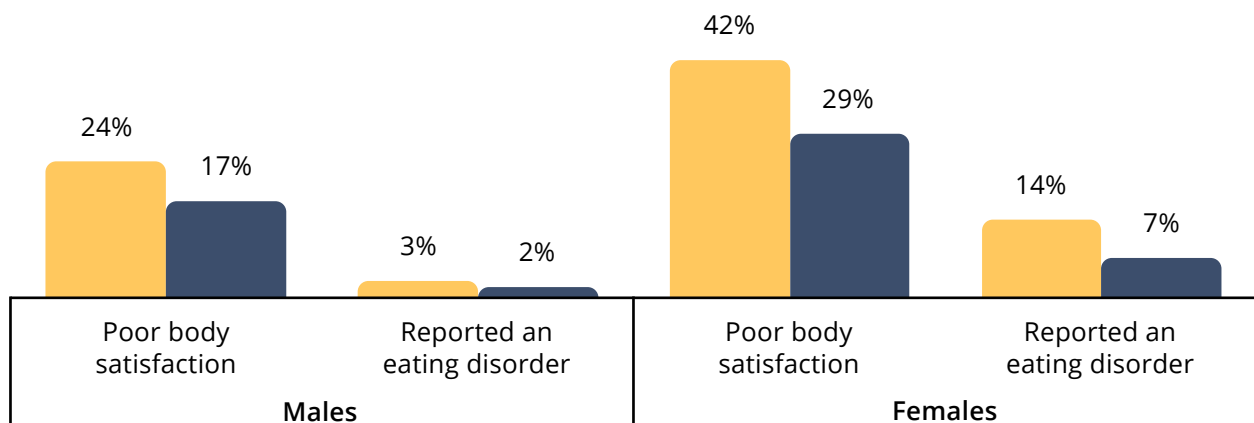
17-year-old female

Youth who completed the BC AHS were asked to rate their body satisfaction from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). Youth who were on social media after bedtime were more likely than those who were not on social media at night to report low body satisfaction (i.e., scored a 1 or 2 out of 5; 34% vs. 23%). They were also more likely to report an eating disorder (9% vs. 4%).

### Males and females who were on social media after bedtime were more likely to report poor body satisfaction and an eating disorder

● Were on social media after bedtime

● Were not on social media after bedtime



## Life satisfaction and self-esteem

Youth who reviewed the BC AHS data talked about social media impacting their self-image and life satisfaction, as their life often looked dull and less glamorous than the stories and images that others posted. They also reported feeling embarrassed, hurt, and that their self-esteem was negatively impacted when they did not get views or likes for content they posted, or when unflattering content was posted about them.

***“Not getting enough views can have a negative impact on mental health.”***

***“Sometimes it’s hard to tell if people are laughing at me or with me [online].”***

***“There are things you really don’t want going viral.”***

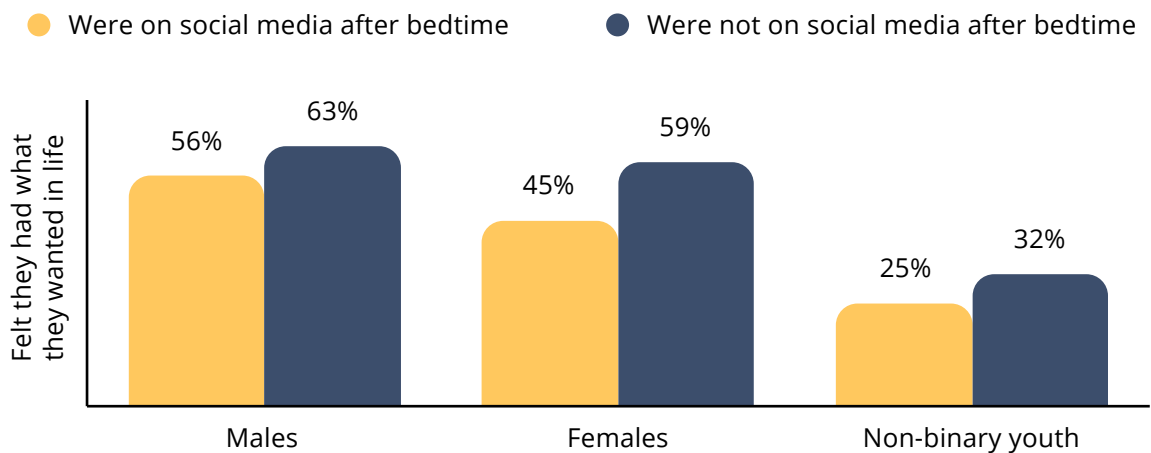


***“I see a lot of people online saying that this or that person in my school is attractive, my self-esteem has lowered a bit.”***

17-year-old male

In addition to lower body satisfaction, youth who were on social media after their expected bedtime were less likely to feel good about themselves overall (47% vs. 60% of those who did not scroll after bedtime) and to feel they had what they wanted in life (49% vs. 60%).

### Youth who were on social media after bedtime were less likely to feel satisfied with their life

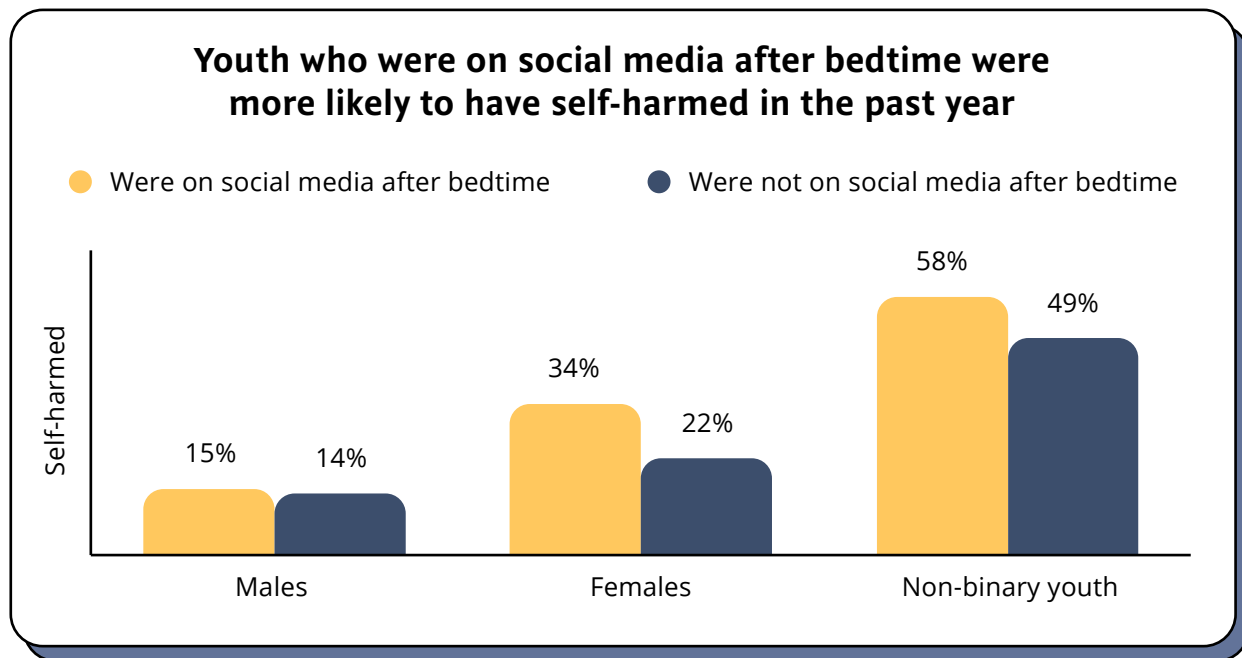


## Self-harm and suicidality

Females and non-binary youth who were on social media after bedtime were more likely than their same-gender peers who were not on social media at night to have cut or injured themselves on purpose without trying to kill themselves (self-harmed) in the past year. However, this association was not seen among males.

Females who scrolled after bedtime were more likely to have attempted suicide in the past year (7% vs. 5% of females who were not on social media at night). This association was not present among non-binary youth and males.

Youth who were on social media after bedtime were more likely than those not on social media after bedtime to have seriously considered suicide in the past year (20% vs. 13%). Patterns were similar for males (13% vs. 9%), females (25% vs. 15%), and non-binary youth (50% vs. 42%).



Note: For males, the difference was not statistically significant.

## Substance use

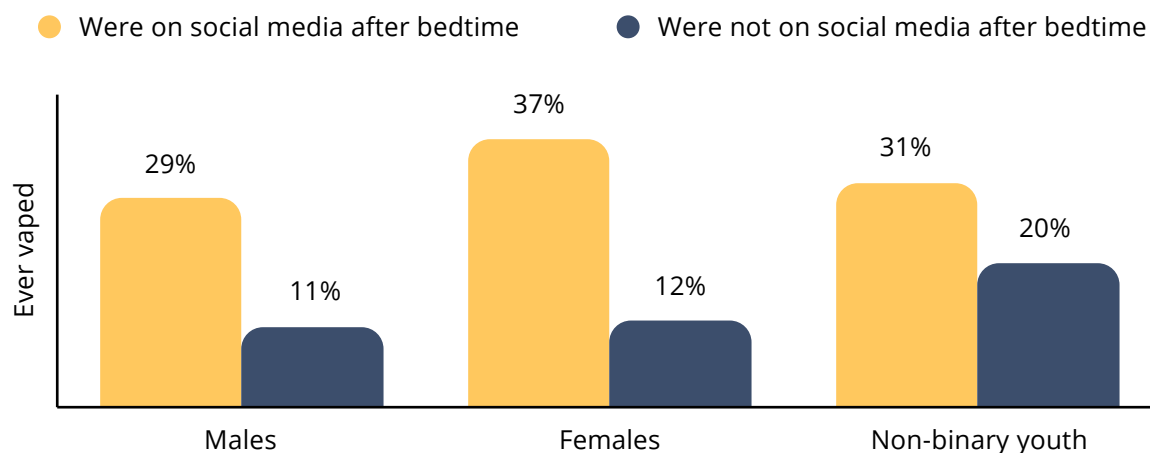
Studies from other countries have found a link between youth's social media use and increased substance use (e.g., Liu et al., 2024). It has been suggested that this association is a result of youth being exposed to substance use advertising through social media, and that substance use is glamorized by social media influencers (Rutherford et al., 2023).

