

2025

Boys in the Digital Wild:

Online Culture, Identity, and Well-Being

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Bezos Family Foundation

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2025

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Online Culture, Identity, and Well-Being

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Special thanks to Richard Reeves, Brian Scholl, and Isaac Rose-Berman of the American Institute for Boys and Men for their contributions to this report.

Robb, M. B., & Mann, S. (2025). *Boys in the digital wild: Online culture, identity, and well-being.* San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media.

Key Findings

Common Sense Media conducted a nationally representative survey of 1,017 adolescent boys age 11 to 17 across the United States in July 2025 to understand how digital environments shape masculine identity development during adolescence. The study examined boys' engagement patterns across social media platforms and gaming communities, their exposure to online masculinity content and influencers, and how these digital experiences relate to their emotional well-being, self-esteem, and real-world relationships.

1.

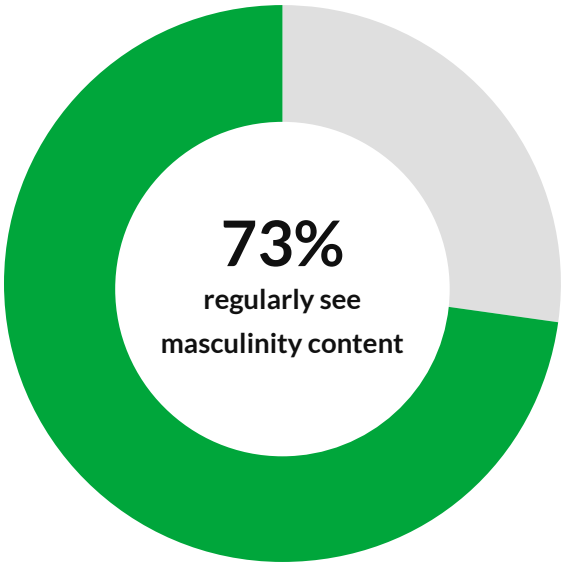
Nearly three-quarters of adolescent boys regularly see "digital masculinity" content.

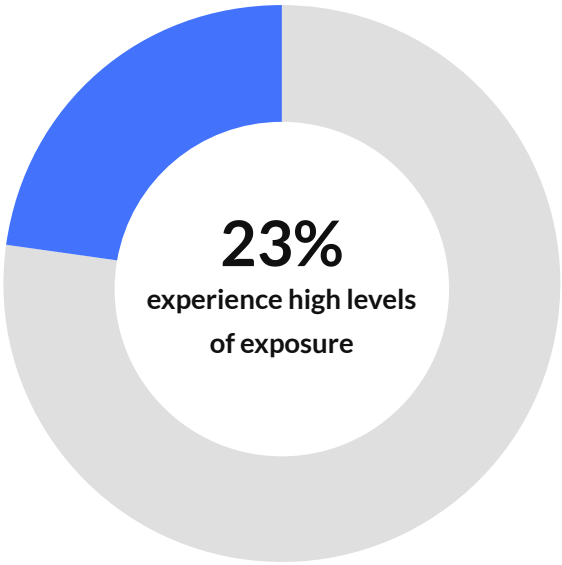
Nearly three-quarters of boys (73%) regularly encounter masculinity-related content, and nearly one in four (23%) experience high levels of exposure. Boys most commonly encounter messages about making money (44%), building muscle (39%), and fighting or weapons (35%).

Exposure increases with age: Older boys (age 14 to 17) see significantly more of this content than younger boys (age 11 to 13).

Figure A: Percent of boys who see masculinity-related content.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017).





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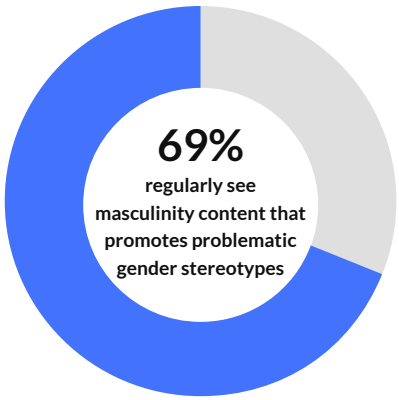
2.

Over two-thirds encounter problematic gender stereotypes online.

Over two-thirds of adolescent boys (69%) regularly see masculinity content that promotes problematic gender stereotypes. This includes messages that girls only want to date certain types of guys (28%), that girls use their looks to get what they want (25%), that boys are treated unfairly compared to girls (12%), or that girls should focus on home and family (12%). Out of the 69% of adolescent boys who see this content regularly, one in five (20%) see these messages at the highest exposure levels, meaning they had encountered at least three of the four problematic messages.

Figure B: Percent of boys who see masculinity-related content that promotes problematic gender stereotypes.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017).



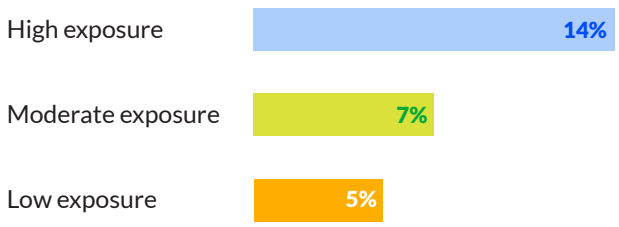
3.

Boys with heavy digital masculinity exposure have more negative self-esteem.

Most boys report healthy self-esteem, but those with high digital masculinity exposure are more likely to struggle. Overall, 14% of boys with high digital masculinity exposure have low self-esteem (vs. 5% low and 7% moderate exposure). They're more likely to feel "useless at times" (39% vs. 24% with low exposure) and think they're "no good" (34% vs. 16% with low exposure).

Figure C: Percent of boys with low self-esteem, by masculinity-content exposure.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; High digital masculinity exposure, n = 275; Moderate exposure, n = 508; Low exposure, n = 233).



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4.

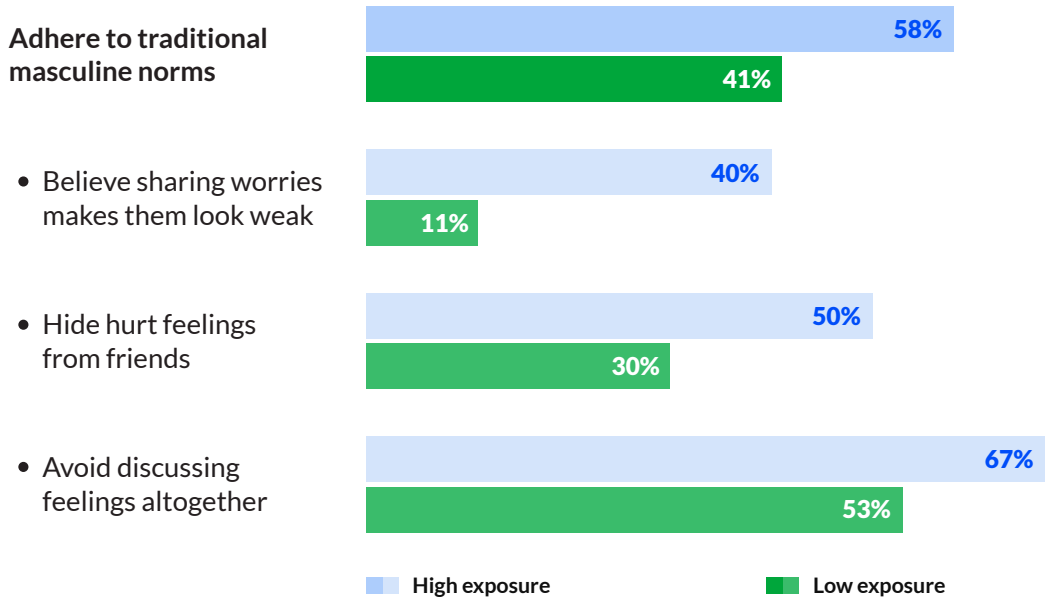
Boys with high digital masculinity exposure are significantly more likely to suppress their emotions and avoid vulnerability, but they maintain the capacity to care for others.

Boys with high digital masculinity exposure are significantly more likely to adhere to traditional masculine norms (58% vs. 41% with low exposure). These norms may be expressed in specific beliefs and behaviors. For example, boys with high exposure to digital masculinity content are nearly four times more likely to believe that sharing worries makes them look weak (40% vs. 11% with low exposure), are more likely to hide hurt feelings from friends (50% vs. 30%), and are more likely to avoid discussing feelings altogether (67% vs. 53%).

However, boys still embrace caring behaviors, with 62% believing in being friendly even to those who are unfriendly to them, 55% putting others' needs before their own, and 51% caring about others' feelings more than their own. These findings point to a tension in boys' relationships: They often feel comfortable caring for others, but less comfortable asking for care themselves.

Figure D: Boys' adherence to masculine norms and emotional expression, by digital masculinity exposure.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; High digital masculinity exposure, n = 275; Low exposure, n = 233).



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5.

Boys who are exposed to higher levels of digital masculinity content are more likely to report being lonely.

More than one in four adolescent boys (26%) report feeling lonely. Boys who are being exposed to high or moderate levels of digital masculinity content are more likely to report being lonely than boys who have the lowest level of exposure to this content (18% low vs. 29% moderate and 30% high). Boys who are lonely are less active in real-life social activities. They play video games with friends less often (55% vs. 74% of boys who are not lonely) and hang out in person much less frequently (27% vs. 50%).

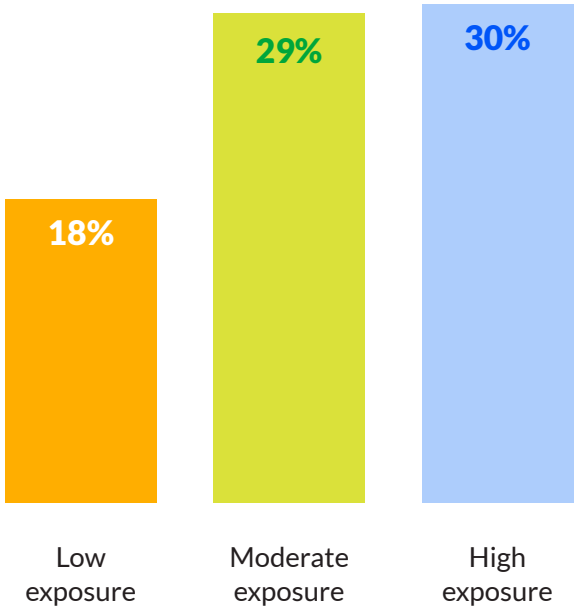
Figure E: 1 in 4 boys report feeling lonely.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017).



Figure F: Percent of boys who are lonely, by masculinity-content exposure.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; High digital masculinity exposure, n = 275; Moderate exposure, n = 508; Low exposure, n = 233).



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6.

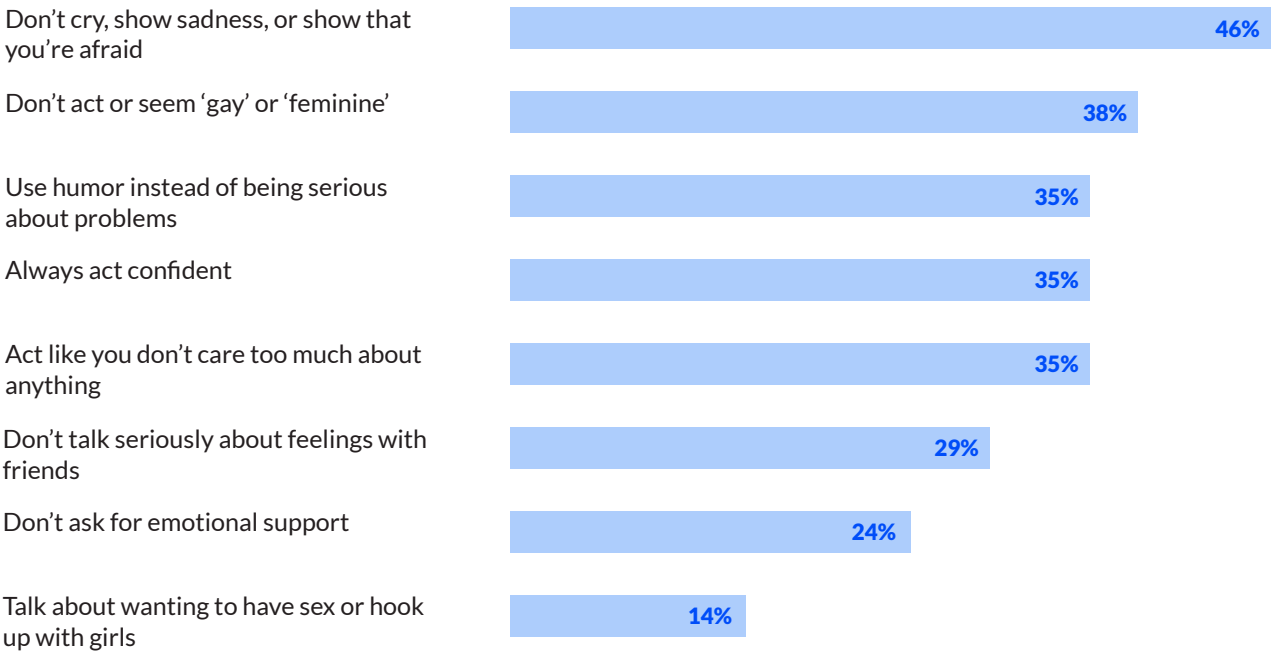
Many boys feel pressure to follow "unwritten rules" to avoid teasing.

To avoid being teased or picked on, nearly half of boys (46%) believe they must not cry, show sadness, or show fear. Other "unwritten rules" include not acting "gay" or "feminine" (38%), using humor instead of being serious about problems (35%), always acting confident (35%), pretending not to care too much about anything (35%), and not talking seriously about feelings with friends (29%).

Boys with higher digital masculinity exposure are more likely to believe these unwritten rules must be followed. For example, 59% of high-exposure boys believe they can't cry or show fear (versus 28% of low-exposure boys), and 35% believe they shouldn't talk seriously about feelings with friends (versus 19% with low exposure). This may reflect cultural expectations about masculine behavior that boys encounter across family, peer, and community contexts, but the association between digital masculinity exposure and adherence to these rules suggests that online content may be reinforcing messages that boys already receive about emotional expression and masculinity.

Figure G: "Unwritten rules" that boys follow to avoid getting picked on.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017).



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7.

Ninety-one percent of boys encounter body transformation messages online.

Almost all boys (91%) said they had been exposed to body image or appearance content online. Three-quarters (75%) of adolescent boys are exposed to content about being muscular. Other body image and appearance content that boys are exposed to include: dressing in a particular style (47%), being tall (43%), having clear skin (38%), or having a certain jawline or facial structure (25%). Boys with higher exposure to digital masculinity content were also more likely to report seeing body image and appearance content.

Overall, about one in four say social media makes them feel pressure to change the way they look (24%). High exposure to digital masculinity content is strongly associated with body image pressures. Boys with high exposure were more than four times as likely to say social media makes them feel that they should change how they look (41% vs. 9% of those with low exposure).

Figure H: Percent of boys who encounter body transformation messages online.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017).

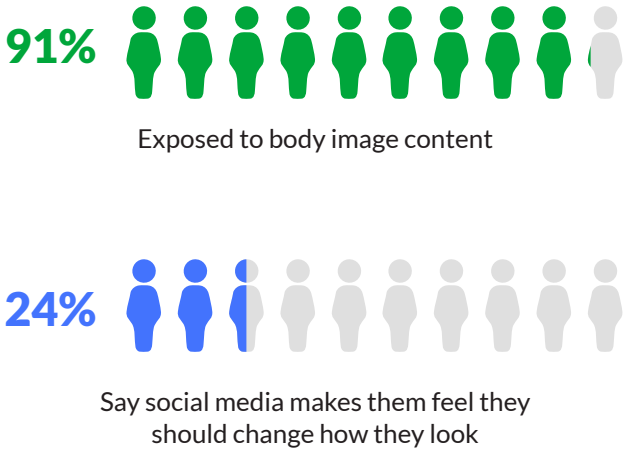
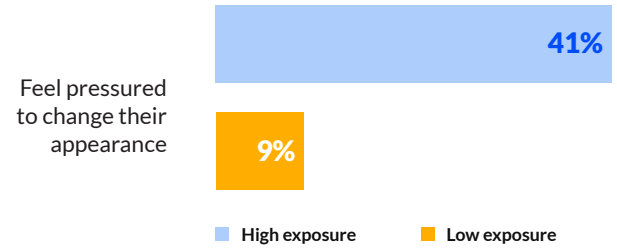


Figure I: Percent of boys who feel pressured to change appearance, by exposure to digital masculinity content.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 508; High exposure, n = 275; Low exposure, n = 233).



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8.

Adolescent boys live and connect online: 94% use social media or games daily.

Nearly all boys age 11 to 17 (94%) are online daily, with YouTube leading at 77% daily usage, followed by 52% on TikTok. More than half play video games with chat features daily (62%). For more than half of boys, online platforms and/or gaming make them feel like they belong (54%), that people like who they are (52%), and that they are safe to say what they really think (51%).

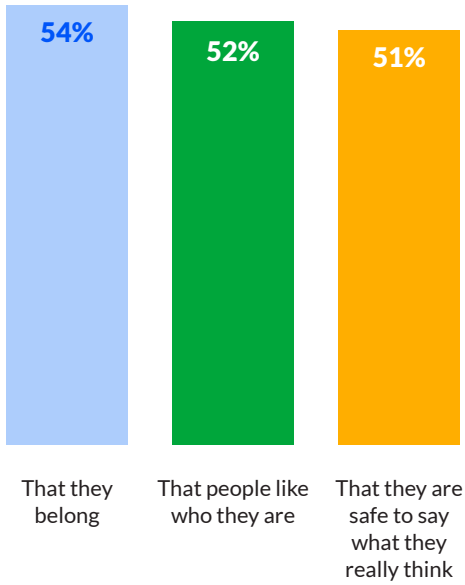
9.

Most boys (58%) find a sense of belonging in gaming, but observe widespread problematic behaviors.

Gaming provides social connection for many, with 58% of all gamers feeling like part of a group that likes them (rising to 64% among heavy gamers). Most gamers (54%) have stood up for someone against mean comments. However, these same spaces normalize problematic behaviors that most boys witness regularly: 70% observe bullying or harassment, and half or more hear racist comments, homophobic comments, or disrespectful language about women. Heavy gamers are significantly more likely to engage in harmful conduct themselves, with 29% admitting to saying mean things about others (vs. 16% of occasional gamers), and 12% engaging in bullying or harassment (vs. 4% of occasional gamers).

Figure J: How boys feel about online platforms/gaming.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017).



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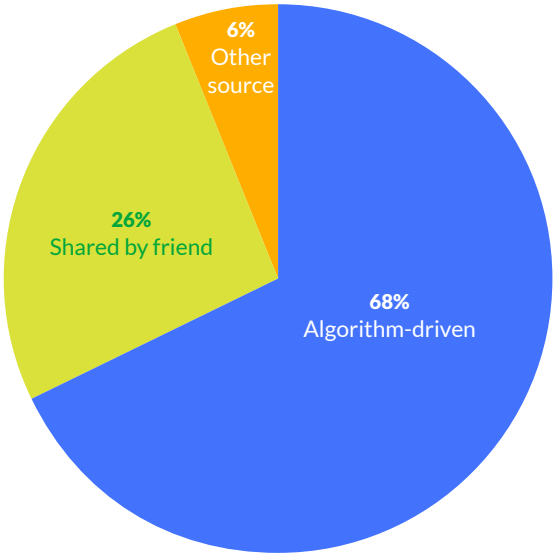
10.

Algorithms, not user intent, are the primary driver of boys' exposure to masculinity content.

For boys who have seen masculinity content online, more than two-thirds (68%) say it just started showing up in their feed without them searching for it, while one in four (26%) say friends shared it with them. TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram are the most often mentioned platforms for nearly all digital masculinity content, including all problematic content. Among boys who use these platforms, the following percentages report seeing each type of content sometimes or more often: 48% of TikTok users and 38% of Instagram users see content suggesting that girls only want to date certain types of guys, 46% of TikTok users see content claiming that girls use their looks to get special treatment, and 27% of TikTok users and 22% of Instagram users encounter messages that boys are treated unfairly compared to girls.

Figure K: How digital masculinity content reaches boys.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017).



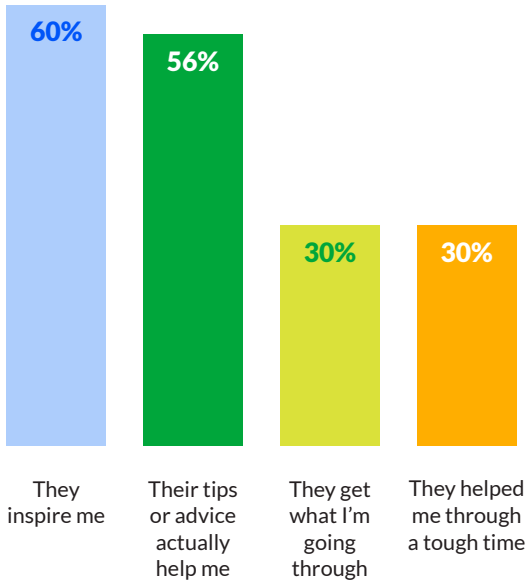
11.

Content creators and influencers have emerged as significant sources of guidance and emotional support for adolescent boys; 60% find them inspirational, and 56% receive practical help.

This influence is particularly strong among boys with the highest masculinity content exposure, who find creators especially inspirational (71%) and helpful (68%). About one in three boys (30%) report that an influencer helped them through a tough time, or that the influencer gets what they're going through, with this reaching nearly half (48%) among those most exposed to masculinity content.

Figure L: Percent of adolescent boys who agree/strongly agree an influencer impacted them in the following ways.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017).



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12.

Real-world relationships are crucial for boys' mental health and self-esteem.

Most boys report having multiple people they could turn to in a tough situation: 68% have two or more people they could connect with, 23% have one person to connect with, while only 8% report having non-human, online-only, or no one to turn to for online support. Boys with at least one human support show significantly better self-esteem and attitudes about themselves. When going through tough situations, parents are boys' first choice for help (79%), followed by friends (54%) and siblings (38%). However, as digital masculinity exposure increases, boys are less likely to turn to parents for support—86% of boys with low exposure would turn to a parent, compared to 73% of those with high exposure. Most boys (88%) have had conversations with parents about being a man, with nearly half (47%) describing these as helpful and supportive, and 42% feeling comfortable asking questions during these discussions.

KEY TERMS

Digital masculinity refers to the ways in which masculine-associated traits, values, and identities are constructed, performed, and negotiated online. In this study, we measured boys' overall exposure to 12 different types of masculinity-related content online, including messages about making money, building muscle, dating, fighting or weapons, being providers or protectors, and various gender stereotypes.

Problematic digital masculinity represents a subset of the broader digital masculinity content that promotes particularly problematic gender stereotypes and narratives. This narrower category focuses on four specific types of content from our larger scale: messages that boys/men are treated unfairly compared to girls/women, that girls/women should focus on taking care of their home and family, that girls/women use their looks to get special treatment, and that girls/women only want to date certain types of guys (e.g., tall, rich, or very attractive men).

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Introduction

Adolescence represents one of the most profound periods of human development, characterized by dramatic physical, cognitive, and social and emotional changes that reshape how young people see themselves and their place in the world. For boys age 11 through 17, this developmental period coincides with critical tasks of identity formation as outlined in Erik Erikson's fifth psychosocial stage, "identity versus role confusion," in which adolescents must successfully navigate questions of "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong?" to emerge with a coherent sense of self.

During these pivotal years, boys' brains undergo dramatic changes that affect how they handle emotions, make decisions, and take risks. The parts of the brain responsible for seeking rewards and social connection develop rapidly, while the areas that help with impulse control and long-term thinking are still maturing. This creates a period where fitting in with peers and gaining social acceptance becomes incredibly important—often more important than adult approval or long-term consequences. At the same time, boys are receiving cultural messages that they should be tough, competitive, and emotionally independent—expectations that can make the already challenging work of figuring out who they are even more complicated.

The development of masculine identity during adolescence occurs through a complex interplay of biological maturation, social comparison, and cultural messaging. Psychologist William Pollack's concept of the "boy code" describes how boys learn restrictive rules about emotional expression and vulnerability that can undermine their well-being (1999). As Kimmel (2010) and Way (2011, 2024) have argued, masculinity is often constructed in opposition with femininity, influencing pressure to avoid anything perceived as "girly" or "gay." Boys pay close attention to social hierarchies and work to avoid being positioned at the bottom, judging their worth against idealized masculine standards. Way's research suggests that boys deeply desire emotionally intimate friendships—what she calls "deep secret" relationships—yet struggle to find and maintain such connections as masculine norms increasingly discourage emotional expression and interdependence with age. Teens naturally seek clear answers to complex identity questions, which makes them especially drawn to confident online voices who promise simple solutions to the confusing developmental work of figuring out who they are and where they fit in masculine hierarchies. Reeves (2022) argues that while women and girls have made historic gains in education and work, many boys and men are struggling academically, socially, and economically, and that society needs to better understand and support them.

The Digital Masculinity Landscape: Where Boys Go Online

Today's adolescent boys inhabit digital environments that are simultaneously more connected and more complex than ever before. Gaming communities represent a primary social space where boys negotiate peer relationships, develop competencies, and encounter messaging about masculine identity. Platforms like Discord, Twitch, and multiplayer gaming environments provide spaces for collaboration, competition, and camaraderie that can foster genuine connection and skill development. Yet these same spaces often normalize toxic behaviors, including harassment, derogatory language about women and LGBTQ+ people, and rigid expectations about emotional expression. Platforms like YouTube and TikTok serve as primary information sources where boys encounter everything from gaming tutorials to relationship advice, often delivered by creators whose business models depend on building devoted audiences among young male viewers.

The influencer economy has created a new category of masculine role models who reach boys directly through their personal devices, often bypassing traditional gatekeepers like parents or educators. These content creators—ranging from gaming personalities to fitness influencers and lifestyle coaches—shape boys' perceptions about success, relationships, physical appearance, and emotional expression. While some creators provide genuinely helpful guidance and positive mentorship, others promote problematic messages about gender roles, consent, and social relationships that can have real-world consequences for adolescent development. The landscape is shaped in part by the outsize reach of figures and shows like Andrew Tate, Joe Rogan, Fresh and Fit, Sneako, and other high-profile influencers whose content frequently surfaces in social media feeds.

