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Friendship in an Online-Offline World

Digital Life, Connection and Wellbeing Among Young People



Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

Friendships increasingly span online and in-person life, creating new opportunities for connection while raising questions about how these relationships fit into young people's broader social lives and wellbeing.

Social connections are central to young people's lives and wellbeing, yet relatively little cross-cultural evidence is available on how they experience friendships across online and in-person settings.[1] This study, conducted by Boston Children's Digital Wellness Lab and Gallup, with support from the Pinterest Impact Fund, helped address this gap by surveying young people aged 15 to 22 across 16 countries in 2026. Combining online surveys in 14 countries with face-to-face interviews in Kenya and South Africa, the study offers a distinctive cross-national perspective on how friendships develop and coexist across settings, how young people engage with digital spaces, and how their relationships are associated with loneliness and wellbeing.

1 In-person friendships remain central to young people's social lives.



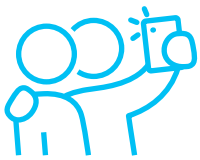
A median of 93% across countries report having an in-person friend, compared with 74% who have a friendship that began in person but is now maintained primarily online and 37% who have a close online-only friend. In-person friendships receive the highest ratings for strength and support and are associated with the most positive emotional experiences.

2 Higher-quality relationships, particularly in-person friendships, are associated with better wellbeing.



High-quality in-person friendships are associated with about twice the adjusted odds of thriving compared with having no in-person friend. Stronger parent or caregiver relationships show an even larger association. Friendship quality also tends to go together across online-offline settings: Young people who rate one friendship highly often give similarly positive ratings to their other friendships.

3 Online-only friendships generally coexist with active offline social lives.



Young people with online-only friends participate at similar or higher rates in organized in-person group activities than those without such friends. Yet they are also more likely to want additional in-person time with friends (68% vs. 58%), suggesting that participation in organized face-to-face activities and friendship connection are not necessarily the same thing.

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4 Online-only friendships begin through different pathways, but trust and support are closely associated with their quality.



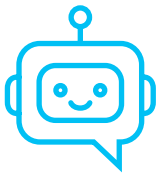
Young men more often describe meeting these friends through gaming, while young women more often mention social media. Among the themes young people mention when describing their friendships, closeness, trust and support show the strongest positive association with high-quality relationships.

5 Young people's online activities are varied, with scrolling the most common, while much online communication remains anchored in existing relationships.



Short-form scrolling is the most common activity measured, reported often or very often by 72% of young people. TikTok and Instagram are among the most commonly named platforms, although preferences vary considerably across countries. Young people communicate online more frequently with in-person friends and family than with online-only friends or strangers.

6 AI companionship is part of some young people's digital social lives.



Among all respondents, a median of 33% report using AI for companionship. This is more common among frequent AI users and young people with digitally mediated friendships. Those with an online-only friend are more likely than those without one to report AI companionship (42% vs. 26%), although these patterns do not establish whether AI companionship supplements or substitutes for human relationships.

7 Loneliness is associated with how young people experience their relationships and communicate online.

Higher loneliness is less common among those with stronger in-person friendships, while no comparable difference appears across levels of online-only friendship quality. Higher loneliness is also more common among young people who frequently communicate online with strangers or online-only friends than among those who frequently communicate with in-person friends or family members.



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Notes About the Findings

> *The following definitions and methodological notes explain key concepts and analytical approaches used throughout the report.*

Friendship modes: The report examines three modes of close friendship: in-person friendships, friendships that began in person but are now maintained primarily online ("offline-to-online"), and online-only friendships with someone the young person has never met in person. These modes are not mutually exclusive; young people may report friendships in more than one mode.

Friendship quality: The perceived strength and supportiveness of a friendship. For each friendship mode, young people rate their closest friend in that mode on a 0-to-10 scale, from the weakest and least supportive relationship imaginable to the strongest and most supportive. Ratings are grouped as low (0-5), medium (6-8) or high (9-10), using the same thresholds across all three modes. Throughout the report, "high-quality" and "strongest" friendships refer to those rated as a 9 or 10.

Thriving: A measure of how positively young people evaluate their current and future lives. Following Gallup's Life Evaluation classification, young people are classified as thriving if they rate their current life a 7 or higher and their expected life in five years an 8 or higher, both on 0-to-10 scales.

Loneliness: Feelings of social disconnection, including lacking companionship, feeling left out and feeling isolated. Loneliness is measured using the Three-Item Loneliness Scale (TILS),[2] with responses combined into a score ranging from 3 to 9. Higher scores indicate greater loneliness. Scores are categorized as lower loneliness (3-6) and higher loneliness (7-9), consistent with prior research using this threshold.

How results are calculated and summarized: All reported estimates use survey weights designed to improve representativeness within each country. Cross-country summaries generally use one of two approaches. Some findings report the median of country-level estimates, giving each country equal influence regardless of sample size. Other findings, particularly subgroup comparisons and analyses involving smaller groups, pool data across countries using respondent weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally before any item-specific filtering. This approach maintains the survey weighting within each country.

Unless otherwise noted, statistics exclude non-substantive responses, including volunteered "don't know" responses in face-to-face interviews and skipped questions in online surveys. For questions asked only of a subset of young people, results are generally calculated among those eligible to receive the question. Exceptions are noted where applicable. For example, the percentage reporting each friendship mode is generally calculated among all young people, including those who were not asked certain friendship questions because they did not meet the eligibility criteria.

Interpreting associations: Some findings are based on statistical models that account for other characteristics, such as age, gender, country, and additional social or demographic factors. These adjusted estimates describe associations after accounting for the variables included in each model. Because the study is observational, the findings cannot establish cause and effect.

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CHAPTER 1

The State of Social Connection Among Young People

Highlights:

1 **In-person friendship remains a near-universal part of young people's social lives.** At the country median, 93% report at least one friend they primarily spend time with in person, and these friendships receive the highest ratings for strength and support overall.

2 **Digitally mediated friendships generally add to, rather than replace, in-person relationships.** The two most common friendship configurations both include an in-person friend alongside at least one digitally mediated friendship, while just 4% report having one or both types of online friends without also having an in-person friend.

3 **Higher-quality friendships are linked to more positive emotional experiences.** Across all three friendship modes — in-person, offline-to-online, online-only — young people with higher-quality friendships are much more likely to report feeling connected, safe and happy when spending time with those friends.

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1.1 | Friendship in an Online-Offline World

Social connection is closely tied to young people's wellbeing, and friendship is a central part of their social lives. As those relationships increasingly span online and offline settings, technology creates new ways to connect while introducing new challenges. Social media, gaming platforms and messaging apps can help existing friends stay connected and can also bring together people who have never met in person, raising questions about how these different relationships fit together and shape young people's experiences of friendship.

This report examines three modes of close friendship:

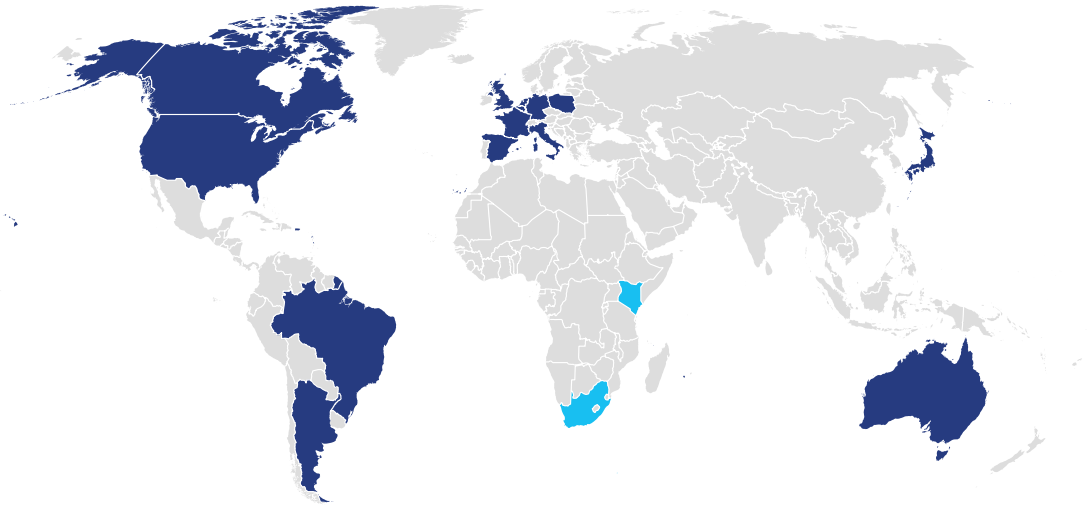
- friendships maintained **primarily in person**
- friendships that **began in person** but are now **maintained primarily online**
- close friendships with people known **only online**

These modes are analytical rather than mutually exclusive: Many young people have friendships in more than one mode, and individual relationships may move between online and offline settings.

This chapter describes how common these friendship modes are, how young people rate their strength and supportiveness, and how they feel when interacting with different friends.

About the Study

In a 2026 study, the Boston Children's Digital Wellness Lab and Gallup, with support from the Pinterest Impact Fund, surveyed young people aged 15 to 22 in 16 countries about their friendships, online experiences and overall wellbeing. In 14 countries, the survey was conducted online using non-probability web samples; in Kenya and South Africa, interviews were conducted face to face using probability-based, nationally representative samples. Survey data were weighted within each country to improve alignment with key population characteristics and, where applicable, to account for selection probabilities and other features of the sampling design.



Countries Included in the Study

- Countries conducting online interviews
- Countries conducting face-to-face interviews

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TABLE 1.1

Countries Included in the Study

Countries, data collection mode, fieldwork dates, sample sizes and margins of error/credibility intervals

Country	Mode	Fieldwork dates (2026)	Sample size	MOE / Credibility interval (+/- pp)
Argentina	Web	Jun 15-Jul 24	1,050	3.7
Australia	Web	May 28-Jul 9	1,001	3.1
Belgium	Web	Jun 17-Jul 25	1,000	3.6
Brazil	Web	Jun 13-Jul 15	1,003	3.6
Canada	Web	Jun 19-Jul 23	1,010	3.2
France	Web	Jun 15-Jul 15	1,002	3.3
Germany	Web	Jun 19-Jul 23	1,010	3.7
Italy	Web	Jun 19-Jul 17	1,007	3.4
Japan	Web	Jun 16-Jul 24	1,005	3.2
Kenya	Face to face	Aug 1-13	1,000	3.3
Netherlands	Web	Jun 19-Jul 27	820	3.8
Poland	Web	Jun 17-Jul 23	1,017	3.6
South Africa	Face to face	Jul 15-Aug 21	1,000	3.4
Spain	Web	Jun 19-Jul 16	1,000	3.3
United Kingdom	Web	May 28-Jul 4	1,000	3.2
United States	Web	May 28-Jul 7	1,000	3.3

Note: Margins of error (MOE) are reported for the probability-based samples in Kenya and South Africa; credibility intervals are reported for the non-probability web samples. Both are calculated at the 95% confidence level using effective sample sizes adjusted for unequal weighting. These generalized estimates do not account for clustering, stratification, or potential coverage and selection biases.

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1.2 | Friendship Takes Several Forms

In-person friendship remains a near-universal part of young people's social lives. A median of 93% report having at least one friend they primarily spend time with in person,[3] compared with 74% who have a friendship that began in person but is now maintained primarily online and 37% who have a close online-only friend.

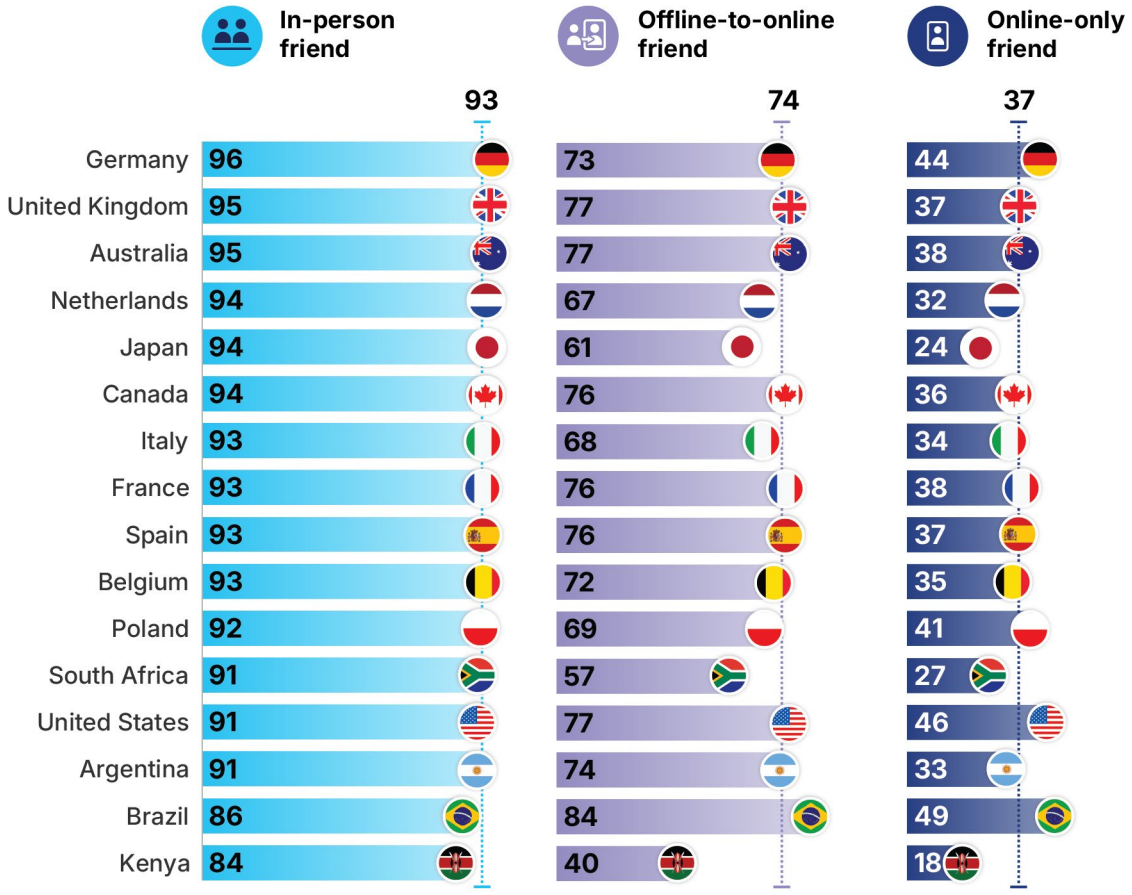
FIGURE 1.1

Percentage of 15- to 22-Year-Olds Who Have at Least One In-Person, Offline-to-Online or Close Online-Only Friend, by Country

QUESTION WORDING:

- **In-person friend:** *Based on two questions asking whether young people have (1) at least one close friend they primarily spend time with in person or, if not, (2) any friend they primarily spend time with in person.*
- **Offline-to-online friend:** *Do you have at least one friend who you met in person, but now primarily keep in touch with online?*
- **Online-only friend:** *Do you have any close online friends? By "online friends," we mean anyone who you consider a close friend that you have only ever interacted with online and have not met in person.*

% Reporting each friendship type, among all respondents
Dashed line = median across countries



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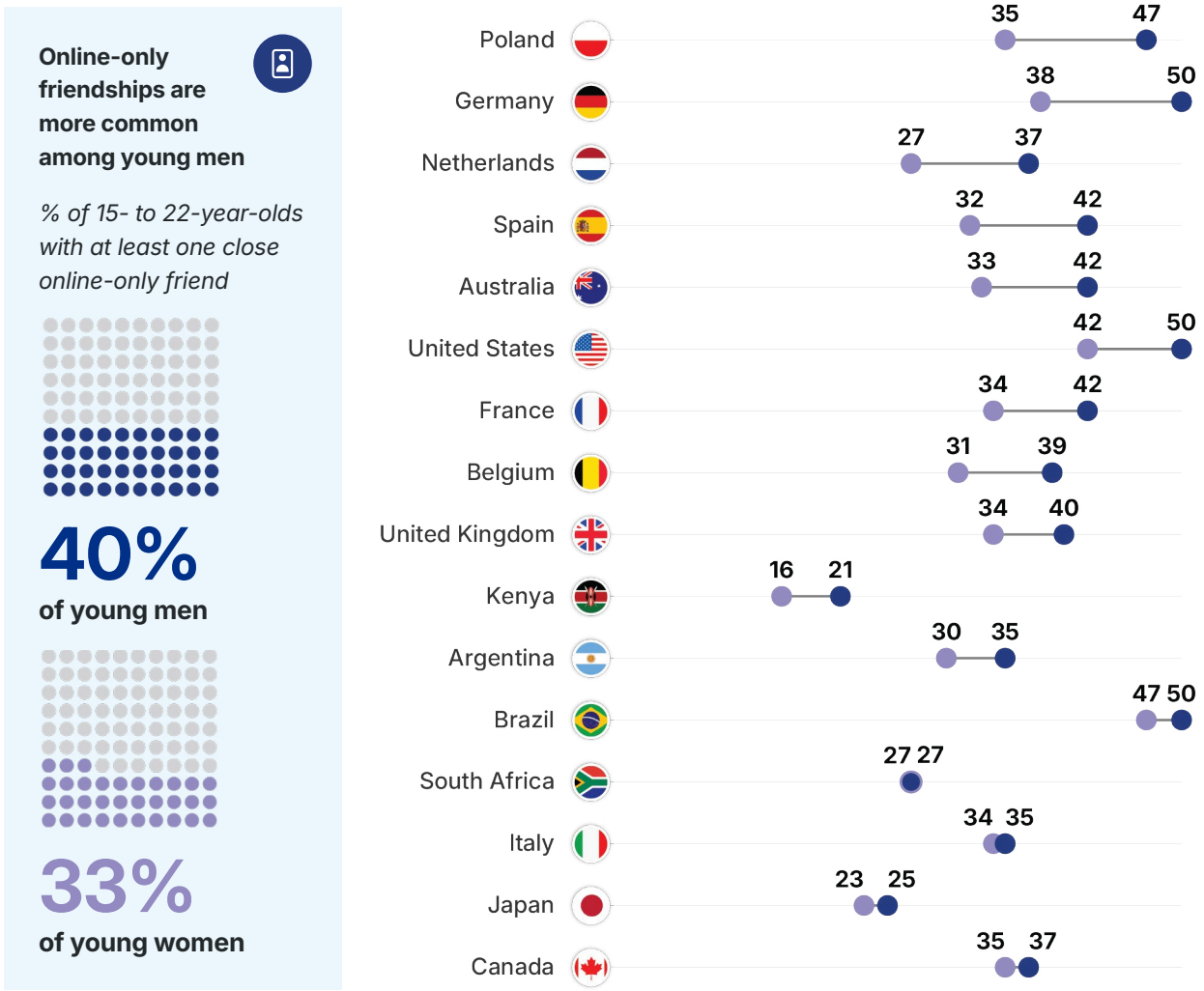
The comparatively low rate of online-only friendships in Kenya partly reflects differences in internet access. Questions about online friendships were asked only of young people with regular access to an internet-enabled device; 58% of young people in Kenya met this criterion, compared with 88% in South Africa and virtually all young people surveyed online. Among Kenyans with regular internet access, 31% report having an online-only friend, compared with 18% of all young people in the country.