Youth of all gender identities who were on social media after their expected bedtime were more likely than those not on social media at night to have tried various substances. These included alcohol (47% vs. 21%), vaping (33% vs. 12%), and cannabis (28% vs. 10%).

Nighttime social media use was also associated with using substances regularly in the past month, with generally similar patterns for youth of all genders. For example, among youth who had ever vaped, those who were on social media after bedtime were more likely to have vaped on 20 or more days in the past month (24% vs. 17% of youth who did not scroll after bedtime), including every day (16% vs. 10%).

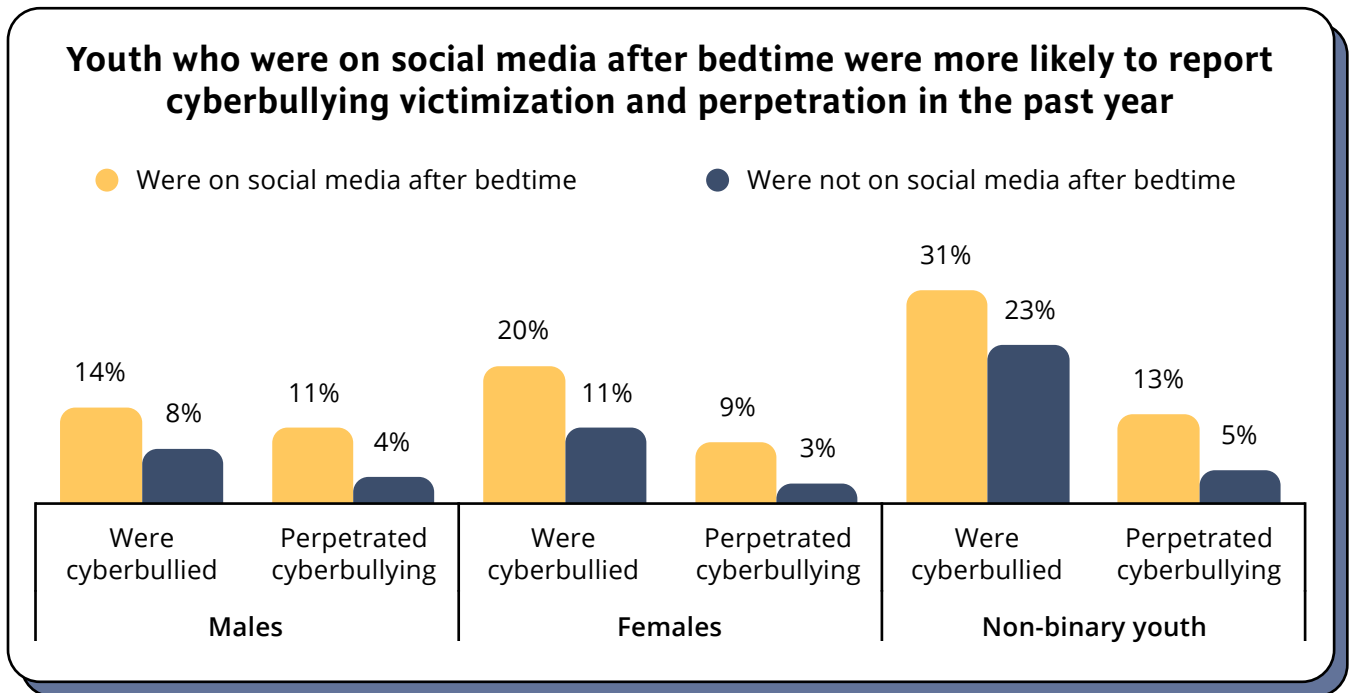
Youth who were on social media at night were also more likely to have consumed five or more drinks of alcohol within a couple of hours in the past month (36% vs. 25% who were not on social media at night; among youth who had tried alcohol).

### Youth who were on social media after bedtime were more likely to have vaped



## Online victimization and perpetration

Youth who were on social media after the time they were expected to be asleep were more likely than those not on social media at night to have been cyberbullied (18% vs. 10%) and to have perpetrated cyberbullying (10% vs. 4%) in the past year.



**“Online was a great way for girls to bully me.”**

14-year-old female



**“Online grooming is a real thing (take it from me, being groomed and convinced to send explicit images and texts).”**

16-year-old female



**“[I want to learn more about] how to report and deal with profane, anonymous messages online that also somehow obtained a picture of you. Online safety. What to do.”**

15-year-old female

## In-person victimization and perpetration

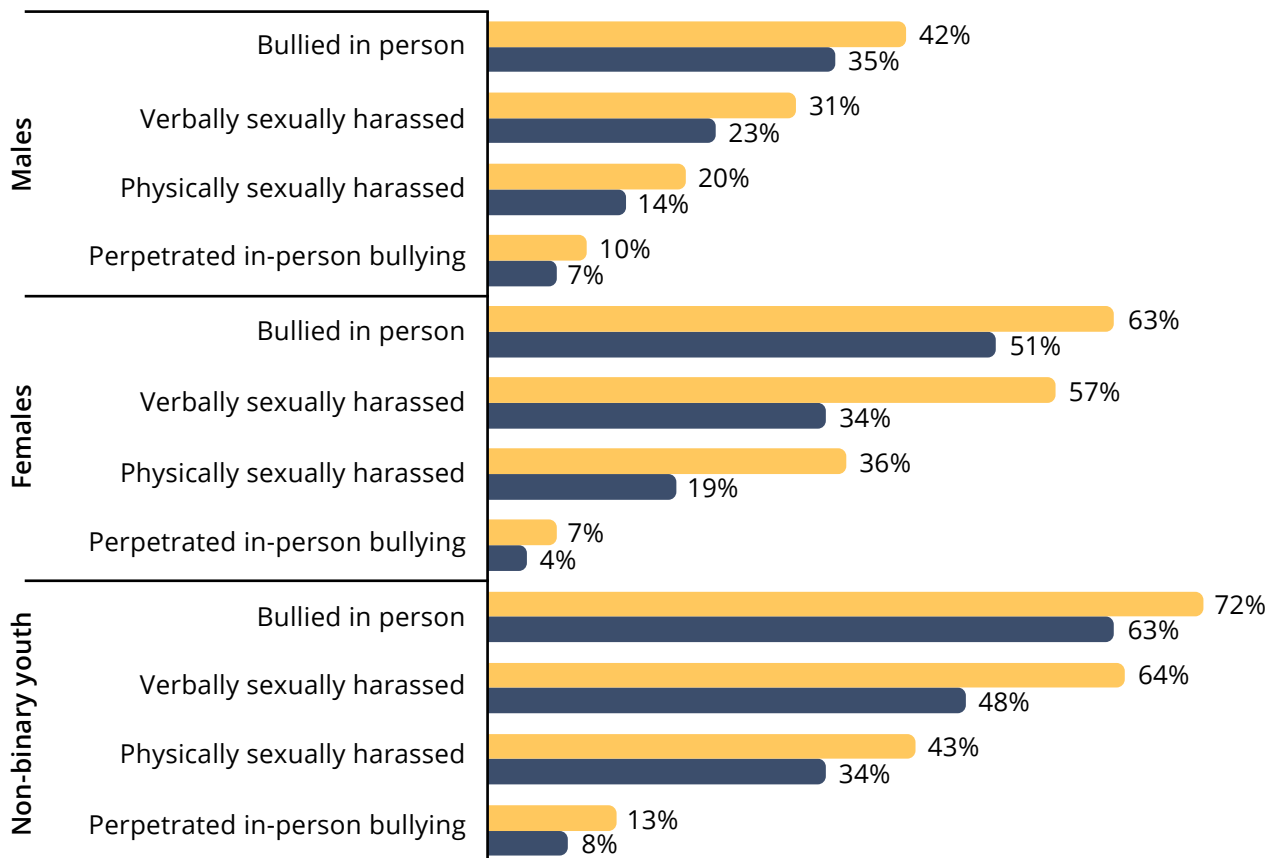
In-person victimization and perpetration were more common among youth who were on social media at night. For example, youth who scrolled after bedtime were more likely to have experienced verbal sexual harassment (45% vs. 28% of those who were not on social media at night) and physical sexual harassment (29% vs. 16%) in the past year.

They were also more likely to have been forced into sexual activity by another youth (8% vs. 4% who were not on social media at night). Patterns were similar for males (4% vs. 2%), females (12% vs. 5%), and non-binary youth (17% vs. 11%).

Youth who were on social media at night were more likely than those not on social media at that time to have been the victim of social exclusion (41% vs. 30%), extreme teasing (38% vs. 29%), and physical assaults (9% vs. 8%) by another youth at school or on the way to or from school in the past year. They were also more likely to have perpetrated such bullying in the past year (9% vs. 6%).

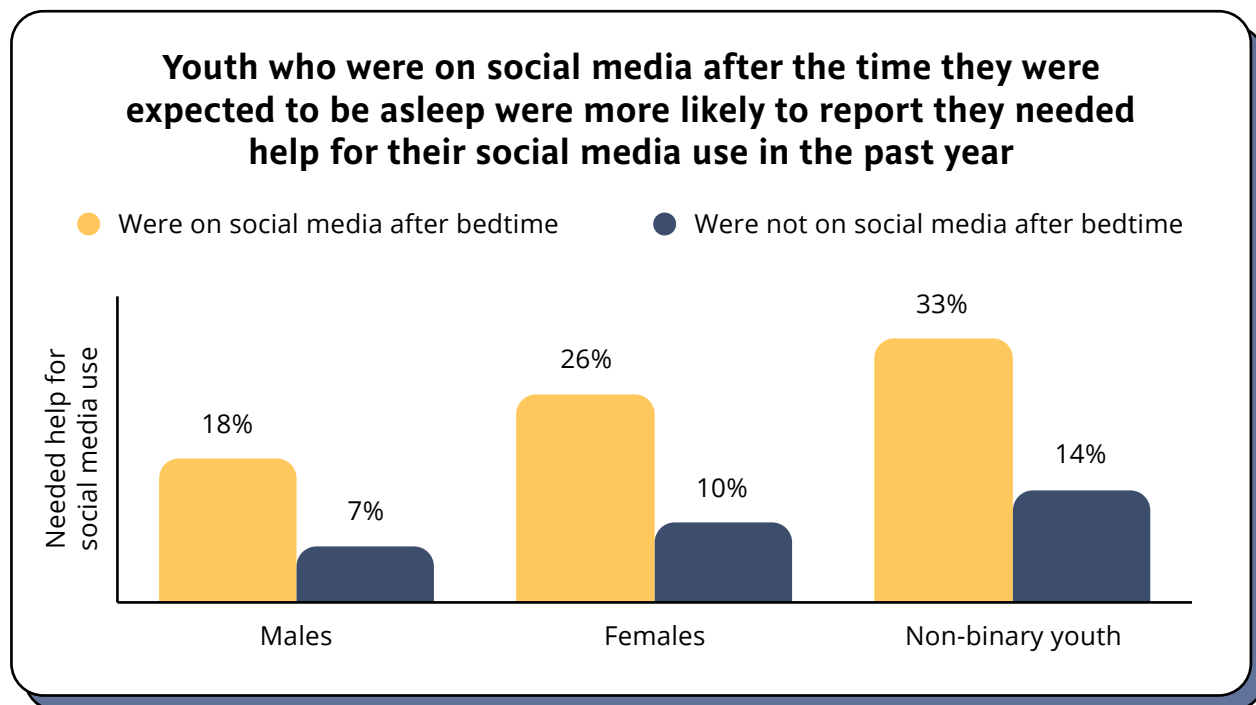
### Youth who were on social media after bedtime were more likely to report in-person victimization and perpetration in the past year

● Were on social media after bedtime      ● Were not on social media after bedtime



## Problematic social media use

Youth who were on social media after the time they were expected to be asleep were more than twice as likely as youth who were not on social media at night to report that their social media use had reached a point in the past year where they needed help (23% vs. 9%). This was the case among males, females, and non-binary youth.