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Research reveals concerning trends in boys' exposure to masculinity content and influencers, including online communities organized around male grievance and anti-women ideologies that specifically target young men questioning their identity and place in the world (Brito et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2024). These digital pipelines often begin with seemingly innocuous content about self-improvement or dating advice, and then gradually introduce more extreme messages about gender relations and social hierarchies. The algorithmic nature of digital platforms can amplify these messages, creating echo chambers that reinforce narrow and potentially harmful definitions of masculinity.

Gaming culture represents both an opportunity and a risk in boys' digital lives. Multiplayer gaming provides authentic spaces for teamwork, problem-solving, and friendship formation that can support healthy development. However, gaming communities can normalize aggressive communication, harassment of female players, and exclusionary behaviors that can reinforce antisocial behaviors (Anti-Defamation League, 2024; Wells et al., 2025). Boys report experiencing significant social pressure within gaming environments to conform to aggressive communication styles and to avoid expressing vulnerability or emotional support for other players.

The Current Study

This study presents a comprehensive examination of 1,017 boys age 11 through 17, conducted in July 2025 through nationally representative sampling that ensures diverse representation across socioeconomic backgrounds and racial/ethnic identities. Our research investigates boys' engagement patterns across social media and gaming platforms, their relationships with online content creators and influencers, their experiences of masculinity messaging and identity pressure in digital spaces, and the role of online communities and offline relationships.

Quotes featured throughout the report are from in-depth interviews with adolescent boys conducted during survey development to provide contextual understanding of their digital experiences.

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Main Report

Platform Usage Among Adolescents

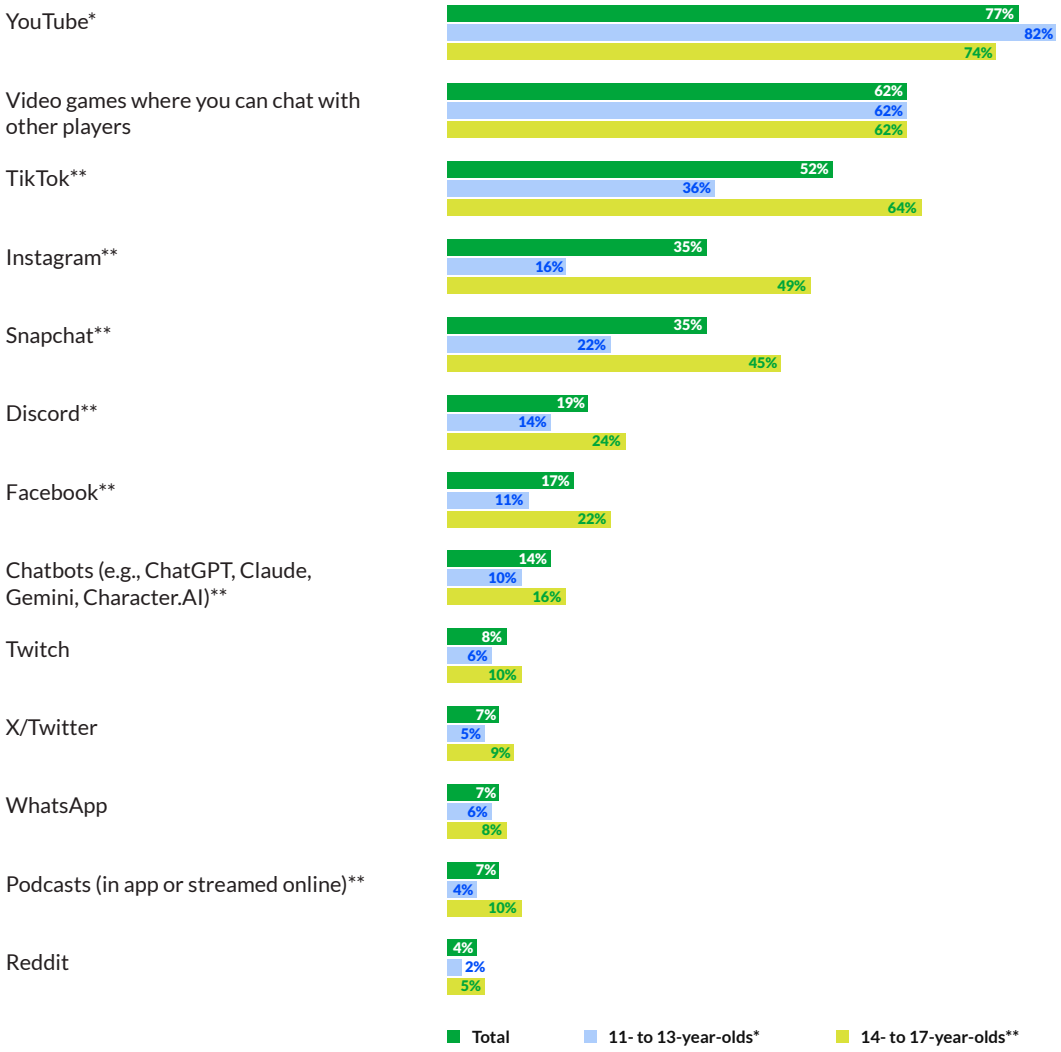
YouTube is the most frequently used platform among 11- to 17-year-old boys, with 77% reporting daily use. Daily use of YouTube is especially high for 11- to 13-year-old boys, with 82% reporting using the platform at least once a day (compared to 74% of 14- to 17-year-olds). Older adolescent boys (14 to 17) are more likely than younger boys to use online platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat. Video games are a popular daily activity across age groups, with 62% of boys reporting daily use. Chatbots and platforms such as Discord, Facebook, and Twitch are less likely to be used daily by all ages. While usage is slightly higher among older adolescents, these platforms remain on the fringe of daily youth habits.

"The videos, they just make me happier. Like, I don't really feel sad on TikTok."

(14-year-old)

Figure 1: Daily platform use among adolescent boys. Percent who use each platform daily or multiple times per day.

*Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; 11- to 13-year-olds, n = 482; 14- to 17-year-olds, n = 535). */** indicates a significant difference between the two age groups.*



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Gaming Frequency and Social Experiences While Gaming

Nearly two-thirds (62%) of all adolescent boys are heavy gamers (boys who play at least daily), with both age groups (11- to 13-year-olds and 14- to 17-year-olds) mirroring adolescents overall in their gaming behavior (both groups are at 62% for heavy gamers). Among boys who play video games with chat features (text or voice), experiences in gaming spaces vary significantly based on how often they play. Heavy gamers are more likely than occasional gamers (those who play less than daily) to report both positive and negative social experiences.

"And with social media, social gaming, I feel like there is a lot of … I wouldn't say pressure, but just kind of expectation for boys to be socially unacceptable and, like, either racist or something online. Like in video games and on audio chats. So in games like Call of Duty, the guys in that game are known for being just extremely racist and horrible and stuff."

(16-year-old)

Positive Social Interactions Are More Common Among Heavy Gamers

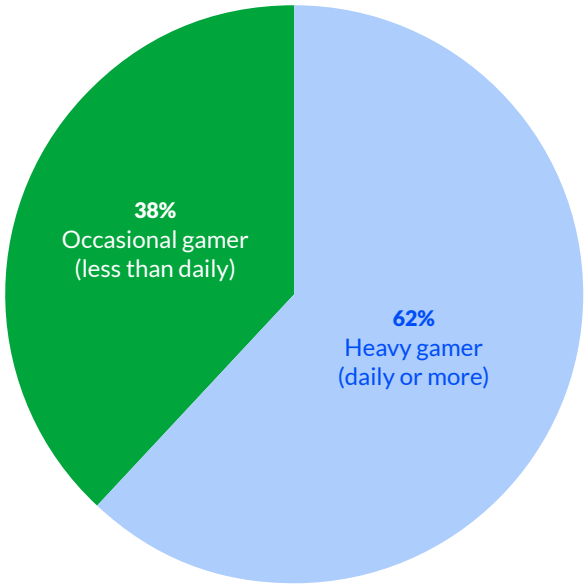
More than half of gamers feel like they are a part of a group that likes them (58%), and nearly two in five report having interesting conversations (37%). One-third (34%) are helped by other players to play better, and more than one-quarter (27%) of all gamers say they often make new friends while playing video games.

- 64% of heavy gamers say they feel like part of a group that likes them, compared to just 45% of occasional gamers.
- Heavy gamers are also more likely to report having interesting conversations (43% vs. 27% of occasional gamers), getting help from other players (41% vs. 18% of occasional gamers), and making new friends (34% vs. 12% of occasional gamers).
- Black adolescent boys are more likely than Latino boys to have interesting conversations (42% vs. 29% of Latino boys) and more likely than White boys to make new friends while gaming (36% vs. 23% of White boys). Multiracial boys are more likely than all other boys, but significantly more likely than White boys, to feel pressured to talk differently than they normally would (16% vs. 8% White).

Heavy gamers are more likely to say they feel accepted and socially connected during gameplay. These differences suggest that frequent gaming may foster stronger social bonds and community-building opportunities.

Figure 2: Gaming frequency among adolescent boys.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017).



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Negative Interactions Are Also More Common Among Heavy Gamers

More than one-third (37%) of all gamers hear or see comments that put others down when playing video games, while nearly one in four (23%) hear or see others being bullied.

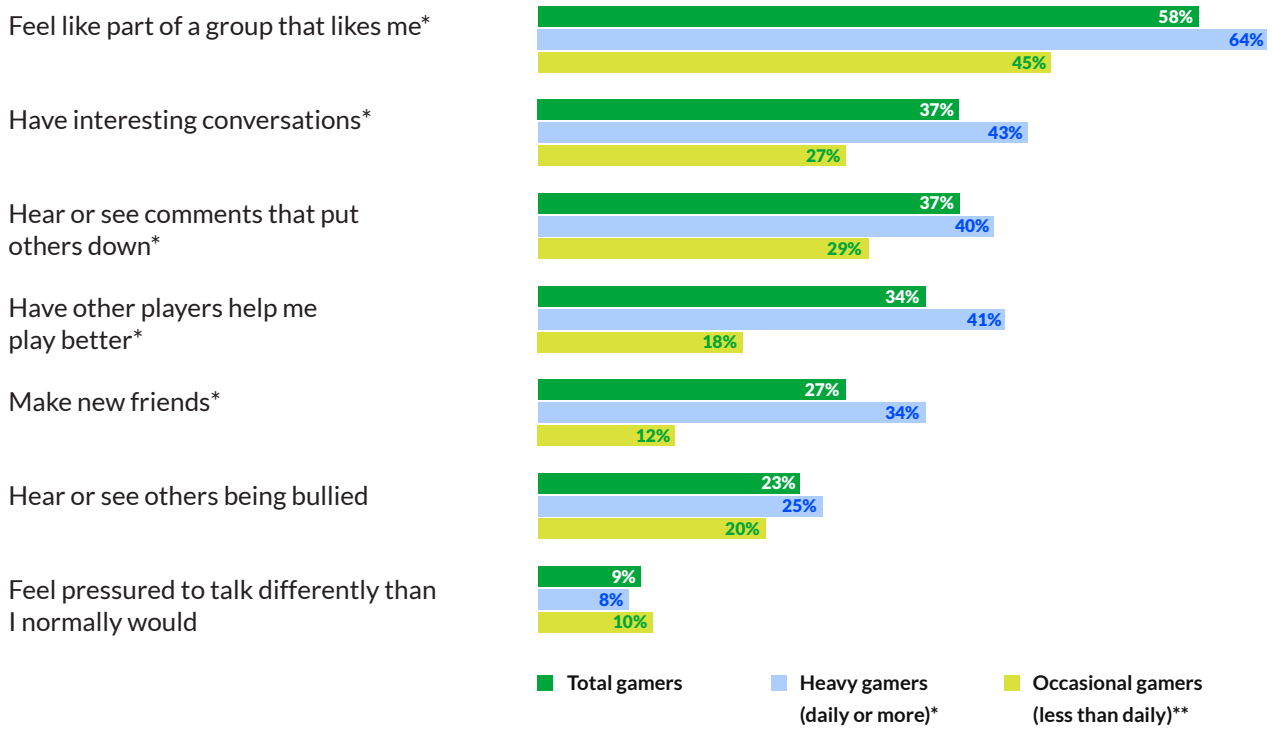
- 40% of heavy gamers say they hear or see comments that put others down, compared to 29% of occasional gamers.
- 25% of heavy gamers report seeing or hearing others being bullied, vs. 20% of occasional gamers.

Even though these negative experiences are more prevalent among heavy gamers, the gaps are smaller than those seen in positive interactions, which suggests that frequent players are more socially engaged overall.

While boys who are heavy gamers may experience increased social connection, they also show somewhat more exposure to harmful comments or bullying while gaming. This highlights the dual nature of online gaming spaces—as both a source of meaningful peer connection and exposure to negative behaviors—particularly for those who play most often.

Figure 3: Boys' social experiences while gaming online. Percent who experience each often or very often.

*Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; Heavy gamers, n = 677; Occasional gamers, n = 339). */** indicates a significant difference between heavy and occasional gamers.*



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Gaming Behaviors

Older Adolescents and Heavy Gamers Are More Likely to Report Engaging in Negative Behaviors While Gaming

The most common self-reported gaming behavior among adolescent boys is standing up for someone against mean comments, with 54% of all gamers saying they have done this. However, one in four (24%) admit to having said something mean about others. Other behaviors that adolescent boys have done themselves are mentioned by less than 1 in 10: bullying or harassing other players (9%), saying "KYS" (*kill yourself*) or something similar (7%), saying something racist comments (7% each), saying something disrespectful about gay/transgender people or women (6% each), or something disrespectful about someone's religion (5%).

- Compared to the younger boys, older adolescents are more likely to report engaging in most of the harmful and inappropriate behaviors during online gameplay. In particular, older boys are more likely than younger boys to report that they have said "KYS" (*kill yourself*) or something similar (9% older vs. 4% younger) or said something negative about someone's religion (7% older vs. 2% younger).
- Differences by gaming frequency are more pronounced. Heavy gamers are significantly more likely to report engaging in negative behaviors than occasional gamers:
  - Saying mean things about others: 29% heavy vs. 16% occasional
  - Bullying or harassing other players: 12% heavy vs. 4% occasional
  - Saying KYS or something similar: 9% heavy vs. 3% occasional

This pattern suggests that heavier exposure to gaming environments—especially those that include communication with others—may increase the likelihood of both positive social engagement and negative behavior.

"Online, there's no real boundaries. And I think like, you can really do whatever you feel if you really, like, follow through with it. And in real life, you can be actually confronted about it and corrected. But online it's not the same because you're just behind your screen, and you can just do whatever you want to say or whatever."

(17-year-old)

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Figure 4: Self-reported behaviors while gaming with others ("I've done this myself").

Base: Boys who play video games where they can chat (in text or voice) with other players (N = 955). Superscript a/b/c/d indicates that the data for the noted demographic group is significantly higher than the data for the demographic group represented by that letter in the header of the table.

	Total (N = 955)	11- to 13-Year-Olds[a] (n = 452)	14- to 17-Year-Olds[b] (n = 503)	Heavy Gamers[c] (n = 677)	Occasional Gamers[d] (n = 278)
Stood up for someone against mean comments	**54%**	55%	53%	56%	51%
Said mean things about others	**24%**	24%	25%	29%[d]	16%
Bullying or harassing other players	**9%**	8%	10%	12%[d]	4%
Said 'KYS', 'Kill Yourself,' or something similar	**7%**	4%	9%[a]	9%[d]	3%
Said something racist	**7%**	5%	8%	8%	5%
Said disrespectful things about people who are gay or transgender	**6%**	4%	8%	6%	7%
Said disrespectful things about women	**6%**	4%	7%	7%	4%
Said negative things about someone's religion	**5%**	2%	7%[a]	4%	6%

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Negative behavior toward others—including bullying, mean comments, and discriminatory language—is commonly observed by adolescents while gaming online. Top behaviors observed by adolescent boys while gaming are:

- Bullying or harassing other players: 70%
- Saying mean things about others: 68%
- Saying something racist: 58%

While most of the negative behaviors have been observed by roughly half or more of the boys, only two in five (42%) have seen players actively stand up against them.

- The majority of those observing negative behaviors, as well as those observing someone else stand up against mean comments being said, are older boys, as compared to the younger adolescents.
- Whether a boy is a heavy or occasional gamer does not seem to significantly affect their observation of negative or positive behaviors of other players while gaming.

Figure 5: Observed behavior while gaming with others ("I've seen or heard others do this").

Base: Boys who play video games where they can chat (in text or voice) with other players (N = 955). Superscript a/b indicates that the data for the noted demographic group is significantly higher than the data for the demographic group represented by that letter in the header of the table.

	Total (N = 955)	11- to 13-Year-Olds[a] (n = 452)	14- to 17-Year-Olds[b] (n = 503)	Heavy Gamers (n = 677)	Occasional Gamers (n = 278)
Bullying or harassing other players	**70%**	66%	74%	72%	68%
Said mean things about others	**68%**	65%	70%	67%	70%
Said something racist	**58%**	50%	65%[a]	60%	56%
Said disrespectful things about people who are gay or transgender	**52%**	41%	60%[a]	54%	50%
Said disrespectful things about women	**50%**	42%	55%[a]	48%	53%
Said 'KYS', 'Kill Yourself,' or something similar	**47%**	37%	55%[a]	49%	42%
Stood up for someone against mean comments	**42%**	36%	46%[a]	41%	42%
Said negative things about someone's religion	**35%**	27%	41%[a]	35%	35%

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Digital Masculinity Content While Online

Digital masculinity refers to the ways in which masculine-associated traits, values, and identities are constructed, performed, and negotiated online. This encompasses a broad spectrum of content, from fitness and financial success messaging to dating advice and gender roles. In this study, we measured boys' overall exposure to 12 different types of masculinity-related content online, including messages about making money, building muscle, dating, fighting or weapons, being providers or protectors, and various gender stereotypes.

Problematic digital masculinity represents a specific subset of the broader digital masculinity content that promotes particularly problematic gender stereotypes and narratives. This narrower category focuses on four specific types of content from our larger scale: messages that boys/men are treated unfairly compared to girls/women, that girls/women should focus on taking care of their home and family, that girls/women use their looks to get special treatment, and that girls/women only want to date certain types of guys (e.g., tall, rich, or very attractive men).

For both categories, we classified boys as having high, moderate, or low exposure based on how frequently they encounter multiple types of masculinity content or problematic content online (see the appendix for detailed scoring). While a boy might be exposed to general digital masculinity content about fitness or career success without encountering problematic messages, those with high problematic digital masculinity exposure are consuming content that explicitly promotes gender stereotypes about both masculinity and femininity. Throughout this report, when we refer to "digital masculinity exposure," we're discussing the broader 12-item scale, while "problematic digital masculinity exposure" specifically refers to the four-item subscale that measures exposure to these more harmful narratives.

Boys—especially older adolescents—are regularly exposed to digital masculinity content that emphasizes money, strength, and dominance. The most frequently encountered messages relate to making money (44% overall), getting fit or building muscle (39%), and content about fighting, weapons, or guns (35%). Exposure to these messages is notably higher among older adolescents (14- to 17-year-olds), with 51% seeing content about making money and 47% seeing content about fitness—compared to 35% and 28%, respectively, among younger boys.

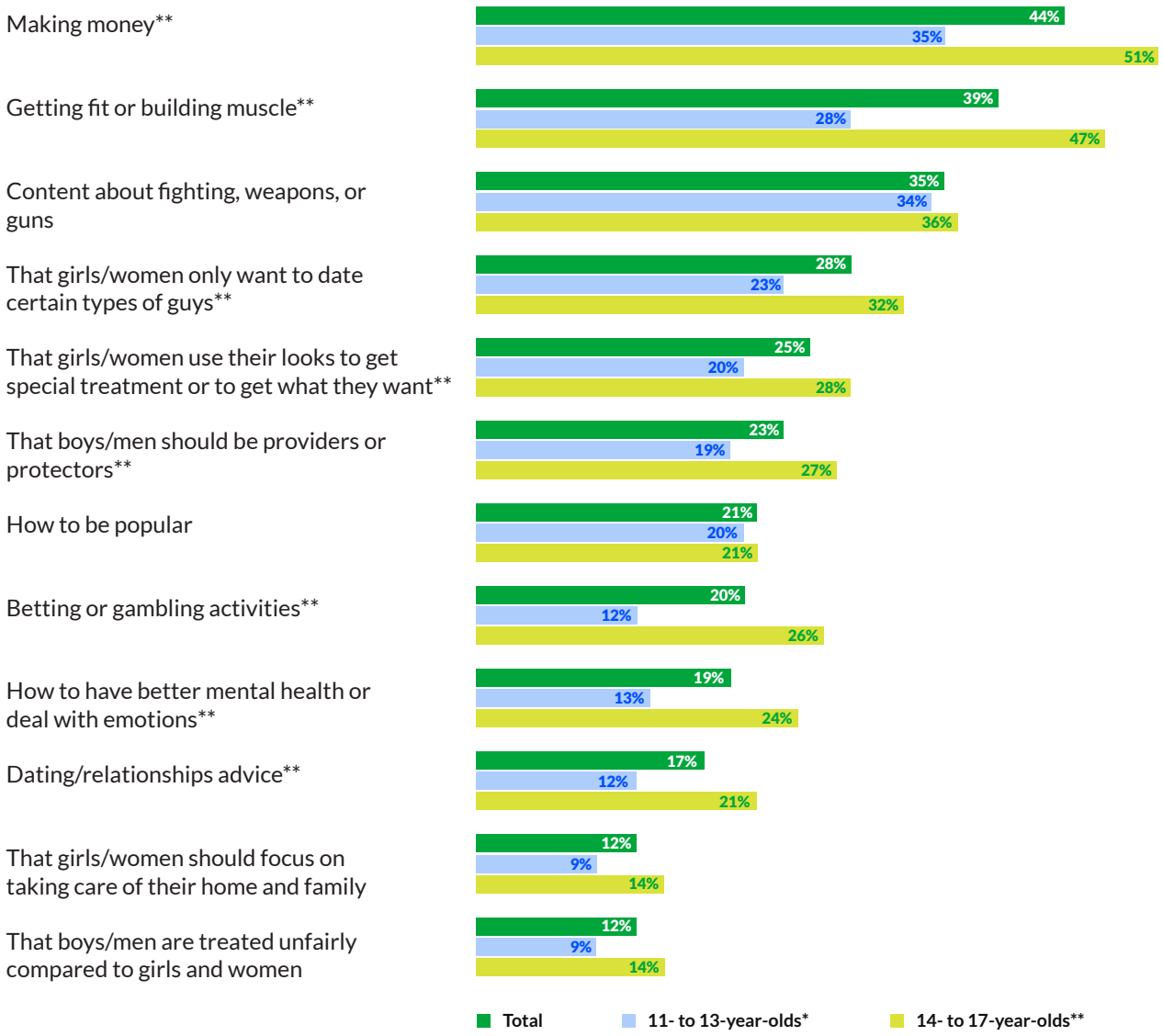
"You have to be very tall. You have to, you know, be like very, very fit, very rich. You have to have a high level of confidence. Like putting yourself out there first and initiating stuff."

(16-year-old)

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Figure 6: Digital masculinity exposure. Percent who see each kind of content often or very often.

*Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; 11- to 13-year-olds, n = 482; 14- to 17-year-olds, n = 535). */** indicates a significant difference between 11- to 13-year-olds and 14- to 17-year-olds.*



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Exposure Levels to Digital Masculinity

The majority (73%) of adolescent boys have moderate to high levels of digital masculinity exposure, and nearly one in four (23%) report high levels of digital masculinity exposure. The highest percentage (50%) of adolescent boys report encountering digital messages related to masculinity at moderate levels, but exposure increases with age and varies notably by racial groups. Black boys are most likely to have high levels of exposure to masculinity content (34% vs. 22% of White boys and 17% of Latino boys).

Exposure Increases with Age

Across nearly all topics, older boys (14 to 17) report higher exposure to digital masculinity content than younger boys (11 to 13), often by margins of 10 percentage points or more. This age gap is most pronounced for content such as:

- Making money (51% vs. 35%)
- Fitness/building muscle (47% vs. 28%)
- Gambling or betting activities (26% vs. 12%)

Further, more than two-thirds of all boys (69%) have moderate to high levels of exposure to problematic masculinity content. Of all boys, one in five (20%) have problematic masculinity exposure at the highest level. Black boys are less likely to report exposure to problematic masculinity messages, while multiracial boys report the highest exposure to harmful or stereotypical masculinity content.

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Figure 7: Digital masculinity content exposure, by age and race.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Superscript a/b/c/d/e/f indicates that the data for the noted demographic group is significantly higher than the data for the demographic group represented by that letter in the header of the table.

		Age		Race			
	Total	11- to 13-Year-Olds[a]	14- to 17-Year-Olds[b]	White[c]	Black[d]	Hispanic/ Latino[e]	Multiracial[f]
	(N = 1,017)	(n = 482)	(n = 535)	(n = 438)	(n = 187)	(n = 255)	(n = 129)
Overall Digital Masculinity Exposure Levels							
Low	**27%**	37%[b]	20%	26%	23%	36%[c, d, f]	17%
Moderate	**50%**	46%	53%	52%	43%	47%	55%
High	**23%**	17%	27%[a]	22%	34%[c, e]	17%	28%
Problematic Masculinity Exposure Levels							
Low	**31%**	42%[b]	23%	29%	26%	38%	26%
Moderate	**49%**	43%	53%[a]	52%	49%	45%	44%
High	**20%**	15%	25%[a]	19%	24%	17%	30%[c, e]

Differences by Platform

TikTok is the most often mentioned platform where boys encounter nearly all of this content, including all problematic content (highlighted below). Among boys who use these platforms, the following percentages report seeing each type of content sometimes or more often: 48% of TikTok users and 38% of Instagram users see content suggesting that girls only want to date certain types of guys, 46% of TikTok users see content claiming that girls use their looks to get special treatment, and 27% of TikTok users and 22% of Instagram users encounter messages that boys are treated unfairly compared to girls.