Online-only friendships are more common among young men than young women in most countries surveyed. A median of 40% of young men report having an online-only friend, compared with 33% of young women.

FIGURE 1.2

Online-Only Friendship Is More Common Among Young Men in Most Countries

% Reporting at least one online-only friend, among all respondents, by gender



Note: Gender differences are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level ($p < .05$) in Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States.

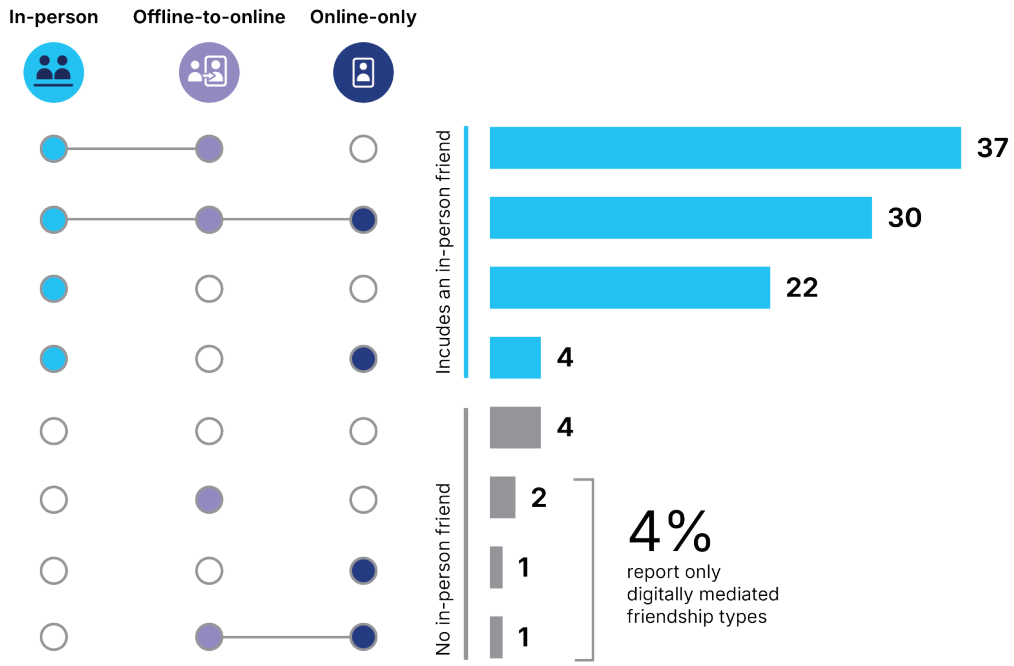
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Most young people report more than one friendship mode, and these networks usually include an in-person friend. Overall, 37% report having both an in-person friendship and a friendship that began offline but is now maintained primarily online, while 30% report all three friendship modes. Another 22% report having only an in-person friendship. By contrast, 4% report one or both digitally mediated friendship modes without also reporting having an in-person friend.

FIGURE 1.3

In-Person Friendships Anchor Most Young People's Friendship Networks

% Reporting each combination of friendship types



Note: Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering. Categories reflect the combination of in-person, offline-to-online and online-only friendships reported.

The pattern reinforces a broader theme of the report: Digitally mediated friendships appear to add to, rather than replace, in-person relationships.

The two most common friendship configurations both include an in-person friend alongside at least one digitally mediated friendship, while just 4% of young people report one or both digitally mediated friendship modes without also reporting having an in-person friend.

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Who Reports No Friendship of Any Mode?

Very few young people in this study — fewer than one in 20 — say they have none of the three friendship modes measured here: in-person, offline-to-online or online-only. Further analysis identifies several characteristics associated with having none of these friendship modes, but one stands out in particular: not having a trusted adult outside the family.

Among young people without a trusted adult outside the family, 10% report none of the three friendship modes, compared with just 2% of those who have a trusted adult. This association remains substantial after accounting for country of residence, gender, age, urbanicity and parent/caregiver relationship quality. In the adjusted analysis, **young people without a trusted adult have approximately 6.8 times the odds of reporting none of the three friendship modes** compared with those who have one. Because reporting none of the friendship modes measured is relatively rare, these findings should be interpreted cautiously.



FIGURE 1.4

Young People Without a Trusted Adult Are More Likely to Report No Friendship of Any Mode

Percentages reporting none of the three friendship modes measured, by whether they have a trusted adult outside the family

10%
of those **without a trusted adult** report no friendship of any mode

2%
of those **with a trusted adult** report no friendship of any mode

Note: Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering. Results shown are unadjusted. The association remains statistically significant after accounting for country, gender, age, urbanicity and parent/caregiver relationship quality.

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1.3 | Friendship Strength, Support and Emotional Experience

Having a friendship is only part of the picture; how young people experience that relationship also matters. Throughout this report, friendship "quality" refers to young people's ratings of how strong and supportive a relationship is.

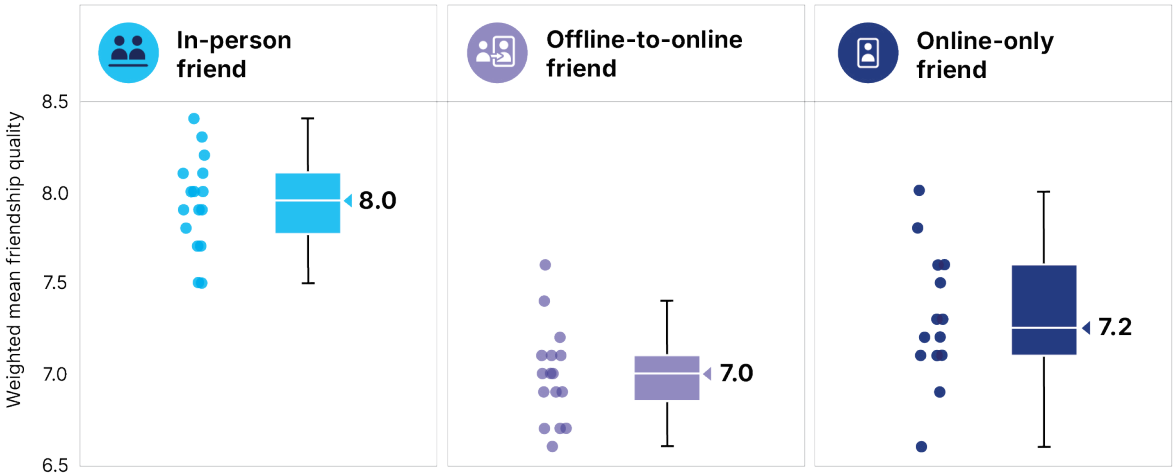
In-person friendships receive the highest ratings overall. The median country-level average is 8.0 on a 0-to-10 scale, and in-person friendships are rated more highly than friendships that began in person but are now maintained primarily online, in every country surveyed. Online-only friendships are also generally rated below in-person friendships, although the difference is smaller and less consistent across countries.

FIGURE 1.5

In-Person Friendships Receive the Highest Ratings for Strength and Support

Distribution of country-level weighted mean friendship quality scores, by friendship mode

QUESTION WORDING: *On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is the weakest and least supportive relationship you can imagine, and 10 is the strongest and most supportive, how would you rate your relationship with this [friend type]?*



Note: Each dot represents a country-level weighted mean. Ratings range from 0, the weakest and least supportive relationship imaginable, to 10, the strongest and most supportive. Boxes show the interquartile range; lines show the median.

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A median of 41% of young people with an in-person friendship rate its strength and supportiveness a 9 or 10, compared with 26% of those with an online-only friendship and 21% of those with an offline-to-online friendship. These findings also show that digitally mediated friendships can be highly supportive, even if they generally receive lower ratings than in-person friendships.

Age and gender differences in average friendship quality are comparatively modest. Young people aged 15 to 17 generally rate their in-person friendships somewhat more highly than those aged 18 to 22. Young women also give slightly higher ratings to in-person friendships, while young men give slightly higher ratings to digitally mediated friendships.

In-Person Friendships Stand Out for Positive Emotional Experiences

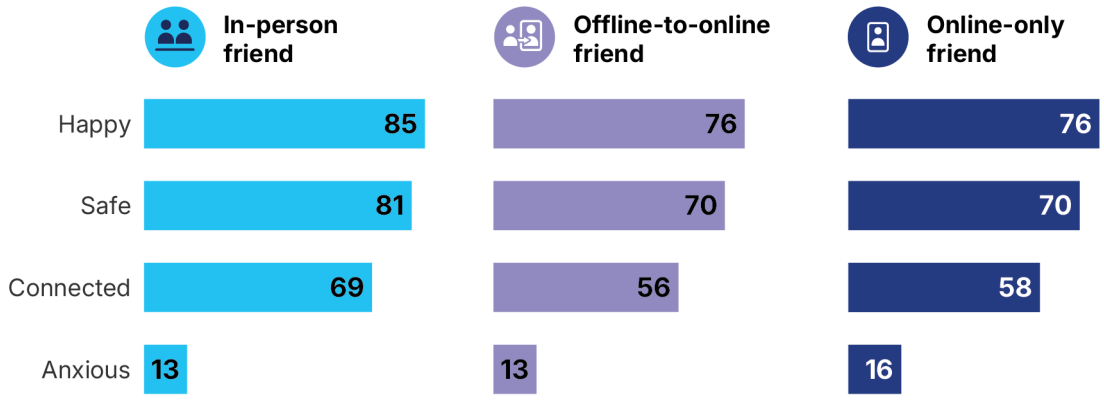
Beyond rating the strength and supportiveness of their friendships, young people were also asked how often they feel connected, safe, happy and anxious when spending time with these friends. Positive emotional experiences are common across all three friendship modes, but in-person friendships stand out. Overall, 85% say they often or always feel happy with their closest in-person friend, while 81% feel safe and 69% feel connected. Frequent anxiety is much less common, at 13%.

FIGURE 1.6

Young People Report the Most Positive Emotional Experiences With In-Person Friends

QUESTION WORDING: *Still thinking of your closest [friend type], how often do you feel each of the following when you spend time with this friend?*

% Experiencing each emotion often or always when spending time with their closest friend, by friendship mode



Note: Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

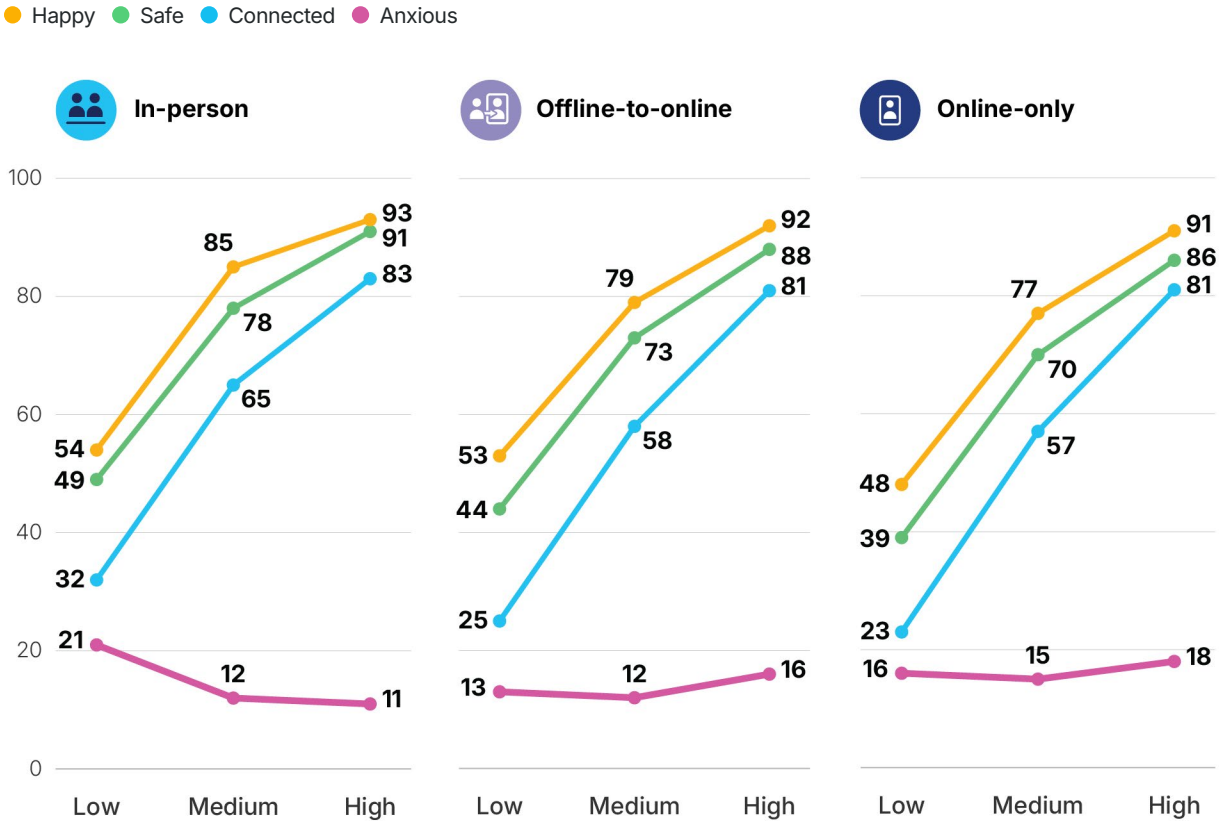
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Across all three friendship modes, higher-quality friendships are associated with substantially more frequent feelings of connection, safety and happiness. The relationship between friendship quality and anxiety is less consistent.

FIGURE 1.7

Positive Emotional Experiences Rise With Friendship Quality Across All Three Friendship Modes

% Experiencing each emotion often or always, by friendship mode and friendship quality



Note: Low friendship quality=0-5, medium=6-8 and high=9-10. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

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CHAPTER 2

How Online and In-Person Friendships Coexist

Highlights:

1. **Strong friendships tend to coexist across settings.** Young people who rate their closest friend in one friendship mode relatively low or high tend to give similar ratings to their closest friends in other modes.

2. **In-person friendships are most often rated highest.** Among young people who rate at least two friendship modes, 45% rate in-person friendships highest outright, while 33% give the same highest rating to two or more friendship modes.

3. **Young people with online-only friends remain active offline but often want more in-person time.** They participate in group activities at similar or higher rates than those without online-only friends, yet they are more likely to want additional in-person time with friends (68% vs. 58%).

4. **Online-only friendships begin differently for young men and women.** Young men more often meet through gaming, while young women more often connect through social media.

5. **Trust and support distinguish higher-quality online-only friendships.** Young people who cite closeness, trust and support as reasons for keeping in touch with their online-only friend are more likely to rate the friendship highly, while those who mention gaming or social media as reasons for connecting are not independently associated with higher friendship quality.