The remainder of this report focuses on youth who might be particularly vulnerable to their social media use becoming problematic, as well as the supports that can reduce that risk.

# Youth at risk of problematic social media use

Studies outside of North America have found that youth who experience loneliness, social anxiety, online addictions, and other mental health challenges are at heightened risk of problematic social media use (e.g., Akbari et al., 2023).



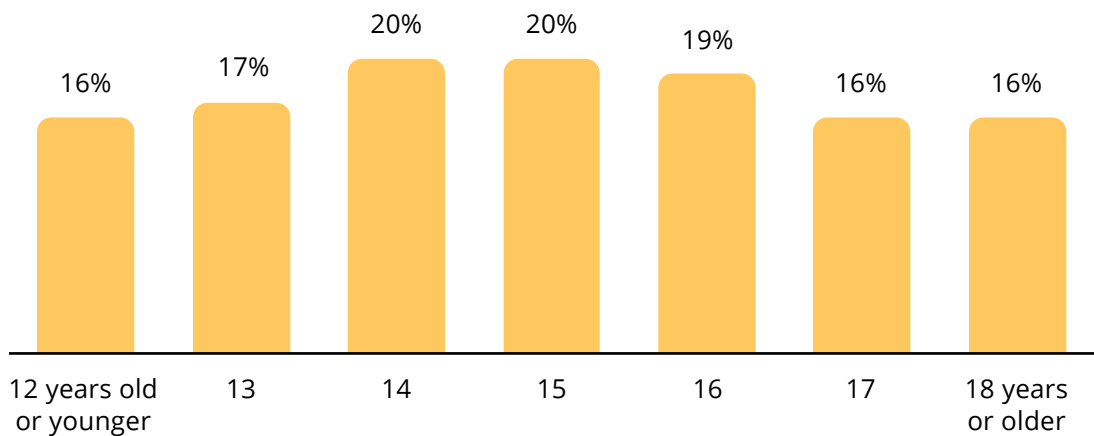
**“[I want to learn] how to limit social media consumption as I often feel ‘addicted’ to it.”**

16-year-old female

Overall, 18% of youth felt or were told that they needed help for their social media use in the past year. Non-binary youth were the most likely, and males were the least likely, to report problematic social media use (27% of non-binary youth vs. 22% of females vs. 14% of males).

The older youth were when they completed the BC AHS, the more likely they were to have used social media the previous school day and to have used it at night. However, youth aged 14–16 were the most likely to report needing help for their use.

**Youth who felt or had been told they needed help for their social media use in the past 12 months**



Note: Not all differences between ages were statistically significant.

Youth who identified as a sexual minority were more likely than those who identified as straight to need help for their social media use (24% vs. 16%). For example, 20% of sexual minority males needed help with their use, compared to 13% of straight males. Similarly, 26% of sexual minority females, compared to 20% of straight females, reported problematic social media use.

## Adverse experiences

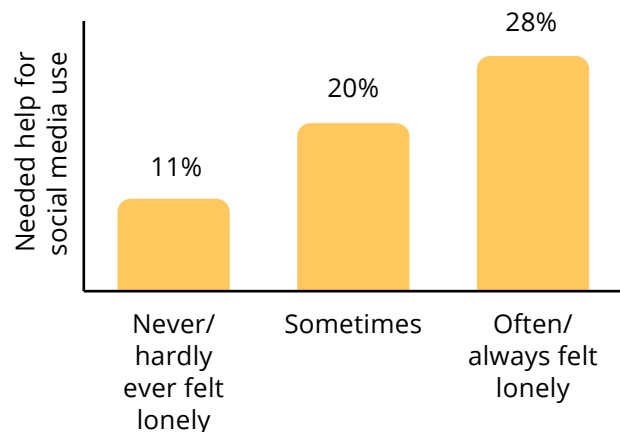
Experiencing challenges in their lives increased youth’s likelihood of reporting problematic social media use in the past year. For example, rates of problematic social media use were higher among youth who had experienced:

- 📌 **Government care or an alternative to care** (25% reported problematic social media use vs. 18% of youth never in care).
- 📌 **Bereavement**, including experiencing the death of someone close to them due to an overdose (26% vs. 17%), violence (27% vs. 18%), and suicide (28% vs. 17%).
- 📌 **Poverty and deprivation**. For example, youth who went to bed hungry at least sometimes because there was not enough money for food were more likely to have a problem with their social media use (29% vs. 17% who never went to bed hungry). Also, youth who were deprived of two or more items from the Youth Deprivation Index were more likely to report problematic social media use (28% vs. 23% of those deprived of one item vs. 16% of those who did not experience deprivation).

## Loneliness

The more often youth felt lonely, the more likely they were to have a problem with their social media use. For example, among males, just under a quarter (23%) who often or always felt lonely reported problematic social media use, compared to 17% who sometimes felt lonely, and 10% who never or hardly ever experienced loneliness.

**The more often youth felt lonely, the more likely they were to need help for their social media use in the past year**

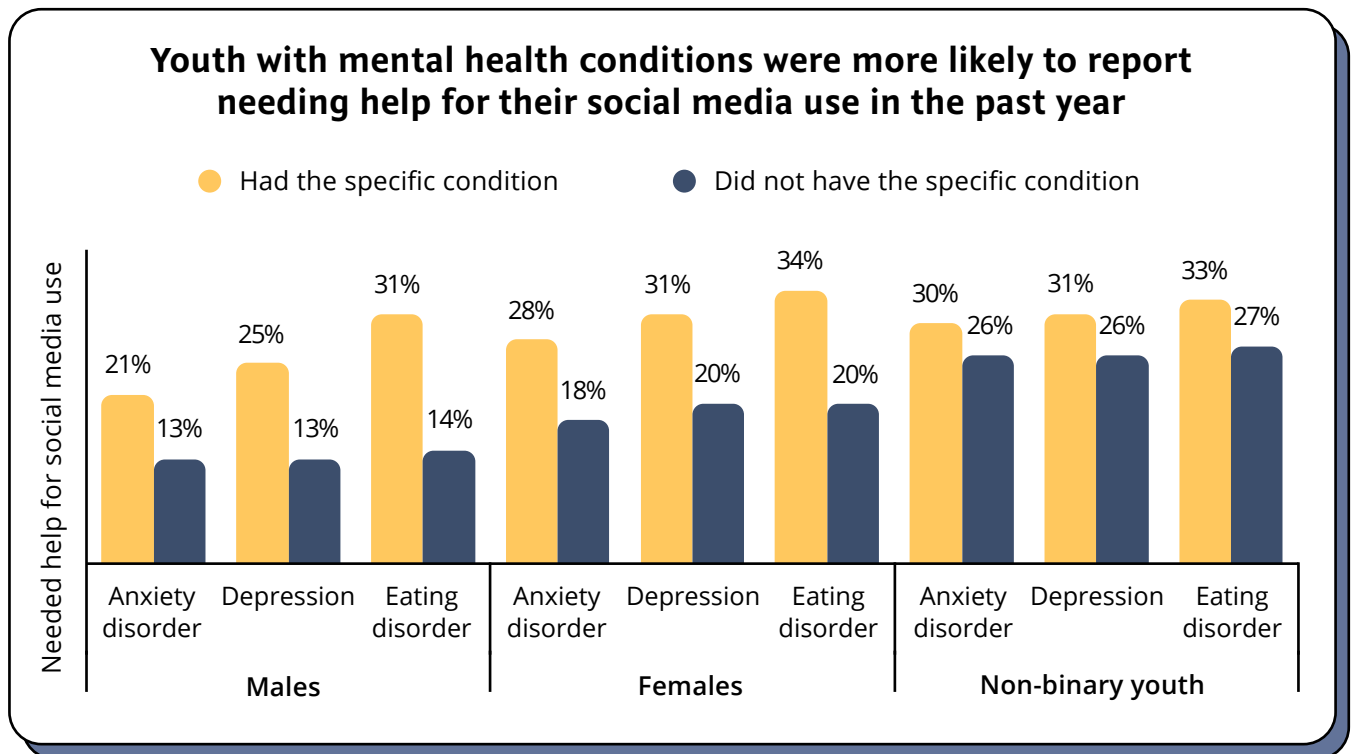


Similarly, youth who felt they spent too much time on their own were more likely to report problematic social media use than those who spent the right amount of time alone (25% vs. 15%). Patterns were similar for males (20% vs. 12%), females (30% vs. 18%), and non-binary youth (35% vs. 22%).