Adolescent boys are most likely to be exposed to content about fighting, weapons, or guns through video games (43%) and YouTube (42%), which likely reflects the content of many video games and online streamers. Exposure to gambling and betting content is most likely to occur on TikTok (29%) and YouTube (26%). These trends in platforms associated with exposure are mirrored among those adolescents with the highest levels of exposure (both general exposure and problematic exposure) as well, with TikTok being the dominant platform for nearly all content.

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Figure 8: Percent of boys exposed to each type of masculinity content, by platform.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Items within the blue borders are considered "problematic masculinity content."

Content Seen Sometimes or More Often	Total	Platform Used						
		TikTok	YouTube	Instagram	Facebook	Snapchat	Video games	Discord
	(N = 1,017)	(n = 782)	(n = 1,006)	(n = 614)	(n = 487)	(n = 640)	(n = 955)	(n = 485)
Getting fit or building muscle	**72%**	59%	52%	47%	40%	24%	12%	9%
Making money	**72%**	58%	53%	48%	43%	24%	19%	19%
Content about fighting, weapons, or guns	**65%**	38%	42%	29%	27%	23%	43%	18%
That girls or women only want to date certain types of guys	**59%**	48%	36%	38%	32%	25%	13%	12%
That girls or women use their looks to get special treatment or to get what they want	**56%**	46%	32%	38%	33%	28%	13%	12%
How to have better mental health or deal with emotions	**54%**	38%	36%	31%	30%	14%	8%	8%
That boys and men should be providers or protectors	**54%**	38%	31%	30%	33%	13%	10%	6%
Dating/relationships advice	**47%**	39%	28%	32%	31%	19%	9%	13%
How to be popular	**47%**	41%	33%	32%	24%	22%	12%	13%
Betting or gambling activities	**43%**	29%	26%	22%	24%	11%	15%	10%
That boys and men are treated unfairly compared to girls and women	**38%**	27%	19%	22%	20%	10%	9%	8%
That girls or women should focus on taking care of their home and family	**36%**	25%	19%	21%	21%	9%	7%	6%

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For boys who have seen masculinity content online (whether general and/or problematic), more than two-thirds (68%) say it just started showing up in their feed (without them searching for it), while one in four (26%) say friends shared it with them.

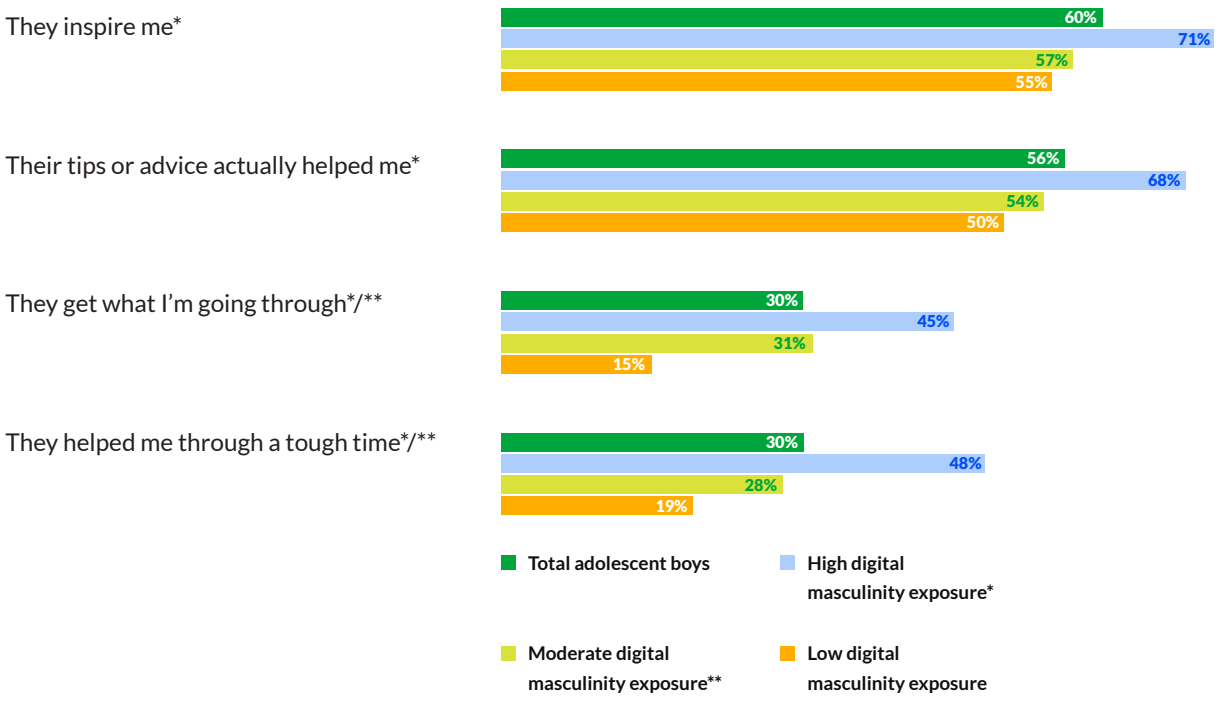
Content Creators and Influencers

For adolescent boys, content creators and influencers inspire (60%) and offer tips or advice that adolescents feel actually helps them (56%). Boys with the highest levels of exposure to masculinity content are significantly more likely to find influencers and content creators to be inspirational (71%), helpful (68%) and relatable (45%). Black adolescents are significantly more likely than all other racial groups to agree that influencers and content creators get what they are going through (46% compared to 27% of White boys, 28% of Latino boys, and 28% of multiracial boys).

Nearly one in three adolescents (30%) say that an influencer, streamer, or content creator has helped them get through a tough time. This proportion is considerably higher for those with the highest levels of content exposure (48% high vs. 28% moderate and 19% low).

Figure 9: The influence of content creators on boys. Percent agreeing with each statement.

*Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; High digital masculinity exposure, n = 275; Moderate exposure, n = 508; Low exposure, n = 233). */** indicates a significant difference between boys with high, moderate, and low levels of digital masculinity exposure.*

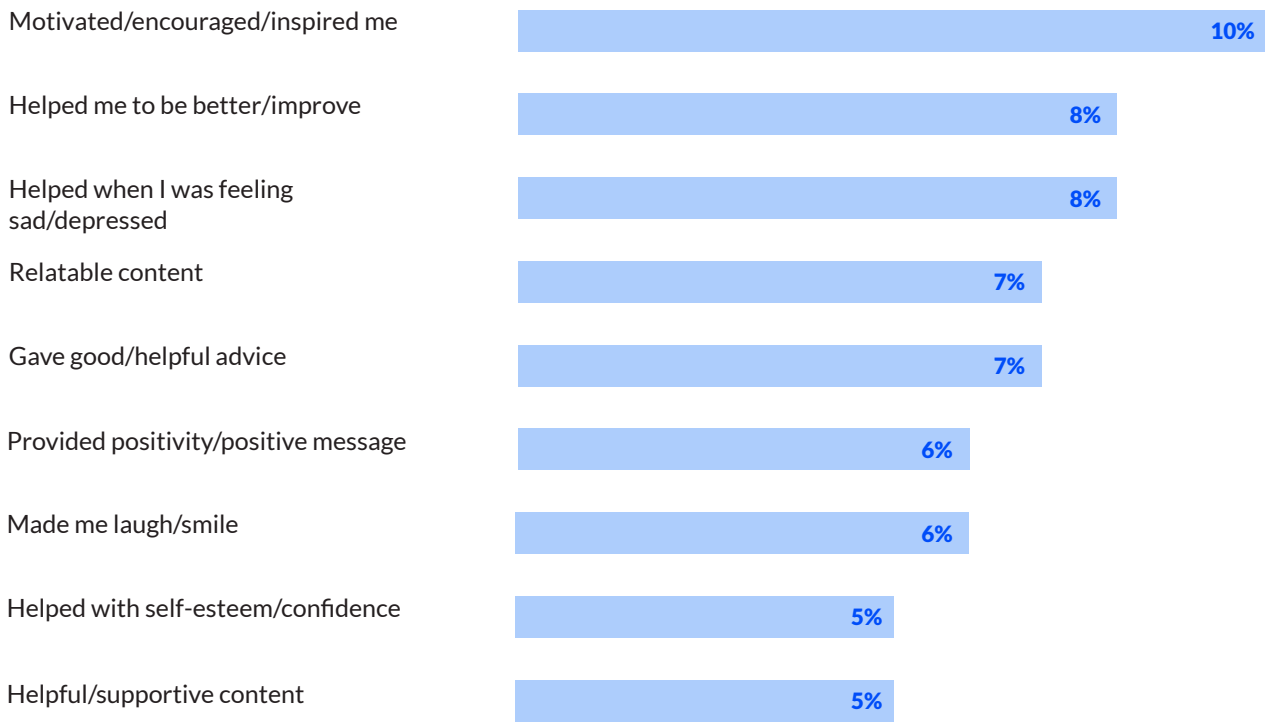


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For those boys who say an influencer has helped them through a tough time in their lives, that help is most often in the form of emotional and motivational support. Top responses include motivating/encouraging/inspiring me (10%), help to be better/improve (8%), and help when feeling sad/depressed (8%).

Figure 10: How influencers help adolescent boys through tough times.

Base: Total adolescent boys who felt that something said by an influencer, streamer, or content creator helped them through a tough time (n = 326). (Asked unaided and accepted all responses.)



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Online and Offline Communities and Connections Among Adolescent Boys

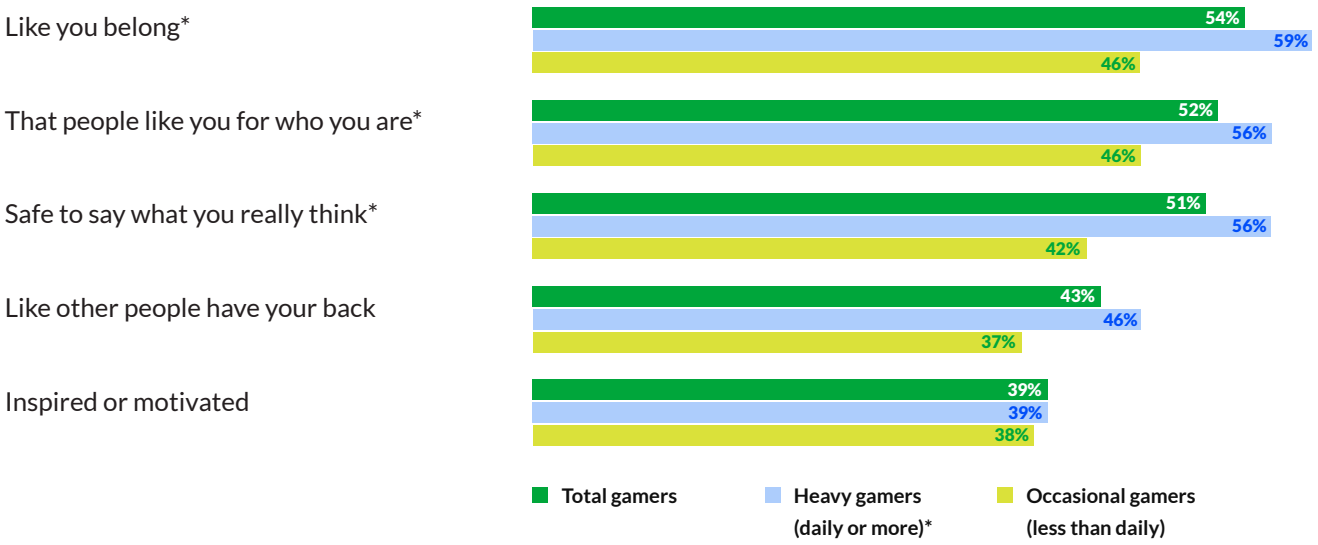
Social media and online gaming offer many adolescent boys a sense of community and belonging. For more than half of boys, online platforms and/or gaming make them feel like they belong (54%), that people like who they are (52%), and that they are safe to say what they really think (51%). To a slightly lesser extent, these online communities make them feel as if others have their back (43%) and feel inspired/motivated (39%).

Adolescents who engage in regular gaming report significantly higher levels of positive emotional experiences compared to those who only game occasionally.

- 59% of heavy gamers said they often feel like they belong, compared to 46% of occasional gamers.
- 56% feel liked for who they are (vs. 46%).
- 56% feel safe expressing what they really think (vs. 42%).

Figure 11: Social well-being in gaming and social media. Percent experiencing each often or very often.

*Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; Heavy gamers, n = 677; Occasional gamers, n = 339). * indicates a significant difference between heavy and occasional gamers.*



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Loneliness Among Adolescent Boys

More than one in four (26%) of all boys age 11 to 17 are lonely (based on responses to the UCLA three-item Loneliness Scale). Older adolescents (14 to 17 years old) are slightly more likely to report being lonely (28%) compared to 11- to 13-year-olds (24%).

Figure 12: Percent of boys who feel lonely, by age and race/ethnicity.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Superscript a/b/c/d/e/f indicates that the data for the noted demographic group is significantly higher than the data for the demographic group represented by that letter in the header of the table.

		Age		Race			
	Total	11- to 13-Year-Olds[a]	14- to 17-Year-Olds[b]	White[c]	Black[d]	Hispanic/ Latino[e]	Multiracial[f]
	(N = 1,017)	*(n = 482)*	*(n = 535)*	*(n = 438)*	*(n = 187)*	*(n = 255)*	*(n = 129)*
Lonely	**26%**	24%	28%	30%[d]	16%	25%	28%
Not Lonely	**74%**	76%	72%	70%	84%[c]	75%	72%

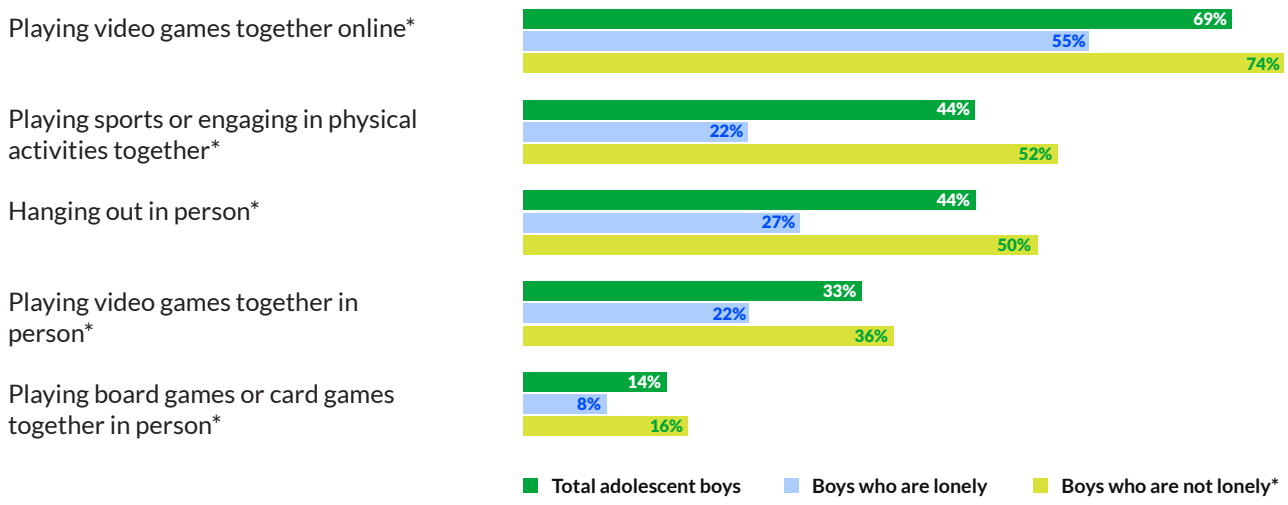
Adolescents who do not report feeling lonely are consistently more likely to participate in real-life social interactions—both in person and online—compared to their lonely peers. Adolescents who feel lonely are engaging less frequently in every type of social activity with friends—whether digital or face to face.

- Playing video games together online is the most common activity overall.
  - 74% of adolescents who do not feel lonely do this frequently, compared to 55% of adolescents who feel lonely—a 19-point gap.
- Hanging out in person (e.g., visiting each other's houses, going to movies) also shows a notable gap:
  - 50% of adolescents who do not feel lonely report doing this frequently vs. only 27% of adolescents who feel lonely.
- Physical activities and sports are another area with a large difference:
  - 52% of adolescents who do not feel lonely participate frequently vs. 22% of adolescents who feel lonely.

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Figure 13: Frequency of real-life social interactions (often/very often).

*Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; Lonely, n = 274; Not lonely, n = 742). * indicates a significant difference between adolescents who feel lonely and not lonely.*



Adolescents who feel lonely are distinguished by lower self-esteem and weaker human support. Gaming frequency, by contrast, does not differ between adolescents who do and do not feel lonely. Boys who are being exposed to high or moderate levels of digital masculinity content are more likely to report being lonely than boys who have the lowest level of exposure to this content (18% low vs. 29% moderate and 30% high).

Figure 14: Loneliness by digital masculinity content exposure level.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Superscript a/b/c indicates that the data for the noted group is significantly higher than the data for the group represented by that letter in the header of the table.

	Total	Low Digital Masculinity Exposure[a]	Moderate Digital Masculinity Exposure[b]	High Digital Masculinity Exposure[c]
	(N = 1,017)	*(n = 233)*	*(n = 508)*	*(n = 275)*
Lonely	**26%**	18%	29%[a]	30%[a]
Not Lonely	**74%**	82%[b, c]	71%	70%

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Masculinity and Identity

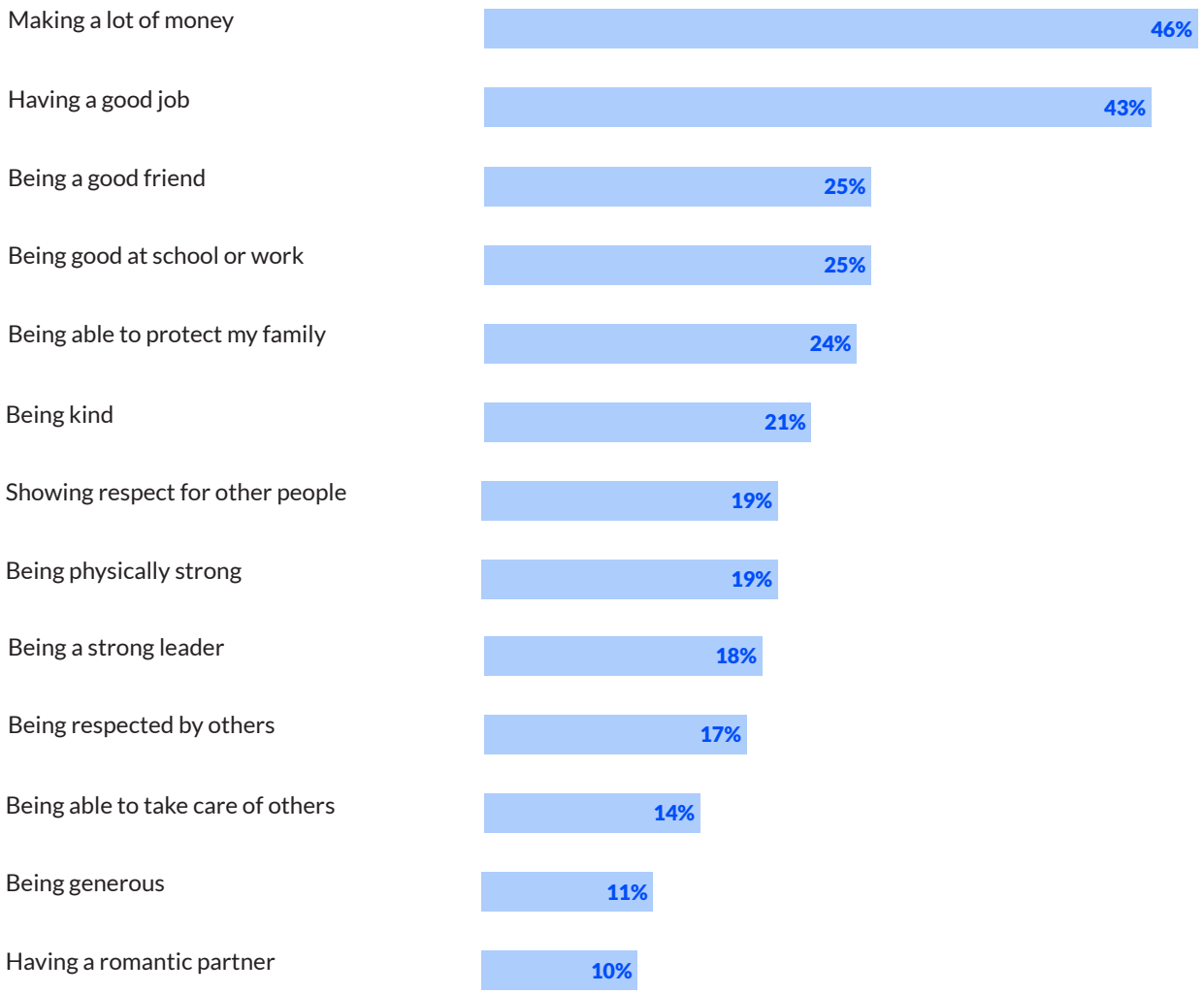
What Success Looks Like

Almost half of adolescent boys (46%), regardless of age, family income, or race, base success in the future on making a lot of money. This is followed by 43% who say that having a good job will make them feel successful. Roughly a quarter link success with being a good friend (25%), being good at school or work (25%), or protecting their family (24%).

Heavy gamers were more likely than occasional gamers to feel that success in the future would be making a lot of money (51% vs. 39%) or having a good job (46% vs. 37%).

Figure 15: What would make adolescent boys feel successful in the future.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Accepted up to three responses.



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Who or What Influences Being a "Good Man"

Seventy percent of adolescent boys select their father or male guardian as the primary source for determining what it means to be a "good man." Younger adolescents age 11 to 13 are more likely to choose a father or male guardian vs. older adolescents age 14 to 17 (77% vs. 66%, respectively).

After fathers/male guardians, over two in five (42%) chose other male family members, and over one-third (36%) are influenced by teachers or coaches.

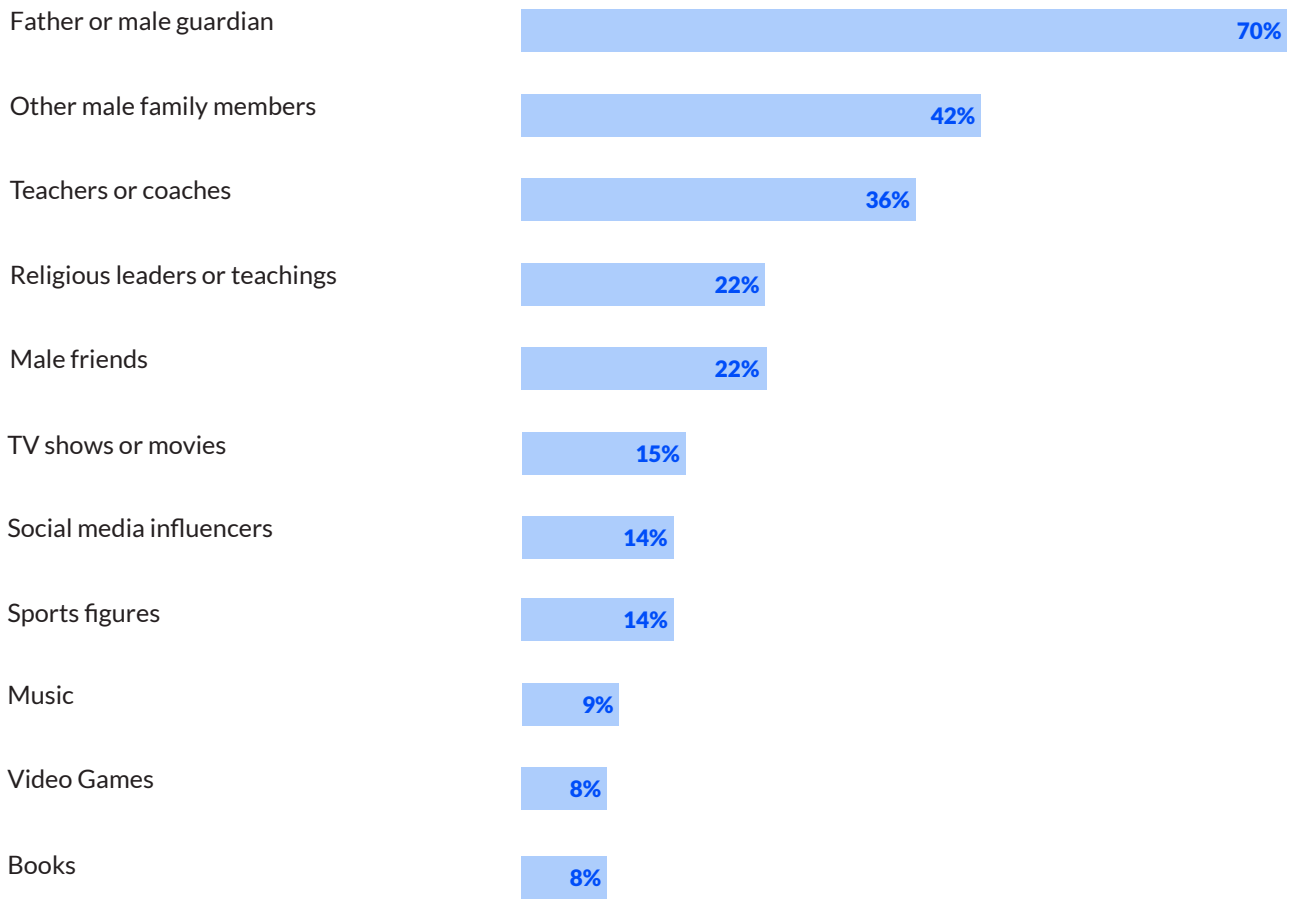
In comparison to the number of adolescent boys who turn to a father or other male family member, considerably fewer adolescent boys (14%) turn to social media influencers for guidance on what it means to be a "good man."