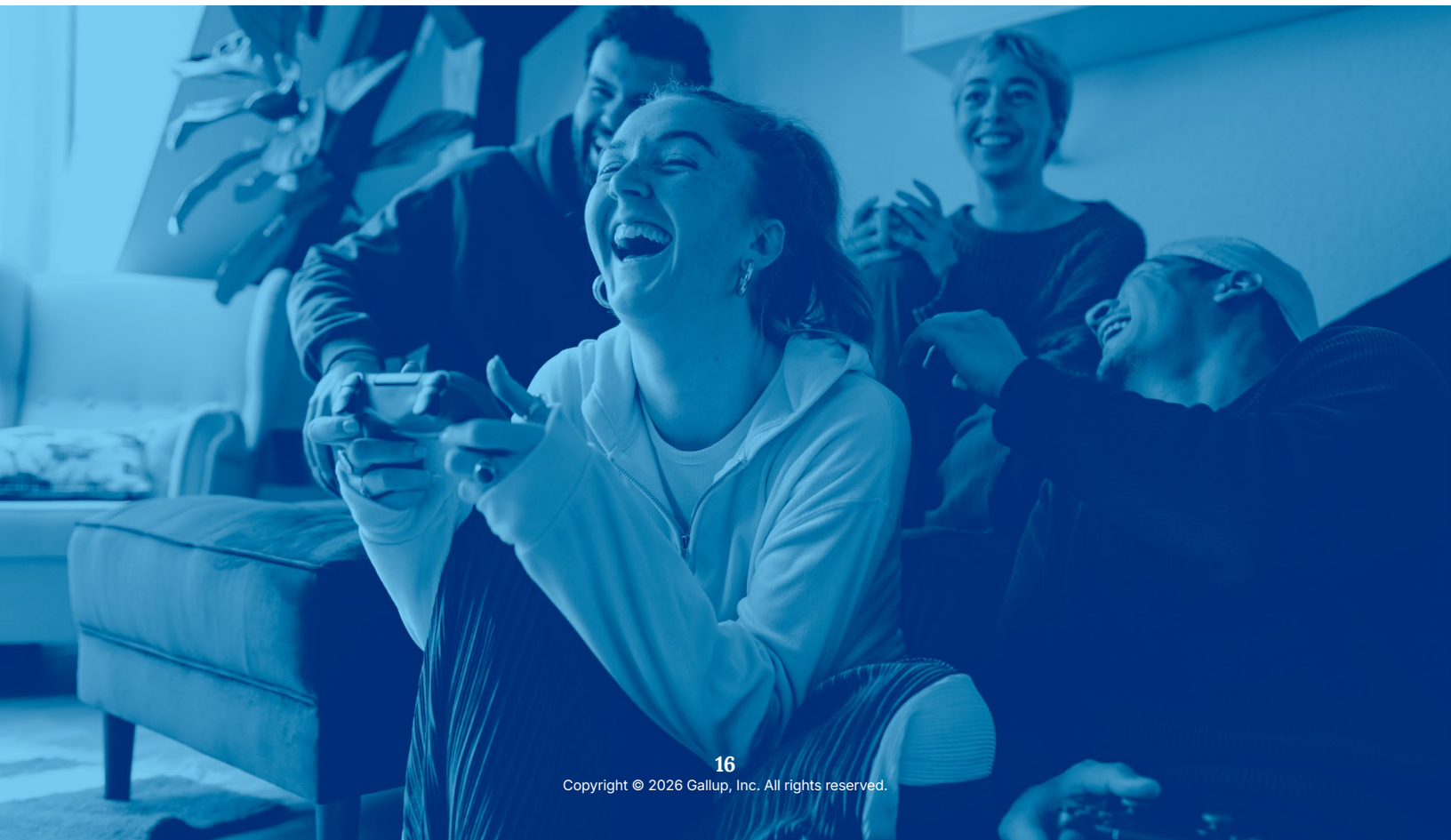
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The role of online friendships in young people's broader social lives can be understood in different ways. One possibility is that online friendships substitute for in-person connection, with young people who have fewer in-person relationships turning to digital spaces to meet social needs elsewhere. Another is that online and in-person friendships accumulate together, with young people building relationships across both settings. The findings in Chapter 1 generally fit the second pattern. For many young people, in-person and digitally mediated friendships coexist within the same social life.

This chapter examines how these relationships coexist, how young people participate in offline social activities alongside their online friendships, and what characterizes higher-quality digitally mediated relationships.

2.1 | Stronger Friendships Often Go Together

Friendship quality appears to reflect more than the mode of friendship itself. Young people who rate one friendship relatively low or high tend to give similar ratings to their other friendships. Those with weaker in-person friendships do not appear to compensate by reporting especially strong digitally mediated friendships; ratings of both offline-to-online and online-only friendships are also lower among these young people.



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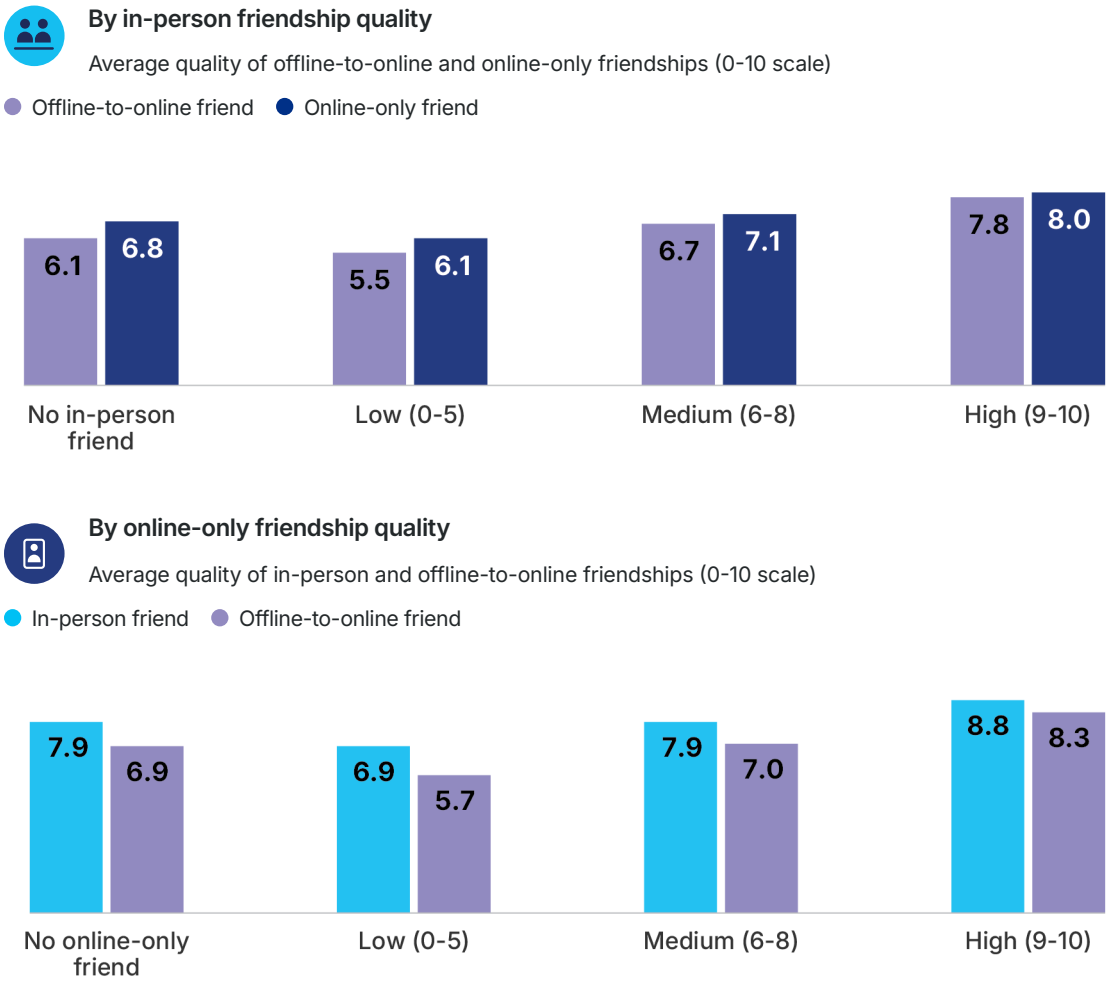
The pattern runs in the other direction as well: Young people with stronger online-only friendships tend to report stronger in-person and offline-to-online friendships (Figure 2.1). One possible explanation is that the social and emotional skills that help young people build supportive relationships may extend across both online and in-person settings. Previous research suggests that adolescents with stronger existing social relationships may also be better positioned to develop and maintain meaningful connections online.[4] These findings suggest that strong friendships tend to coexist across different parts of young people's social lives, rather than showing a general pattern in which stronger friendships in one setting compensate for weaker relationships elsewhere.

FIGURE 2.1

Stronger Friendships Tend to Go Together Across Different Settings

Average rating of other friendship modes on a 0-to-10 scale

QUESTION WORDING: *On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is the weakest and least supportive relationship you can imagine, and 10 is the strongest and most supportive, how would you rate your relationship with this [friend type]?*



Note: Friendship quality is grouped as low (0-5), medium (6-8) and high (9-10). Weighted means use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering. "No [in-person/online-only] friend" refers to young people who did not report having the friendship mode used to define the groups in each panel.

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2.2 | In-Person Friendships Are Most Often Rated Highest

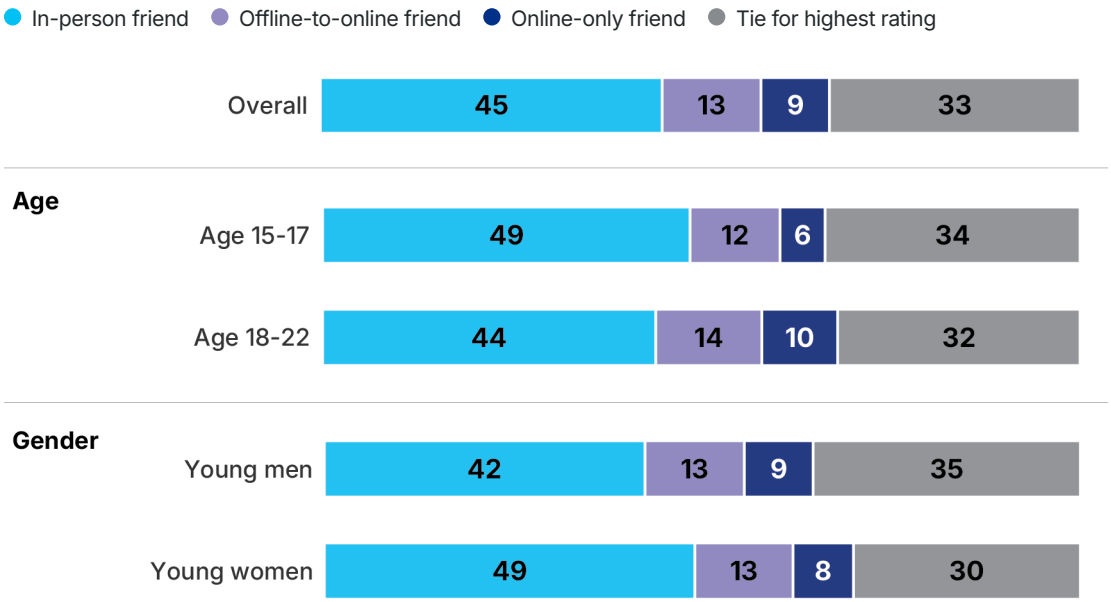
Among young people who rate at least two friendship modes, in-person friendship is most often rated highest outright. Overall, 45% give in-person friendships the highest rating, compared with 13% for offline-to-online friendships and 9% for online-only friendships. Another 33% give the same highest rating to two or more friendship modes.

FIGURE 2.2

In-Person Friendships Are Most Often Rated Highest

QUESTION WORDING: *On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is the weakest and least supportive relationship you can imagine, and 10 is the strongest and most supportive, how would you rate your relationship with this [friend type]?*

% Rating each friendship mode highest, among those rating two or more modes, by age and gender



Note: Results are limited to young people who provide quality ratings for at least two friendship modes, representing about 70% of the pooled, weighted sample. Highest-rated friendship mode refers to the highest numeric score among the friendship modes rated. "Tie" indicates that two or more friendship modes receive the same highest rating. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

Age and gender differences are relatively modest. In-person friendship is somewhat more likely to rank highest among young people aged 15 to 17 and young women. Even when it does not rank highest outright, in-person friendship is often part of the top-rated set, with ties between in-person and offline-to-online friendships especially common.

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2.3 | Young People With Online-Only Friends Stay Active in Offline Social Life

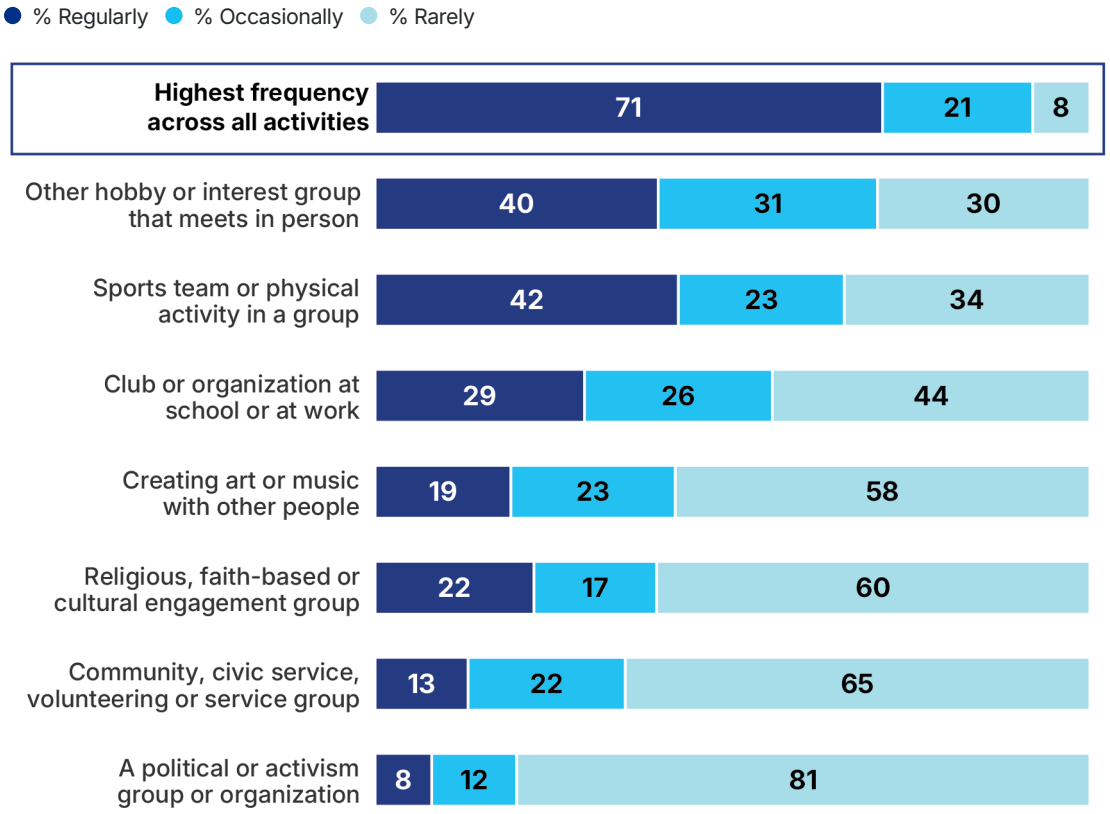
If online-only friendships substituted for in-person social connection, young people with these friendships might be less engaged in offline social activities. One way to examine this possibility is to compare participation in organized in-person group activities such as sports, clubs and interest groups.

In-person group activities are already a common part of young people's social lives: 71% participate regularly — at least once a week — in one or more of the activities measured, while another 21% participate occasionally. Just 8% participate rarely or never (Figure 2.3). Sports and hobby or interest groups are the most commonly attended activities, and regular participation is generally more common among young people aged 15 to 17 (57%) than among those aged 18 to 22 (34%).

FIGURE 2.3

Most Young People Participate Regularly in at Least One In-Person Group Activity

QUESTION WORDING: *How often, if at all, do you participate in any of the following group activities in person?*



Note: Participation categories reflect the highest frequency reported across the seven in-person group activities measured. "Regularly" indicates participation at least once a week; "Occasionally" indicates participation at least a few times a year but less than weekly; and "Rarely" indicates participation once a year, less than once a year or not at all. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

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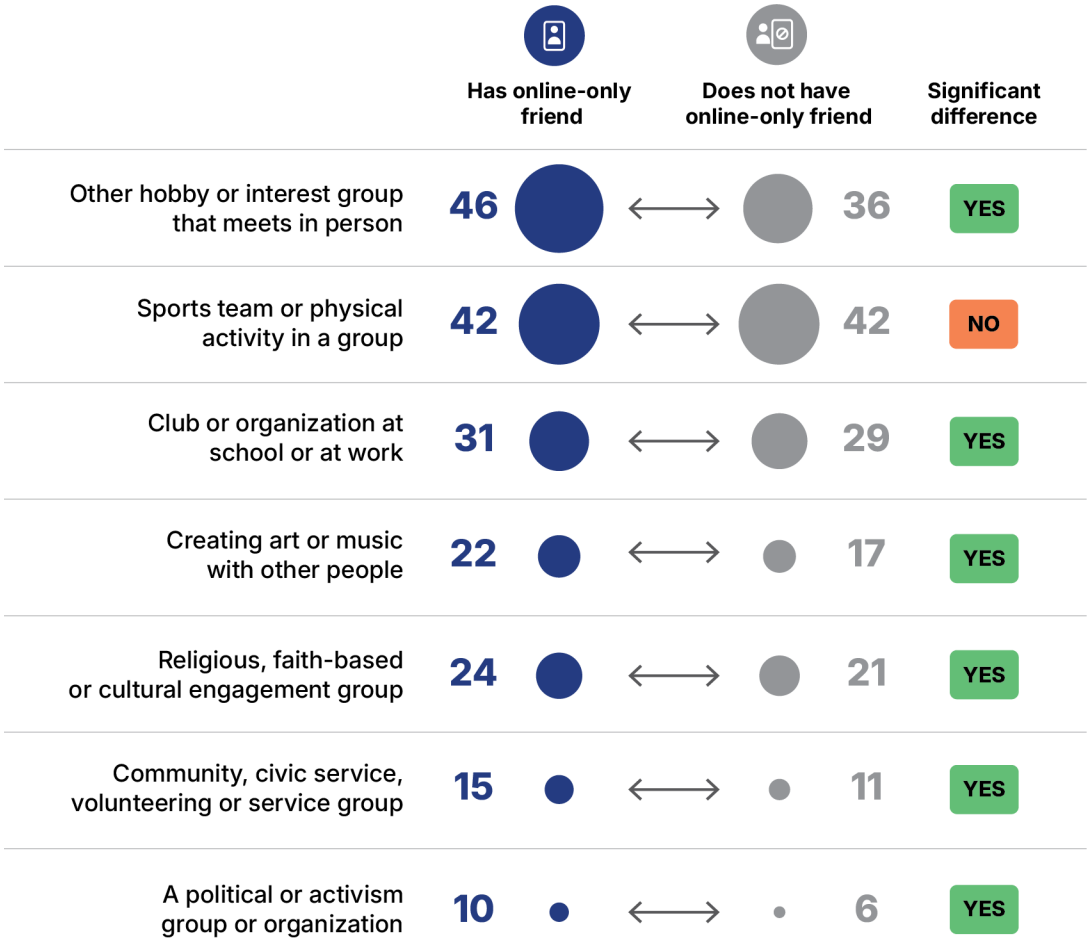
Young people with online-only friends are at least as active as those without such a friend across the seven in-person activities examined — contrary to what a simple substitution explanation might suggest. Weekly participation in sports or group physical activity is nearly identical (42% for both groups), while participation in each of the other six activities is significantly higher among those with online-only friends. The largest difference is for hobby or interest groups, attended at least weekly by 46% of young people with an online-only friend and 36% of those without one.