## Mental health and other conditions

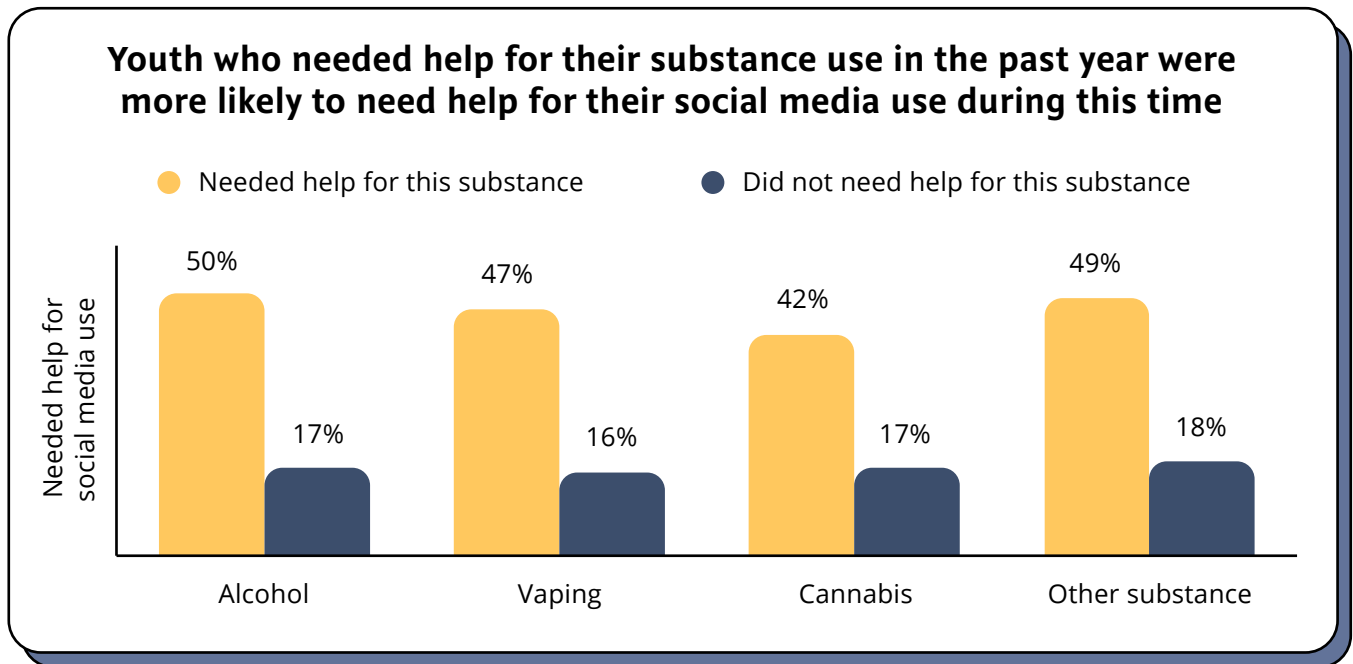
Youth with a mental health condition were around twice as likely as those without such a condition to have a problem with social media use (29% vs. 15%). The link between having a mental health condition and problematic social media use was seen for males (24% vs. 13%), females (31% vs. 18%), and non-binary youth (30% vs. 24%).

When specific health conditions were looked at separately, youth with an eating disorder were more likely than those without such a condition to report problematic social media use (33% vs. 17%). Patterns were similar for youth with depression (29% reported problematic social media use vs. 16% of those without this condition), PTSD (29% vs. 18%), anxiety disorder (27% vs. 16%), obsessive-compulsive disorder (26% vs. 18%), and ADHD (26% vs. 16%). There was no such link to problematic social media use for youth with FASD or autism.



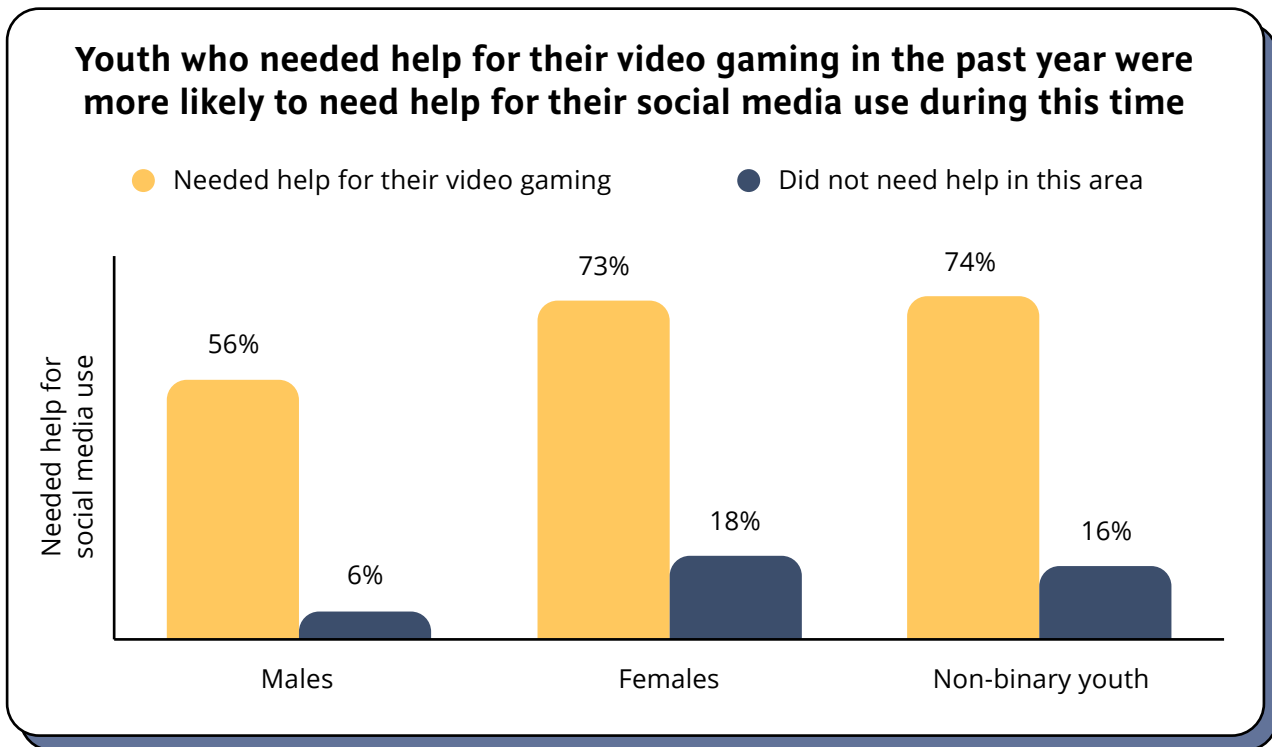
## Needing help in areas beyond social media

Youth of all gender identities who had reached a point where they needed help for their substance use in the past year—including alcohol, cannabis, vapes, and other substances—were more likely to experience problematic social media use than those who did not need help for their substance use.



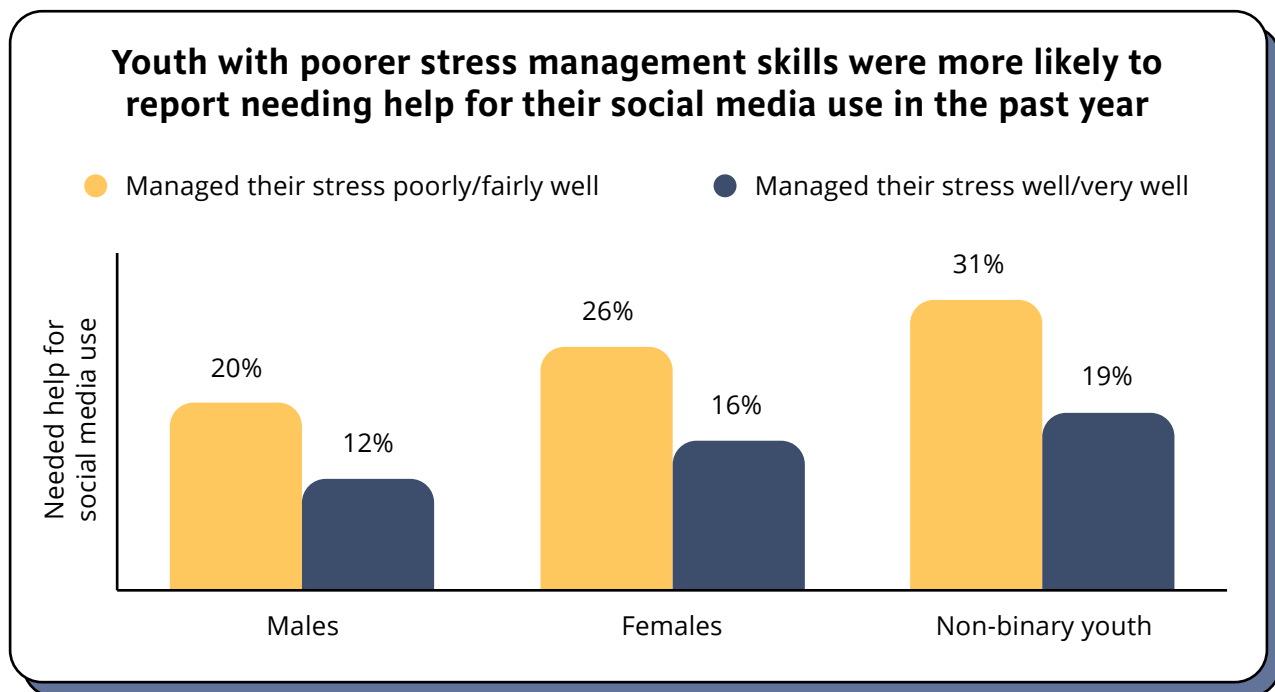
Problematic gaming was also associated with problematic social media use. Youth who needed help for their video gaming in the past year were around five times as likely as youth who did not report problematic gaming to indicate needing help for their social media use during that time (61% vs. 12%).

Similarly, problematic gambling was associated with an increased likelihood of problematic social media use among youth of all gender identities (52% needed help for their social media use vs. 18% of youth who did not report problematic gambling).