"I'm not really sure myself what a man should look like. I'm still trying to figure that out. Like if it's important to be, you know, physically strong or, like, emotionally intelligent and open up about your feelings or. Or whether or not you should completely shut yourself off and not talk about them."

(14-year-old)

Figure 16: Sources for what it means to be a "good man."

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Accepted up to three responses.



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Boys' Beliefs About Masculine and Feminine Norms

To understand how boys think about gender expectations and emotional expression, we examined their agreement with two important sets of norms: traditional masculine-associated norms (beliefs about how men should behave) and traditional feminine-associated norms (beliefs often associated with caring and emotional connection).

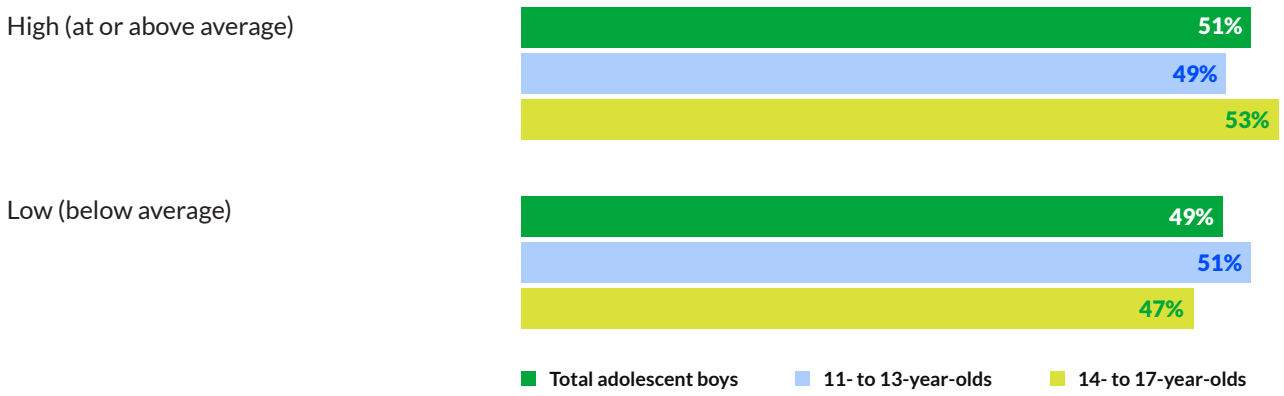
Adherence to Traditional Masculine Norms: The Pressure to Hide Feelings

The Adherence to Norms of Masculinity Scale (Gupta et al., 2013) measures how strongly boys agree with a set of traditional rules about male behavior—particularly beliefs that men should hide their vulnerability, avoid emotional expression, and handle problems alone. These norms tell boys what they need to do to be seen as "real men."

Half (51%) of all adolescent boys fall on the high end of the masculinity norms scale, meaning they are at or above average, while 49% are on the low (below average) end of the scale. Both 11- to 13-year-olds and 14- to 17-year-olds mirror the larger adolescent boy population, with no statistically significant difference between the two age categories.

Figure 17: Norms of masculinity by age.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; 11- to 13-year-olds, n = 482; 14- to 17-year-olds, n = 535).



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Our findings show a clear pattern: The more boys see digital masculinity content online, the more strongly they adhere to these traditional masculine norms about hiding emotions. Boys with high exposure to this content are:

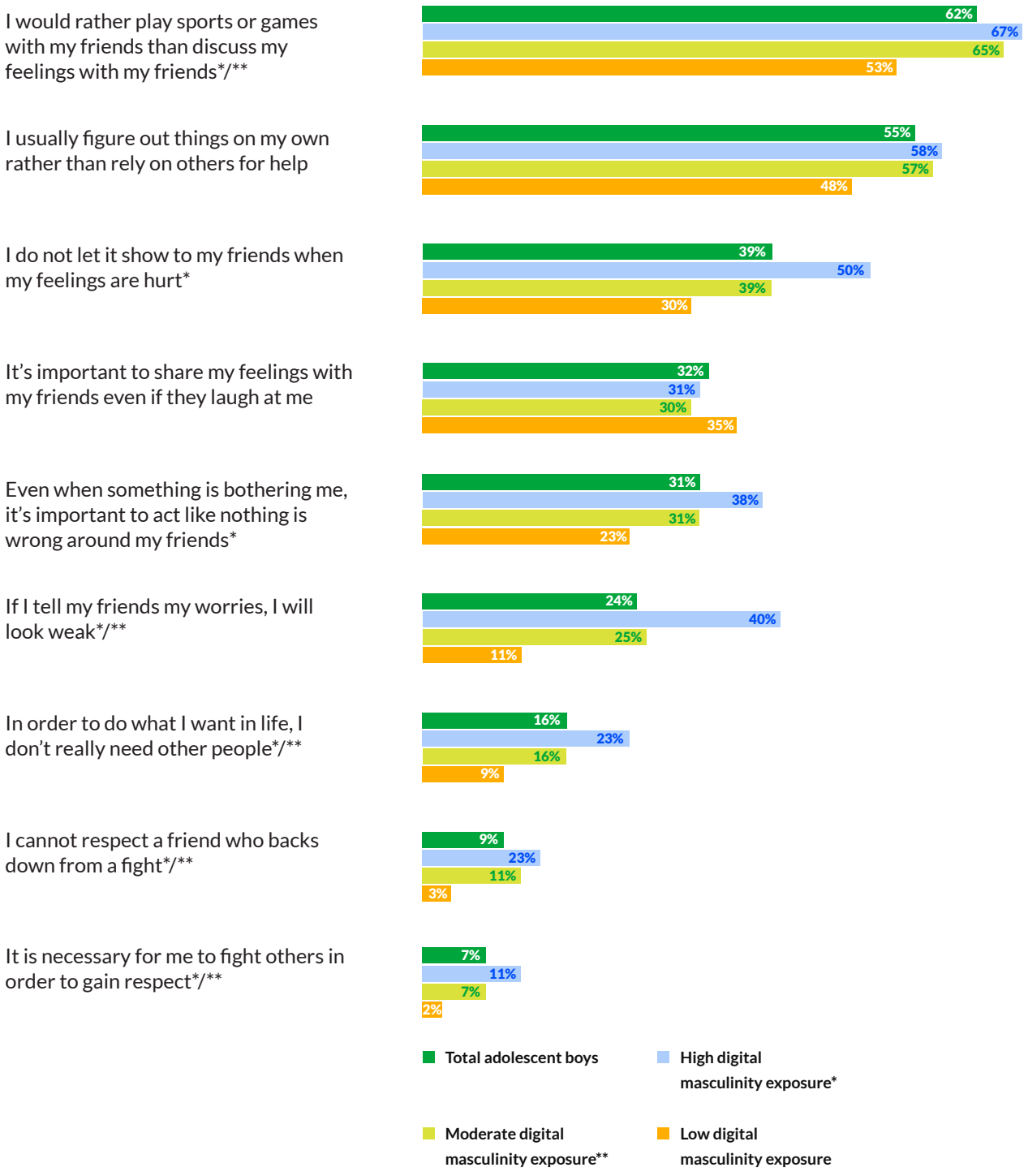
- Nearly four times more likely to believe that sharing worries makes them look weak (40% vs. 11% of those with low exposure).
- More likely to hide hurt feelings from friends (50% vs. 30%).
- More likely to act like nothing is wrong when something is bothering them (38% vs. 23%).
- More likely to avoid discussing feelings altogether (67% vs. 53%).

One-third of boys (32%) reject this norm and believe it's important to share feelings with friends, even if they might be laughed at—especially younger boys age 11 to 13 (37% vs. 27% of 14- to 17-year-olds).

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Figure 18: Percent of boys who agree or strongly agree with norms of masculinity, by digital masculinity exposure.

*Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; High digital masculinity exposure, n = 275; Moderate exposure, n = 508; Low exposure, n = 233). */** indicates a significant difference between high, moderate, and low levels of digital masculinity exposure.*

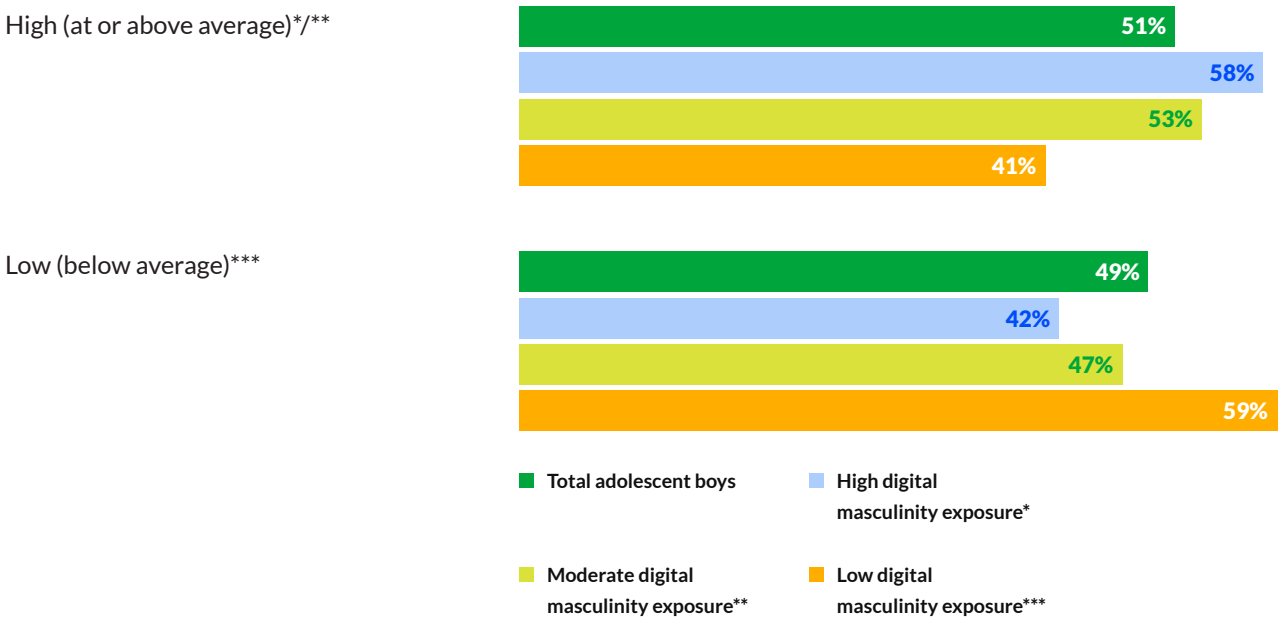


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As digital masculinity exposure levels increase, so does adherence to these masculine norms. Those with high levels of digital masculinity exposure are significantly more likely to be on the high end of the masculinity norms scale than those with low levels of digital masculinity exposure (58% high vs. 41% low exposure).

Figure 19: Norms of masculinity, by digital masculinity exposure levels.

*Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; High digital masculinity exposure, n = 275; Moderate exposure, n = 508; Low exposure, n = 233). */**/*** indicates a significant difference between high, moderate, and low levels of digital masculinity exposure.*



Adherence to Traditional Feminine Norms: The Capacity for Care

The Adherence to Norms of Femininity Scale (2022) measures boys' agreement with a set of values traditionally associated with femininity—such as caring for others' feelings, putting others' needs first, and maintaining kindness even when others aren't kind in return.

More than half (56%) of all adolescent boys fall on the high end of adherence for feminine norms. These adherence levels are consistent across age categories as well. Digital masculinity exposure levels do not appear to have a significant impact on adherence to these feminine norms.

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Figure 20: Norms of femininity, by age.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; 11- to 13-year-olds, n = 482; 14- to 17-year-olds, n = 535).

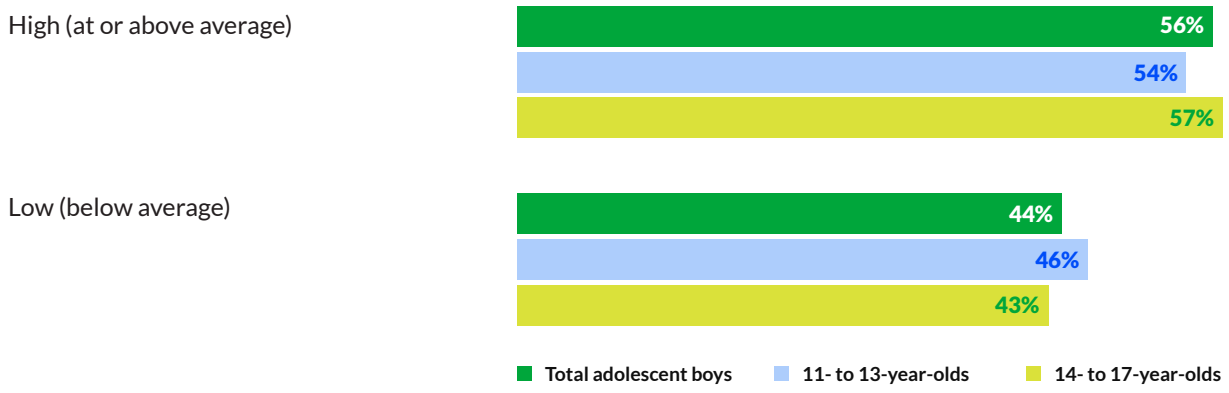
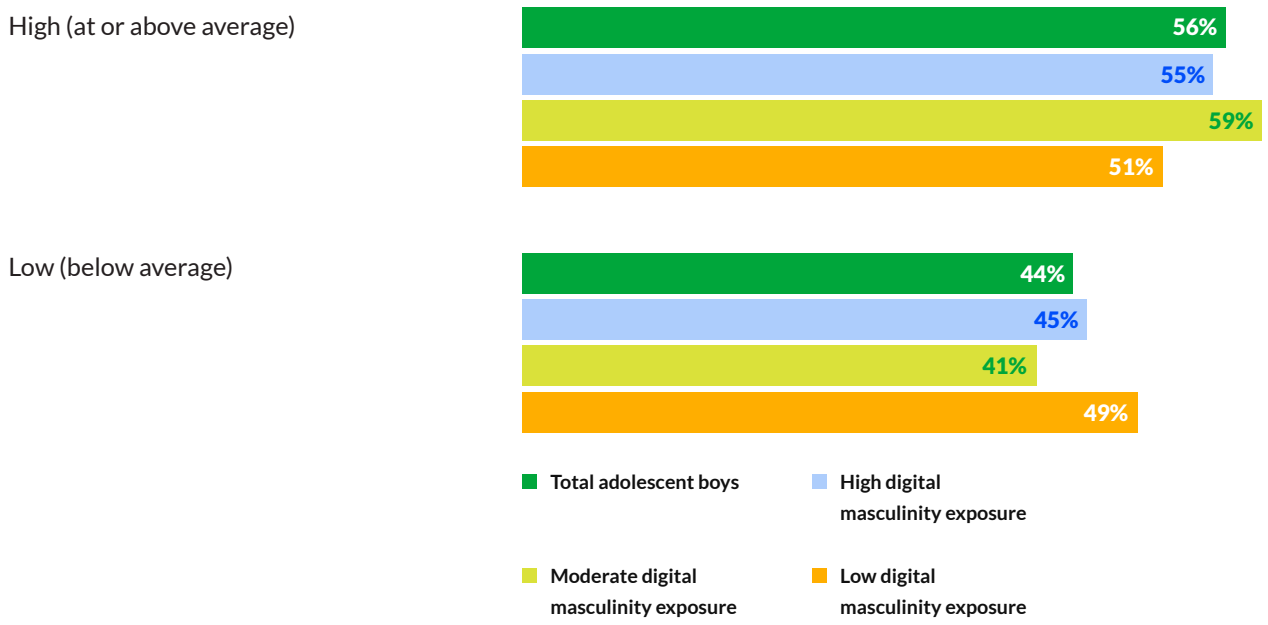


Figure 21: Norms of femininity, by digital masculinity exposure levels.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; High digital masculinity exposure, n = 275; Moderate exposure, n = 508; Low exposure, n = 233).



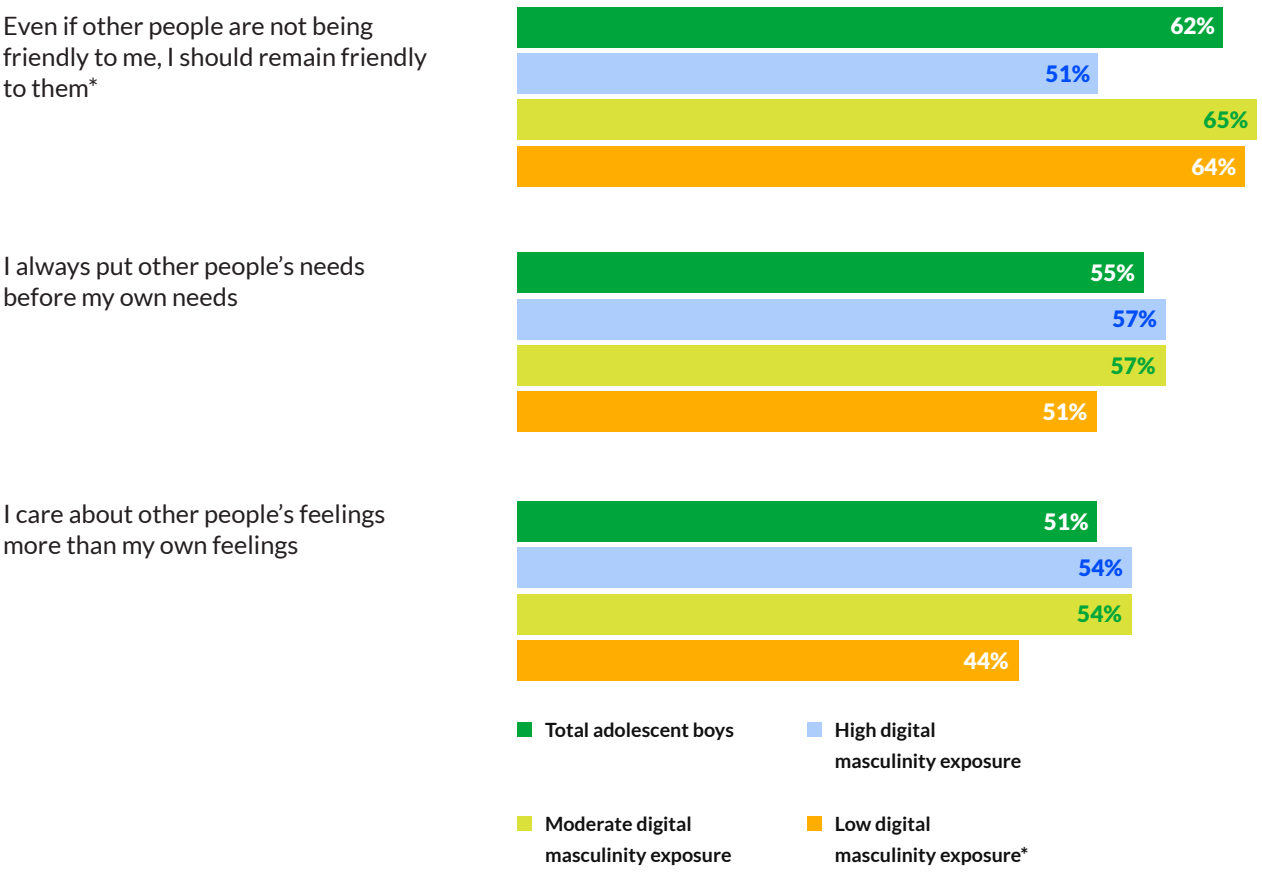
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Notably, while most boys adhere to masculine norms about not sharing their own feelings, they also strongly embrace these caring behaviors:

- 62% believe in being friendly even to those who are unfriendly to them.
- 55% put other people's needs before their own.
- 51% care about others' feelings more than their own.

Figure 22: Percent of boys who agree or strongly agree with norms of femininity, by digital masculinity exposure.

*Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; High digital masculinity exposure, n = 275; Moderate exposure, n = 508; Low exposure, n = 233). * indicates a significant difference between high, moderate, and low levels of digital masculinity exposure.*



Boys simultaneously adhere to a set of masculine norms that tell them to hide their own vulnerability and a set of feminine norms that encourage them to care for others. They're not emotionally disconnected—they resist expressing their own struggles while remaining capable of empathy and support for others. This pattern suggests that these traditional masculine norms may create a one-way street for emotional support, where boys can give but not receive care.

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Adolescent Boys' Attitudes Toward Self and Self-Esteem

The majority of adolescent boys of all ages have a good attitude and self-esteem toward themselves. However, the influences of both digital masculinity exposure and more restrictive views of masculinity affect their self-esteem.

Boys' overall self-esteem was measured and assigned to one of two categories—normal self-esteem or low self-esteem—using the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) (described in the Methodology). Ninety-two percent of the adolescent boys are at a normal level, while 8% are scored as having low self-esteem. Both age groups are similar, with 93% of the younger boys (age 11 to 13) being in the normal range compared to 91% of the older boys (age 14 to 17).

Roughly 9 in 10 adolescent boys feel good about themselves in that they believe they have a number of good qualities (93%), are a person of worth (92%), do things as well as most others (89%), have a positive opinion of themselves (88%), and on the whole are satisfied with who they are (88%).

Not all adolescent boys have a good opinion of themselves, with at least two in five exhibiting at least one negative attitude: 42% wish they had more respect for themselves, and 3 in 10 feel useless at times (32%), or at times think they are no good at all (27%). And 18% feel they do not have much to be proud of, while 1 in 10 (11%) think they are a failure.

Digital Masculinity Exposure Effect on Self-Esteem

While the vast majority of adolescent boys are in the normal range of self-esteem, the more they are exposed to digital masculinity content, both in general and the problematic messages, the more likely a boy is to have low self-esteem.

- 14% of boys with high digital masculinity exposure have low self-esteem (vs. 5% low or 7% moderate exposure).
- For problematic digital exposure, 13% of boys at the high level of exposure have low self-esteem vs. 4% with a low level of exposure.

"I try not to take much of what I see to heart. And it's just kind of, like, it's on social media. I mean people there, they're gonna forget about it. Even if it's good or bad, they're probably gonna forget about it within, like, a couple of days … It can just lead to an unhealthy mindset about what you should be."

(14-year-old)

"I feel there's a lot of pressure to be emotionally stable and uptight and just … a lot of pressure to be OK and, like, not have issues and things going on mentally. And I don't believe that's fair."

(16-year-old)

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Figure 23: Boys' self-esteem, by level of digital masculinity exposure.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Superscript a/b/../f indicates that the data for the noted group is significantly higher than the data for the group represented by that letter in the header of the table. Due to rounding, individual percentages may not sum to total.

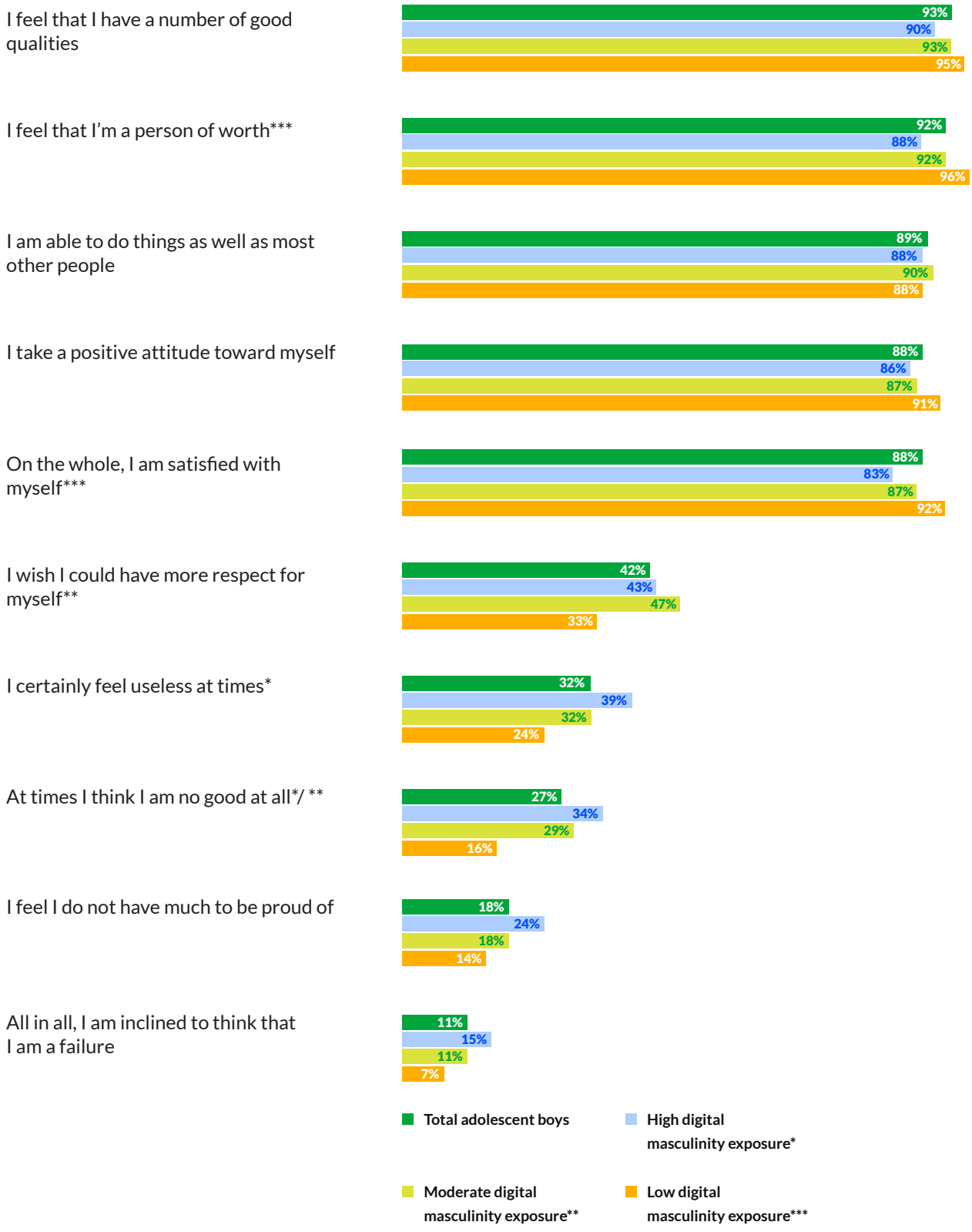
		Digital masculinity exposure			*Problematic digital masculinity exposure*		
	Total	**Low[a]**	**Moderate[b]**	**High[c]**	**Low[d]**	**Moderate[e]**	**High[f]**
	(N = 1,017)	*(n = 233)*	*(n = 508)*	*(n = 275)*	*(n = 272)*	*(n = 498)*	*(n = 246)*
Normal range of self-esteem	**92%**	95%[b]	92%	86%	96%[f]	91%	87%
Low range of self-esteem	**8%**	5%	7%	14%[a, b]	4%	9%	13%[d]

In looking at the specific attributes and attitudes that are used to measure an individual's self-esteem, adolescent boys with lower digital masculinity exposure are specifically more likely to say they are a person of worth (96%) and are satisfied with themselves (92%) vs. those with high exposure (88% and 83%, respectively). Conversely, those with high exposure to digital masculinity content are more likely to say they feel useless at times (39% vs. 24% with low exposure), at times think they are no good at all (34% vs. 16% low exposure), and do not have much to be proud of (24% vs. 14% low exposure).