FIGURE 2.4

Young People With Online-Only Friends Are at Least as Active in In-Person Group Activities

QUESTION WORDING: *How often, if at all, do you participate in any of the following group activities in person?*

% Participating at least once a week



Note: Results are among young people with regular access to an internet-enabled device. Differences between groups are assessed using survey-weighted t-tests. All differences except sports or group physical activity are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level ($p < .05$), without adjustment for multiple comparisons. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

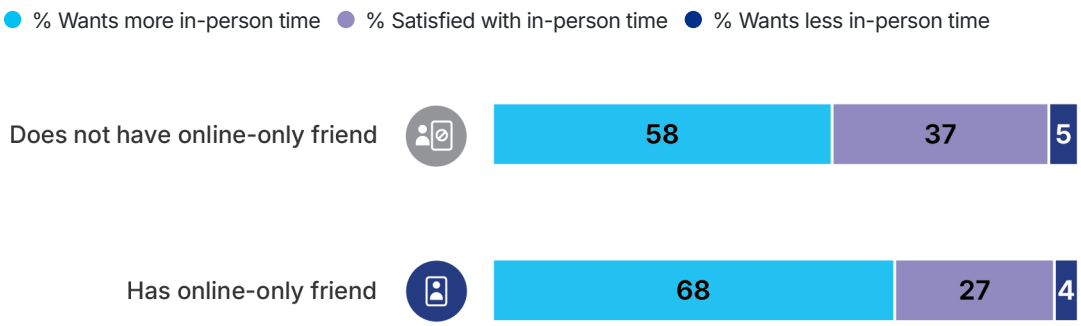
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Yet participation in organized in-person activities tells only part of the story. Despite being at least as active in these activities, young people with online-only friends are also more likely to want additional time with friends in person. Among young people with regular internet access, 68% of those with an online-only friend say they would like to spend more time with friends in person, compared with 58% of those without one. Conversely, 27% of those with an online-only friend say they are satisfied with the amount of in-person time they currently spend with friends, compared with 37% of those without one.

FIGURE 2.5

Young People With Online-Only Friends Are More Likely to Want More In-Person Time With Friends

QUESTION WORDING: *Are you generally satisfied with the amount of time you spend interacting in person with your friends?*



Note: Results are among young people with regular access to an internet-enabled device. The difference between young people with and without an online-only friend who want more in-person time with friends is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level ($p < .05$). Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that online-only friendships do not necessarily come at the expense of in-person social engagement.

Young people with online-only friends are at least as active in organized in-person activities, yet they are more likely to want additional time with friends in person. This distinction highlights an important point: Participation in group activities does not necessarily mean young people feel they have enough in-person connection, even when they have high-quality online-only friendships.

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2.4 | Beyond Platforms: What Young People Value in Online-Only Friendships

Young people describe many different paths into online-only friendship. Those with a close online-only friend were asked how they first met, what they connected over and why they chose to stay in touch. Their responses were examined in two ways: where the friendship first began, such as through gaming or social media (Figure 2.6), and the activities, shared interests or relationship qualities that brought friends together or helped sustain their connection (Table 2.1). These capture different aspects of online-only friendships, so the percentages are not directly comparable.

Gaming and social media are the most common entry points into online-only friendship, but they differ sharply by gender. Young men are more likely than young women to report meeting through gaming platforms (37% vs. 18%), while young women are more likely to say they first connected through social media (36% vs. 21%). Messaging and niche community apps are a secondary pathway and show little gender difference.

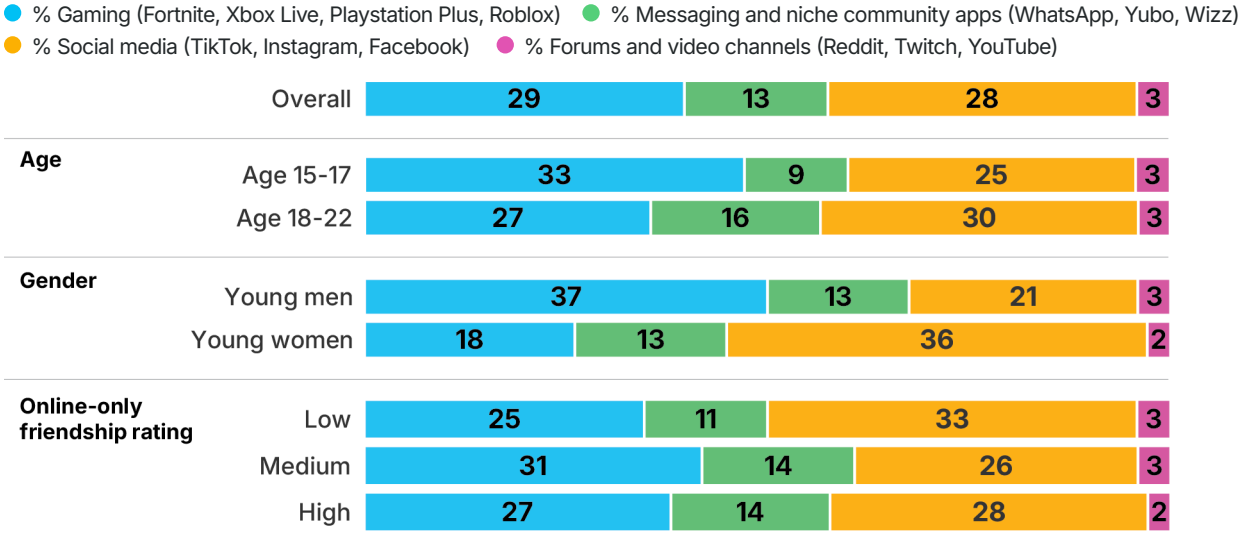
These differences add another dimension to the online social experiences of young men and young women. Young men are somewhat more likely to have online-only friends and more often describe those friendships as beginning through gaming, while young women — among whom online-only friendship is less common — more often describe meeting through social media.

FIGURE 2.6

How Online-Only Friendships Begin Differs Sharply by Gender

Percentage mentioning each coded response category, overall and by demographic group, among those with an online-only friend

QUESTION WORDING: Coded responses to the open-ended question: *Please briefly describe how you met this friend the very first time you communicated online. Where did you meet, what did you connect over, and why did you decide to keep in touch?*



Note: Excludes non-substantive responses, including young people who did not remember where they first met their online-only friend. Young people could mention more than one origin, so percentages do not sum to 100%. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

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The platforms where online-only friendships begin are not always the same ones young people later use to communicate with those friends.

The platforms young people use to stay in touch vary considerably across countries (Figure 2.7). WhatsApp is the most commonly named platform in South Africa (56%), Argentina (44%) and Brazil (44%), while Snapchat leads in Belgium (34%), France (34%), the Netherlands (33%) and the United Kingdom (32%). Other countries show distinct preferences: Facebook is most common in Kenya (48%), Messenger in Poland (35%) and LINE in Japan (35%). These differences highlight how the digital spaces young people use to maintain friendships vary across national contexts.

Across all 16 countries, WhatsApp, Instagram and Discord are the most commonly named platforms for staying in touch.

FIGURE 2.7

The Most Popular Platforms for Staying in Touch With Online-Only Friends Vary Across Countries

QUESTION WORDING: *On what app or platform do you usually communicate with this friend?*

% Use platform to communicate with online-only friend

	WhatsApp	Instagram	Discord	Snapchat	Facebook	TikTok	Messenger	X (Twitter)	LINE	All other platforms	Most popular
South Africa	**56**	3	–	0	31	6	2	–	–	1	WhatsApp
Argentina	**44**	23	15	0	1	7	0	1	–	8	
Brazil	**44**	29	12	0	3	4	1	1	–	6	
Italy	**43**	26	13	1	4	5	1	1	–	6	
Spain	**42**	30	16	1	1	4	0	1	–	5	
Germany	**34**	12	21	15	3	7	0	–	–	9	
Australia	15	**28**	15	12	10	8	2	1	–	10	Instagram
United States	4	**26**	24	13	7	8	6	1	0	9	
Canada	4	19	**33**	20	5	5	4	1	–	10	Discord
Belgium	4	27	19	**34**	3	8	1	1	–	4	Snapchat
France	7	25	19	**34**	3	6	2	1	–	4	
Netherlands	20	9	23	**33**	1	7	0	1	–	6	
United Kingdom	12	15	19	**32**	4	8	2	1	–	7	
Kenya	31	17	–	–	**48**	3	–	–	–	1	Facebook
Poland	4	11	29	4	7	3	**35**	1	–	6	Messenger
Japan	1	21	12	–	0	5	–	20	**35**	6	LINE

Note: A dash (–) indicates that no respondents selected the platform, while 0 indicates a percentage greater than zero that rounds to 0%.

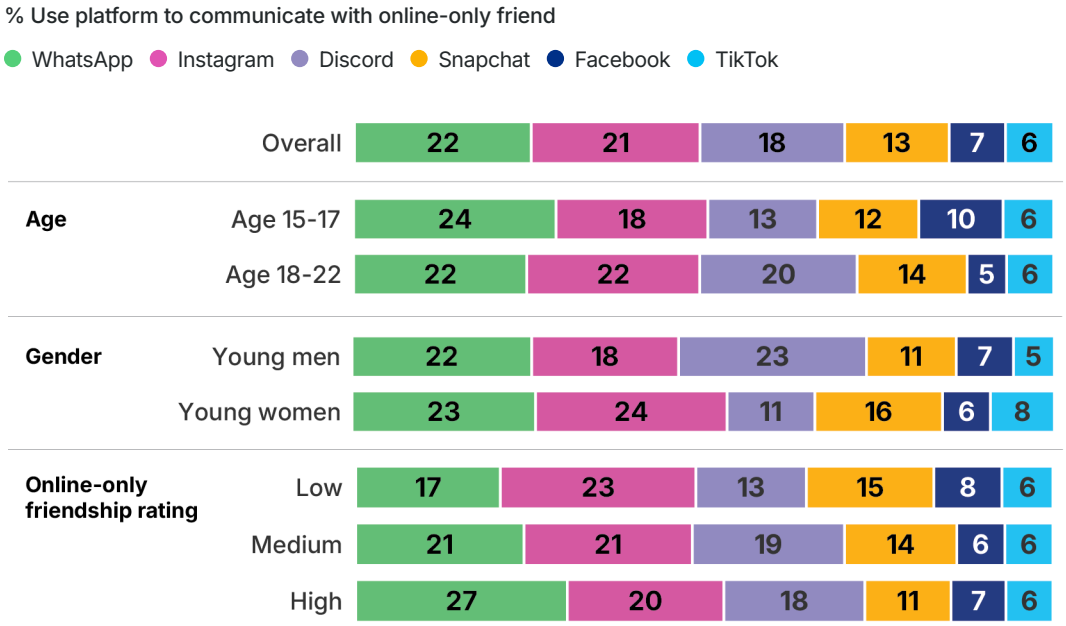
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Gender differences remain visible: Young men are more likely to use Discord, while young women are more likely to use Instagram. Age differences are smaller, although Discord is more common among young people aged 18 to 22 than among those aged 15 to 17.

FIGURE 2.8

The Platforms Where Online-Only Friendships Begin Are Not Always Where They Continue

QUESTION WORDING: *On what app or platform do you usually communicate with this friend?*



Note: Only platforms used by at least 5% of young people overall are shown. Responses could be coded for more than one platform, although multiple mentions are uncommon. Percentages therefore do not necessarily sum to 100%. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

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Beyond where these friendships begin, young people's descriptions also point to the qualities and experiences that help sustain them.

TABLE 2.1

What Brought Online-Only Friends Together and Why They Kept in Touch

Coded themes from the open-ended question about how young people met their online-only friend, what they connected over and why they stayed in touch

Coded connection themes	Description	Overall	Young men	Young women	Adjusted odds ratio for high-quality online-only friendship	Is this theme associated with a high-quality online-only friendship?
Gaming and shared play	Friendships formed or maintained through gaming or gaming communities	33%	44%	20%	0.99	NO
Shared interests and activities	Friendships built around shared hobbies, interests or activities	23%	20%	27%	1.41	YES
Social media connections	Friendships formed or maintained through social media and continued interaction over time	20%	15%	25%	1.03	NO
Conversation and personal rapport	Friendships sustained by enjoyable conversation, humor or personal chemistry	18%	17%	20%	1.60	YES
Closeness, trust and support	Friendships characterized by trust, emotional closeness and mutual support	14%	12%	17%	2.13	YES
Shared social connections and contexts	Friendships rooted in mutual friends, school, communities or similar life circumstances	12%	11%	13%	1.33	YES
Romantic connections	Friendships involving romantic interest, attraction or a romantic relationship	6%	5%	7%	1.49	YES

Note: Excludes non-substantive responses, including young people who did not describe why they stayed in touch with their online-only friend. Young people could mention more than one theme, so percentages do not sum to 100%. "Yes" indicates that mentioning the theme is statistically significantly associated with a high-quality online-only friendship (9-10 on the 0-to-10 strength and supportiveness scale) at the 95% confidence level in the adjusted model; "No" indicates it is not. The model accounts for demographic, country, wellbeing and other relationship factors included in the analysis.

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The themes young people emphasize when describing their online-only friendships are associated with how they rate those relationships. After accounting for other factors, mentioning closeness, trust and support has the strongest positive association with reporting a high-quality friendship. Conversation and personal rapport, romantic connection, shared interests and activities, and shared social contexts are also positively associated with friendship quality. By contrast, mentioning gaming or social media — which more often describes the setting or activity through which young people connected — is not independently associated with higher friendship quality.

Platforms, games and shared activities may provide opportunities for young people to meet and stay connected, but the qualities most strongly associated with higher-rated online-only friendships are familiar ones: trust, support and personal rapport.

This finding also echoes an earlier pattern in the report: Young people with stronger friendships in one setting tend to report stronger friendships in others. Together, these findings suggest that the qualities associated with meaningful relationships may extend across online and in-person settings, rather than belonging to a separate social world.



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CHAPTER 3

How Young People Spend Time and Connect Online

Highlights:

1. **Scrolling is the most common online activity.** Overall, 72% of young people frequently scroll short-form content, though many also use digital spaces to interact, learn and find information.

2. **Young people communicate online most often with people they know in person.** Frequent online communication is more common with in-person friends (68%) and family (57%) than with online-only friends (36%) or strangers (15%).

3. **Online communication patterns are associated with loneliness.** Higher loneliness is more common among those frequently communicating with strangers (42%) or online-only friends (32%) than with in-person friends or family (24% each).

4. **AI companionship is more common among frequent AI users and those with online friendships.** A median of 33% report using AI for companionship, rising to 50% among daily users and 42% among those with online-only friends.

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Online spaces are an important part of young people's social lives. This chapter examines what young people do online, where they spend time, whom they communicate with and how frequently they use the platforms that matter most to them. It also explores how patterns of online communication relate to loneliness and how young people use AI, including for companionship.

Most analyses in this chapter are limited to young people who own or have regular access to an internet-enabled device and were therefore asked questions about online life. This includes virtually all young people in countries where data collection took place online, compared with 88% in South Africa and 58% in Kenya, where interviews were conducted face to face.