## Stress management challenges

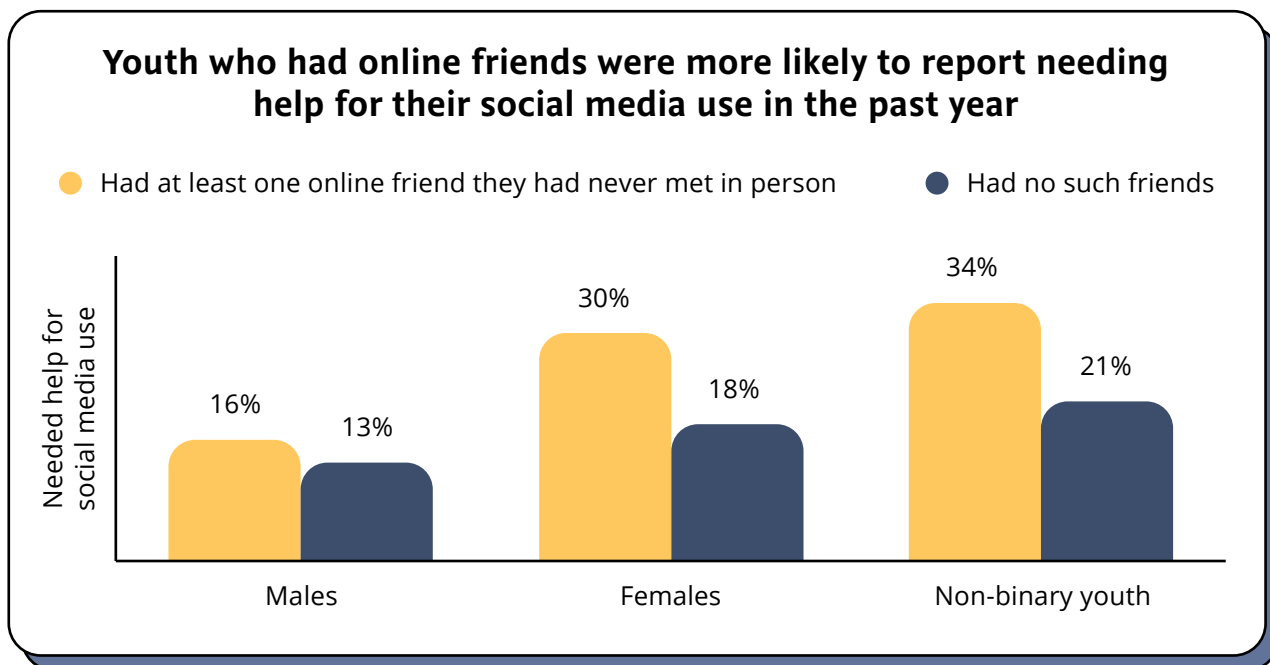
The less youth felt able to manage the stress in their life, the more likely they were to report their social media use had reached a point where they needed help. For example, 24% who managed their stress poorly or only fairly well reported problematic social media use vs. 13% of youth who managed their stress well or very well.



Note: Results are among those who reported they experienced stress.

## Online friends

Despite social connections being a potential benefit of social media use (as noted on [pages 8 and 9](#)), youth who had at least one close online friend they had never met in person were more likely to have a problem with social media use (23% vs. 15% of those with no such friends). Findings were consistent for youth of all gender identities.



## Regular exercise at a gym or online

There was no clear link between regular sports or dance participation and problematic social media use for males, females, or non-binary youth. However, males (but not females or non-binary youth) who exercised at a gym or rec centre on at least a weekly basis were more likely than males who did so less often to need help for their social media use (15% vs. 13%). Similarly, males who exercised to a video or class online at least weekly were more likely to report problematic social media use (19% vs. 14% of males who did so less often).

## Factors most strongly associated with problematic social media use

All the identified factors that were associated with problematic social media use were considered together to assess which had the strongest relations to problematic social media use. For youth of all gender identities, needing help for their gaming was the top factor, followed by using social media after bedtime. Managing stress only fairly well or poorly was another factor that had a robust association with problematic social media use for youth of all gender identities.

There were also some differences based on youth’s gender identity. For example, among females, needing help for alcohol use was strongly tied to problematic social media use, but this association was not among the strongest for males and non-binary youth. Exercising weekly at a gym or rec centre was a robust predictor only among males. For non-binary youth, having online friends they had never met in person was among the top factors associated with needing help for their social media use.

Factors for each gender most strongly associated with problematic social media use	
Males	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Needing help for gaming</li> <li>➤ Scrolling on social media after bedtime</li> <li>➤ Needing help for vaping</li> <li>➤ Feeling lonely often/always</li> <li>➤ Managing stress only fairly well/poorly</li> <li>➤ Exercising at a gym/rec centre at least weekly</li> </ul>
Females	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Needing help for gaming</li> <li>➤ Scrolling on social media after bedtime</li> <li>➤ Needing help for vaping</li> <li>➤ Needing help for alcohol use</li> <li>➤ Feeling lonely often/always</li> <li>➤ Managing stress only fairly well/poorly</li> </ul>
Non-binary youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Needing help for gaming</li> <li>➤ Scrolling on social media after bedtime</li> <li>➤ Managing stress only fairly well/poorly</li> <li>➤ Having online friends they had never met in person</li> </ul>

# Supporting youth with their social media use

Few published studies have considered the supports and connections that can reduce youth's likelihood of engaging in excessive or problematic social media use (Yu & Shek, 2021). However, one study found that supportive and engaged parenting practices reduced the risk that children's use would become problematic (Yu & Shek, 2021).

This section looks at the connections and experiences in youth's lives that could reduce their likelihood of experiencing problematic social media use. Protective factors were also looked at among youth who might be at greater risk of their social media use becoming problematic.

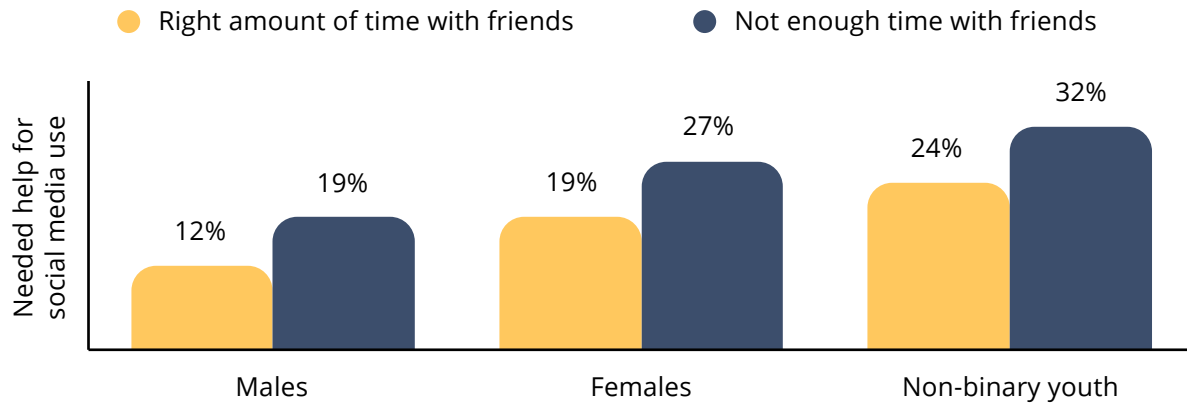
## Friendships

A potential benefit of social media use for males (but not females and non-binary youth) was that those who used social media were more likely to have three or more in-person friends (see [page 9](#)). Having three or more in-person friends also reduced the risk that males' social media use would become problematic (13% vs. 16% of males with fewer in-person friends), which was not seen for females and non-binary youth.

Social media use was linked to males and non-binary youth having friends they could share their ups and downs with, but this was not the case for females (see [page 9](#)). However, having such friendships reduced females' likelihood of problematic social media use (20% reported needing help for their social media use vs. 26% of females without friends they could share their ups and downs with), which was not the case for males and non-binary youth.

Spending enough time with friends was important for youth of all gender identities. Those who felt they spent the right amount of time with their friends were less likely to have a problem with social media use than those who spent insufficient time with their friends. This was also the case among youth at greater risk of problematic social media use. For example, among those who used social media after their expected bedtime, 20% who spent enough time with their friends reported problematic social media use, compared to 29% who spent insufficient time with friends.

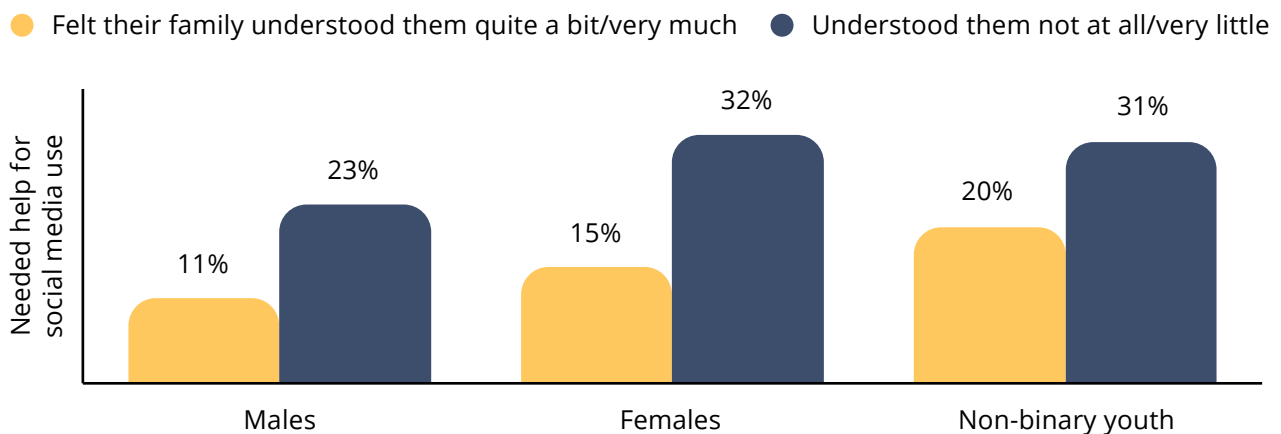
**Youth who felt they spent enough time with their friends were less likely to report problematic social media use in the past year**



## Positive family relationships

Youth who had positive relationships with their family were less likely to report problematic social media use. For example, those who felt their family had fun together quite a bit or very much were less likely to need help for their social media use than those who had fun with their family only a little or not at all (15% vs. 26%). The pattern was similar for youth who felt understood by their family.

**Youth who felt their family understood them were less likely to report problematic social media use in the past year**



Youth who felt they spent enough time with their family were less likely to report problematic social media use than those who spent insufficient time with them. This was the case for males (13% vs. 20%), females (19% vs. 28%), and non-binary youth (25% vs. 32%).