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Figure 24: Responses to Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, by level of digital masculinity exposure.

*Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; High digital masculinity exposure, n = 275; Moderate exposure, n = 508; Low exposure, n = 233). */**/*** indicates a significant difference between high, moderate, and low levels of digital masculinity exposure.*



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Other Factors Associated with Self-Esteem Among Adolescent Boys

While parental communication does not seem to have a negative or positive effect on adolescent boys' attitudes about their self-esteem, human support of any kind (either strong or just some) is related to adolescent boys having a more positive attitude about themselves and their self-esteem. Adolescent boys with no human support consistently agreed with more negative images of themselves, with 3 in 10 (31%) saying they think they are a failure. Those with limited to no human support were significantly more likely to have a low level of self-esteem (38%) vs. those with strong (5%) or some (7%) support.

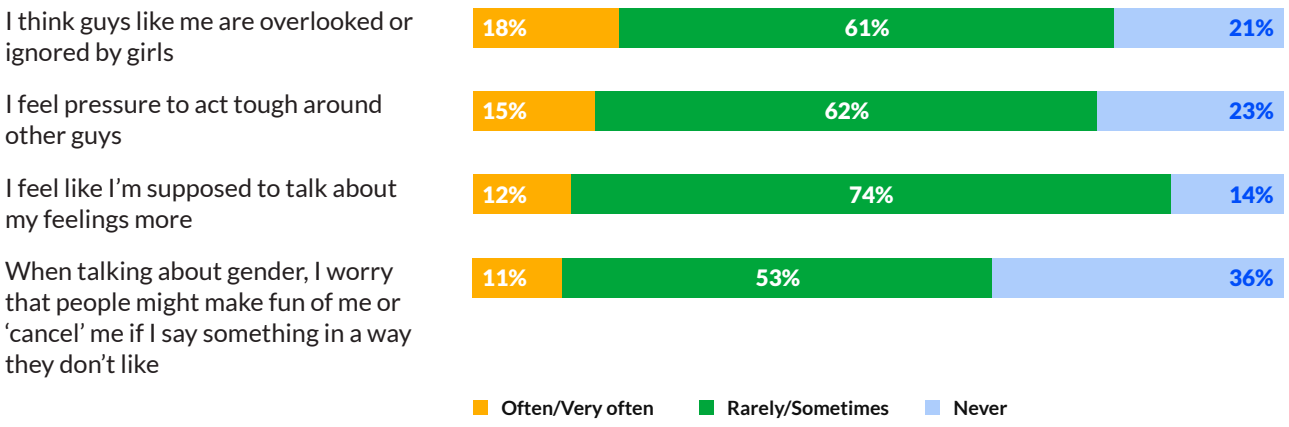
Black adolescent boys are more likely to report self-esteem in the normal range (98%) compared to White boys (92%), Latino boys (91%), and multiracial boys (86%). Parent education, income level, and the age of the adolescent were unrelated to adolescent boys' self-esteem in this survey.

Frequency of Feelings Regarding Social Expectations

Close to one in five adolescent boys (18%) often feel that guys like themselves are overlooked or ignored by girls. Fifteen percent feel pressure to act tough around other guys. Few feel like they are supposed to talk about their feelings more (12%) or, when talking about gender, worry that people might make fun of them if they do something in a way others don't like (11%).

Figure 25: How boys experience social expectations.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017).



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Adolescent boys with high digital masculinity exposure (both general and problematic), who are high on the norms of masculinity scale, who are low in self-esteem, who are lonely, and who are dissatisfied with their body all have strong associations with feelings involving social interactions.

Boys who think guys like themselves are overlooked or ignored by girls are more likely to be:

- Higher in their exposure to digital masculinity in general (23% vs. 8% low exposure) and to problematic content (26% high vs. 8% low).
- Higher on the norms of masculinity scale (24% vs. 11% low).
- Lower on the self-esteem scale (43% vs. 16% normal self-esteem).
- Lonely (30% vs. 14% not lonely).
- Dissatisfied with their body (33% vs. 15% satisfied).

Boys who feel pressure to act tough around other guys are more likely to be:

- Higher in their exposure to digital masculinity in general (22% vs. 9% low exposure) and to problematic content (20% high vs. 9% low).
- Higher on the norms of masculinity scale (24% vs. 6% low).
- Lower on the self-esteem scale (36% low self-esteem vs. 13% normal self-esteem).
- Lonely (27% vs. 11% not lonely).
- Dissatisfied with their body (24% vs. 13% satisfied).

Boys who worry they may be made fun of when discussing gender if they say something in a way others don't like are more likely to be:

- Higher in their exposure to digital masculinity in general (18% vs. 5% low exposure) and to problematic content (15% high vs. 5% low).
- Higher on the norms of masculinity scale (17% vs. 6% low).
- Lower on the self-esteem scale (33% vs. 10% normal self-esteem).
- Lonely (23% vs. 7% not lonely).
- Dissatisfied with their body (19% vs. 10% satisfied).

Adolescent boys who feel like they are supposed to talk more about their feelings are more likely to be:

- Those with low self-esteem (26% vs. 11% normal self-esteem).
- Lonely (18% vs. 10% not lonely).

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Figure 26: Feelings involving social expectations, by human support and digital masculinity.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Superscript i/j/…/z indicates that the data for the noted demographic group is significantly higher than the data for the demographic group represented by that letter in the header of the table.

Often/Very often summary	*I think guys like me are overlooked or ignored by girls*	*I feel pressure to act tough around other guys*	*I feel like I'm supposed to talk about my feelings more*	*When talking about gender, I worry that people might make fun of me or 'cancel' me if I say something in a way they don't like*
Total	**18%**	**15%**	**12%**	**11%**
Human Support				
Strong[i]	16%	13%	13%	11%
Some[j]	18%	18%	10%	10%
Limted/None[k]	32%[i]	24%	14%	23%[i]
Digital Masculinity Exposure				
Low[u]	8%	9%	11%	5%
Moderate[v]	21%[u]	15%	11%	12%[u]
High[w]	23%[u]	22%[u, v]	15%	18%[u, j]
Problematic Digital Masculinity Exposure				
Low[x]	8%	9%	10%	5%
Moderate[y]	21%[x]	16%[x]	12%	14%[x]
High[z]	26%[x]	20%[x]	16%	15%[x]

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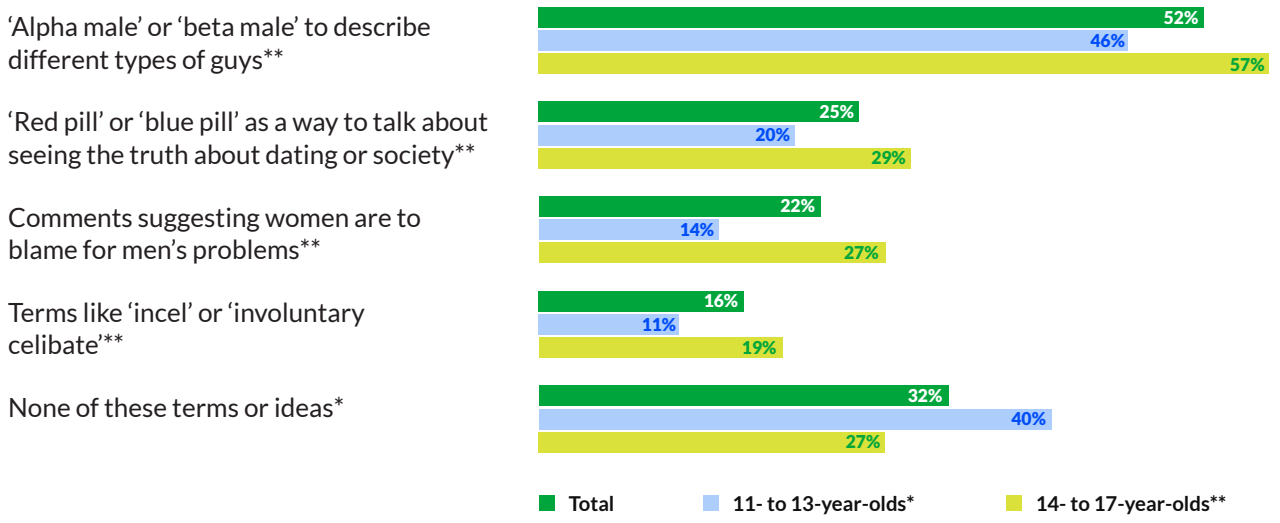
Online Terms Heard by Adolescent Boys

Of the terms asked about in the survey, the most frequent term heard by adolescent boys online either in games or on social media, by slightly more than half, is "Alpha male" or "Beta male" used to describe different types of guys (52%). One in four or less of adolescent boys are familiar with: the terms "red pill" or "blue pill" as a way to talk about seeing the truth about dating or society (25%), comments that women are to blame for men's problems (22%), or terms like "incel" or "involuntarily celibate" (16%). The older adolescent boys were more aware of all of these terms compared to the younger boys.

One-third were not familiar with any of the terms (32%), especially the younger boys (40% vs. 27% of the older adolescents).

Figure 27: Terms heard online by adolescent boys.

*Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; 11- to 13-year-olds, n = 482; 14- to 17-year-olds, n = 535). Accepted as many as applied. */** indicates a significant difference between the two age groups.*



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As digital masculinity exposure increases, both in general and problematic, awareness of all terms and comments increases. Those not aware of any of the terms have the lowest exposure levels to this content.

Figure 28: Common terms boys have seen or heard in online games or social media, by their level of digital masculinity exposure.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Accepted as many as applied. Superscript a/b/../f indicates that the data for the noted group is significantly higher than the data for the group represented by that letter in the header of the table.

		Digital masculinity exposure			*Problematic digital masculinity exposure*		
	Total	**Low[a]**	**Moderate[b]**	**High[c]**	**Low[d]**	**Moderate[e]**	**High[f]**
	(N = 1,017)	*(n = 211)*	*(n = 479)*	*(n = 264)*	*(n = 246)*	*(n = 473)*	*(n = 235)*
'Alpha male' or 'beta male' to describe different types of guys	**52%**	34%	55%[a]	68%[a, b]	35%	56%[d]	69%[d, e]
'Red pill' or 'blue pill' as a way to talk about seeing the truth about dating or society	**25%**	10%	24%[a]	45%[a, b]	10%	28%[d]	42%[d, e]
Comments suggesting women are to blame for men's problems	**22%**	7%	20%[a]	43%[a, b]	6%	23%[d]	43%[d, e]
Terms like 'incel' or 'involuntary celibate'	**16%**	8%	16%[a]	23%[a]	7%	16%[d]	28%[d, e]
None of these terms or ideas	**32%**	55%[b, c]	27%[c]	17%	53%[e, f]	25%	17%

Awareness of the various terms (alpha/beta males; red/blue pill; incel/involuntary celibate) increases with more engagement with parents. While awareness of those terms is higher with boys who have strong human support compared to moderate support, those with no or limited human support also show higher awareness.

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Awareness of comments that suggest women are to blame for men's problems is highest among those with low self-esteem (58%), who are lonely (35%) and dissatisfied with their body image (31%), who are high on the norms of masculinity (25%), and those with limited/no human support (41%).

White adolescent boys are most familiar with all of the terms, though Latino and multiracial adolescent boys are also most familiar with the terms incel or involuntarily celibate (14% and 22%, respectively).

Figure 29: Common terms boys have seen or heard in online games or social media, by their level of human support and parental communication engagement.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Accepted as many as applied. Superscript a/b/…/f indicates that the data for the noted demographic group is significantly higher than the data for the demographic group represented by that letter in the header of the table.

		Human support			*Parental communication engagement level*		
	Total	**2+ Humans[a]**	**1 Human[b]**	**Non-Human /None[c]**	**High[d]**	**Moderate[e]**	**Low[f]**
	(N = 1,017)	*(n = 682)*	*(n = 254)*	*(n = 76)*	*(n = 672)*	*(n = 244)*	*(n = v93)*
'Alpha male' or 'beta male' to describe different types of guys	**52%**	56%[b]	37%	63%[b]	57%[e, f]	46%	40%
'Red pill' or 'blue pill' as a way to talk about seeing the truth about dating or society	**25%**	27%[b]	15%	40%[b]	28%	21%	18%
Comments suggesting women are to blame for men's problems	**22%**	21%	18%	41%[a, b]	23%	19%	21%
Terms like 'incel' or 'involuntary celibate'	**16%**	18%[b]	9%	17%	17%	15%	12%
None of these terms or ideas	**32%**	31%	41%[a, c]	18%	29%	34%	51%[d, e]

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Body Image and Appearance

Satisfaction with Body Image Among Adolescent Boys

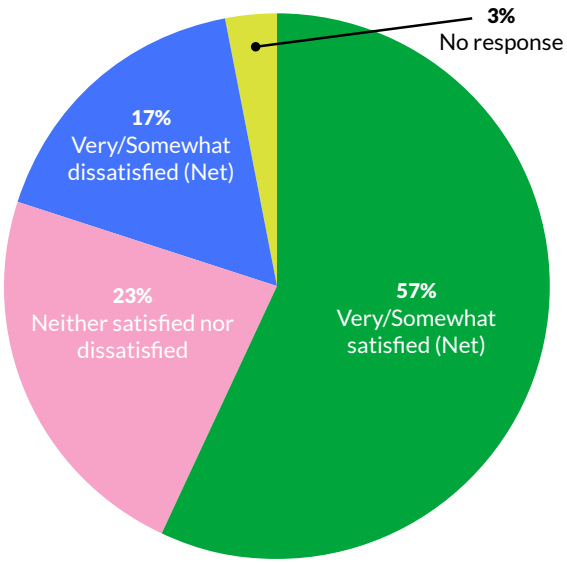
Dissatisfaction with how their body looks is experienced by almost one in five adolescent boys (17%). Close to three in five boys (57%) are satisfied (either very or somewhat) with their body image, and nearly one in four (23%) are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Satisfaction and dissatisfaction in how their body looks is similar between the younger and older boys.

Dissatisfaction with their body image is highest among adolescent boys who are:

- More exposed to problematic masculinity content online (23% high vs. 13% with low exposure).
- High on the norms of masculinity scale (22% vs. 12% low), driven by the older group of 14- to 17-year-olds (24% vs. 12% low).
- Low in self-esteem (42% vs. 15% normal self-esteem).
- Lonely (26% vs. 14% not lonely).
- Heavy gamers (20% vs. 13% occasional).
- Have limited or no human support (33% vs. 16% strong or 14% some support).
- Multiracial (28% vs. 15% White and 10% Black).

Figure 30: Body image satisfaction among adolescent boys.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017).



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Figure 31: Level of body satisfaction, by key indicators and race/ethnicity.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Superscript a/b/…/y indicates that the data for the noted demographic group is significantly higher than the data for the demographic group represented by that letter in the header of the table.

	Very/Somewhat satisfied	*Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied*	*Very/Somewhat dissatisfied*
Total	**57%**	**23%**	**17%**
Self-Esteem			
Normal range[a]	60%[b]	23%	15%
Low[b]	22%	29%	**42%[a]**
Loneliness			
Not lonely[c]	64%[d]	21%	14%
Lonely[d]	39%	29%[c]	**26%[c]**
Overall Norms of Masculinity			
High[e]	51%	23%	**22%[f]**
Low[f]	63%[e]	23%	12%
Norms of Masculinity Scale, age 11 to 13			
High[g]	49%	27%	19%
Low[h]	62%	22%	12%
Norms of Masculinity Scale, age 14 to 17			
High[i]	52%	21%	**24%[j]**
Low[j]	64%[i]	23%	12%
Platform Use			
Heavy gamer[k]	56%	22%	**20%[l]**
Non-heavy gamer[l]	59%	25%	13%
Digital Masculinity Exposure			
Low[m]	58%	25%	15%
Moderate[n]	56%	24%	17%
High[o]	59%	18%	19%
Problematic Digital Masculinity Exposure			
Low[p]	61%	22%	13%
Moderate[q]	57%	24%	17%
High[r]	51%	22%	**23%[p]**
Human Support			
2+ humans[s]	60%[u]	23%	16%
1 human[t]	56%[u]	24%	14%
None/Non-human[u]	37%	22%	**33%[s, t]**
Human Support			
White[v]	57%	27%[w, y]	15%
Black[w]	72%[v, x, y]	14%	10%
Hispanic/Latino[x]	51%	26%[w, y]	19%
Multiracial[y]	55%	13%	**28%[v, w]**

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Online Promotion of Body Image and Appearance

Nearly all adolescent boys (91%) encounter body image content online. Three-quarters of boys (75%) see content about being muscular, making it the most frequently encountered type of body image messaging. Other common appearance-related content includes dressing in a particular style (47%), being tall (43%), having clear skin (38%), and having a certain jawline or facial structure (25%). Only 9% of boys report not seeing any of this body or appearance content promoted online.

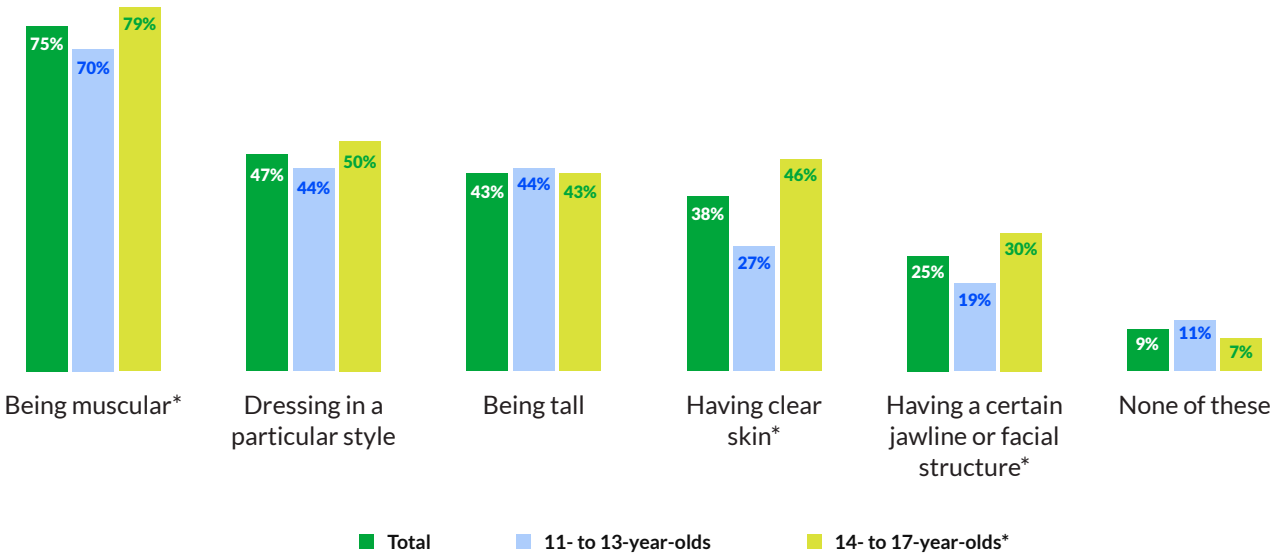
- Older boys mention being muscular, clear skin, and certain jawline/facial structure more than younger boys, while younger boys say none of these more so than older boys.
- By race/ethnicity, White adolescent boys mention being muscular most (80%) and jawline/facial structure (29%); Latino and multiracial boys also mention jawline/facial structure more (27% and 22% respectively).
- Others more likely to mention being muscular are adolescent boys who are dissatisfied with their body image (88%) and those who are in the younger age group and are high on the norms of masculinity scale (76%), but also those with strong human support (77%) and high parent engagement (79%).

"I mean, you could feel bad because, you know, there's like, unrealistic expectations that people post, like the best moments of themselves. A lot of people are taking steroids, and they're not open about it, so they look like more in shape and they lie about it. So you wonder why you don't look like that."

(16-year-old)

Figure 32: Body image and appearance content seen online, by age.

*Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; 11- to 13-year-olds, n = 482; 14– to 17-year-olds, n = 535). Accepted all that applied. * indicates a significant difference between the two age groups.*



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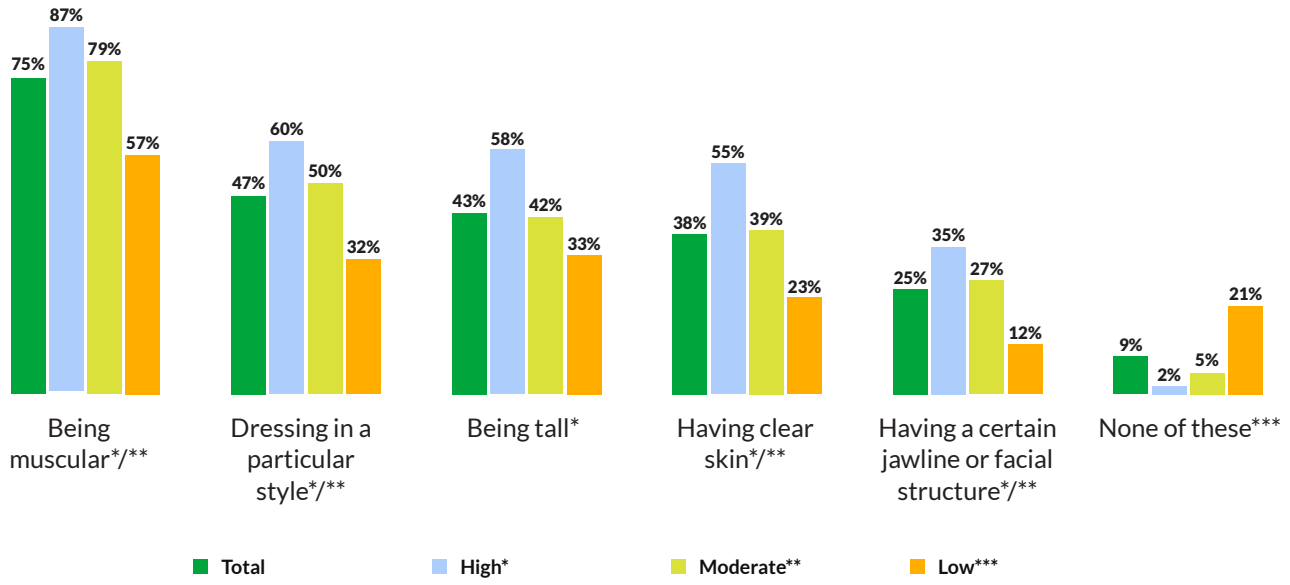
Looking at digital masculinity exposure's impact on adolescent boys, all of the messages mentioned above are mentioned more often by those with high exposure, and all messages except for being tall are also mentioned more often by those with moderate exposure compared to low exposure.

Similar higher mentions are seen among those with higher levels of problematic exposure.

Adolescent boys with low exposure to general masculinity content and to problematic content are more likely to say they are not familiar with any of these body or appearance messages being promoted online.

Figure 33: Body image and appearance content seen online, by digital masculinity exposure.

*Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; High digital masculinity exposure, n = 275; Moderate exposure, n = 508; Low exposure, n = 233). Accepted all that applied. */**/*** indicates a significant difference between high, moderate, and low levels of digital masculinity exposure.*



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Impact of Social Media on Adolescent Boys' Appearance

Very few adolescent boys agree that most guys look like the ones seen on social media (13%). But about one in four say social media makes them feel like they should change the way they look (24%).

Boys more likely to agree that social media makes them feel that they should change their looks are:

- More exposed to digital masculinity content (both general and problematic).
- Have low self-esteem or are lonely.
- Are dissatisfied with their body.
- Are high on the norms of masculinity scale, as well as high on the norms of the femininity scale, driven by older adolescents (age 14 to 17).
- Have limited human support.
- Have high or moderate parental communication.
- Are multiracial.

The only adolescent boys who are more likely to agree that most guys look like the ones seen on social media have low self-esteem (24%) or are high on the norms of masculinity scale (18% overall; 22% of those age 11 to 13, and 15% of those age 14 to 17).

Figure 34: Boys' perception of social media's impact on appearance.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Superscript a/b/.../j indicates that the data for the noted demographic group is significantly higher than the data for the demographic group represented by that letter in the header of the table.

	Most guys look like the ones I see on social media	*Social media makes me feel like I should change the way I look*
Total: Agree/Strongly Agree	**13%**	**24%**
Age		
11 to 13[a]	16%	23%
14 to 17[b]	10%	26%
Digital Masculinity Exposure		
Low[c]	9%	9%
Moderate[d]	13%	26%[c]
High[e]	16%	41%[c, d]
Problematic Digital Masculinity Exposure		
Low[f]	9%	9%
Moderate[g]	14%	27%[f]
High[h]	15%	41%[f, g]
Body Dissatisfaction		
Dissatisfied[i]	11%	45%[j]
Not dissatisfied[j]	13%	20%

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Communication and Support

In-Person Activities and Involvement

Of all the activities surveyed, adolescent boys are most likely to spend time with family (85%) and hang out with friends in person (70%) at least once a week. Almost three in five participate in outdoor activities such as hiking or fishing (57%), and half are involved in organized sports (52%) or school clubs or afterschool activities (49%).