3.1 | What Young People Do Online

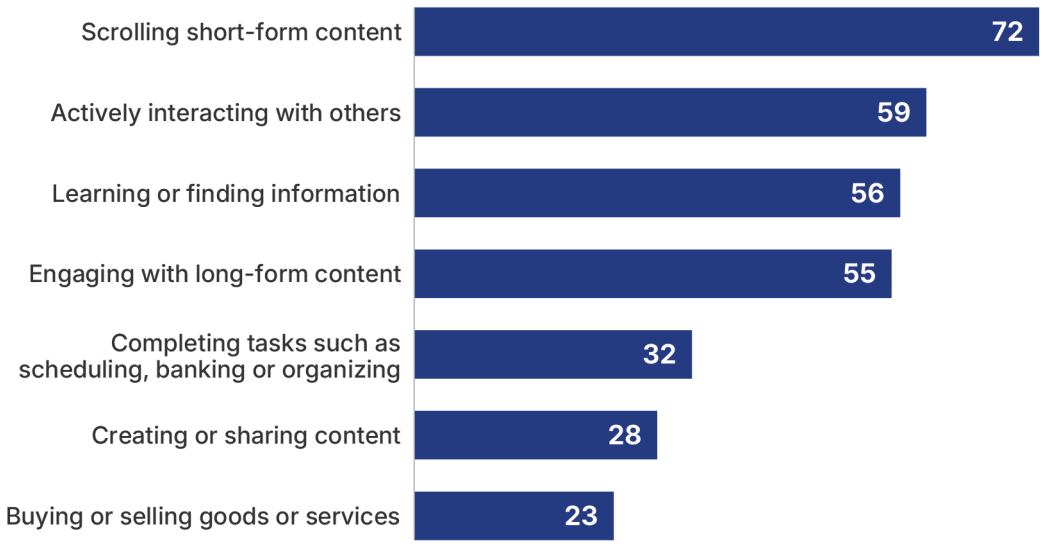
Among 15- to 22-year-olds with regular access to an internet-enabled device, some online activities are much more common than others. Scrolling through short-form content is the most frequent, with 72% saying they do this often or very often. Active interaction with others (59%), learning or finding information (56%), and engaging with long-form content (55%) are also common. Practical tasks, creating or sharing content, and buying or selling goods or services are less frequent.

FIGURE 3.1

What Young People Do Online

QUESTION WORDING: *Thinking about all of the time you spend online, how often do you do each of the following?*

% Reporting each activity often or very often



Note: Results are among young people who own or have regular access to an internet-enabled device. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

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Short-form scrolling, the most commonly reported online activity, also shows a modest association with wellbeing, as measured by young people's ratings of their current lives on a 0-to-10 scale. After accounting for country, age, gender, household income and other online activities, young people who scroll short-form content more frequently tend to rate their current lives slightly lower. This relationship is observational and does not establish whether scrolling influences life evaluation or vice versa.

3.2 | Where Young People Spend Time Online — and How Often

TikTok is the most commonly named platform overall, with a median of 26% saying it is the app, website or platform they have used most often in the past 30 days. Instagram follows at 20% and YouTube at 12%, while LINE and Snapchat each have median shares at or below 10%. Beyond these leading platforms, use is spread across a wider mix of apps and services.

TABLE 3.1

Most-Used App or Platform

QUESTION WORDING: *In the past 30 days, which app, website or platform did you use most often?*

App or platform	Median	Country range
TikTok	26%	8%-38%
Instagram	20%	5%-32%
YouTube	12%	3%-27%
LINE	10%	0%-19%
Snapchat	8%	0%-18%
WhatsApp	7%	0%-36%
Other	6%	2%-7%
Facebook	3%	1%-30%
Discord	2%	0%-5%
Netflix	2%	0%-4%
X (Twitter)	1%	0%-9%

Note: Results show the median and range of country-level percentages among young people who own or have regular access to an internet-enabled device. Because medians are calculated separately for each platform across countries, percentages should not be interpreted as parts of a single distribution or summed to 100%.

These figures reflect the platform young people identified as using most often, rather than the percentage who use each platform.

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These overall medians mask substantial variation across countries. TikTok is most commonly identified as the most-used platform in the United Kingdom (38%) and least commonly in Japan (8%). Instagram ranges from 32% in Brazil to 5% in South Africa, while YouTube ranges from 27% in Japan to 3% in South Africa. Platforms with relatively modest median shares can be much more prominent in particular places: WhatsApp reaches 36% in South Africa despite a cross-country median of 7%, while Facebook reaches 30% in Kenya despite a median of just 3%.

For many young people, their most-used platform is woven into everyday life rather than visited only occasionally (Figure 3.2).

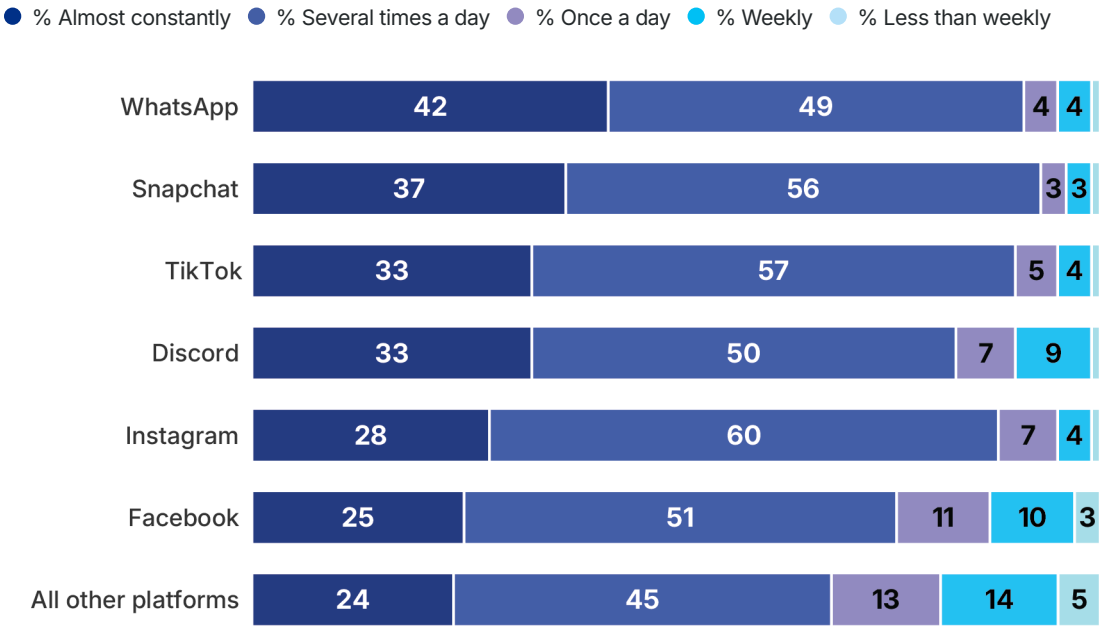
Across the major platforms, roughly three-quarters or more use their top platform several times a day or almost constantly. Differences are more apparent in the share who report almost-constant use, which is highest for WhatsApp (42%) and Snapchat (37%), compared with 25% for Facebook and 28% for Instagram.

The broader group of other platforms shows the clearest contrast, with 69% using them several times a day or almost constantly, compared with 76% to 93% across the named platforms.

FIGURE 3.2

Frequency of Use Varies Across Young People's Most-Used Platforms

Frequency of use of the app, website or platform young people say they have used most often in the past 30 days



Note: Results are among young people who own or have regular access to an internet-enabled device. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

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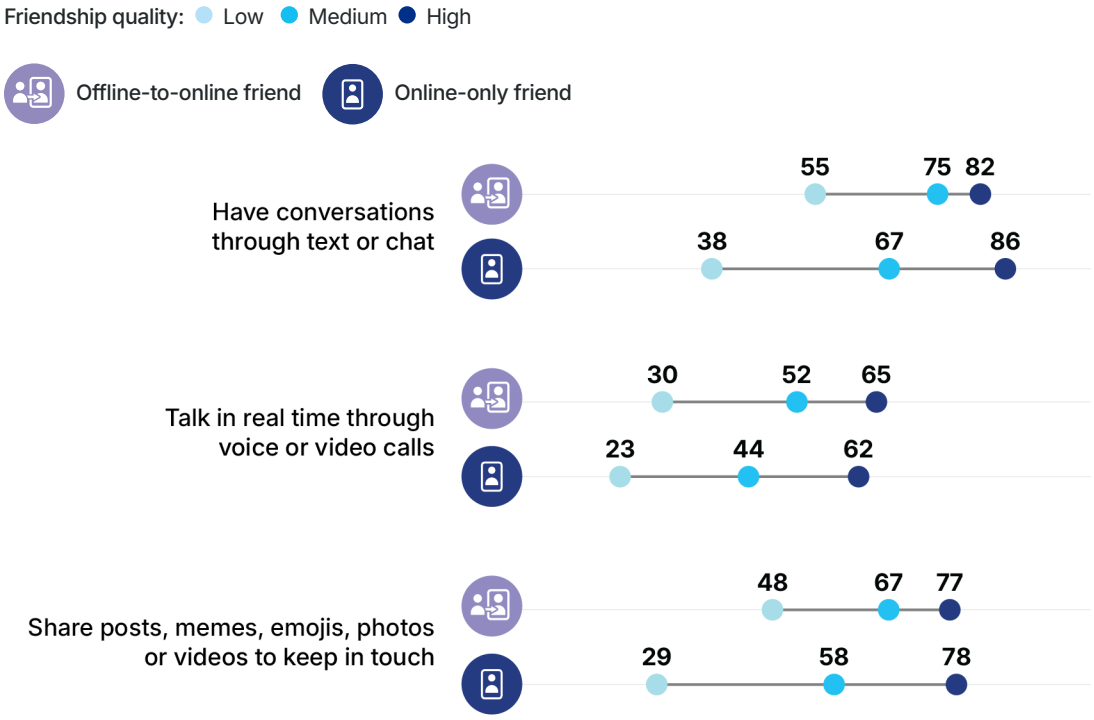
Beyond overall platform use, communication frequency also varies with the strength of young people's friendships. Those who rate their digitally mediated friendships more highly tend to communicate with those friends more often through text or chat, voice or video calls, and shared posts or media. This pattern is particularly pronounced for online-only friendships.

FIGURE 3.3

Higher-Quality Online Friendships Involve More Frequent Communication

QUESTION WORDING: *Still thinking of your closest [friend type], how often do you do each of the following?*

% Often or very often, by friendship mode and friendship quality



Note: Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

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3.3 | Whom Young People Connect With Online

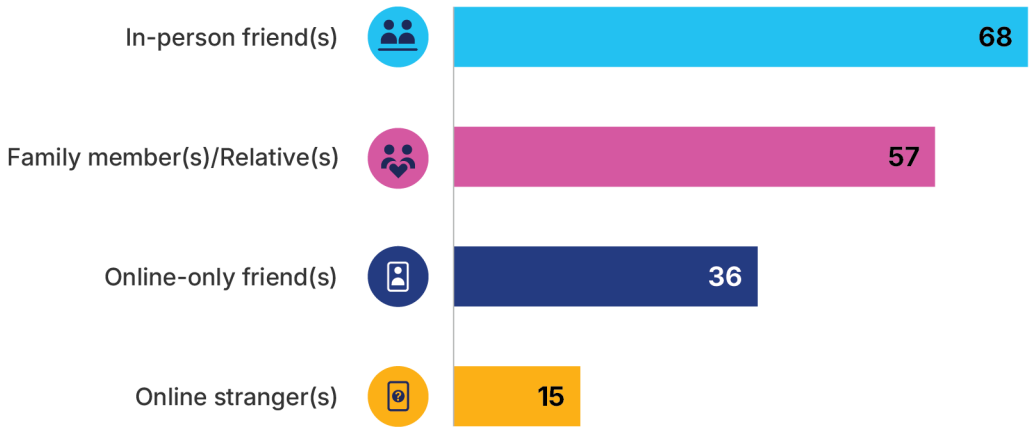
The platforms that people aged 15 to 22 use most often are only one part of their online social lives. When asked whom they communicate with one-to-one online, young people are most likely to report frequent contact with people they also know in person. About seven in 10 (68%) say they often or very often communicate one-to-one online with in-person friends, compared with 57% with family members. Smaller shares report this level of communication with online-only friends (36%) or online strangers (15%).

FIGURE 3.4

Young People Most Often Communicate Online With People They Know in Person

QUESTION WORDING: *How often are your active, online one-to-one communications with each of the following people?*

% Communicating one-to-one online often or very often with each group



Note: Results are among young people with regular access to an internet-enabled device. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

This reinforces a broader theme of the report: Much of young people's online social interaction remains anchored in relationships that also exist in person.

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Whom young people communicate with online may also reflect their broader experience of loneliness. Higher loneliness is more common among those who frequently communicate one-to-one online with online-only friends or strangers (32% and 42%, respectively) than among those who frequently communicate with in-person friends or family members (24% for each). These associations remain statistically significant after accounting for country, age, gender, household income and frequency of communication with the other groups.

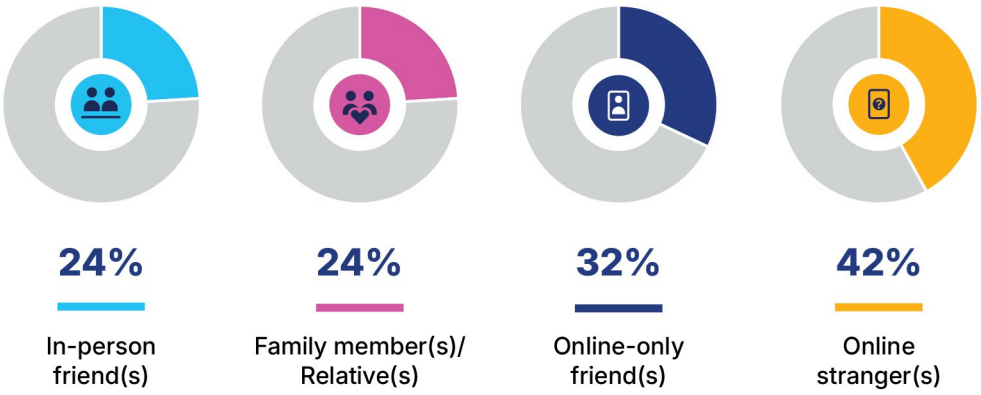
The direction of these relationships is difficult to determine. Young people experiencing greater loneliness may seek out different forms of online interaction, but the findings cannot establish whether those interactions influence loneliness or reflect other factors.

FIGURE 3.5

Higher Loneliness Varies by Whom Young People Communicate With Online Most Frequently

QUESTION WORDING: *How often are your active, online one-to-one communications with each of the following people?*

% Higher loneliness among those communicating one-to-one online often or very often with each group



Note: Percentages are based on young people who report communicating one-to-one online with each group often or very often. Higher loneliness is defined as a score of 7 to 9 on the loneliness scale. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering. In regression analysis predicting higher loneliness, frequent communication with all four groups remained statistically significant after accounting for country, age, gender, household income and frequency of communication with the other three groups. Associations were negative for communication with in-person friends and family members and positive for communication with online-only friends and strangers.

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3.4 | AI in Young People's Online Lives: From Use to Companionship

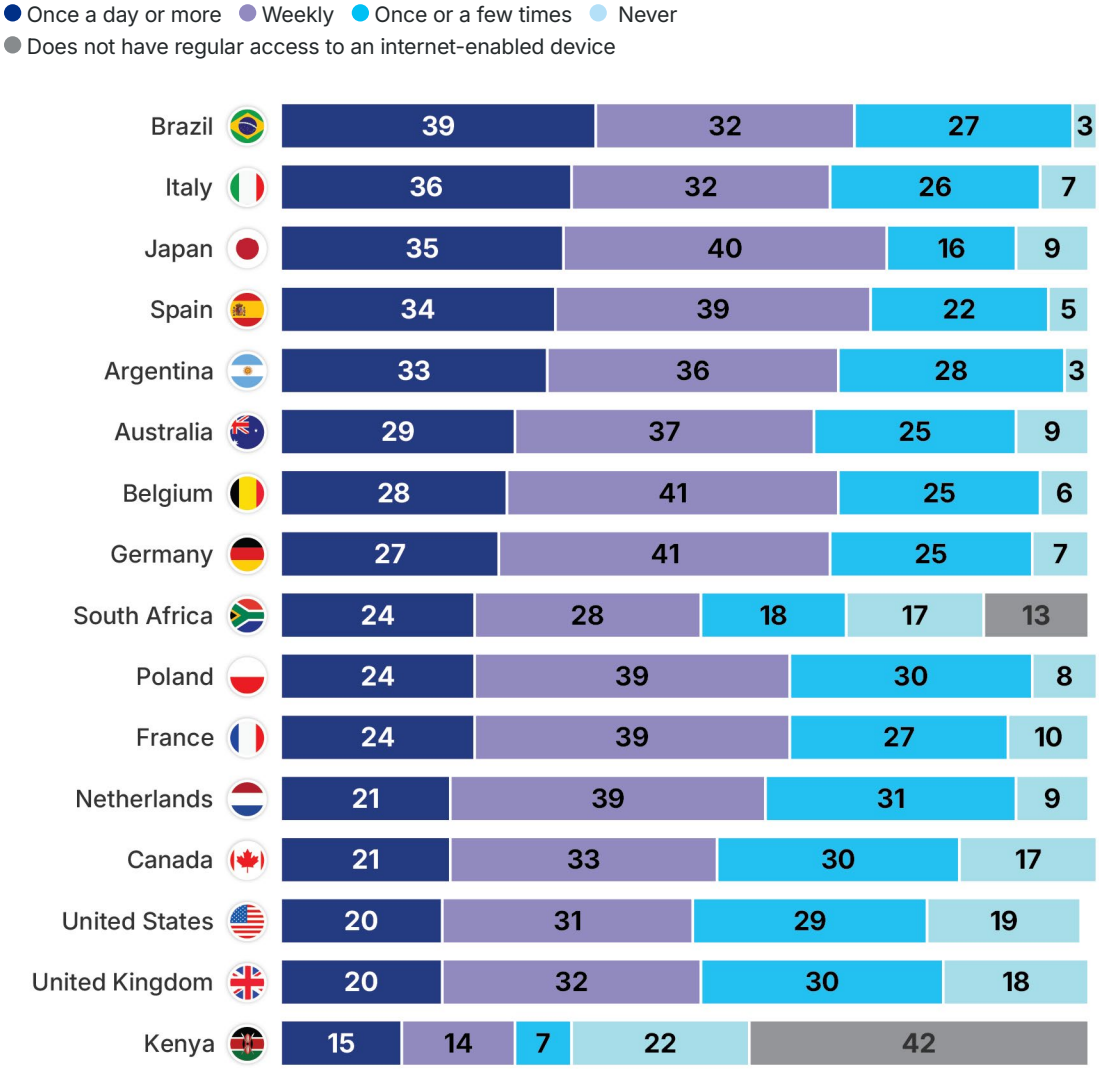
AI has become a regular part of many young people's online lives, although use varies considerably across the countries surveyed. Daily use ranges from 20% in the United States and United Kingdom to 39% in Brazil, with Italy (36%) and Japan (35%) also among the countries where daily use is relatively common. By contrast, nearly half of young people in the United States, United Kingdom and Canada have used AI no more than a few times in the past month, including those who have not used it at all.