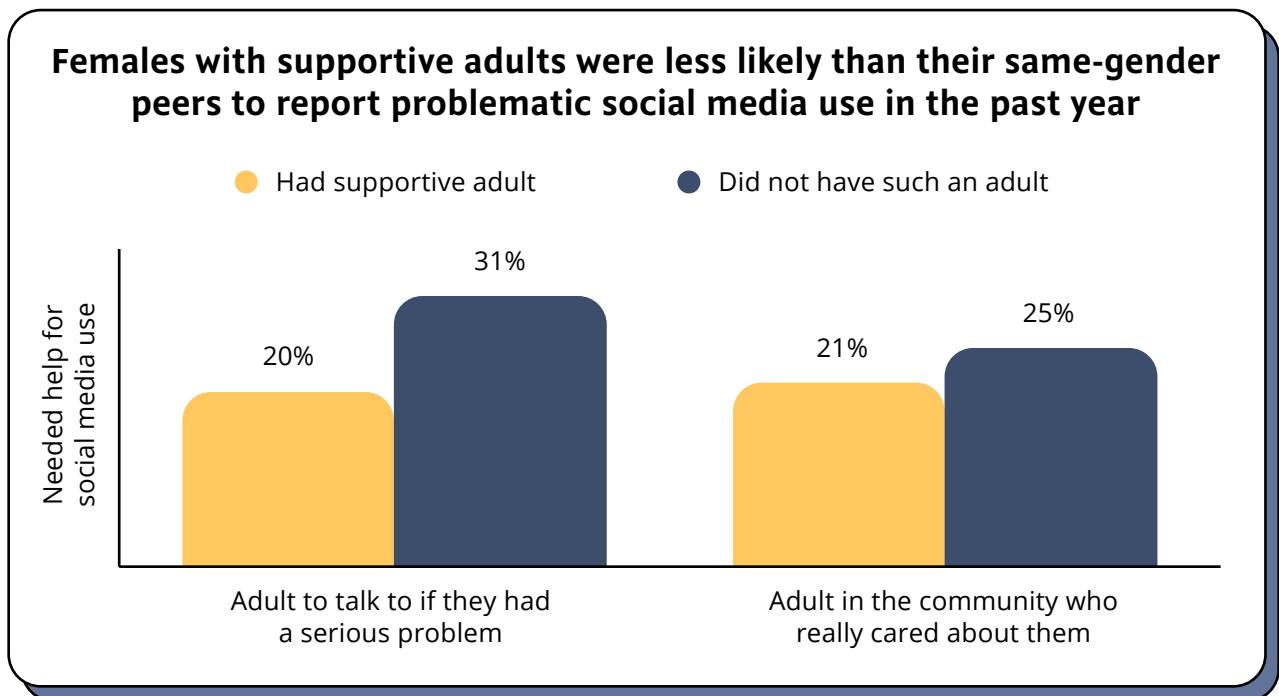
Findings were consistent among youth at greater risk of problematic social media use. For example, among those who managed their stress only fairly well or poorly, those who spent enough time with their family were less likely to have needed help for their social media use in the past year (22% vs. 29% of youth who spent insufficient time with their family).

## Supportive adults

Having an adult inside or outside their family whom youth could talk to if they were having a serious problem reduced their likelihood of problematic social media use (16% vs. 26% of youth who did not have this type of adult support). For example, 13% of males who had such an adult to turn to reported problematic social media use, compared to 21% of males who did not have this type of adult in their life. The pattern was similar for females.

Findings were consistent among youth at greater risk of problematic social media use. For example, among youth who had lost someone close to them due to violence, those who had an adult they could talk to were less likely to report problematic social media use (24% vs. 33% of those who did not have such an adult).

Also, females who felt that at least one adult in their community (outside their school or family) really cared about them were less likely to report needing help for their social media use. However, this finding was not seen among males and non-binary youth.



## Monitoring of youth’s time online



**“It’s not like I have the ability to do much [after bedtime]. My parents are good at controlling devices.”**

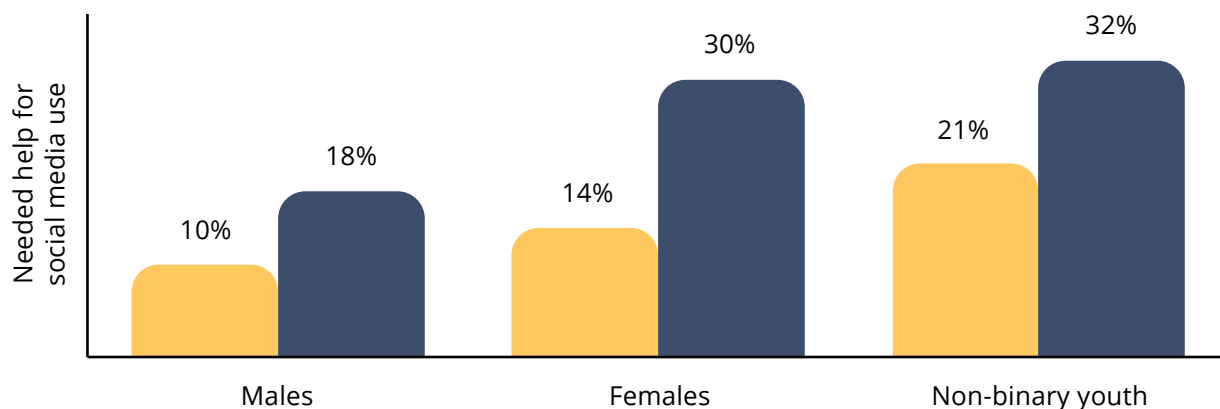
15-year-old female

Monitoring of time online was also protective among youth at greater risk of problematic social media use. For example, among youth who usually felt lonely, those with caregivers who monitored their time online most of the time or always were less likely to report problematic social media use (22% vs. 31% whose caregivers rarely or never monitored their time online).

The more often youth’s parents or other caregivers monitored their time online in the past month, the less likely they were to need help for their social media use (12% of those whose time online was monitored most of the time or always needed help vs. 19% of those whose time online was monitored sometimes vs. 24% whose time online was monitored rarely or never).

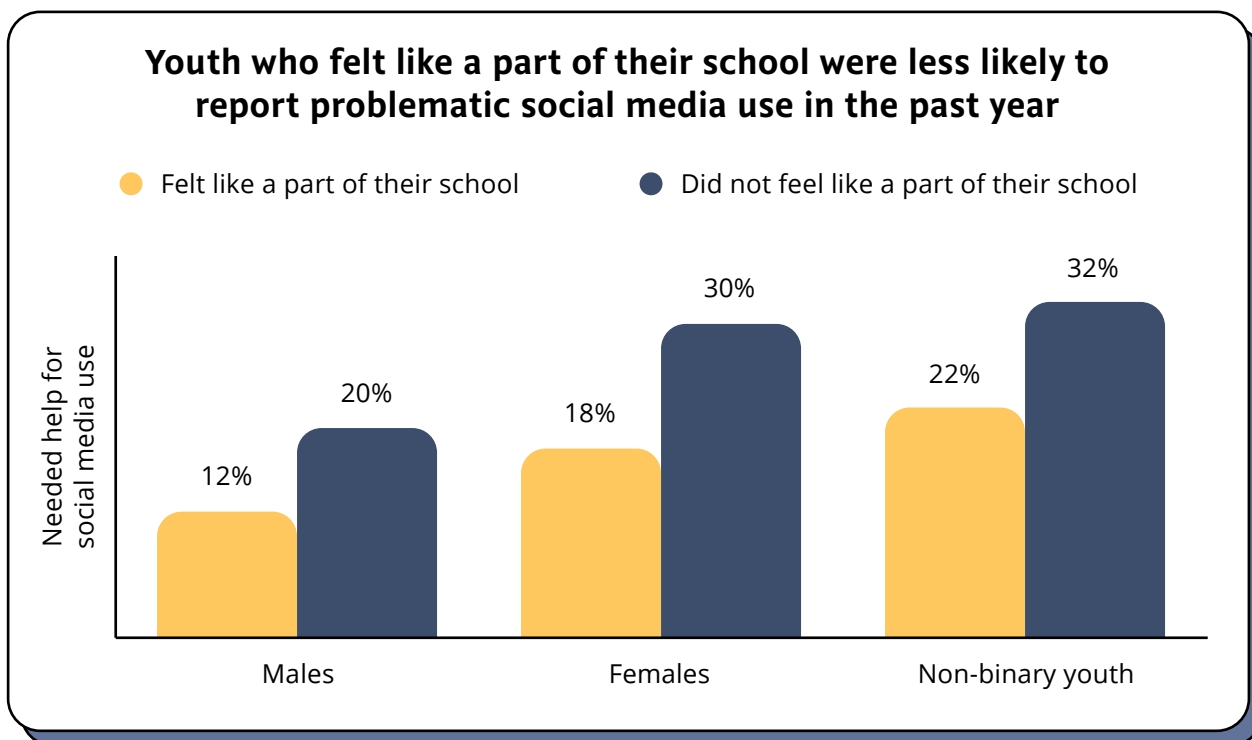
### Youth who felt their caregiver monitored their time online more often in the past month were less likely to report problematic social media use in the past year

● Time online monitored most of the time/always      ● Time online monitored never/rarely



## Positive school experiences and education plans

Feeling like a part of school was associated with a lower likelihood of problematic social media use (15% vs. 26% of youth who did not feel like a part of their school). Similarly, feeling happy to be at school was protective (14% of these youth reported needing help for their social media use vs. 25% of those who did not feel happy at school). Findings were consistent for youth of all gender identities.