Those with high digital masculinity exposure are more likely to be hanging with friends (79% vs. 57% of those with low exposure), participate in outdoor activities (61% vs. 47%) or be involved in organized sports at least once a week (58% vs. 44%). Similarly, those with high exposure to problematic digital content are also more likely to hang with friends at least once a week (81% vs. 60% low exposure), participate in outdoor activities (66% vs. 49%), and be involved in organized sports (59% vs. 46%).

Figure 35: Activities that adolescent boys had participated in over the past year.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017).

	At least once a week	*Less than weekly*	*Done before, not regularly/Never*
Family activities	**85%**	9%	5%
Hanging out with friends in person	**70%**	17%	13%
Outdoor activities (hiking, fishing, etc.)	**57%**	16%	27%
Organized sports (team or individual)	**52%**	42%	41%
School clubs or after-school activities (outside of art or music activities)	**49%**	11%	39%
Art, music-focused activities or organizations	**37%**	14%	50%
Religious services or youth groups	**33%**	8%	59%
Community service or volunteering	**16%**	12%	71%

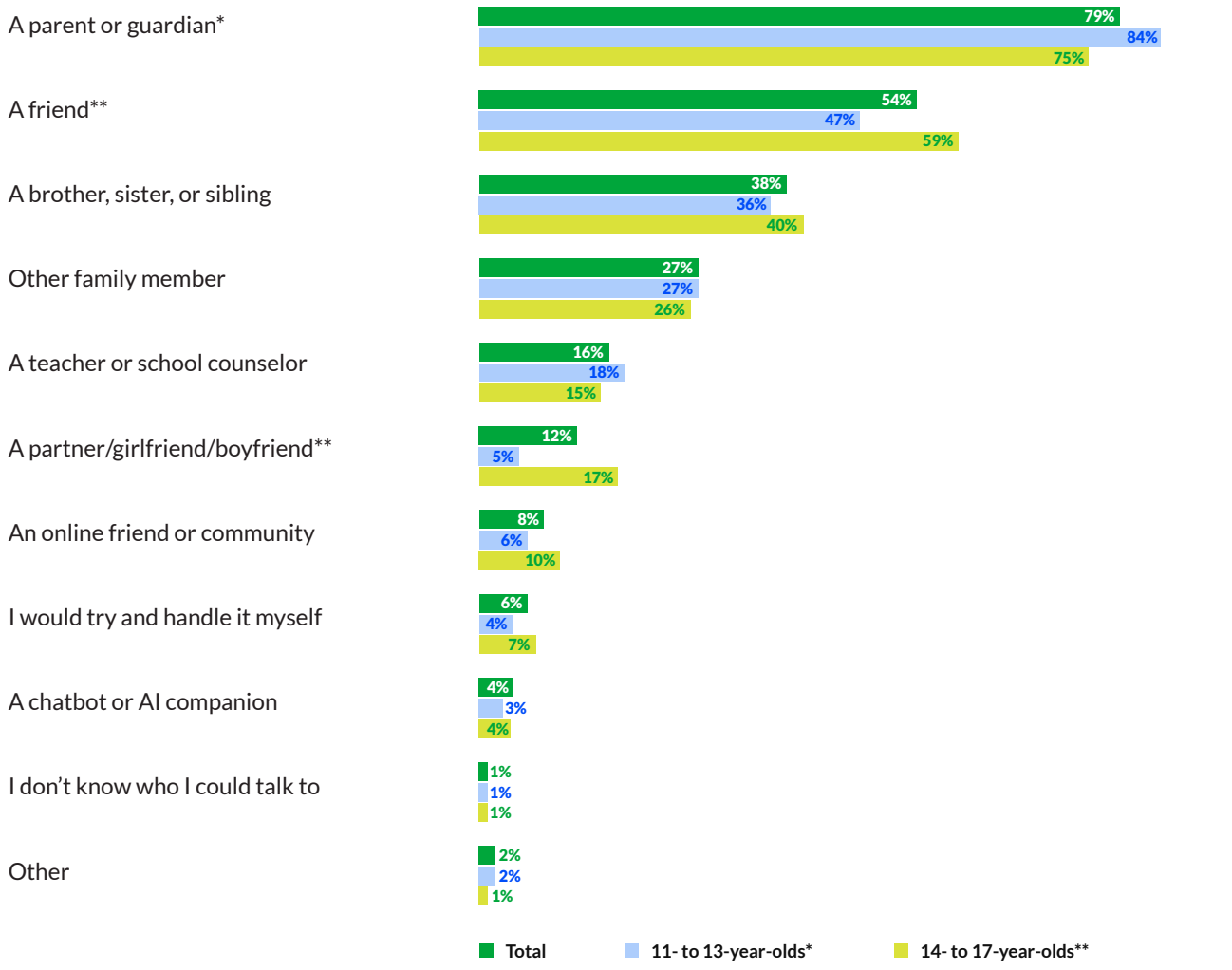
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Advisers to Adolescent Boys When Facing Tough Situations

If going through tough situations, a majority of adolescent boys will turn to a parent or guardian (79%), with younger adolescents (age 11 to 13) being even more likely to do so than those age 14 to 17 (84% vs. 75%, respectively). Just over half will turn to a friend (54%), with older adolescents more likely to speak to a friend compared to younger adolescents (59% older vs. 47% younger). Next confidants are siblings (38%) or other family members (27%). Less than one in five will speak with an educator (16%), or boyfriend or girlfriend (12%). Older boys are more likely to turn to a partner (17% vs. 5% of younger boys). Online or AI connections are mentioned by fewer than 1 in 10, with 8% saying an online friend or community, and 4% reaching out to a chatbot or AI companion. Six percent (6%) would handle it themselves, and only 1% don't know who they would talk to.

Figure 36: Who boys turn to when facing tough situations, by age.

*Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; 11- to 13-year-olds, n = 482; 14- to 17-year-olds, n = 535). Accepted all that applied. */** indicates a significant difference between the two age groups.*



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Overall, adolescent boys who turn to parents, friends, siblings, and other family members are more likely to be those who do not suffer from low self-esteem, loneliness, or dissatisfaction with their body image, as well as those who are on the lower norm of the masculinity scale.

Boys who have low self-esteem or are lonely are more likely to turn to a chatbot or AI companion.

Figure 37: Who boys turn to when facing tough situations.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Accepted all that applied. Superscript a/b/…/h indicates that the data for the noted demographic group is significantly higher than the data for the demographic group represented by that letter in the header of the table.

	Total	Self-esteem		Loneliness		Body dissatisfaction		Norms of masculinity scale	
		Normal range[a]	Low[b]	Not lonely[c]	Lonely[d]	Dissatisfied[e]	Not dissatisfied[f]	High[g]	Low[h]
Parent or guardian	**79%**	82%[b]	39%	82%[d]	70%	69%	82%[e]	73%	85%[g]
Friend	**54%**	56%[b]	35%	56%	50%	50%	56%	48%	61%[g]
Brother, sister, or sibling	**38%**	40%[b]	20%	41%[d]	28%	31%	40%	34%	42%[g]
Other family member	**27%**	28%[b]	12%	28%	23%	24%	28%	23%	31%[g]
Online friend or community	**8%**	8%	15%	8%	9%	12%	7%	8%	9%
Chatbot or AI companion	**4%**	3%	12%[a]	2%	7%[c]	6%	3%	3%	4%

There are several other differences in who an adolescent boy does or does not turn to when they are facing a tough situation:

- As digital masculinity exposure increases, turning to a parent or guardian decreases. Those with low digital masculinity exposure are more likely to turn to a parent (general: 86% low vs. 78% moderate and 73% high; problematic: 84% low vs. 78% moderate and 74% high).
- Heavy gamers are more likely to turn to an online friend/companion (12% vs. 3% for occasional gamers).

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- While only 6% overall would try to handle it themselves, this is more likely for those with low self-esteem (21%), those who are lonely (10%), dissatisfied with their body (12%), 11- to 13-year-olds who are high on the masculinity norm attitude scale (7%), and those who have limited or no human support (75%). Those with low self-esteem and who are dissatisfied with their body are also more likely to be unsure of who to turn to for advice (5% and 3% respectively).
- There are some differences by race/ethnicity, in that White and multiracial adolescent boys (58% and 61% respectively) are more likely to turn to a friend, while Black adolescent boys are more likely to handle it themselves (9%). Multiracial boys are also more likely to go to a parent or guardian for advice (87%) or to use a chatbot or AI companion (9%).

Human Support for Adolescent Boys

Human support was measured by asking boys who they would turn to during a difficult situation that caused them to worry a lot. Adolescent boys who said they had at least two real human connections—people they know in real life such as friends, parents, siblings, other family members, teachers, or romantic partners—were classified as having strong human support. Selecting exactly one real human connection indicated some human support, while choosing only non-human or online options (such as online friends, chatbots, or AI companions) or preferring to handle situations themselves indicated limited or no human support.

Over two-thirds of boys have strong human support (two or more real-life human connections) (69%), nearly one-quarter have some human support (one real-life human connection) (23%), and less than 1 in 10 have limited to no human support (8%).

"I think it, like, depends, like, if I want to share or not. But usually I'll talk to, like, my friends about it on, like, if we're like in the party or something on the game. And I'll just talk about it real quick. But I feel like some things are too personal to be shared."

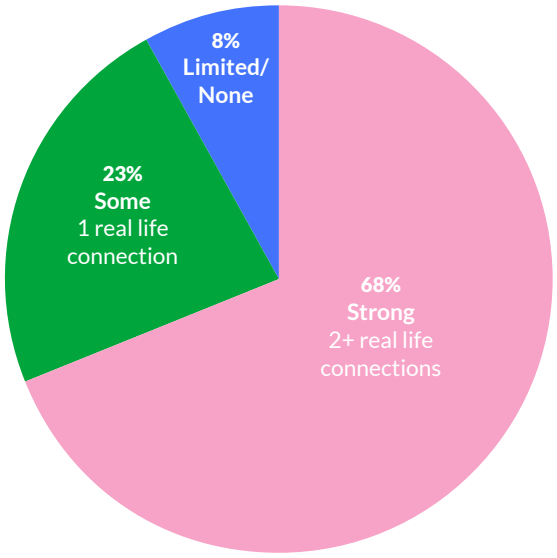
(17-year-old)

"No, I don't talk to anybody. Because I don't feel like there's a need to."

(16-year-old)

Figure 38: Human support among all adolescent boys.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017).



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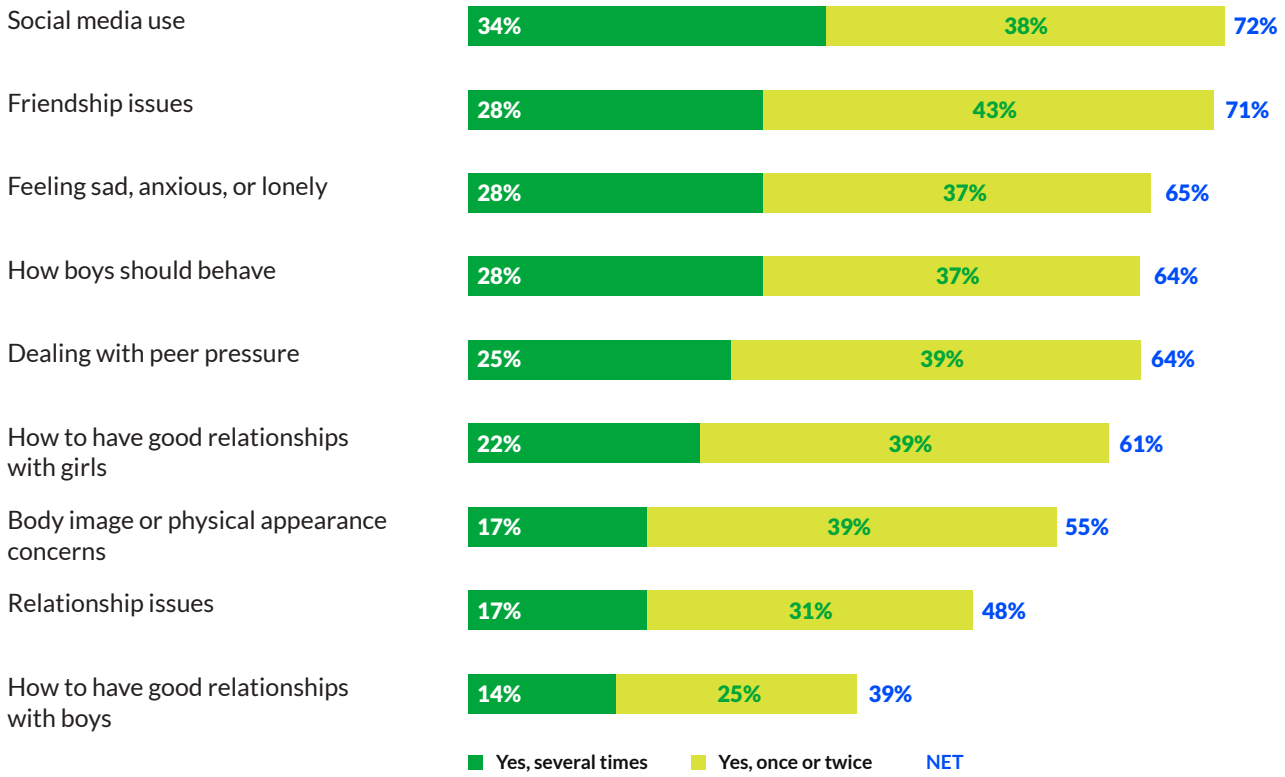
Topics of Conversation with Parents or Trusted Adults

The top conversations with parents or other trusted adults by more than 7 in 10 adolescent boys are on social media use (72%) and friendship issues (71%). Close to two-thirds have discussed feeling sad, anxious, or lonely (65%), as well as how boys should behave and dealing with peer pressure (64% each). Other conversations include having a good relationship with girls (61%), body image/physical appearance (55%), general relationship issues (48%), and having a good relationship with other boys (39%).

When speaking with parents or other trusted adults, boys age 11 to 13 are more likely to discuss how boys should behave (70% vs. 60% of older adolescents), while older adolescent boys are more likely to discuss relationship issues (57% vs. 36% of younger boys). White and Black adolescent boys are more likely to discuss dealing with peer pressure (67% and 69% vs. 56% of Latino adolescent boys and 59% of multiracial adolescent boys). Multiracial adolescent boys are most likely to discuss social media use (83%).

Figure 39: Percent of boys who have talked about the following with parents or trusted adults.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Due to rounding, individual percentages may not sum to total.



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Body image also has an impact on which topics are discussed with parents or other adults. Those who are dissatisfied with their body image are more likely to discuss body image or physical appearance concerns (69% vs. 53% of those who are satisfied). Those who are not dissatisfied are more likely to hold conversations on friendship issues (73% vs. 63% dissatisfied) or dealing with peer pressure (66% vs. 54% dissatisfied)

Those who are lonely are more likely to discuss:

- Feeling sad, anxious, or lonely (73% vs. 62% not lonely).
- Dealing with peer pressure (71% vs. 61% not lonely).
- How to have good relationships with boys (46% vs. 36% not lonely).

Older adolescent boys age 14 to 17 who are on the lower end of the scale of masculinity norms are more likely to discuss how boys should behave (67% vs. 55% of those on the high end of the scale) or body image or physical appearance concerns (63% vs. 51% high end).

Engagement Level and Conversation Topics with Parents or Trusted Adults by Digital Masculinity Exposure

Close to two-thirds of all adolescent boys are highly engaged with parents or trusted adults (63%). One in four (26%) have a moderate level of engagement, and 1 in 10 (10%) have low engagement. Engagement level was determined based on the number of conversations that adolescent boys have with a parent or other trusted adult on topics such as behavior, relationships, emotions, peer pressure, social media use, body image, friendships, etc.

Adolescent boys with moderate or high exposure to either general or problematic digital masculinity content are having more conversations with parents or other trusted adults than those with low exposure to this digital content. This may be because boys who spend more time online are more exposed to masculinity content or more open or accustomed to talking with adults about what they see and experience. In contrast, boys with lower exposure may also be more sheltered or restricted by parents, and therefore less likely to have these conversations.

Heavy gamers are significantly less engaged with parents and other trusted adults compared to occasional gamers (13% of heavy gamers have a low level of engagement vs. 6% of less frequent gamers).

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Figure 40: Parent or trusted adult engagement, by digital masculinity exposure.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Superscript a/b/../f indicates that the data for the noted group is significantly higher than the data for the group represented by that letter in the header of the table.

		Digital masculinity exposure			*Problematic digital masculinity exposure*		
	Total	**Low[a]**	**Moderate[b]**	**High[c]**	**Low[d]**	**Moderate[e]**	**High[f]**
	(N = 1,017)	*(n = 233)*	*(n = 508)*	*(n = 275)*	*(n = 272)*	*(n = 498)*	*(n = 246)*
High parent engagement	**63%**	46%	67%[a]	74%[a]	50%	66%[d]	74%[d]
Moderate parent engagement	**26%**	34%[b, c]	23%	21%	32%[f]	24%	21%
Low parent engagement	**10%**	19%[b, c]	8%	4%	17%[e, f]	8%	5%

Figure 41: Conversation topics between boys and parents or trusted adults.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Superscript a/b/.../f indicates that the data for the noted demographic group is significantly higher than the data for the demographic group represented by that letter in the header of the table.

		Digital masculinity exposure			*Problematic digital masculinity exposure*		
	Total	**Low[a]**	**Moderate[b]**	**High[c]**	**Low[d]**	**Moderate[e]**	**High[f]**
	(N = 1,017)	*(n = 233)*	*(n = 508)*	*(n = 275)*	*(n = 272)*	*(n = 498)*	*(n = 246)*
Social media use	**72%**	63%	74%[a]	79%[a]	66%	73%	81%[d]
Friendship issues	**71%**	59%	73%[a]	80%[a]	61%	74%[d]	79%[d]
Feeling sad, anxious, or lonely	**65%**	57%	67%	70%[a]	59%	67%	69%
How boys should behave	**64%**	57%	65%	71%[a]	61%	63%	71%
Dealing with peer pressure	**64%**	48%	66%[a]	76%[a, b]	52%	67%[d]	73%[d]
How to have good relationships with girls	**61%**	46%	61%[a]	79%[a, b]	47%	63%[d]	78%[d, e]
Body image or physical appearance concerns	**55%**	45%	57%[a]	64%[a]	47%	57%[d]	64%[d]
Relationship issues	**48%**	32%	51%[a]	61%[a]	33%	51%[d]	64%[d, e]
How to have good relationships with boys	**39%**	31%	42%[a]	40%	30%	41%[d]	47%[d]

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Conversations with Parents or Guardians About Being a Man

Almost 9 in 10 adolescent boys (88%) have had a conversation with a parent or guardian about being a man that they described as helpful and supportive (47%), felt comfortable about asking questions (42%), gave practical advice (39%), and was awkward but worth having (32%). Younger boys age 11 to 13 were more likely to say they were mostly just told what not to do (20% vs. 14% of boys 14 to 17).

Adolescent boys least likely to have had a conversation with a parent or guardian about being a man come from upper-income homes (17%), parents with college degrees (17%), as well as those with lower parental engagement (37%) and limited or no human support (32%).

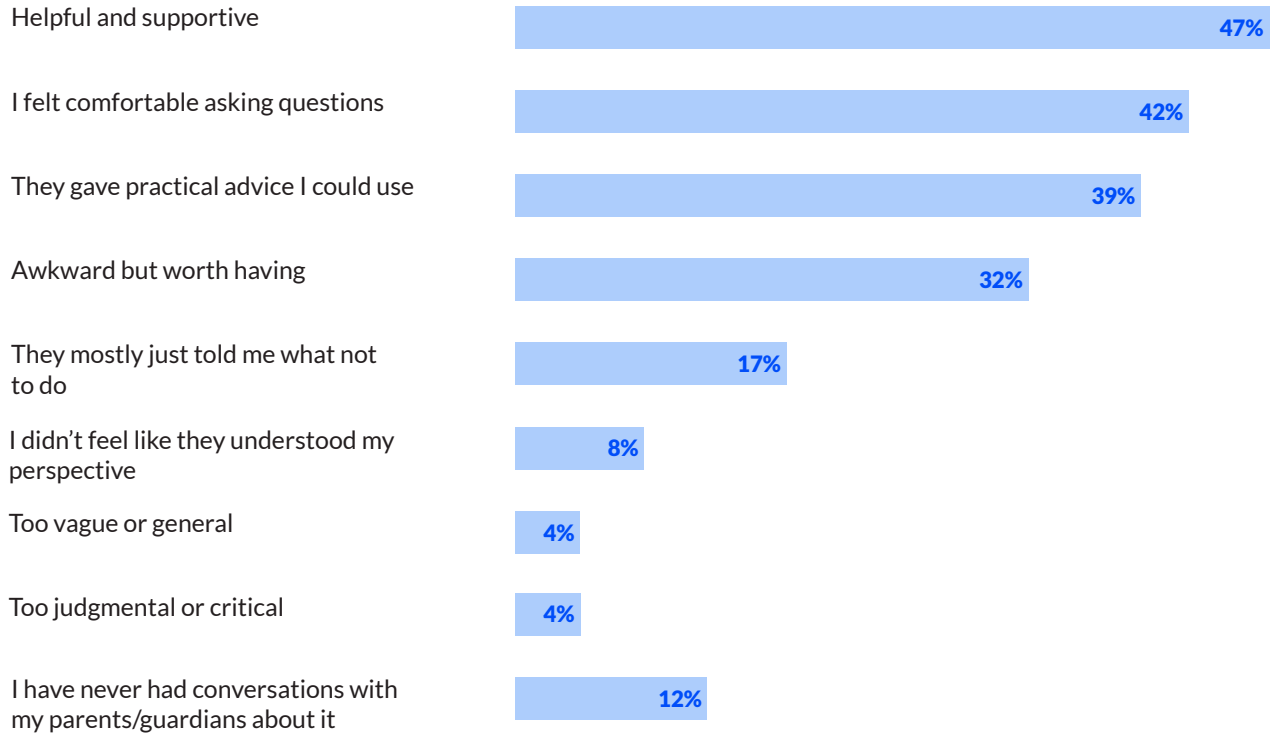
Adolescent boys with a low level of exposure to digital masculinity content were also more likely to say they have never had a conversation about being a man with a parent or guardian, which may be related to their parents being more restrictive in their adolescent's online viewing and in regard to conversations on the topic of being a man (17% low vs. 12% moderate and 6% high exposure).

While less than 1 in 10 adolescent boys felt that their parent/guardian did not understand their perspective (8%), this was higher among adolescent boys with higher digital masculinity exposure (10% high and 9% moderate vs. 3% low), as well as those with low self-esteem (22% vs. 7% normal self-esteem), those who are lonely (15% vs. 5% not lonely) or dissatisfied with their body image (14% vs. 7%), and those who are high on the norms of masculinity scale (12% vs. 4% low on the scale).

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Figure 42: How adolescent boys describe conversations with parents or trusted adults on being a man.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Accepted all that applied.



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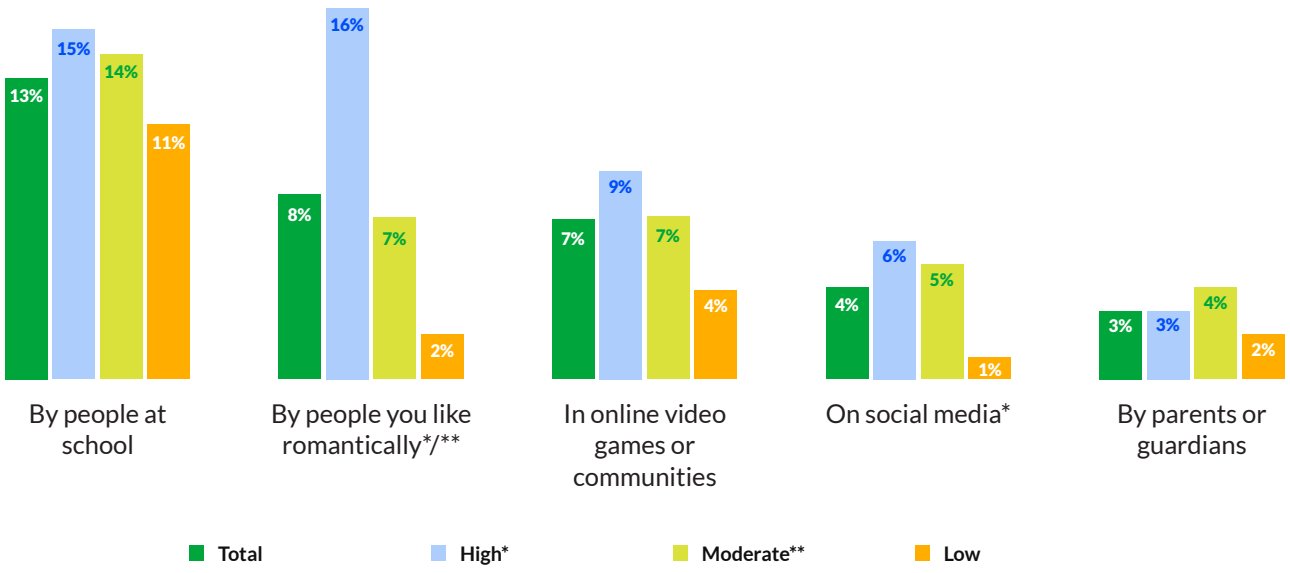
Rejection of Adolescent Boys

Few adolescent boys overall have a high frequency of being rejected (often or very often). The most frequent rejection is by people at school (13%), followed by less than 1 in 10 being rejected by someone they were involved with romantically (8%) or in online video games or communities (7%). Even fewer, 4% have been rejected on social media and 3% by a parent or guardian.

The higher the exposure to digital masculinity content that adolescent boys have, the more likely they are to be rejected by people they like romantically (16% high vs. 7% moderate and 2% low exposure). Those with high exposure are also more likely to be rejected on social media (6% high vs. 1% low). The same is seen among those with higher levels of problematic exposure.

Figure 43: Adolescent boys' feelings of rejection, by digital masculinity exposure.

*Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; High digital masculinity exposure, n = 275; Moderate exposure, n = 508; Low exposure, n = 233). */** indicates a significant difference between high, moderate, and low levels of digital masculinity exposure.*



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As shown in the below table, rejection is higher among those with low self-esteem, who are lonely, who are dissatisfied with their body image, and who are higher on the scale of masculinity norms.

Figure 44: Feelings of rejection, by self-esteem, loneliness, body dissatisfaction, and adherence to norms of masculinity.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Superscript a/b/…/h indicates that the data for the noted demographic group is significantly higher than the data for the demographic group represented by that letter in the header of the table.

		Self-esteem		*Loneliness*		*Body dissatisfaction*		*Norms of masculinity scale*	
	Total	*Normal range[a]*	*Low[b]*	*Not lonely[c]*	*Lonely[d]*	*Dissatisfied[e]*	*Not dissatisfied[f]*	*High[g]*	*Low[h]*
By people at school	**13%**	11%	40%[a]	8%	29%[c]	25%[f]	10%	18%[h]	8%
By people you like romantically	**8%**	6%	27%[a]	5%	15%[c]	18%[f]	6%	11%[h]	5%
In online video games or communities	**7%**	6%	17%[a]	3%	16%[c]	5%	6%	10%[h]	3%
On social media	**4%**	3%	17%[a]	2%	9%[c]	4%	4%	5%	3%
By parents or guardians	**3%**	3%	10%[a]	2%	5%	4%	3%	5%[h]	1%

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Barriers to Connection

"Unwritten Rules" Adolescent Boys Have to Follow

The top "unwritten rule" that boys feel they need to follow so they don't get teased or picked on is to not cry, show sadness, or show that you are afraid (46%). This is followed by not "acting gay" or "feminine" (38%), and roughly one-third choosing to use humor instead of being serious about problems, always acting confident, or acting like you don't care too much about anything (35% each), and not talking too seriously about feelings with friends (29%). About one in four (24%) don't think you should ask for emotional support, and the fewest (14%) feel that you shouldn't talk about wanting to have sex with girls. Almost one in five did not feel that any of the unwritten rules have to be followed to avoid teasing (17%).

Those with the highest exposure to digital masculinity content (both general and problematic) were most likely to select all of the unwritten rules asked about. Those with the lowest exposure were more likely to say that none of them applied.

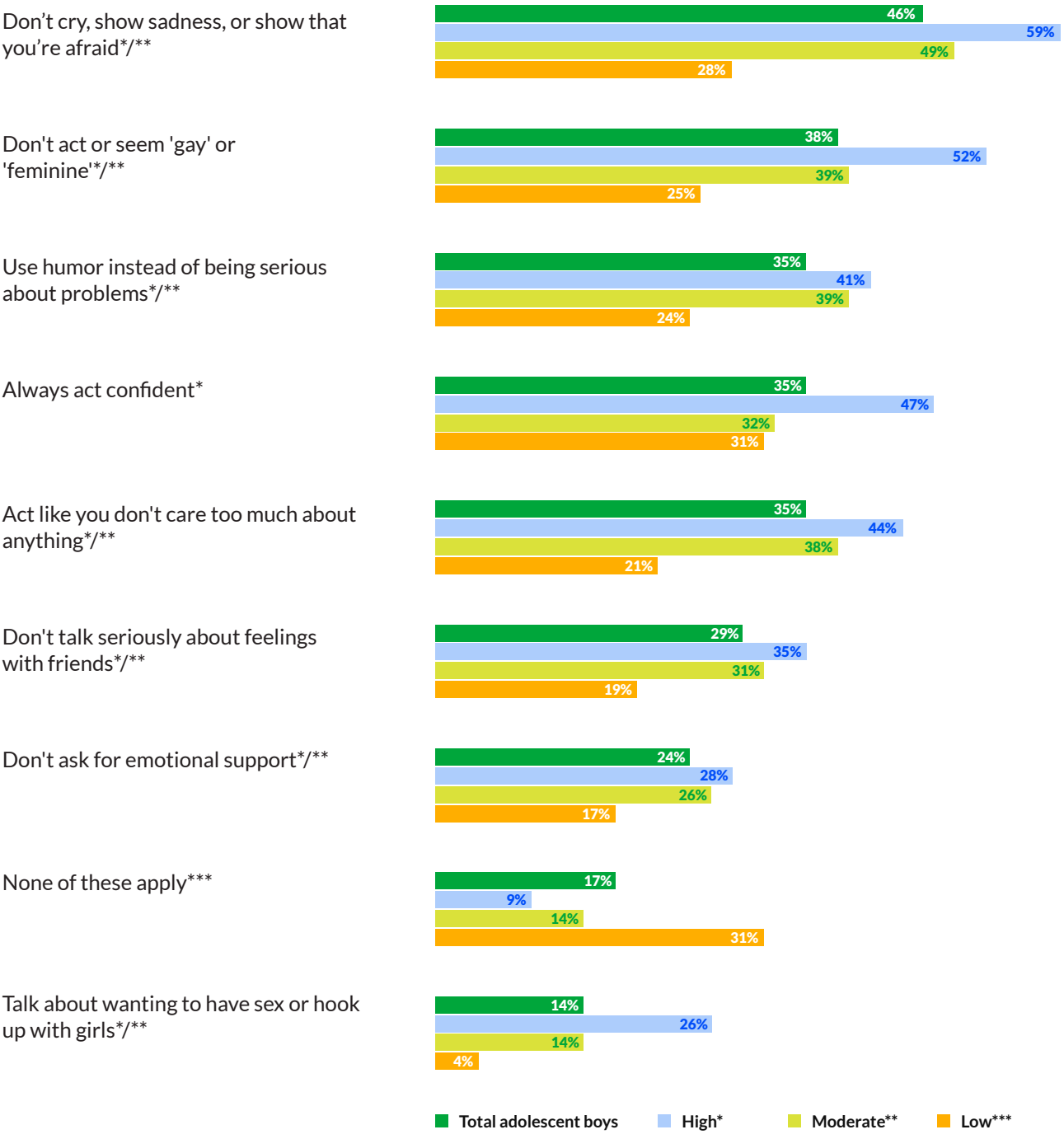
"I guess overall, you have to be strong-minded. Don't be complaining all the time or something like that. Or, if you are too sensitive, like, don't act like a girl or whatever. You know what I'm saying?"

(17-year-old)

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Figure 45: "Unwritten rules" that boys follow so they don't get teased, by digital masculinity exposure.

*Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; High digital masculinity exposure, n = 275; Moderate exposure, n = 508; Low exposure, n = 233). Accepted all that applied. */**/*** indicates a significant difference between high, moderate, and low levels of digital masculinity exposure.*



Adolescent boys with low self-esteem, who are lonely, who are dissatisfied with their body image, and who are high on the norms of masculinity scale are all more likely to think that all of the unwritten rules, other than "always act confident," should be followed.

Figure 46: "Unwritten rules" by self-esteem, loneliness, body dissatisfaction, and norms of masculinity.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Accepted all that applied. Superscript a/b/.../h indicates that the data for the noted demographic group is significantly higher than the data for the demographic group represented by that letter in the header of the table.

		Self-esteem		*Loneliness*		*Body dissatisfaction*		*Norms of masculinity scale*	
	Total	*Normal range[a]*	*Low[b]*	*Not lonely[c]*	*Lonely[d]*	*Dissatisfied[e]*	*Not dissatisfied[f]*	*High[g]*	*Low[h]*
Don't cry, show sadness, or show that you're afraid	**46%**	44%	59%	41%	57%[c]	50%	45%	52%[h]	39%
Don't act or seem 'gay' or 'feminine'	**38%**	37%	54%[a]	35%	46%[c]	43%	38%	45%[h]	31%
Use humor instead of being serious about problems	**35%**	34%	51%[a]	31%	46%[c]	54%[f]	32%	41%[h]	30%
Always act confident	**35%**	35%	35%	35%	35%	38%	35%	37%	33%
Act like you don't care too much about anything	**35%**	34%	43%	29%	51%[c]	39%	34%	40%[h]	29%
Don't talk seriously about feelings with friends	**29%**	27%	45%[a]	24%	42%[c]	38%[f]	27%	37%[h]	20%
Don't ask for emotional support	**24%**	23%	42%[a]	21%	33%[c]	30%	23%	31%[h]	17%
Talk about wanting to have sex or hook up with girls	**14%**	13%	28%[a]	12%	19%[c]	23%[f]	12%	19%[h]	9%
None of these apply	**17%**	17%	12%	19%	12%	18%	16%	12%	23%[g]

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Attitudes Toward Online Community

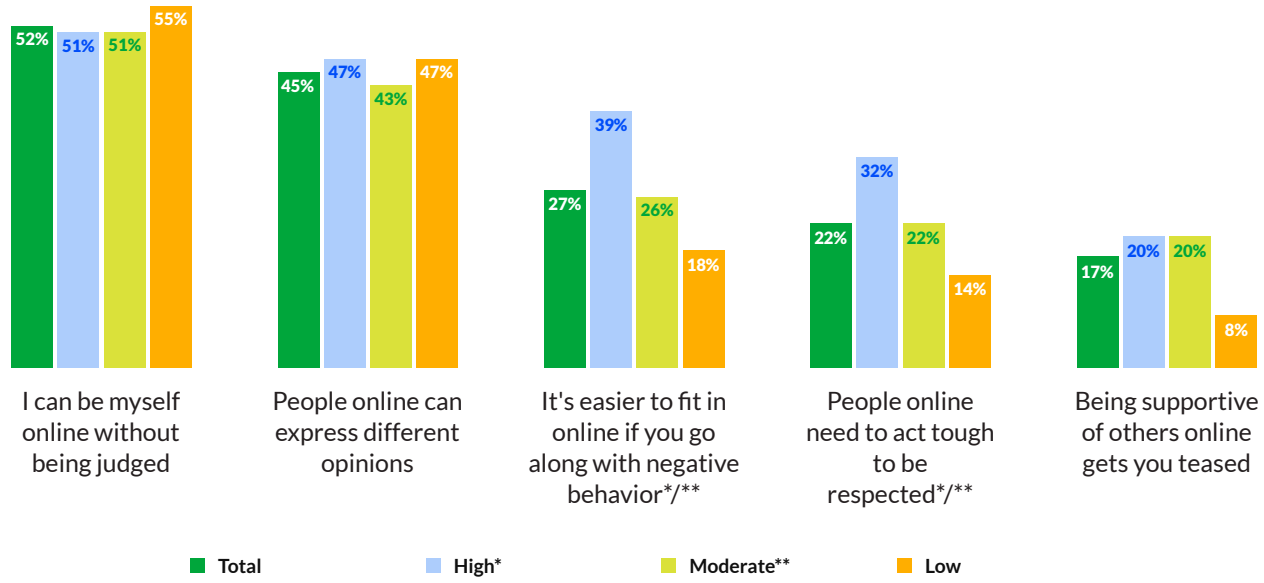
Half of all adolescent boys agree that they can be themselves online without being judged (52%), and just under half (45%) feel that people online can express different opinions respectfully. Fewer agree with the more negative attitudes about being online:

- It's easier to fit in online if you go along with negative behavior (27%).
- People online need to act tough to be respected (22%).
- Being supportive of others gets you teased (17%).

The more exposure to digital masculinity that adolescent boys have, the more likely they are to agree that it's easier to fit in if they go along with negative behavior and that to be respected online you have to act tough. This is true for problematic exposure as well.

Figure 47: Boys' views on online community culture. Percent who agree or strongly agree with each statement, by digital masculinity exposure.

*Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017; High digital masculinity exposure, n = 275; Moderate exposure, n = 508; Low exposure, n = 233). */** indicates a significant difference between high, moderate, and low levels of digital masculinity exposure.*



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Among adolescent boys who agree that they can be themselves online without being judged, more are in the normal range of self-esteem, are not lonely, and are low on the norms of masculinity scale. Similarly, among adolescent boys who feel that people can express different opinions respectfully online, more are not lonely and low on the norms of masculinity scale.

Conversely, adolescent boys with low self-esteem, who are lonely, who are dissatisfied with their body image, and who are higher on the norms of masculinity scale are more likely to agree that it's easier to fit in online if you go along with negative behavior, that people online need to act tough to be respected, and that being supportive of others online gets you teased.

Figure 48: Boys' views on online community culture, by levels of self-esteem, loneliness, body dissatisfaction, and norms of masculinity.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Superscript a/b/…/h indicates that the data for the noted demographic group is significantly higher than the data for the demographic group represented by that letter in the header of the table.

		Self-esteem		*Loneliness*		*Body dissatisfaction*		*Norms of masculinity scale*	
	Total	***Normal range[a]***	***Low[b]***	***Not lonely[c]***	***Lonely[d]***	***Dissatisfied[e]***	***Not dissatisfied[f]***	***High[g]***	***Low[h]***
I can be myself online without being judged	**52%**	54%[b]	33%	57%[d]	38%	44%	54%	43%	61%[g]
People online can express different opinions respectfully	**45%**	46%	39%	49%[d]	34%	44%	46%	37%	53%[g]
It's easier to fit in online if you go along with negative behavior	**27%**	26%	43%[a]	24%	36%[c]	35%	25%	37%[h]	17%
People online need to act tough to be respected	**22%**	22%	31%	21%	27%	30%[f]	20%	31%[h]	13%
Being supportive of others online gets you teased	**17%**	15%	38%[a]	13%	27%[c]	22%	15%	25%[h]	8%

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Looking Forward

Attitude of Adolescent Boys Toward Their Future

Three in five adolescent boys (60%) are very/somewhat hopeful for their future, though over one in five (21%) are very/somewhat worried. Older adolescents age 14 to 17 are more worried (26% vs. the younger boys at 15%).

Those who are most worried have high exposure to digital masculinity content (27%), have low self-esteem (53%), are lonely (31%), and are dissatisfied with their body image (35%). Among those who are more hopeful are those who have lower exposure to problematic content (67%), have a low level of restrictive masculinity attitudes (66% overall, but driven by the 14- to 17-year-olds who are also 66% hopeful), have strong human support (63%), do not have low self-esteem (63%), are not lonely (65%), or are not dissatisfied with their body image (64%).

White and Black adolescent boys are more hopeful for their future (63% & 65% respectively vs. Latino boys at 50%), as are those whose parent's education is high school or less (68%).

Figure 49: How hopeful or worried boys are about their future.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017).

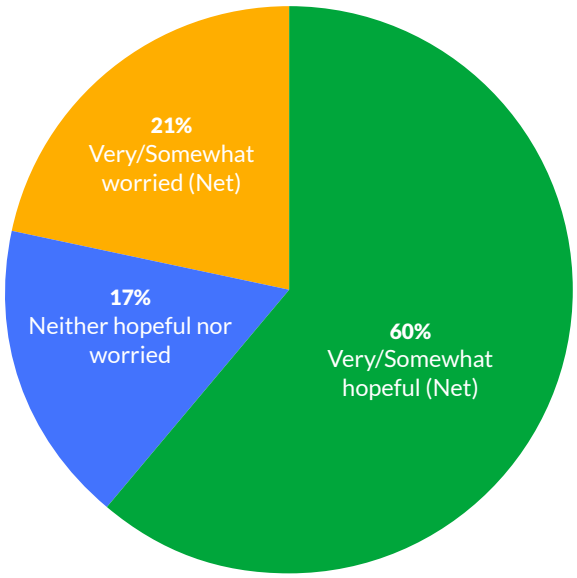


Figure 50: Outlook for the future, by demographics.

Base: Total adolescent boys (N = 1,017). Superscript a/b/.../g indicates that the data for the noted demographic group is significantly higher than the data for the demographic group represented by that letter in the header of the table.

	Very/Somewhat hopeful (Net)	*Very/Somewhat worried (Net)*
Total	**60%**	**21%**
Race/Ethnicity		
White[a]	63%[c]	19%
Black[b]	65%[c]	17%
Latino[c]	50%	24%
Multiracial[d]	61%	27%
Parent Education		
High school or less[e]	68%[f, g]	15%
Some college[f]	54%	26%[e]
College graduate+ [g]	58%	22%

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Discussion

This study of 1,017 boys age 11 to 17 reveals a complex landscape where adolescent identity formation intersects with evolving digital influences. The findings paint a nuanced picture of how boys navigate masculinity messaging online while maintaining meaningful human connections—a balancing act that carries both opportunities and significant risks for their development.

Algorithmic Construction of Masculinity

One of the most striking findings is that nearly three-quarters of boys (73%) regularly encounter digital masculinity content online, with algorithms—not user intent—serving as the primary driver of exposure. This represents a shift from previous generations, for whom masculine role models emerged primarily from family, community, and traditional media. Today's boys are encountering messages about "making money" (44%), "building muscle" (39%), and "fighting or weapons" (35%) through platforms specifically designed to capture and hold their attention.

When over two-thirds of boys (69%) regularly see problematic content promoting gender stereotypes, including messages that girls only want to date certain types of guys or use their looks to get what they want, we see how digital platforms may be shaping masculine identity formation in concerning ways. However, it's important to note the nuanced nature of boys' exposure to different types of problematic content. While messages about dating dynamics are common, only 12% of boys report seeing content suggesting that boys are treated unfairly compared to girls, a finding that challenges assumptions about the ubiquity of male grievance narratives online. While these messages exist and can be harmful, they may not be as pervasive in boys' everyday digital experiences as many had feared.

The data suggests that while boys aren't necessarily seeking out this content, the sophisticated targeting and recommendation algorithms of platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram are creating what amounts to a masculinity curriculum delivered at a sensitive time for boys. That one in five boys (20%) experience high levels of problematic masculinity exposure indicates that substantial numbers are receiving concentrated doses of potentially harmful messaging about gender roles and relationships.

Body Image Pressures and Self-Worth

The finding that one in four boys report that social media makes them feel they should change how they look represents a concerning parallel to well-documented body image issues among girls. This pressure intensifies dramatically with digital masculinity exposure: Boys with high exposure are more than four times as likely to say social media makes them feel they should change their appearance (41% versus 9% with low exposure). Given that 91% of boys are exposed to appearance-related content online, we're observing significant body image pressures on boys that deserve serious attention.

The association between body dissatisfaction and other concerning outcomes, including higher levels of loneliness and restrictive masculinity attitudes, suggests that these appearance pressures aren't superficial concerns, and may be linked to broader mental health and social development challenges.

The Importance of Human Support

Boys with robust real-world connections show markedly better outcomes across multiple measures, demonstrating the irreplaceable value of authentic relationships. The 68% of boys who have real-world connections (two or more trusted people) demonstrate better self-esteem, lower loneliness, and more resilient attitudes than those with limited support networks.

The relationship between human connection and digital masculinity exposure reveals important patterns. Boys with high exposure to masculinity content are more likely to experience loneliness and to suppress emotional expression, believing they must avoid showing sadness, fear, or vulnerability to avoid social rejection. These boys are nearly four times more likely to believe that sharing worries makes them look weak (40% versus 11% with low exposure), and are more likely to hide hurt feelings from friends (50% vs. 30%).

However, our data reveals a concerning paradox in boys' emotional capabilities: While 62% believe in being friendly even to those who are unfriendly, 55% put others' needs before their own, and 51% care about others' feelings more than their own, these same boys struggle to receive the level of care they give. This pattern suggests that

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traditional masculine norms don't eliminate boys' capacity for empathy and caregiving, but rather create a troubling one-way street for emotional support. Boys say they can be emotional providers but are simultaneously not being emotional recipients, a dynamic that may contribute to the loneliness and isolation many experience.

Boys with more real-world connections are better equipped to navigate digital influences without adopting restrictive masculine attitudes. When going through tough situations, parents remain boys' first choice for help (79%), followed by friends (54%) and siblings (38%). However, as digital masculinity exposure increases, boys become less likely to turn to parents for support, dropping from 86% of boys with low exposure to 73% with high exposure.

This pattern underscores how crucial it is to strengthen real-world relationships before problems develop. The data shows that boys who say they have people they can turn to in a tough situation show significantly better self-esteem and attitudes about themselves, while those with limited or no human support are more vulnerable to problematic online influences and concerning behaviors.

Encouragingly, the vast majority of boys (88%) have had conversations with parents about being a man, and nearly half (47%) describe these as helpful and supportive. This suggests that parents have significant influence when they engage meaningfully with their sons about identity and development.

Digital Spaces as Sources of Connection and Support

One of the most significant findings highlights how digital spaces may be filling important gaps in emotional support and connection for adolescent boys. With 60% of boys finding influencers to be inspirational and 56% receiving practical help from them, content creators are providing guidance during critical developmental moments when boys may be reluctant to turn to adults in their lives. Among boys with the highest masculinity content exposure, these relationships become even more significant, with 71% finding creators inspirational and 48% reporting that an influencer helped them through difficult times.

Gaming communities similarly provide authentic social connection for many boys, with 58% of gamers reporting that they feel like part of a group that likes them, rising to 64% among heavy gamers. These digital spaces offer belonging and community that may be particularly valuable for boys who struggle with face-to-face social interactions or feel isolated in their offline environments.

However, these same spaces also normalize problematic behaviors. The majority of boys witness bullying, harassment, and discriminatory language during gameplay, and heavy gamers are more likely to engage in harmful conduct themselves. This duality highlights both the genuine social benefits these communities provide and the concerning behaviors they can reinforce.

Limitations

Several important limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. First, this cross-sectional study captures attitudes and behaviors at a single point in time, which prevents conclusions about whether digital masculinity exposure influences the more concerning attitudes or whether boys with certain predispositions seek out reinforcing content. The relationships observed are likely bidirectional, with algorithms both responding to and shaping user preferences.

Second, while our 12-item digital masculinity exposure scale was developed through expert consultation, it may not capture the full spectrum of masculinity content that boys encounter online. Additionally, the rapidly evolving nature of digital platforms means that our July 2025 snapshot may not capture emerging platforms or features, and frequent changes to platform algorithms could shift the distribution and delivery of masculinity content over time.

Third, the difficulty of disentangling high masculinity content exposure from general heavy internet usage means that some observed associations may reflect broader patterns of digital engagement, rather than specific responses to masculinity content. Additionally, boys who are less emotionally expressive by nature may be drawn to digital spaces that validate emotional suppression, creating selection effects that complicate interpretation.

Fourth, the 11 to 17 age range in our sample spans significant developmental stages. While we analyze findings by age groups, masculinity identity formation processes differ substantially between early and late adolescence, and our cross-sectional design may not capture these developmental trajectories.

It's also important to recognize that many terms (e.g., "alpha/beta male," "red pill/blue pill") may carry different meanings across social groups and contexts. Our survey assessed boys' exposure frequency to these concepts, but

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not their understanding or interpretation of this content. A boy's familiarity with these terms doesn't necessarily indicate adoption of associated ideologies. Given our finding that algorithms often deliver masculinity content without user intent, boys may encounter these concepts without actively seeking them or fully understanding their ideological implications. Parents and educators should approach these conversations with nuance rather than alarm.

A final limitation concerns potential underreporting of pressure to "man up" among boys with high digital masculinity exposure. Boys most deeply embedded in restrictive masculine cultures may be least likely to admit feeling pressured to suppress emotions or experience loneliness, as acknowledging such vulnerability could contradict the ideologies they've adopted. Admitting to emotional struggles may be perceived as "feminine" or weak, making boys reluctant to acknowledge these feelings even in anonymous surveys. This suggests that our findings may underestimate the true prevalence of emotional suppression pressure, particularly among boys most at risk. For example, the relatively modest overall rates of reported pressure to "act tough" (15% often/very often) and reports of loneliness (26%) may reflect a reporting bias rather than actual lower prevalence.

Guidance for Stakeholders

For parents

This research helps parents understand the digital influences shaping their sons' understanding of masculinity. Many of these topics could be part of meaningful conversations. Parents can use this knowledge to engage in specific discussions:

- **Start conversations about algorithms:** Begin with some questions that show your curiosity: *"Have you noticed that your feed shows you a lot of videos about gambling?"* or *"What kinds of posts about making money do you see most often?"* Then explain that this research shows that boys and young men often receive messages about masculinity even if they don't search for that type of content. You may want to discuss questions like, *"Why do you think technology companies believe boys like you want to see this kind of content?"* or *"How does it feel to know they are marketing to you in this way?"*
- **Discuss body image directly:** Spend some time learning about concepts like "bigorexia" (the health condition that can lead to an unhealthy fixation on building muscle mass) and the risks of eating disorders, which can sometimes go undiagnosed in boys. You can talk about this issue by asking questions like, *"Social media shows a lot about being muscular or looking a certain way. Have you seen content like that?"* and then follow up with questions like, *"How does that make you feel about yourself?"* If you have specific concerns about your child, be sure to seek professional medical help.
- **Explore influencer relationships:** Knowing that some teen boys look up to or admire the influencers they see, it's best to lead with curiosity, not criticism. Ask questions like, *"Which content creators do you find inspiring?"* or *"What advice have you gotten from people online?"* Try to understand what makes the people they follow so interesting or compelling. Gently encourage some critical thinking by asking questions like, *"Do they ever say things you disagree with or don't like?"*
- **Address emotional expression:** Boys need to hear—and see—the men in their lives expressing a full range of emotions. Be sure you're not reinforcing rigid ideas of how boys and men are supposed to act or emote. You can ask questions like, *"Do you feel pressure to act a certain way when you're upset or worried?"* or *"Do the people you see online ever talk about how they handle their feelings?"*
- **Strengthen real-world connections:** Prioritize family time, encourage face-to-face friendships, model healthy emotional expression, and help boys connect with multiple trusted adults in their lives.
- **Leverage positive online communities:** Since many boys find belonging in gaming communities, help them identify and participate in online spaces with positive community standards and good moderation. Don't be afraid to step in if you hear slurs, insults, or hurtful language being used. Be clear about your limits and expectations.
- **Connect digital interests to real-world activities:** If your son enjoys gaming, consider local gaming clubs, esports teams, or coding classes that combine his interests with face-to-face interaction.
- **Create judgment-free zones:** It can be challenging, but make it your goal to create a space where boys can discuss what they see online without worrying about being punished or having their internet access taken away. Try to help them navigate challenging situations and, if something has already happened, discuss what can be done to repair the situation and how to avoid similar incidents in the future.