FIGURE 3.6

Frequency of AI Use, by Country

QUESTION WORDING: *In the past month, how often did you intentionally use AI apps, websites or platforms?*

% Reporting each frequency, among all respondents



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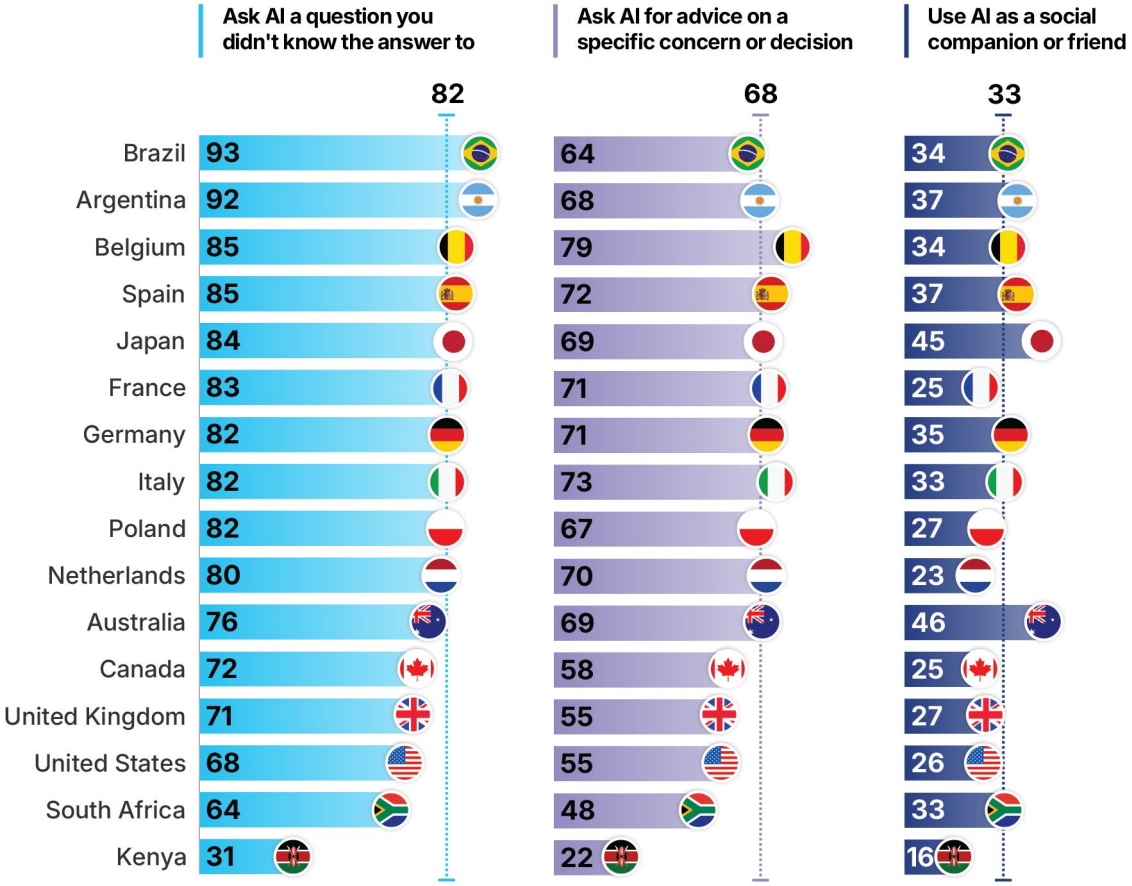
Young people turn to AI for a variety of purposes, most commonly to seek information. Across the 16 countries, a median of 82% say they have used it to ask a question they did not know the answer to. About two-thirds (68%) have used it for advice about a specific concern or decision, while 33% have used AI as a social companion or friend.

FIGURE 3.7

How Young People Use AI, by Country

% Reporting each use, among all respondents

Dashed line = median across countries



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Frequent AI Users and Those With Online Friends More Likely to Use AI for Companionship

Use of AI as a social companion or friend increases with overall frequency of AI use. Half of young people who use AI at least daily report using it for companionship, compared with 35% of weekly users and 24% of those who use AI less frequently. This suggests that AI companionship is more common among young people who engage with AI regularly.

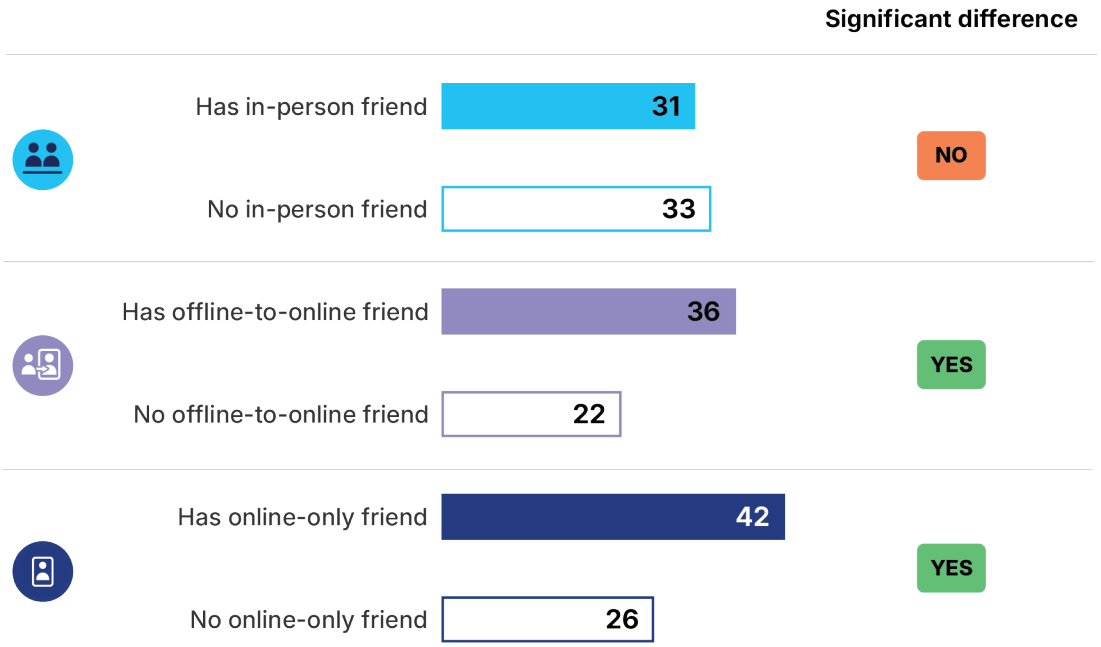
AI companionship is also more common among young people who have digitally mediated friendships.

Among those with an online-only friend, 42% report using AI as a social companion or friend, compared with 26% of those without one. A similar difference is observed among young people with and without an offline-to-online friend (36% vs. 22%).

FIGURE 3.8

AI Companionship, by Friendship Mode

% Reporting use of AI as a social companion, among young people who have used AI at least once in the past month



Note: "Significant difference" indicates whether the difference between young people with and without each friendship type is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level ($p < .05$). Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

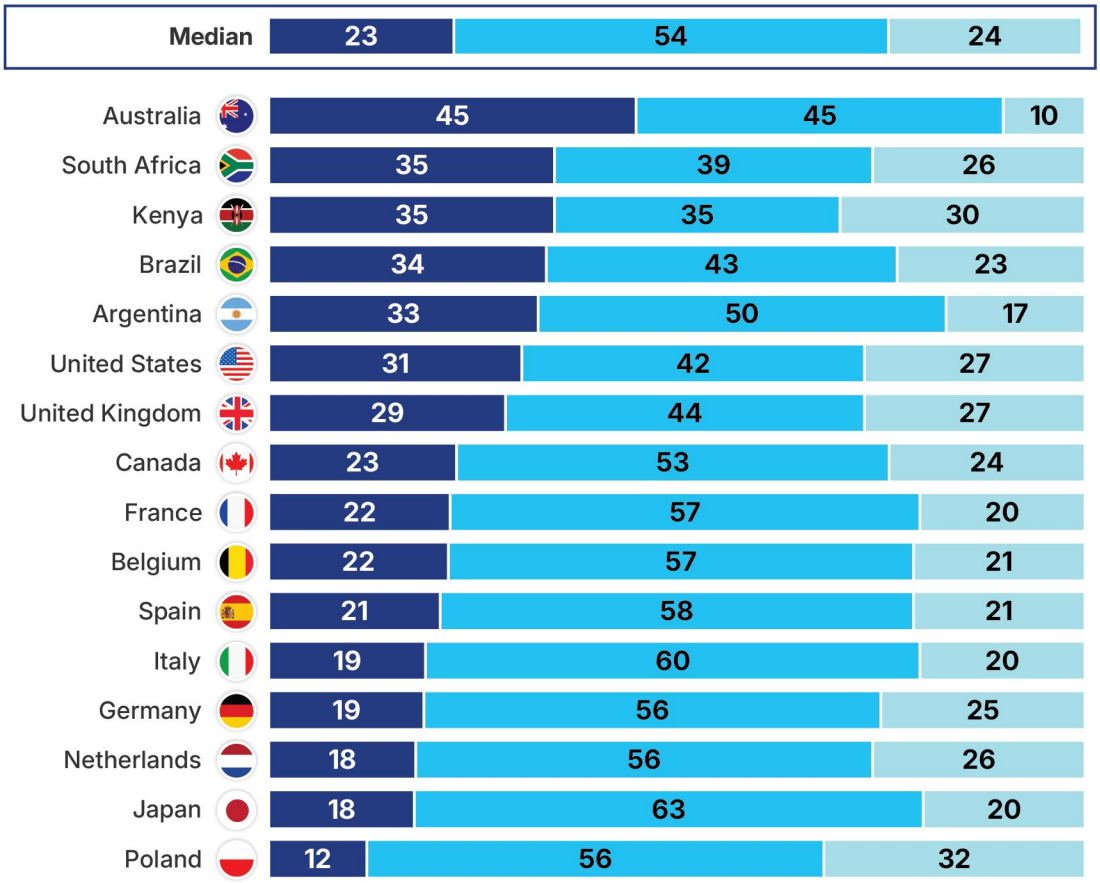
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Among young people who use AI as a social companion or friend, perceptions of these experiences vary across countries. In Australia, 45% rate their AI companionship as high quality, compared with 35% in South Africa and Kenya and just 12% in Poland. In most countries, however, young people are more likely to give their AI companionship a medium rating than either a high or low rating. These assessments should be compared cautiously with those for human friendships examined in this report, as young people may have different expectations of what makes an AI companion or human friendship meaningful and supportive.

FIGURE 3.9

AI Companion Quality Rating, by Country

% Rating companionship as low, medium or high quality, among those using AI as a social companion or friend



Note: Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

All in all, these findings suggest that AI companionship exists alongside other forms of digital engagement and human friendship. While young people with digitally mediated friendships are more likely to use AI for companionship, these patterns do not establish whether AI companionship supplements, substitutes for or otherwise influences their human relationships.

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CHAPTER 4

How Relationships Relate to Loneliness and Wellbeing

Highlights:

1. **Online acceptance is common, while belonging and support are less widespread.** Overall, 61% say there are people online who accept them for who they are, while 48% each say they feel they belong in an online community or could turn to someone online for support.

2. **When loneliness hits, scrolling is the most common response.** Six in 10 young people say they often or always scroll through online content when lonely. However, among those who use each strategy, spending time with someone in person is about as likely as scrolling to be rated as substantially helpful.

3. **Higher-quality in-person friendships show the clearest association with lower loneliness.** Higher loneliness falls from 32% among those with low-quality in-person friendships to 21% among those with high-quality ones. No comparable difference appears across online-only friendship quality levels.

4. **Loneliness is lowest when a young person's highest-rated friendship is in person.** Higher loneliness is reported by 20% of those whose in-person friendship is rated highest, compared with 31% whose offline-to-online friendship is rated highest and 43% whose online-only friendship is rated highest.

5. **Stronger relationships, particularly those rooted in in-person interactions, are associated with better wellbeing.** Individuals with high-quality in-person friendships are about twice as likely to be thriving in their life evaluations as those without in-person friendships. High-quality parent/caregiver relationships are associated with even higher odds of thriving.

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Young people's relationships are defined not only by whom they connect with and how those connections are maintained, but also by the extent to which they provide belonging, support and positive social experiences. Digital spaces can expand opportunities for connection, but they can also expose young people to negative social experiences or become places they turn to when feeling isolated.

This chapter examines how young people's online experiences and the quality of their relationships are associated with loneliness and overall wellbeing. Because the data are observational, they cannot determine whether particular relationships or behaviors shape wellbeing, whether wellbeing influences the relationships and behaviors young people adopt, or whether both reflect other factors in their lives.

4.1 | Online Acceptance Is Widespread, While Belonging and Support Are Less Common

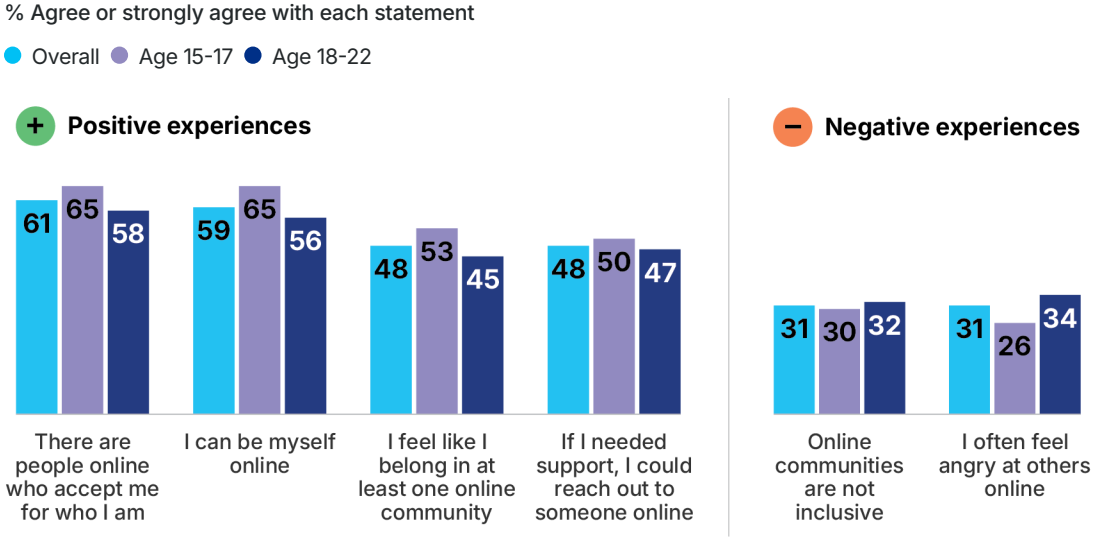
Most young people with regular access to an internet-enabled device report positive experiences in their online social lives, although these experiences are far from universal. Overall, roughly six in 10 say there are people online who accept them for who they are or that they can be themselves online, while about half say they feel they belong in an online community or could turn to someone online for support. Negative experiences are less common, though about three in 10 say online communities are not inclusive or that they often feel angry at others online.