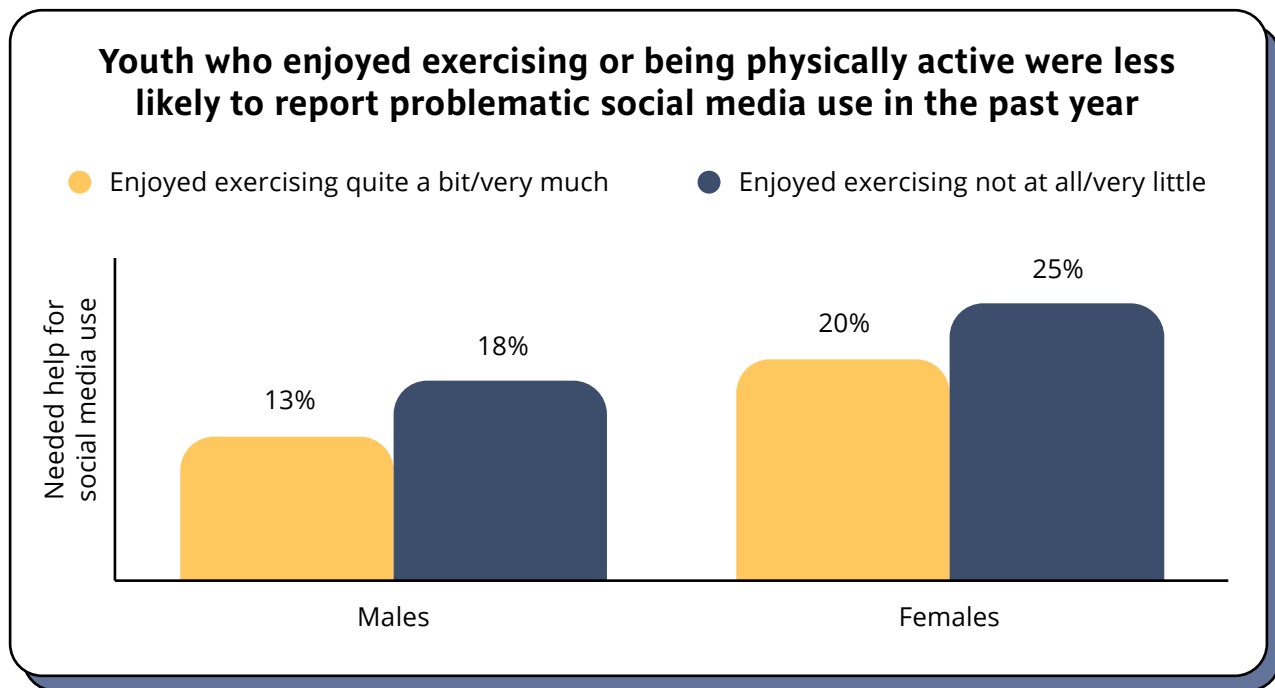


Having educational aspirations also reduced the risk of problematic social media use for males and females. For example, 13% of males who planned to attend post-secondary needed help for their social media use, compared to 22% who did not expect to finish high school. Similarly, 21% of females who planned to attend post-secondary reported problematic social media use, compared to 36% who did not expect to graduate from high school.

Feeling connected to school and having academic aspirations was also protective among youth at greater risk of problematic social media use. For example, among females who used social media after bedtime, those who planned to attend post-secondary were less likely to need help for their social media use in the past year (24% vs. 42% of those who did not expect to graduate from high school).

## Physical activity enjoyment

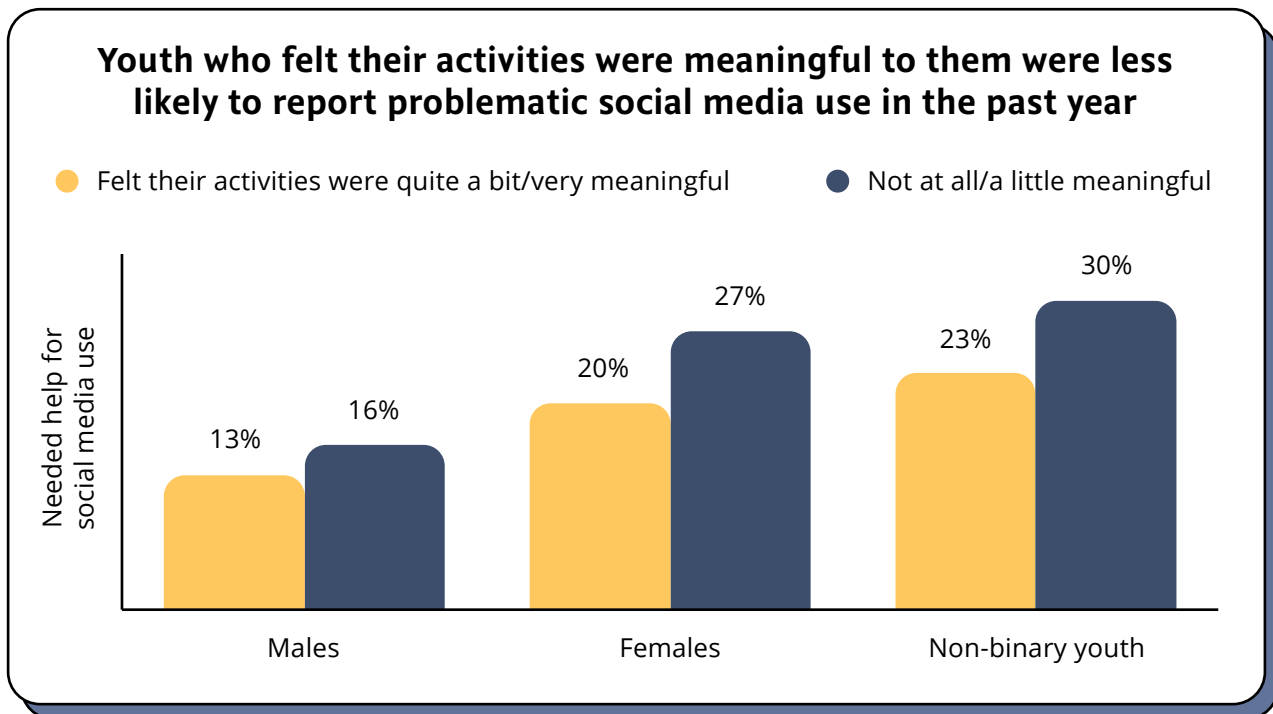
Regularly engaging in sports and exercise did not in itself reduce the likelihood of problematic social media use for males, females, or non-binary youth. However, enjoyment of physical activity made a difference for males and females.



## Meaningful engagement

Feeling meaningfully engaged in their activities was linked to a lower likelihood of problematic social media use for youth of all gender identities. For example, the more youth felt their ideas were valued within their extracurricular activities, the less likely they were to have needed help for their social media use in the past year (14% who felt their ideas were valued quite a bit or very much needed help vs. 18% who felt their ideas were somewhat valued vs. 22% who felt their ideas were valued not at all or only a little).

Findings were similar among youth who were at increased risk of problematic social media use. For example, among youth with care experience, those who felt their activities were quite or very meaningful were less likely to have got to a point where they needed help for their social media use (20% vs. 30% who felt their activities were not at all or only a little meaningful).

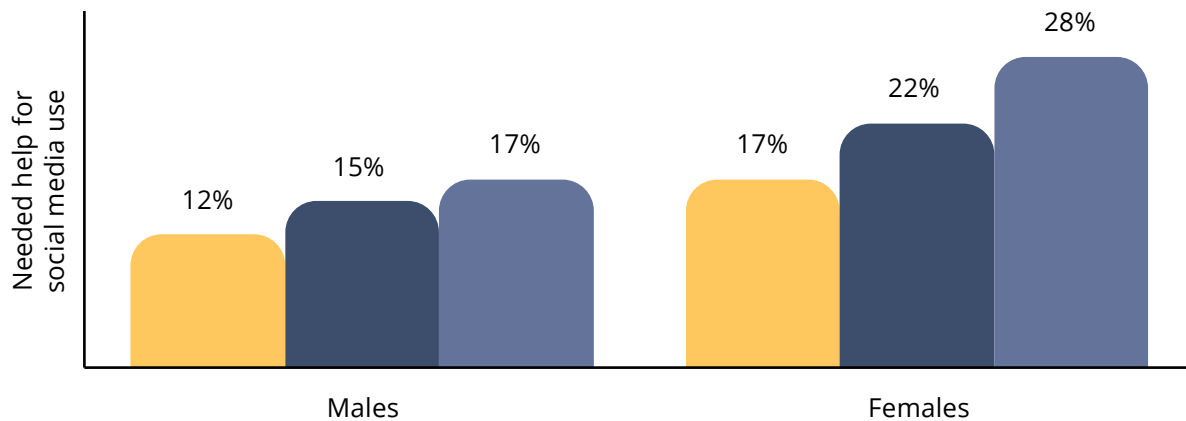


## Community connection

Youth who felt more connected to their community were less likely to report problematic social media use. Specifically, 15% who felt quite or very connected reported needing help for their social media use in the past year, which was lower than for those who felt somewhat connected (19%) and very little or not at all connected to their community (23%).

### The more connected youth felt to their community, the less likely they were to report problematic social media use in the past year

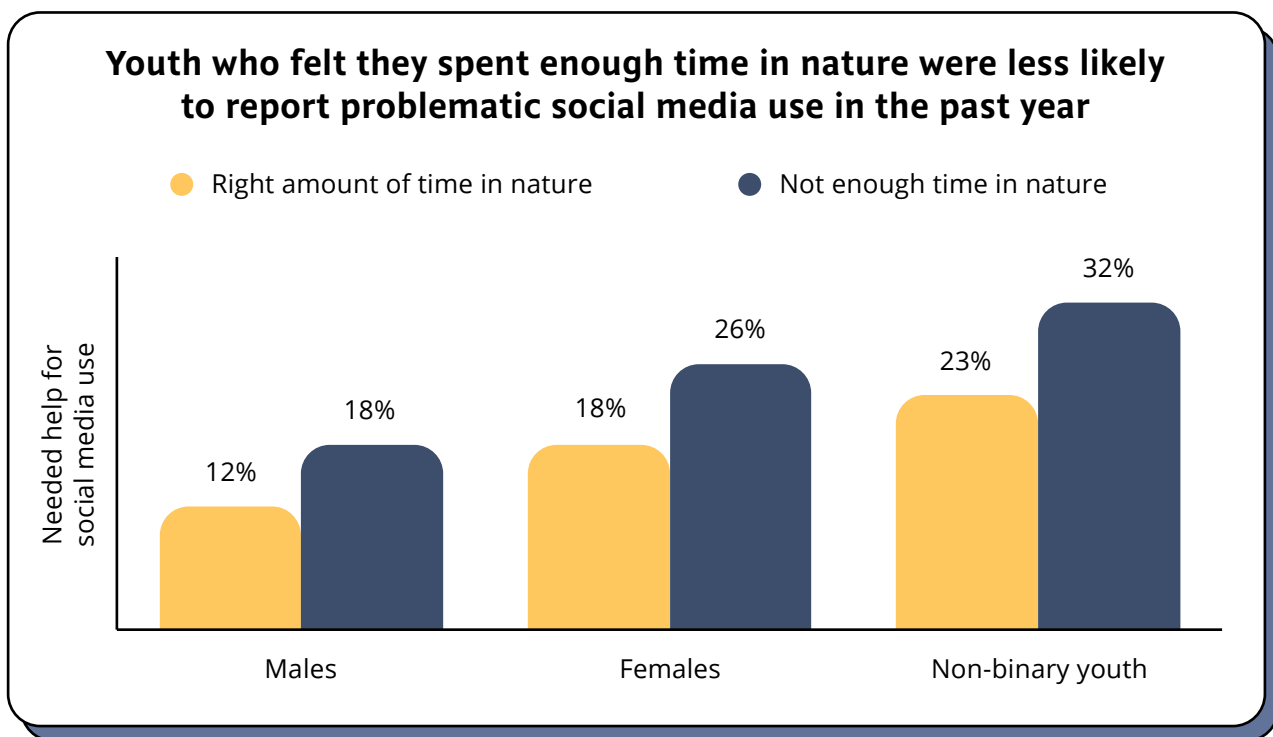
● Connected quite a bit/very much    ● Somewhat    ● Connected very little/not at all



## Connection to nature

Youth who felt they spent enough time in nature, including those at greater risk of problematic use, were less likely to report needing help for their social media use. For example, among non-binary youth who used social media at night, 29% who spent enough time in nature reported problematic use, which was lower than the 38% who spent insufficient time in nature.