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For educators

Schools can integrate awareness of digital masculinity influences into existing curricula and create supportive environments for healthy identity development:

- **Develop** comprehensive digital literacy and well-being programs that help students understand how algorithms specifically target and amplify masculinity and body transformation content, helping students think critically about online content and influences.
- **Create safe discussion spaces** where boys can explore modern masculinity expectations and challenges without judgment.
- **Support families with practical resources and guidance** for having constructive conversations about masculinity pressures, recognizing that most boys value parental input when delivered supportively.
- **Implement peer intervention training** in gaming and online contexts, building on the finding that many boys already stand up against negative behavior.
- **Train staff to recognize signs** of social isolation, body image concerns, or restrictive masculine attitudes that may be linked to digital influences.
- **Promote in-person social connection** through structured activities and intentional relationship-building opportunities, particularly for boys who may be socially isolated.
- **Establish mentorship programs** that connect boys with positive adult male role models who can provide guidance on healthy masculinity.
- **Address terminology contextually** when terms like "alpha male" or "incel" emerge in classroom discussions, helping students understand the complexity and potential harm of these concepts.
- **Offer a range of extracurricular offerings**, such as sports, theater, music, robotics, and outdoor programs, so boys can find different ways to build skills, confidence, and connection. Opportunities can include both all-male and mixed-gender groups, giving boys space to form supportive relationships in multiple contexts.

For communities and mentors

The data shows that boys with strong human support networks are far more resilient to problematic digital influences. Communities can create more opportunities for positive male mentorship:

- **Support mentorship organizations like** Big Brothers Big Sisters, which provide one-on-one relationships with caring adults who can model healthy masculinity.
- **Invest in youth-serving activities:** Scouting America, sports leagues, makerspaces, and community programs offer structured environments where boys can develop skills and relationships with positive male role models.
- **Encourage men in caring roles:** Support and celebrate men who choose careers as elementary teachers, youth workers, counselors, and coaches—professions that provide boys with examples of nurturing masculinity.
- **Foster neighborhood connections:** Encourage positive interactions between adult men and neighborhood boys through informal mentorship, whether coaching Little League, leading scout troops, or simply being a positive presence.
- **Create inclusive activities:** Develop programs that welcome boys regardless of traditional masculine interests, from art and music to outdoor adventure and community service.
- **Support fathers and father figures:** Provide resources and programs that help men develop skills for emotionally supportive parenting and positive male role modeling.

For policymakers

This data provides evidence for targeted regulations that can create safer online environments for adolescent boys while preserving beneficial aspects of digital connection:

- **Establish algorithmic transparency requirements** for platforms serving minors, requiring disclosure of how content is recommended to young users.
- **Require age-appropriate design** by platforms to protect against the negative developmental impacts of recommendation algorithms on adolescent identity formation.
- **Ban algorithmic feeds and overnight notifications** to kids under 16 unless parents provide consent.
- **Support research funding** focused on understanding healthy masculine identity development in digital contexts and evaluating intervention effectiveness.
- **Mandate parental control tools** that provide meaningful insights into children's content exposure patterns, and allow parents to limit the appearance-focused, hypermasculine, or gender stereotype content viewable by children under the age of 13—not just providing screen time limits.

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- **Establish liability frameworks** for platforms that knowingly promote appearance-focused, hypermasculine, or gender-stereotyped content.
- **Regulate influencer marketing** targeting minors, particularly around fitness supplements, appearance enhancement products, or lifestyle content that promotes unrealistic standards.
- **Fund digital literacy education** programs in every school to specifically address masculinity messaging and healthy relationship formation on social media and AI platforms.
- **Develop policies to address the rise of AI companions.** Some boys may use them for advice or connection, but they cannot replace healthy relationships with peers and adults. No one under the age of 18 should be allowed to use AI companions. And policymakers should ensure strong privacy protections, guard against exploitative design, and support research on how these tools affect adolescent development.

For industry

Gaming and social media companies can implement design changes that preserve community benefits while reducing harmful exposures:

- **Audit recommendation algorithms** for potential amplification of restrictive masculinity messaging to young users.
- **Implement content circuit breakers** that limit exposure to appearance-focused or gender stereotype content for users under 18.
- **Design positive community features** in gaming spaces that reward supportive behavior and provide alternatives to toxic communication patterns.
- **Create better moderation tools** that address harassment and discriminatory language while preserving genuine social connections.
- **Develop age-appropriate versions of platforms** that provide community and inspiration without harmful appearance or lifestyle pressures, and utilize age-assurance methods to ensure that users are using the appropriate version.
- **Partner with mental health organizations** to provide resources for users who show signs of social isolation or emotional distress.

The path forward requires acknowledging that digital platforms have become significant influences on how boys understand masculinity while working to ensure that these influences support rather than undermine healthy development. With thoughtful intervention from parents, educators, policymakers, and industry, we can help boys navigate these digital environments while maintaining the human connections essential to their well-being.

Methodology

Overview

Common Sense Media engaged SSRS to conduct this study among boys age 11 to 17 living in the United States. SSRS invited the boys to participate in a self-administered online survey through their parents, who were members of the SSRS Opinion Panel. Data collection was conducted from July 9 to 14, 2025, among a sample of n = 1,017 respondents.

The survey was conducted via the internet in English (977) and Spanish (40). Data was weighted to represent the target population of boys age 11 to 17. The margin of sampling error for the complete set of weighted data is ± 4.2 percentage points.

This section provides information about the sampling procedures and the methods used to collect, process, and weight data for this study.

Sample Design: SSRS Opinion Panel

SSRS Opinion Panel members are recruited randomly based on nationally representative ABS (Address Based Sample) design (including Hawaii and Alaska). ABS respondents are randomly sampled by Marketing Systems Group (MSG) through the U.S. Postal Service's Computerized Delivery Sequence File (CDS), a regularly updated listing of all known addresses in the U.S. For the SSRS Opinion Panel, known business addresses are excluded from the sample frame. Additional panelists are recruited via random digit dial (RDD) telephone samples of cellphone numbers connected to a prepaid cellphone. This sample is selected by MSG from the cellphone RDD frame using a flag that identifies prepaid numbers. Prepaid cellphone numbers are associated with cellphones that are "pay as you go" and do not require a contract.

The SSRS Opinion Panel is a multimode panel (web and phone). Most panelists take self-administered web surveys.

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However, the option to take surveys conducted by a live telephone interviewer is available to those who do not use the internet, as well as those who use the internet but are reluctant to take surveys online.

Survey Sampling

The sample drawn for this study were boys age 11 to 17 living in the United States who were recruited through SSRS Opinion Panelists, who are U.S. adults age 18 or older that have a child/children age 11 to 17 living in their household. The sample was drawn using a probability proportional to size (PPS) methodology to ensure adequate representation of each demographic group while minimizing the variability of the final weights. The sample was additionally stratified by preferred survey language, mode, and age group of child/children in their household (either 6 to 11 years or 12 to 17 years) to meet the sample size targets.

Questionnaire Design

To prepare the final questionnaire, SSRS conducted in-depth interviews with 10 boys age 11 to 17, recruited through the parents/legal guardians who are members of the SSRS Opinion Panel and through friends and families. Recruitment took place from April 10 to 25, 2025, and the interviews were conducted concurrently from April 16 to 27, 2025. Figure 51 summarizes the age distribution of the participating boys. The boys' valuable insights played a key role in helping Common Sense Media with developing the web questionnaire.

Figure 51: Number of boys who participated in the in-depth interviews, by age.

Age	*Number of boys interviewed*
11 years old	1
12 years old	1
13 years old	1
14 years old	2
15 years old	0
16 years old	3
17 years old	2

Next, cognitive interviews were conducted with a separate group of 10 boys age 11 to 17. Recruitment and interviews were carried out concurrently from June 13 to 25, 2025. During the interviews, the participants were presented with questions about their social media use, gaming habits, perception of masculinity, and other subjects to gauge comprehension. The main goals of the testing were threefold: (1) to grasp how participants interpreted the questions, (2) to understand their thought processes in arriving at answers, and (3) to assess whether any questions posed challenges or could be made more relevant to the boys. Figure 52 presents the age distribution of boys who participated in the cognitive interviews.

Figure 52: Number of boys who participated in the cognitive interviews, by age.

Age	*Number of boys interviewed*
11 years old	2
12 years old	2
13 years old	1
14 years old	1
15 years old	1
16 years old	1
17 years old	2

Following the pretests, SSRS made adjustments to the survey instrument based on the feedback collected from the boys. Changes to the survey instrument did not substantially change its content but further clarified questions and response options to ensure data validity.

SSRS reviewed the questionnaire primarily to identify potential problems in the instrument that might increase respondent burden, cause respondents to refuse or terminate the survey, create problems with respondent comprehension, or pose practical challenges for mode-specific administration such as complex skip patterns.

To enhance accessibility, the questionnaire was translated into Spanish, providing respondents with the option to take the survey in either English or Spanish based on their comfort level. With the exemption of the screening questions, both the parent and the child respondents were allowed to (or "could") skip questions if they wanted.

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Data Collection

Screening

Panelists were screened at the start of the survey for their parental status. Respondents who indicated that they are not a parent/legal guardian of a boy/boys age 11 to 17, or if they were but did not consent for their son to take the survey, were not invited to continue with the survey.

Web Contact Procedures

A "soft launch" that invited a limited number of panelists and their sons to take the survey was conducted from July 9 to 10, 2025. Soft launch data was checked to ensure the functionality of the program and that the administration length of the survey was within the scope of work. After checking soft launch data to ensure that all questionnaire content and skip patterns were correct, an additional sample was released to ensure the final sample met the study goals. Following the full launch of the survey in English and Spanish on July 11, 2025, a reminder was sent via email or SMS on July 13, 2025.

In households with multiple eligible sons, the parent/legal guardian was instructed to select the son with the most recent birthday. The survey could be completed immediately if the selected son was available, or resumed later when he became available.

In appreciation for the boys' participation, they received post-paid compensation in the form of an electronic gift card, sent via email immediately to their parent/legal guardian's email address after completion of the survey.

Median web survey length was approximately 22 minutes, while the average web survey length was approximately 25 minutes.

Programming, Data Processing, and Integration

Programming

Prior to the field period, SSRS programmed the study into its Forsta Plus (formerly known as Confirmit) Web/CATI platform for administration in English or Spanish. Extensive checking of the program was conducted to ensure that skip patterns and sample splits followed the design of the questionnaire.

Additional steps were employed to ensure quality experience in survey administration regardless of the device utilized by respondents, whether a desktop computer, tablet, or mobile phone. The web program was optimized for administration via smartphone or other mobile handheld devices. The web program was also checked on multiple devices, including desktop computers and handheld mobile devices, and different web browsers to ensure consistent and optimized visualization across devices and web browsers. The web survey was accessed directly by respondents, using their unique survey links with embedded passwords. This also gave them the ability to return to their survey later if they chose to suspend their survey.

Quality Control Checks

Respondents who had responses containing gibberish in the open-ended questions were excluded from the final data set. Three completed surveys were removed after applying this cleaning standard (0.3%).

Weighting and Design Effects

Data was weighted to represent boys age 11 to 17 living in the United States. The weighting involves multiple stages, reflecting the nature of sampling for probability-based panels. First, to account for recruitment into the Panel, a base weight is created for the entire SSRS Opinion Panel. Then, a study-level base weight is created by adjusting this Panel-wide base weight for the probability of selection into the individual study. To account for the fact that more than one boy in the household is being interviewed, an adjustment is made for sampling one boy within the household when there is more than one boy. Finally, to create the final weight, the study-level data is raked to parameters for the study's target population.

Panel-Wide Base Weight

The Panel-wide base weight adjusts for the SSRS Opinion Panel recruitment and retention process—specifically, differential probabilities of being selected for the recruitment sample, completing the registration survey, joining the Panel, and remaining on the Panel.

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Recruitment Design Weight

The design weight accounts for differential probabilities of selection for the recruitment sample. The design weight for the SSRS Opinion Panel was computed differently depending on whether the panelist was recruited from address-based sample (ABS), a prepaid cellphone sample, or the SSRS dual-frame RDD telephone Omnibus.

ABS Recruits

The design weight for ABS recruits corrects for the disproportionate ABS design by adjusting the sample distribution across the ABS strata to match the distribution of the ABS frame across strata.

ABS recruits come from a variety of sample sources, some of which employ different stratification schemes. The design weight for ABS recruits is tailored to the stratification scheme used for the sample from which the panelist was recruited. Currently, ABS recruitment waves for the SSRS Opinion Panel are stratified on a combination of geographic region and model-based indicators of the presence of key subpopulations.

Prepaid Cell Recruits

The design weight for prepaid cellphone recruits accounts for any disproportionate sampling of prepaid cellphone numbers from the cellphone RDD frame.

Telephone Omnibus Recruits

The design weight for the telephone Omnibus recruits is their original base weight computed at the time of the original Omnibus interview. This base weight accounts for selection probabilities associated with the overlapping dual-frame Omnibus sample design.[1] This base weight is a function of the landline and cell frame sample sizes, as well as each respondent's telephone usage and number of adults in the household.

Recruitment, Nonresponse, and Attrition Adjustments

Two adjustments are applied to the recruitment design weight:

- A nonresponse adjustment correcting for variability in the recruitment response rate.
- An attrition adjustment correcting for variability in the rate at which originally recruited panelists are retained on the Panel.

Both steps use a weighting class adjustment in which adjustment cells are defined by a cross of the recruitment channel and geographic strata.

For ABS recruits, a household size adjustment is also applied to correct for the sampling of one adult within each sampled address.

Non-Internet Adjustment

For projects that collect data entirely online, people who do not use the internet cannot be included in the sample. To account for this non-coverage and make the results more representative of the entire target population, SSRS makes a non-internet adjustment to the base weight.

This uses a model-based propensity score adjustment to make adults with internet access representative of all adults (regardless of whether they have internet access). Propensity scores are estimated by modeling panel response mode on a range of demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral covariates. The model is a conditional inference tree built in R using the *partykit* package.

Panel-Wide Raking

To create the final Panel-wide base weight, the full Panel is raked to target parameters for the population of U.S. adults (age 18+). Panel-wide raking parameters include gender, age, educational attainment, race/ethnicity, Census division, civic engagement, population density, frequency of internet use, voter registration status, party identification, religion, household size, and home tenure. This raking step uses panelist profile variables; missing data in these variables is filled in using hot decking prior to raking.

1. Buskirk, T. D., & Best, J. (2012) Venn diagrams, probability 101, and sampling weights computed for dual frame telephone RDD designs. Journal of Statistics and Mathematics, Vol. 15: 3696–3710.

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Final Study-Level Weight

Study-Level Base Weight

The study-level base weight adjusts for differential probabilities of selection from the SSRS Opinion Panel into the sample for this specific study. The study-level base weight is calculated as:

$$PABW * \frac{N_h}{n_h}$$

where PABW is the Panel-wide base weight calculated as described above, and, for each stratum h, Nh is the number of panelists available and nh is the number invited into the study.

Study-level sampling strata were formed from quantiles of PABW, with higher-weight panelists being given a higher probability of selection. These weight-based strata were defined by crossing language (English/Spanish) with the presence of children age 6 to 17 to meet the required sample size targets for each group.

Within Household Probability of Selection Adjustment for the Boys

An adjustment was made to account for the fact that one boy within each household that has more than one boy was interviewed. If the number of boys in the household is denoted by A, then the probability that any boy is interviewed and the probability of selection adjustment is: $a_1 = (1/A)^{-1} = A.$[2]

The adjusted base weight would be $FinalBW = PPS_{base} weight \; x \; A.$

Study-Level Raking

With the study-level base weight applied, the data was weighted to balance the demographic profile of the sample to the target population parameters.

Weighting was accomplished by raking sample distributions to target population distributions using iterative proportional fitting. This procedure balances each calibration variable to target benchmarks individually and iteratively. The entire set of calibration variables is cycled through until the weights converge across all dimensions.

Data was weighted to distributions of: the boys' age, boys' education, boys' race and ethnicity, region, parents' education, sex by education, age by education, number of age eligible boys in the household, home tenure, civic engagement, population density, and internet use frequency. Missing data in the raking variables was imputed using hot decking. Hot deck imputation replaces the missing values of a respondent randomly with another similar respondent without missing data. The following figure shows the data sources used for calibration totals.

Figure 53: Calibration variable sources.

Dimensions	*Source*
Boys' age	2023 American Community Survey (ACS)[3]
Boys' education	
Boys' race and ethnicity	
Census region	
Parents' education	
Parents' sex	
Parents' age	
Home tenure	
Number of boys age 11 to 17 in the household	
Population density	Weighted SSRS Opinion Panel
Internet frequency	
Civic engagement	

Weights were trimmed at the 4th and 96th percentiles to prevent individual interviews from having too much influence on survey-derived estimates.

2. The standard procedure is to cap A at 3.

3. Ruggles, S., Flood, S., Sobek, M., Backman, D., Cooper, G., Rivera Drew, J. A., Richards, S., Rodgers, R., Schroeder, J., & Williams, K. C. W. IPUMS USA: Version 16.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2025. https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V16.0.

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Figure 54: Sample demographics.

Category	*Values*	*Parameter*	*Unweighted*	*Weight*
Adolescent age	11	13.9%	23.2%	14.3%
	12	14.0%	11.8%	14.4%
	13	14.2%	12.4%	13.6%
	14	14.7%	13.1%	14.5%
	15	14.6%	11.1%	13.8%
	16	14.5%	13.1%	14.6%
	17	14.1%	15.3%	14.7%
Adolescent education	Public school/Not attending	87.8%	86.9%	87.5%
	Private school	12.2%	13.1%	12.5%
Parent education	HS grad or less	33.9%	29.4%	32.4%
	Some college /assoc. degree	27.9%	35.7%	27.8%
	College grad +	38.3%	34.9%	39.7%
Sex, by education	Male, some college or less	28.6%	11.2%	25.5%
	Male, college grad +	17.1%	12.4%	17.8%
	Female, some college or less	33.1%	53.9%	34.8%
	Female, college grad +	21.1%	22.5%	21.9%
Age, by education	18–34, Some college or less	7.7%	19.0%	8.3%
	18–34, College grad +	1.1%	2.5%	1.2%
	35–54, Some college or less	50.0%	44.1%	47.8%
	35–54, College grad +	33.8%	30.1%	35.0%
	55+, Some college or less	4.0%	2.1%	4.1%
	55+, College grad +	3.4%	2.4%	3.6%
Adolescent race and ethnicity	White non-Hispanic	47.8%	43.9%	47.3%
	Black non-Hispanic	12.0%	18.6%	12.6%
	Hispanic born in the U.S.	23.8%	23.3%	23.8%
	Hispanic born outside the U.S.	2.8%	1.5%	2.7%
	Other non-Hispanic	13.6%	12.8%	13.7%
Census region	Northeast	16.0%	15.7%	16.1%
	Midwest	20.9%	20.8%	20.3%
	South	38.8%	43.3%	39.4%
	West	24.3%	20.2%	24.3%
Civic engagement	Civically engaged	39.9%	52.2%	41.9%
	Not engaged	60.1%	47.8%	58.1%
Population density	1 Lowest 20%	22.1%	20.6%	21.7%
	2	20.5%	20.9%	20.6%
	3	21.4%	20.9%	20.7%
	4	19.1%	18.9%	19.5%
	5 Highest 20%	17.0%	18.7%	17.5%
Internet frequency	Almost constantly	51.2%	69.6%	53.4%
	Several times a day or less	48.8%	30.4%	46.6%
Number of boys 11–17 in the household	1	82.5%	70.4%	81.6%
	2	15.8%	25.0%	16.6%
	3+	1.7%	4.6%	1.8%
Home tenure	Own	73.2%	54.5%	72.2%
	Rent	26.8%	45.5%	27.8%

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Effects of Sample Design on Statistical Inference

Post-data collection statistical adjustments require analysis procedures that reflect departures from simple random sampling. SSRS calculates the effects of these design features so that an appropriate adjustment can be incorporated into tests of statistical significance when using this data. The so-called design effect, or "deff," represents the loss in statistical efficiency that results from a disproportionate sample design and systematic nonresponse. The total sample design effects for this survey is 1.90.

SSRS calculates the composite design effect for a sample of size *n*, with each case having a weight, w, as:[4]

$$deff = \frac{n\sum w^2}{(\sum w)^2}$$

The survey's margin of error is the largest 95% confidence interval for any estimated proportion based on the total sample—the one around 50%. For example, the margin of error for the entire sample is 4.2 percentage points, respectively. This means that in 95 out of every 100 samples drawn using the same methodology, estimated proportions based on the entire sample will be no more than 4.2 percentage points away from their true values in the population. Margins of error for subgroups will be larger. It is important to remember that sampling fluctuations are only one possible source of error in a survey estimate. Other sources, such as respondent selection bias, questionnaire wording, and reporting inaccuracy, may contribute additional error of greater or lesser magnitude.

4. Kish, L. (1992). Weighting for unequal pi. Journal of Official Statistics, Vol. 8, No. 2 (183–200).

Sample Disposition and Response Rate

Figure 55 details the completion and response rates for this study.

Figure 55: Completion rate/response rate.

Completion rates/composite response rates	*Total*
Total sample (invited to participate)	6,990
Screen-outs	1,039
Total eligible	5,951
Quality control removals	3
Incompletes	1,064
Quota full	430
Completions*	1,017
Incidence/eligibility rate	49.46%
Survey completion rate (completions/total invited to participate)	14.55%
Survey RR3	21.80%

** Excludes screen-outs or data quality removals that completed the survey.*

Cumulative Response Rate

Cumulative response rate takes into consideration the response rate for the panel recruitment survey, the percent of recruitment survey respondents that agree to join the panel, and this survey's response rate. The cumulative RR3 comes to 1.06%.

Study-Specific Scales

The following scales were computed from survey questions designed to explore the behaviors and attitudes of boys age 11 to 17 in the United States, with a particular focus on how social media may influence their views and perceptions of masculinity. The specifications on how these scales were determined are in the Appendix.

1. Digital Masculinity Exposure (DME)

The Digital Masculinity Exposure scale assesses the level to which the boys were exposed to online/digital content on masculine-associated traits, values, and identities. Twelve items were used to measure the scale (see items below).

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The boys rated each statement on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Often). The Likert scale was assigned with scores 0, 1, and 2, with 0 for "Never," 1 for "Rarely" or "Sometimes," and 2 for "Often" or "Very Often." The scores were summed (ranged 0 to 24), with scores 0–8 indicating low exposure, 9–16 as moderate exposure, and 17–24 as high exposure.

2. Problematic Digital Masculinity Exposure (PDME)

Problematic Digital Masculinity refers to the enactment and reinforcement of harmful masculine-associated norms in online environments. This includes behaviors and narratives such as that boys/men are treated unfairly compared to girls/women, that girls/women should focus on taking care of their home/family, that girls/women use their looks to get special treatment/what they want, and that they only want to date certain types of guys (e.g., tall, rich, or very attractive men). Four out of the 12 items from DME were scored in the same manner and summed, which ranged from 0 to 8. Scores 0–2 indicated low exposure, 3–5 moderate exposure, and 6–8 high exposure.

3. Self-Esteem Scale

Self-esteem was measured using the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) (Rosenberg, 1965). The boys were asked to rate the items on a scale of "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Giving a rating of "Strongly Agree" for items 1, 3, 4, 7, and 10 would render a score of 3, whereas a "Strongly Agree" score for items 2, 5, 6, 8, and 9 would render a score of 0. The scores were summed, which ranged from 0 to 30. A total score of 15 and higher is measured as normal range, while scores below 15 indicate low self-esteem.

4. Loneliness Scale

The UCLA Loneliness Scale (Hughes et al., 2004) was used to assess whether the boys were lonely. It was measured by asking the boys how often they feel that they lack friendships, that they are left out, or that they are isolated from others. Responses were captured on a three-point scale, with 1 being "Hardly ever," 2 for "Some of the time," and 3 for "Often." The scores were summed (ranged 3 to 9). A total score of 3 to 5 was considered not lonely, and a total score of 6 to 9 was considered lonely.

5. Body Dissatisfaction Scale

The Body Dissatisfaction Scale was measured by asking the boys their level of satisfaction with the way their body looks. Those who answered "Somewhat" (1) or "Very dissatisfied" (2) are considered dissatisfied with their body, and those who answered "Neither satisfied or dissatisfied" (3), "Somewhat satisfied" (4), or "Very satisfied" (5) are considered to be not dissatisfied with their body.

6. Adherence to Norms of Masculinity Scale

The Adherence to Norms of Masculinity Scale measures the boys' understanding and notions of traditional masculine-associated norms. That is, what they considered appropriate for men and how men should behave in relationships. Such norms often emphasize emotional restraint, self-reliance, avoiding seeking for help, and prioritizing respect from others. In this study, the boys responded to nine statements about their thoughts and feelings in various situations, rating each from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree"). The scores were averaged, noting that item 9 was reverse-coded, with those above the mean classified as having high adherence and those below the mean as having low adherence to norms of masculinity.

7. Adherence to Norms of Femininity Scale

The Adherence to Norms of Femininity Scale measures the boys' agreement with traditionally feminine-associated norms. That is, values such as caring for others' feelings, putting others' needs before their own, and maintaining friendliness even toward those who are not friendly in return. In this study, the boys responded to three statements reflecting these norms, rating each from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree"). The scores were averaged, with those above the mean classified as having high adherence and those below the mean as having low adherence to norms of femininity.

8. Human Support

The boys were asked who they would turn to during a difficult situation that caused them to worry a lot. The response options included common people in their lives—such as a friend, parent, sibling, other family member, or teacher—as well as non-human or less personal sources, such as an online friend, chatbot/AI, or handling it themselves. Those who selected at least two real human options (Items 1–5 and 10) were classified as having "strong human

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support." Selecting exactly one real human option indicated "some human support," while choosing only non-human options or preferring isolation indicated "limited or no human support."

9. Parental Engagement

Parental engagement was measured by asking boys whether they had ever discussed specific topics with a parent or other trusted adult. These topics included guidance on behavior, relationships, emotions, peer pressure, social media use, body image, friendships, and related issues. Boys who had discussed at least five of the listed topics were classified as having high parental engagement, those who had discussed two to four topics as having moderate parental engagement, and those who had discussed zero or one topic as having low parental engagement.

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