FIGURE 4.1

Online Acceptance Is More Common Than a Sense of Belonging or Support

QUESTION WORDING: *Please share whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about your online life.*

% Agree or strongly agree with each statement



Note: Results are among young people with regular access to an internet-enabled device. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

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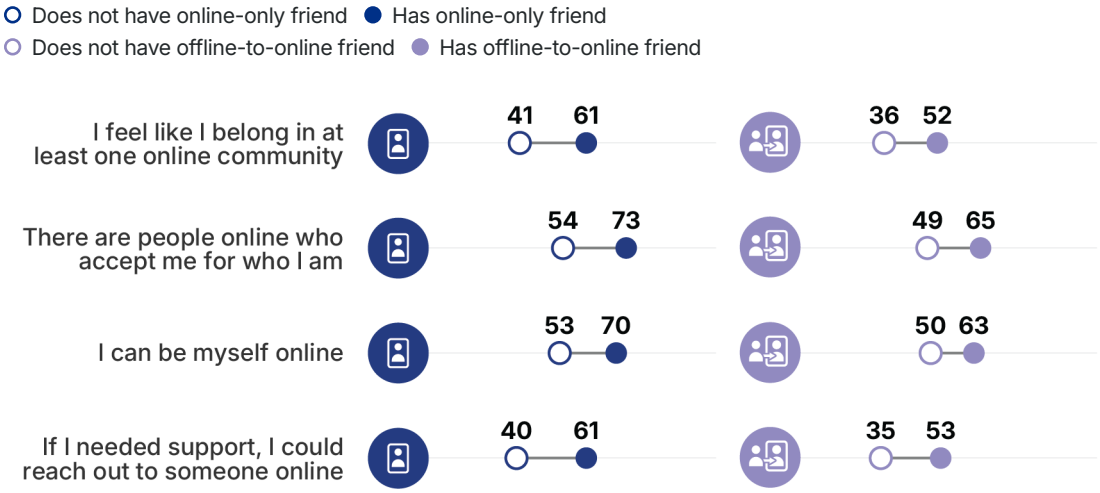
Young people aged 15 to 17 generally report more positive online social experiences than those aged 18 to 22. The largest differences appear in feeling able to be oneself online, feeling accepted by others and belonging in an online community. Those aged 18 to 22 are more likely to report often feeling angry at others online, while the age difference in access to online support is relatively small. Gender differences are generally more modest, although young men are more likely than young women to report belonging to an online community (53% vs. 43%).

Online belonging also differs substantially depending on whether young people have a digitally mediated friendship. Those with an online-only friend are 17 to 21 percentage points more likely than those without one to agree with each of the four positive belonging and support items. Differences are also substantial for offline-to-online friendship, ranging from 13 to 18 points.

FIGURE 4.2

Young People With Digitally Mediated Friendships Report More Online Belonging and Support

% Agree or strongly agree with each statement, by friendship status



Note: Results are among young people with regular access to an internet-enabled device. All differences between young people with and without each friendship mode are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level ($p < .05$). Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

These findings echo a broader pattern in the report: Young people with digitally mediated friendships often appear socially engaged across multiple settings.

Here, young people with online-only or offline-to-online friendships report a stronger sense of belonging and support online, complementing earlier findings that they also remain active in their in-person social life. These associations suggest that digitally mediated friendships can coexist with broader social engagement, although they do not establish whether these friendships contribute directly to feelings of belonging and support.

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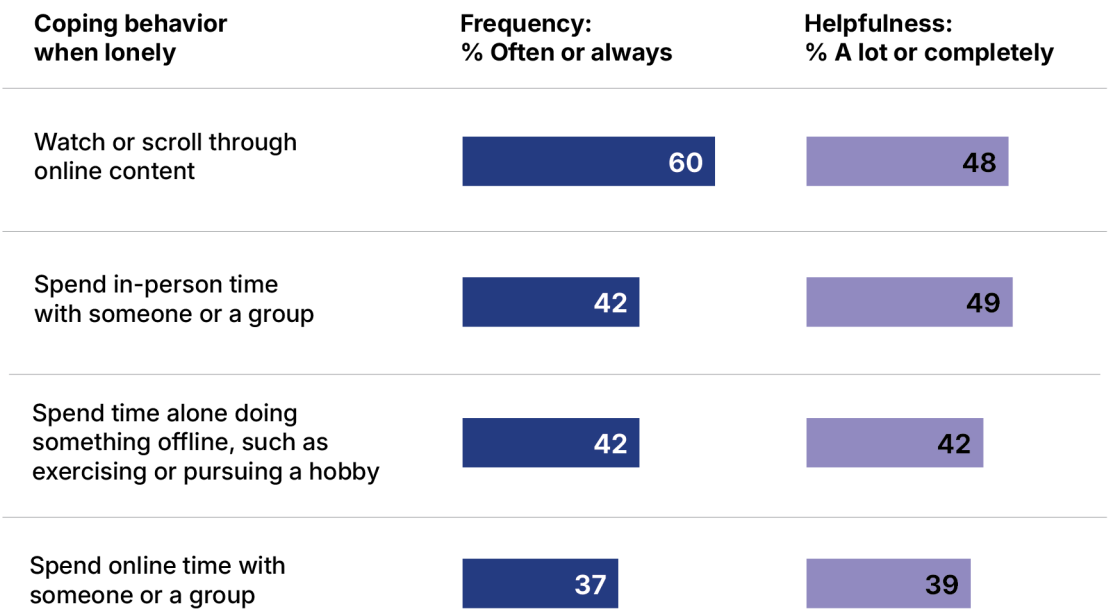
4.2 | Loneliness Linked to How Young People Engage Online

When young people feel lonely, scrolling through online content is the response they report most often. Spending time with someone in person is less common, but among those who use each strategy, it is about as likely as scrolling to be rated as substantially helpful. Although scrolling is more commonly used when young people feel lonely, those who use scrolling or in-person time as coping strategies report nearly identical levels of perceived helpfulness.

FIGURE 4.3

Scrolling Is the Most Common Response to Loneliness, but In-Person Time Is Similarly Likely to Help

Percentages reporting frequency and helpfulness of coping behaviors when feeling lonely



Note: Results are among respondents with regular access to an internet-enabled device. Helpfulness was asked separately for each response only among respondents who said they use that response at least rarely when feeling lonely; the base for the helpfulness percentage therefore differs across responses. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

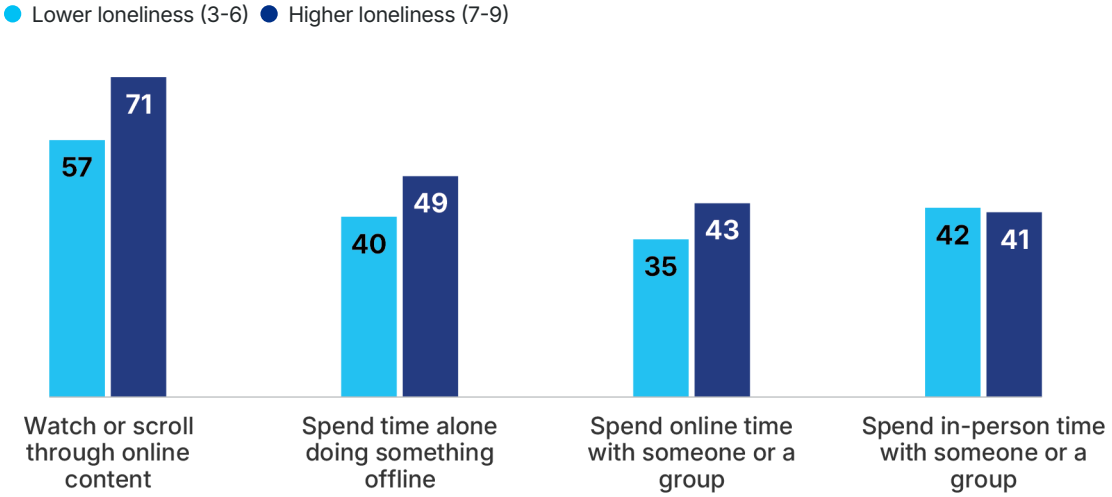
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Coping patterns also differ by how lonely young people feel. Those with higher loneliness are more likely to scroll, spend time alone offline or spend time with someone online when lonely. By contrast, spending time with someone in person is nearly identical among those with higher and lower loneliness. This pattern suggests that higher loneliness is associated with greater use of solitary and online coping strategies, while in-person coping does not vary meaningfully by loneliness level.

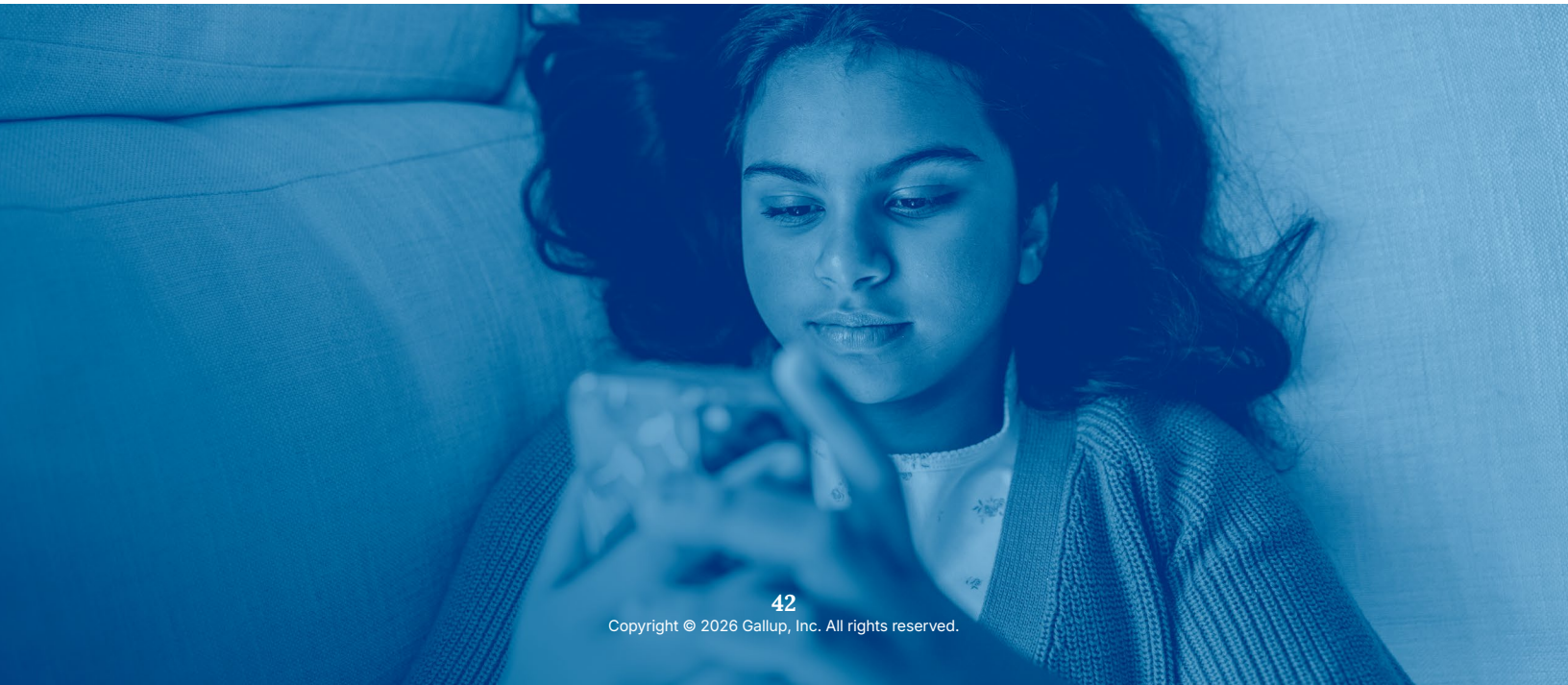
FIGURE 4.4

Young People With Higher Loneliness More Often Turn to Solitary and Online Coping Strategies

% Reporting each coping behavior often or always when feeling lonely, by loneliness level



Note: Lower and higher loneliness were measured using a three-item loneliness scale ranging from 3 to 9; scores of 3 to 6 are classified as lower loneliness, and scores of 7 to 9 as higher loneliness. Differences between the two groups are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level ($p < .05$) for all coping behaviors except spending time with someone in person. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.



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4.3 | Stronger In-Person Friendships Show the Clearest Link to Lower Loneliness

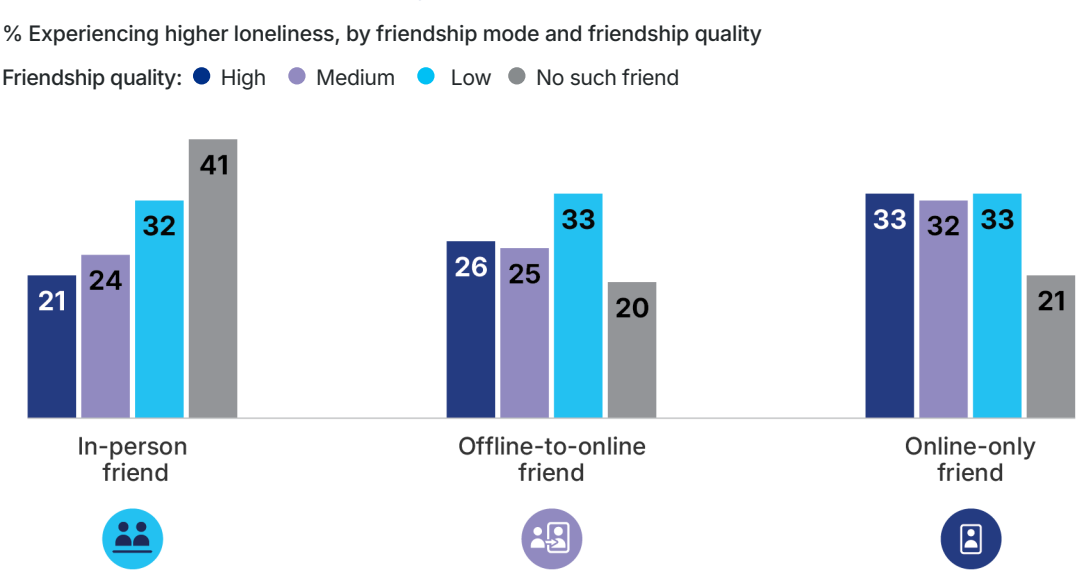
The relationship between friendship quality and loneliness differs across friendship modes. While higher-quality friendships are not uniformly associated with lower loneliness, the clearest association appears among friendships rooted in in-person interaction. Among young people with an in-person friendship, the share experiencing higher loneliness declines steadily as friendship quality rises, from 32% among those with a low-quality friendship to 21% among those with a high-quality friendship. A similar, though less pronounced, pattern appears for friendships that began in person and later moved online.

Online-only friendships stand apart. Higher loneliness is essentially unchanged across quality levels — 33% at low quality, 32% at medium quality and 33% at high quality. This does not mean that a high-quality online-only friendship brings no value to the young person who has it. Rather, in these descriptive results, higher ratings of online-only friendship quality are not accompanied by lower levels of loneliness.

FIGURE 4.5

Higher-Quality In-Person Friendships Are Associated With Lower Loneliness, While Online-Only Friendships Show Little Difference

% Experiencing higher loneliness, by friendship mode and friendship quality



Note: Higher loneliness refers to scores of 7 to 9 on the three-item loneliness scale, which measures how often young people report lacking companionship, feeling left out and feeling isolated. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering. Regression analysis predicting higher loneliness adjusts for friendship quality across all three modes, satisfaction with in-person time spent with friends and family, AI companionship, trusted adult availability, parent/caregiver relationship quality, age, gender, urbanicity, household income and country. "No such friend" is shown separately and is not part of the friendship-quality scale.

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Further analysis reinforces the distinction between friendship modes. After accounting for other relationships, satisfaction with in-person social time, AI companionship and demographic characteristics, young people with in-person friendships have approximately half the odds of higher loneliness compared with those without an in-person friend, regardless of friendship quality. The pattern is less consistent for offline-to-online friendships, where low- and high-quality friendships are associated with somewhat higher odds of loneliness, while medium-quality friendships show no statistically significant difference.

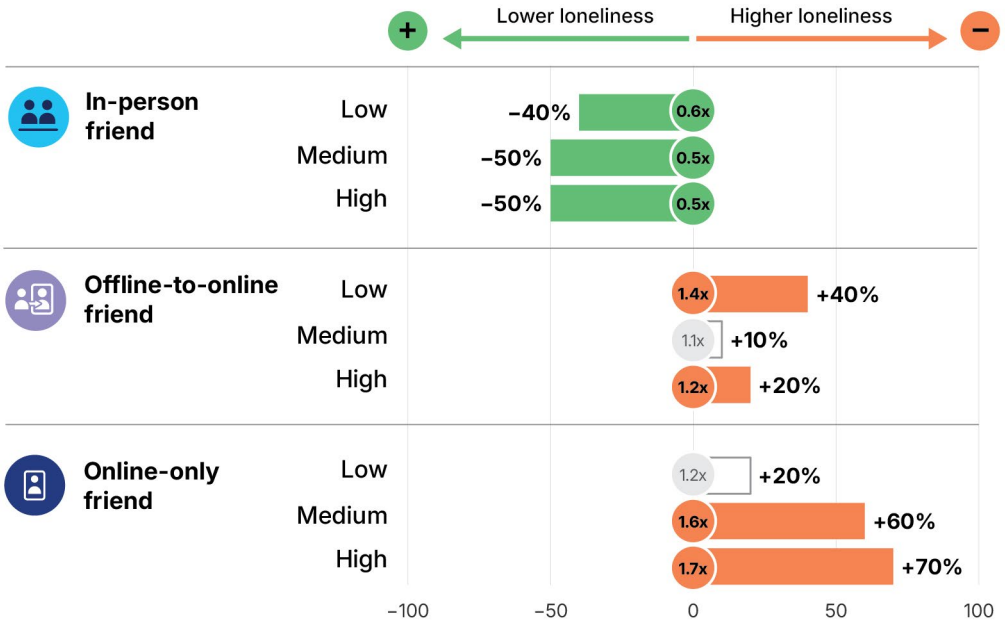
For online-only friendships, the adjusted findings offer a different perspective from the descriptive results in Figure 4.5. Although loneliness varies little across levels of online-only friendship quality, young people with medium- or high-quality online-only friendships have approximately 1.6 to 1.7 times the adjusted odds of higher loneliness compared with those without an online-only friend. This does not mean that online-only friendships contribute to loneliness.