Also, the more often females felt connected to the land or nature, the less likely they were to have needed help for their social media use. Specifically, 18% of females who often or always felt connected to nature reported problematic social media use, compared to 21% who sometimes felt connected, and 25% who never or hardly ever felt connected. This association was not seen among males or non-binary youth.



## Recommendations for supporting youth with their social media use

As illustrated in this report, ensuring youth have connections and opportunities can help to reduce the risk of their social media use becoming problematic. Additional recommendations from the Canadian Psychological Association (2025) and American Psychological Association (2023) include:

- Ensuring young people receive age-appropriate social media literacy training and that they gain skills to navigate social media as safely as possible. This can include supporting young people to question the accuracy of social media content; to understand how their content may be stored and shared; to learn what may and may not be appropriate to post; and to gain skills to communicate safely online and to resolve conflicts that may arise on social media platforms.
- Having ongoing conversations with youth about the content they are engaging with online, and encouraging those who use social media to focus on content that can enhance social support and pro social connection.
- Minimizing young people's exposure to social media content that includes illegal or unhealthy behaviour (e.g., self-harm, harm to others, restrictive eating, purging, excessive exercise) and 'cyberhate' (e.g., discrimination, prejudice).
- Encouraging youth to avoid or limit their use of social media for social comparison (e.g., appearance-related content) and to understand that others' images and content can be manipulated (e.g., enhanced).
- Ensuring social media use does not interfere with health-promoting activities, such as sleep and physical activity.
- Being aware of youth's social media use and signs that their use may be becoming problematic (e.g., inability to put devices away; efforts to constantly access social media; and not engaging in person with others and in physical activities because of social media use). Also, being aware of resources that may be available to help youth struggling with their social media use.



***"I would like to learn more about keeping ourselves safe on social media."***

14-year-old female

Youth who reviewed the 2023 BC AHS results wanted education and skill-building opportunities to develop digital literacy and healthy online habits, starting in elementary school. They wanted support to explore their motivations for using social media; learn how to improve safety and privacy online; develop healthy digital relationships and boundaries; identify scams, misinformation, and AI-generated content; and learn how to consume social media in a way that limited negative impacts.

***"Don't do a ban. Teach a safe way to use [social media]."***

***"Learn about balance—separation between life and online."***

***"Teach youth how it can be a place for memories for themselves rather than just posting for likes."***

Youth expressed frustration that excessive time online was often considered only a youth problem, and felt adults also struggled to maintain healthy limits. They suggested that adults, such as teachers and parents/guardians, should learn and model the type of healthy relationships with social media and gaming they wanted to see among youth.

# Summary and conclusion

Using social media is a reality for most BC youth, as the majority had used it the previous school day and after their expected bedtime. There were some gender differences in social media use, with females the most likely to be on social media (including at night), and non-binary youth the most likely to report problematic social media use. However, for youth of all gender identities, social media was associated with poorer health and well-being, particularly when they were using social media after they were expected to be asleep. This included youth reporting lower body satisfaction, poorer sleep, disordered eating, suicidal ideation, and reduced life satisfaction.

Nighttime social media use was also associated with a greater likelihood of cyberbullying victimization and perpetration, as well as experiencing in-person victimization and perpetration. However, establishing or maintaining social connections was a potential benefit of using social media. These results highlight both the potential interpersonal harms and benefits that can arise from social media use. Given that youth's online experiences may reflect and possibly contribute to their offline experiences, it is important for them to be supported to gain skills for developing and maintaining healthy relationships both online and offline.

Youth as young as 12 reported problematic social media use. This suggests that social media literacy education should begin in elementary school and continue through to Grade 12, as youth's interactions with different social media content and platforms evolve and grow.

For youth of all gender identities, needing help for their gaming was a strong predictor of problematic social media use. Other robust predictors of problematic use were nighttime social media use, and managing stress only fairly well or poorly. These findings highlight areas where youth may be supported to reduce their likelihood of needing help for their use. For example, supporting youth to develop their stress management skills may help them to cope with their stress in ways other than turning to social media.

There were also some gender-specific factors associated with problematic social media use, which suggest that gender-specific interventions may be warranted. For example, regularly exercising at a gym or rec centre was a strong predictor of problematic use exclusively for males, and suggests the need for targeted conversations with male youth that address body image and exercising in relation to social media use.

Findings in this report point to factors that can reduce the likelihood of problematic social media use. These include caregiver monitoring of youth's time online, alongside supportive and understanding relationships with family; having an adult to turn to if youth have a serious problem; feeling connected to school and having academic aspirations after high school; spending time in nature; and taking part in physical activities and other extracurriculars that youth find enjoyable and meaningful. There were also some gender-specific protective factors, such as having three or more close in-person friends for males; and having an adult in their community who cares about them for females.

Finally, as noted at the start of this report, a limitation of the BC AHS data was that associations between social media use and well-being challenges could be identified, but the direction of those relations could not necessarily be ascertained. However, youth's responses to the data, which were included in this report, offer useful information about the bidirectional nature of those associations as well as some additional context to the findings, and speak to the need for ongoing and open dialogue with young people about their social media use.

# Resources

**erase BC.** Online safety resources for youth, caregivers, and school staff: [gov.bc.ca/gov/content/erase/school-and-online-safety/online-safety](https://gov.bc.ca/gov/content/erase/school-and-online-safety/online-safety)

**Media Smarts.** Digital literacy resources for caregivers: [mediasmarts.ca/resources-for-parents](https://mediasmarts.ca/resources-for-parents)

**Here to Help BC.** Media and digital literacy resources for youth and caregivers, especially focused on self-esteem and body image: [heretohelp.bc.ca/infosheet/media-literacy-a-guide-for-parents-and-youth](https://heretohelp.bc.ca/infosheet/media-literacy-a-guide-for-parents-and-youth)

**EmbodyBC.** Resources and information about navigating social media, especially relating to body image: [embodybc.com/resources/navigating-media/](https://embodybc.com/resources/navigating-media/)

**Kelty Mental Health.** Resources for caregivers to support healthy tech habits: [kelytmentalhealth.ca/techincheck](https://kelytmentalhealth.ca/techincheck)

**NeedHelpNow.ca.** For youth who have been negatively impacted by the sharing of an intimate or sexual image, or have been sexually victimized online: [needhelpnow.ca/en/contact/](https://needhelpnow.ca/en/contact/)

**NetSmartz.** Resources for youth and caregivers to help young people stay safe online: [missingkids.org/netsmartz/home](https://missingkids.org/netsmartz/home)

**Kids Help Phone.** Resources for youth to gain information and set boundaries around using social media: [kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/social-media-resources-to-support-your-mental-health](https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/social-media-resources-to-support-your-mental-health)

**Foundry.** Information about healthy technology use and online safety, including how to stay safe on social media: [foundrybc.ca/topic-page/how-to-use-technology-in-a-healthy-way/](https://foundrybc.ca/topic-page/how-to-use-technology-in-a-healthy-way/)

**Cybersecurity Lab.** An online game where players discover how they can keep their digital lives safe and develop an understanding of cyber threats and defenses: [pbslearningmedia.org/resource/nvcy-sci-cyberlab/nova-cybersecurity-lab/](https://pbslearningmedia.org/resource/nvcy-sci-cyberlab/nova-cybersecurity-lab/)

**The Balance Phone website** recommends 10 apps to reduce social media use on your phone. These include apps such as:

- ✦ **Forest**—which aims to motivate users to take time off social media. The longer they are off their phone, the more their virtual forest flourishes.
- ✦ **One Sec**—adds a mandatory pause every time someone opens a social media app, with the aim of encouraging reflection and breaking the habit of opening apps without thinking.
- ✦ Find the rest of the list at: [thebalancephone.com/blogs/blog/apps-stop-using-social-media?](https://thebalancephone.com/blogs/blog/apps-stop-using-social-media?)

## A selection of McCreary resources:

**From loot boxes to lottery tickets.** This report looks at the gaming and gambling behaviours of over 38,000 BC youth aged 12–18 using data from the 2023 BC AHS: [mcs.bc.ca/pdf/from\\_loot\\_boxes\\_to\\_lottery\\_tickets.pdf](https://mcs.bc.ca/pdf/from_loot_boxes_to_lottery_tickets.pdf)

**BC youth’s experiences with vaping and nicotine pouches: Findings from a youth-led study.** This report is based on findings from a survey that was co-developed by the Minister of Health’s Youth Advisory Council on Health and Wellness, in consultation with experts in the area of youth vaping and nicotine pouch use: [mcs.bc.ca/pdf/bc\\_youth\\_vaping\\_and\\_nicotine\\_pouches\\_2025.pdf](https://mcs.bc.ca/pdf/bc_youth_vaping_and_nicotine_pouches_2025.pdf)

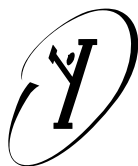
**Taking Pride.** Resources for facilitating workshops for 2SLGBTQ+ youth on healthy relationship skills. These workshops can incorporate discussions of online relationships.

- ✦ Curriculum for healthy-relationship skills workshops: [mcs.bc.ca/pdf/2025\\_taking\\_pride\\_workshop\\_manual.pdf](https://mcs.bc.ca/pdf/2025_taking_pride_workshop_manual.pdf)
- ✦ Facilitation guide for the workshops: [mcs.bc.ca/pdf/2025\\_taking\\_pride\\_facilitation\\_guide.pdf](https://mcs.bc.ca/pdf/2025_taking_pride_facilitation_guide.pdf)

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