Rather, the findings suggest that even young people who experience these friendships as strong and supportive may still feel socially disconnected. Together, these results underscore the importance of considering young people's broader relationships and social experiences when examining loneliness.

FIGURE 4.6

In-Person Friendship Quality Is Linked to Lower Odds of Loneliness; Online-Only Friendship Quality Is Not

Adjusted percentage change in the odds of higher loneliness, by friendship mode and friendship quality (Reference category: No friendship of this type)



Note: Higher loneliness refers to scores of 7-9 on the three-item loneliness scale, which measures how often young people report lacking companionship, feeling left out and feeling isolated. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

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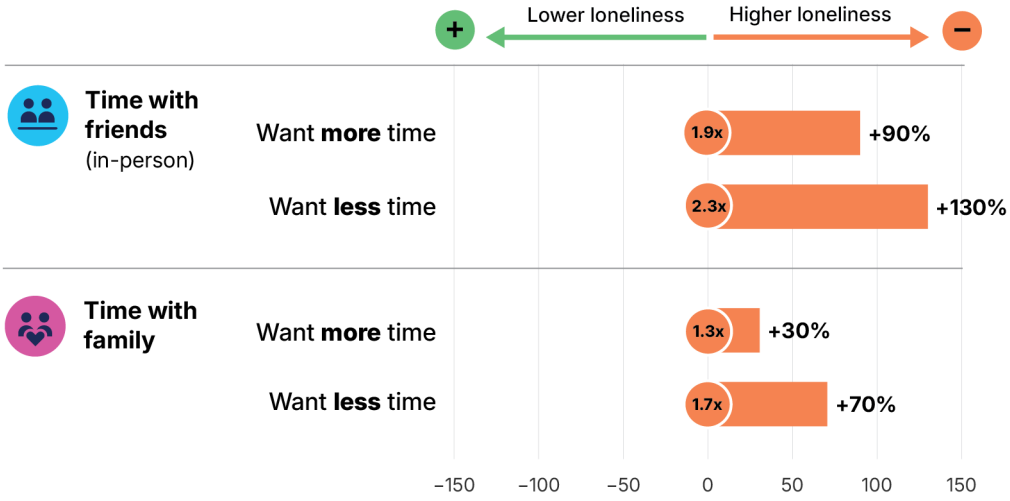
Beyond Friendship Quality: Social Experiences and Loneliness

Expanded analysis also identifies associations between loneliness and young people's satisfaction with in-person social time, as well as their use of AI for companionship.

FIGURE 4.7

Wanting Different Amounts of In-Person Time Is Linked to About Twice the Odds of Higher Loneliness

Adjusted percentage change in the odds of higher loneliness (Reference category: Young people who are satisfied with their in-person time)



Note: Higher loneliness refers to scores of 7-9 on the three-item loneliness scale, which measures how often young people report lacking companionship, feeling left out and feeling isolated. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.

First, young people who want either more or less time with friends in person have roughly twice the adjusted odds of higher loneliness compared with those who are satisfied with the amount of social time they have (1.9 and 2.3 times the odds, respectively). Notably, the association is strongest among those who want less time with friends.

Loneliness and social withdrawal can go hand in hand, as people who feel lonely may sometimes pull away from others rather than seek more time together.[5] A similar, though less pronounced, pattern appears for time spent with family.

Separately, young people who report using AI as a social companion or friend also have 70% higher adjusted odds of higher loneliness than those who do not report AI companionship, after accounting for friendship quality, social-time satisfaction and other characteristics.

These findings are observational and do not establish whether dissatisfaction with social time or AI companionship contributes to loneliness, results from it or reflects other circumstances.

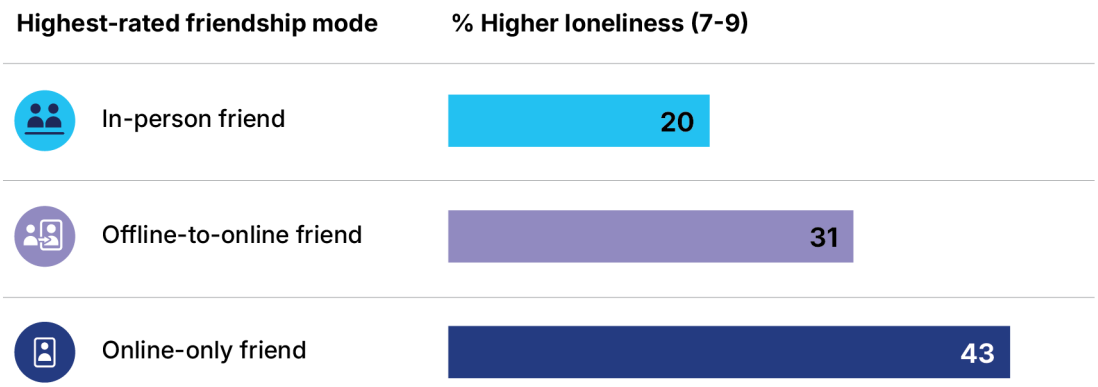
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Looking at the relationship from a different angle, higher loneliness is substantially more common when young people's highest-rated friendship is online-only rather than in person (Figure 4.8). Among those with a clear highest-rated friendship mode, 20% of those whose in-person friendship is rated highest fall in the higher loneliness range, compared with 31% whose offline-to-online friendship is rated highest and 43% whose online-only friendship is rated highest.

FIGURE 4.8

Loneliness Is Lowest When an In-Person Friendship Is Rated Highest

Percentages classified as having higher loneliness, by highest-rated friendship mode



Note: Results are limited to young people with a clear highest-rated friendship mode; ties are excluded. "Highest-rated" refers to the friendship mode receiving the highest 0-to-10 strength and supportiveness rating. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering.



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4.4 | Thriving Rises With Stronger Relationships

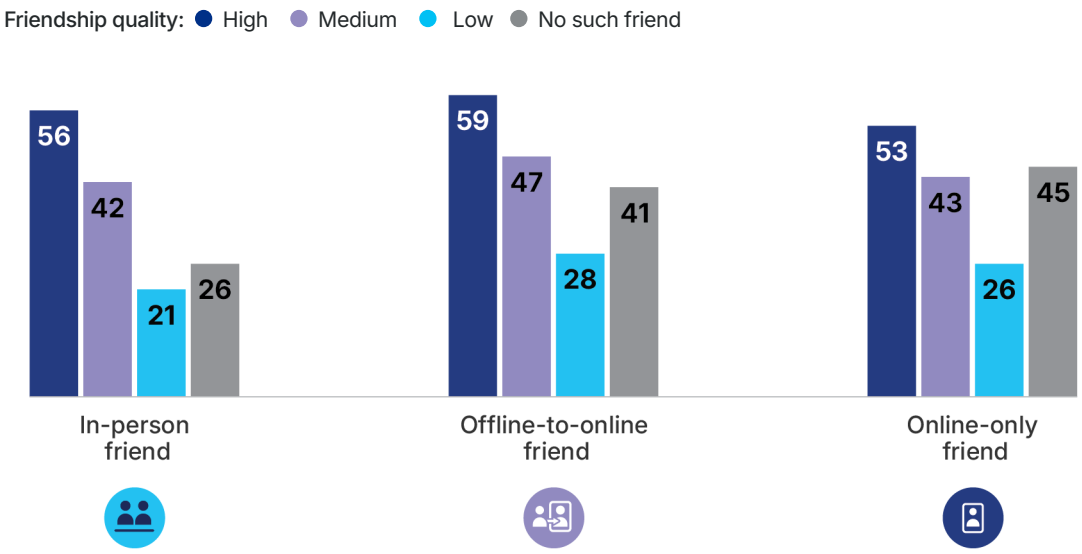
As friendship quality rises, young people tend to evaluate their lives more positively across all three friendship modes. This is evident in the share classified as thriving — meaning they rate their current life a 7 or higher and their expected life in five years an 8 or higher on a 0-to-10 scale — which rises substantially from low- to high-quality friendships.

Among those with an in-person friend, 21% of young people with a low-quality relationship are thriving, compared with 56% of those with a high-quality one. Similar gradients appear for offline-to-online friendships, where the corresponding shares are 28% and 59%, and for online-only friendships, where they are 26% and 53%.

FIGURE 4.9

Thriving Rises With Friendship Quality Across All Three Modes of Close Friendship

% Thriving, by friendship mode and friendship quality



Note: "Thriving" refers to young people who rate their current life a 7 or higher and their expected life in five years an 8 or higher on 0-to-10 scales, following Gallup's Life Evaluation definition. Weighted percentages use pooled weights rescaled so that each country contributes equally to the total sample before any item-specific filtering. "No such friend" is shown separately and is not part of the friendship-quality scale.

These descriptive results also illustrate an important complication: Wellbeing may reflect not only the quality of a particular friendship, but also the broader set of relationships around it. More than seven in 10 young people (72%) report friendships in multiple modes, and, as Chapter 2 showed, stronger relationships in one mode often coexist with stronger relationships in others. Regression analysis helps distinguish these overlapping patterns by examining all three friendship modes simultaneously while accounting for other important relationships and demographic characteristics.

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In-person friendship quality shows the clearest positive association with wellbeing. Compared with young people who report having no in-person friend, those with medium- and especially high-quality in-person friendships have higher odds of thriving and rate their current lives more positively. Among those with a high-quality in-person friendship, the adjusted odds of thriving are nearly twice as high (1.92 times), and current-life ratings are approximately 0.6 points higher on the 0-to-10 scale (Table 4.1).

To interpret Table 4.1, odds ratios above 1 indicate higher odds of thriving, while values below 1 indicate lower odds. For current-life ratings, positive differences indicate higher scores, and negative differences indicate lower scores. All estimates are relative to the reference groups specified below the table.

TABLE 4.1

Adjusted Associations Between Relationship Quality and Overall Wellbeing

Friendship estimates are relative to having no friendship of that mode.
Parent/Caregiver estimates are relative to having a low-quality relationship.

Relationship	Quality	Odds of thriving (ratio)	Difference in current-life rating (points)
In-person friendship	Low (0-5)	0.83 (n.s.)	+0.12 (n.s.)
	Medium (6-8)	1.32	+0.27
	High (9-10)	1.92	+0.58
Offline-to-online friendship	Low (0-5)	0.71	-0.25
	Medium (6-8)	1.05 (n.s.)	0.00 (n.s.)
	High (9-10)	1.39	+0.27
Online-only friendship	Low (0-5)	0.71	-0.22
	Medium (6-8)	0.84	-0.11
	High (9-10)	0.94 (n.s.)	+0.04 (n.s.)
Parent/Caregiver relationship	Medium (6-8)	1.65	+0.57
	High (9-10)	2.72	+0.96

Note: For friendship modes, estimates compare each quality level with young people who do not have that friendship mode. For parent/caregiver relationships, estimates compare medium and high quality with low quality. Odds ratios describe the relative odds of thriving; differences in current-life ratings are measured in points on a 0-to-10 scale. Models adjust for friendship quality across all three modes, satisfaction with in-person time spent with friends and family, AI companionship, trusted-adult availability, parent/caregiver relationship quality, age, gender, urbanicity, household income and country. "n.s." indicates that an estimate is not statistically significant at the 95% confidence level; all other estimates are significant.

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Offline-to-online friendships show a less consistent relationship with wellbeing. Compared with those without this type of friendship, young people with low-quality offline-to-online friendships report lower wellbeing, while those with high-quality friendships have higher odds of thriving and more positive current-life ratings.

Online-only friendships show a more nuanced relationship with wellbeing. Although thriving increases from 26% among those with low-quality online-only friendships to 53% among those with high-quality ones (Figure 4.9), this pattern becomes less straightforward after accounting for other factors. Compared with young people who have no online-only friend, those with low- or medium-quality friendships have lower adjusted odds of thriving, while those with high-quality friendships do not differ significantly. However, an additional adjusted comparison shows that high-quality online-only friendships are associated with higher odds of thriving than low-quality ones. Together, these findings suggest that stronger online-only friendships are associated with more positive wellbeing, but their relationship with thriving also depends on the broader social and personal circumstances considered in the analysis.

Parent/Caregiver relationship quality shows an especially strong association with wellbeing. Compared with young people who rate this relationship as low quality, those with a medium-quality relationship have approximately 1.7 times the adjusted odds of thriving and rate their current lives 0.57 points higher. Among those with a high-quality relationship, the differences widen to approximately 2.7 times the odds of thriving and nearly one point higher on the current-life ladder.

While these results cannot establish cause and effect, they point to the particular importance of friendships rooted in in-person interaction for young people's wellbeing.

Higher-quality in-person friendships show the clearest and most consistent positive associations with wellbeing, while high-quality offline-to-online friendships are also linked to more positive outcomes.

The relationship between online-only friendship quality and wellbeing is more complex, underscoring the different ways these friendship modes relate to young people's lives.

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Concluding Thoughts

The findings from this 16-country study highlight the importance of understanding young people's social lives as a network of relationships that span online and in-person settings. By examining friendships, digital behaviors, loneliness and wellbeing together among young people aged 15 to 22, the study provides a broader perspective on how these experiences are interconnected across different social and cultural contexts.

1 Supportive Relationships Are Closely Linked to Young People's Wellbeing

Across multiple aspects of young people's social lives, the study finds a consistent association between the quality of their relationships and their wellbeing. Higher-quality friendships are associated with more positive emotional experiences across all three friendship modes, but friendships rooted in in-person interaction show the clearest and most consistent positive associations with overall wellbeing. Young people with stronger in-person friendships are less likely to report higher loneliness and more likely to be thriving, even after accounting for other relationships and demographic characteristics.

Supportive relationships extend beyond friendships. The quality of young people's relationships with parents or caregivers shows an especially strong association with wellbeing, while having a trusted adult outside the family is associated with a greater likelihood of reporting at least one of the friendship modes measured. Together, these findings highlight the importance of considering the broader network of relationships in young people's lives, rather than focusing exclusively on any single friendship or setting.

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2 Online and In-Person Friendships Are Part of a Broader Social Life

The findings also challenge the idea that online and in-person friendships compete with one another. Most young people report friendships across multiple settings, and those who rate their friendships highly in one mode tend to give similarly positive ratings to friendships in other modes. These patterns suggest that stronger friendships tend to coexist across settings, rather than showing a general tendency for stronger relationships in one setting to compensate for weaker connections elsewhere.

The same pattern emerges in young people's offline activities. Those with online-only friends participate in organized in-person group activities at similar or higher rates than those without such friendships. Yet they are also more likely to want additional time with friends in person, suggesting that active participation in offline social life does not necessarily mean young people feel they have enough face-to-face connection.

Digital platforms play different roles in these interconnected social lives. Gaming and social media provide common pathways into online-only friendships, with young men and women often describing different ways of meeting these friends. Other platforms help young people stay connected, while much online communication takes place with friends and family members they already know in person. When young people describe their online-only friendships, references to trust, support and personal rapport are more strongly associated with higher friendship quality than mentions of gaming or social media alone. These patterns suggest that digital spaces may shape how friendships begin and are maintained, while many of the qualities associated with stronger friendships are familiar across settings.

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3 Understanding Digital Life Requires Looking Beyond Screen Time

Young people's digital lives involve much more than the amount of time they spend online. They use digital spaces to communicate, learn, find information, create content and entertain themselves, often moving among several activities and platforms. The findings suggest that understanding these experiences requires attention to what young people do online, whom they interact with and how those interactions fit into their broader social lives.

These distinctions are particularly relevant to loneliness. Frequent online communication with in-person friends and family members is associated with lower loneliness, while frequent communication with online-only friends or strangers is associated with higher loneliness. Friendship quality also matters: Stronger in-person friendships are consistently associated with lower loneliness, whereas the relationship between online-only friendship quality and loneliness is more complex.

AI adds another dimension to young people's digital experiences. Some young people already use AI for companionship, particularly frequent AI users and those with digitally mediated friendships: 42% of young people with an online-only friend report using AI for companionship, compared with 26% of those without one. AI companionship is also associated with higher loneliness after accounting for other relationships and characteristics. However, the findings cannot determine whether young people turn to AI because they feel lonely, whether AI companionship influences their social experiences or whether other circumstances help explain these relationships.

Viewed as a whole, this study highlights how closely young people's online and in-person social lives are interconnected. Digital spaces offer additional opportunities to form and maintain relationships, but in-person friendships and other supportive relationships remain particularly important to wellbeing. The broader message is not that one form of connection is inherently better or worse, but that the quality of young people's relationships and the wider social context in which they exist matter greatly.

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Endnotes

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3 The in-person friendship measure includes young people who report having a close friend they primarily spend time with in person, as well as those who report having an in-person friend who is not necessarily close. The latter group represents approximately 6% of the pooled, weighted sample. Both groups are included in analyses using the in-person friendship measure throughout the report.

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