

# CSS TEENS & SCREENS 2022

## #AUTHENTICITY



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# PROJECT DESCRIPTION



The Center for Scholars & Storytellers (CSS), based in the Psychology Department at UCLA, **sought to understand teens' perspectives of the entertainment media content they consume.**



As such, CSS designed a survey that asked teens what topics they wish to see in the content they watch, and which kinds of media feel more authentic to them.

CSS intends to conduct this survey on an annual basis.

In July 2022, the survey data was collected from 662 teens (ages 13-18) from across the United States (U.S.). The respondents were fairly representative of the U.S. (according to the 2020 census) in terms of gender and ethnicity. Descriptive statistics were calculated for the entire sample to address questions that were relevant to the goal of this project. In addition, we examined differences in answers within various groups relating to race/ethnicity, gender, geographic location, and sexual orientation. Please see the Methods section on page 10 for more information and a full description of the sample.

**The Center for Scholars & Storytellers (CSS)**, at UCLA, collaborates with leading scientists to provide research-based insights for content creators crafting authentic and inclusive stories for children (ages 2-9) and adolescents (ages 10-25). Our resources and tools include tip sheets, workshops, and original research. As the only organization with industry expertise, academic credibility, and institutional affiliation that focuses solely on youth, CSS aims to positively impact kids, tweens, and teens where they are: on screens. You can learn more about our work at [scholarsandstorytellers.com](https://scholarsandstorytellers.com).



# A NOTE FROM OUR FOUNDER<sup>1</sup>



Stories are at the heart of what makes us human. Scientific research confirms that storytelling affects us at the neural level. The parts of the brain that activate when listening and seeing audiovisual content are language, working memory, visual attention, and theory of mind. **Stories are particularly effective when youth are first learning about the world and making sense of their everyday experiences.** All of us, but particularly the younger generation, spend more time than ever with images, stories, and information, and this content both consciously and unconsciously shapes our thinking. This means that the people who tell stories are some of the most powerful in the world, and the work they do matters more than ever.

At the Center for Scholars & Storytellers, in our continuing efforts to support storytellers, we feel it is important to listen to adolescents and to include their voices in the work that we do. We engage with teens through our Youth Media REPresentation program, our advisory councils, and now a nationwide survey. Our belief is that content creators who want adolescents to engage with their stories should hear from youth themselves about what they want to see. This age group is often underestimated and overlooked in decisions regarding the very media they interact with on a daily basis. It's our hope to make their voices and identities heard in a manner that is truly reflective of their experiences.

We acknowledge that as the years go by, teens' media perceptions will continue to adapt and change. As such, we intend to conduct this survey on an annual basis so we can continue to give voice to what Gen Z has to say about the media they consume. By doing this, we hope to inform others about the invaluable opinions teens have to give about the topics that matter most to them.



"In my experience with the Center for Scholars & Storytellers (CSS), I see their commitment to ensuring that adolescents are being heard, respected, and advocated for. CSS does not reduce adolescents to merely witnesses of its work, but instead actively incorporates adolescents in the construction of its organization and findings, understanding what many organizations fail to acknowledge: Adolescents are intelligent, capable, and valuable facets of our society."  
- **Navia Robinson, Teen Actress, CSS Advisory Council (Female, 17)**



# DEFINITIONS



## Below are definitions for terms that were used in the survey:

*These definitions are how we defined these terms to the teen respondents:*

### » **ASPIRATIONAL CONTENT**

Content about story worlds that teens wish they were part of (e.g., being rich, famous, etc.).

### » **DIVERSE**

The representation of individuals within marginalized groups on the basis of various background indicators such as race, ethnicity, gender identity, disability, sexual orientation, etc.

### » **MEDIA AND/OR ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA**

Content that users consume from various sources such as TV, streaming services (Netflix, Disney+, etc.), social media (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, etc.), video games, and more. By this, we are referring to media content that is consumed outside of school for non-educational purposes.

### » **STREAMING SERVICES**

An online entertainment source that delivers content for TV shows and/or movies (e.g., Netflix, Disney+, HBO Max, Hulu, etc.).

*The following definitions explain how we grouped demographics for our findings:*

### » **YOUNGER TEENS**

Teen respondents that are 13-15 years old.

### » **OLDER TEENS**

Teen respondents that are 16-18 years old.

### » **OTHER GENDER**

Inclusive of participants who identified as nonbinary, unsure of their gender identity, gender nonconforming, or preferred not to say.

### » **PEOPLE OF COLOR**

Respondents who identified as Black, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), Hispanic/Latinx, Middle Eastern/North African (MENA), Multi-Ethnic, Indigenous American, and Other (non-White and non-Caucasian).

### » **LGBTQIA+ TEENS**

Those who identified as anything other than a cisgender, heterosexual individual (e.g., transgender, nonbinary, gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, etc.).



"Not only is the data clear, but teens themselves are urging companies to listen to their needs and find authentic ways to reach Gen Z."

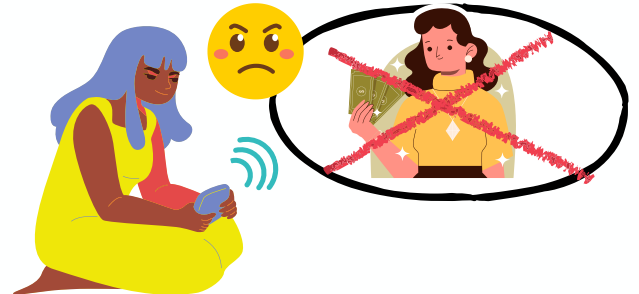
- **Gael Aitor, Teenager Therapy, CSS Advisory Council (Male, 19)**

# MAIN FINDINGS



## 1. Teens resoundingly rejected aspirational stories.

- Only 4.4% said they wanted to see aspirational content.



## 2. Teens wanted to see stories about people that differ from their own identity as well as stories that are hopeful and uplifting.



## 3. When asked to cast their own characters, a majority of teens leaned towards wanting a Black male hero and a White male villain.

- 23.6% of teens wanted Black male heroes while 34.9% wanted White male villains – this accounts for a majority of all surveyed teens.



## 4. Social media is a hub for authenticity according to most teens.

- 55.1% of teens felt that social media did the best job of reflecting content that felt authentic to them.



Further details and breakdowns about these findings can be found on the following pages → →

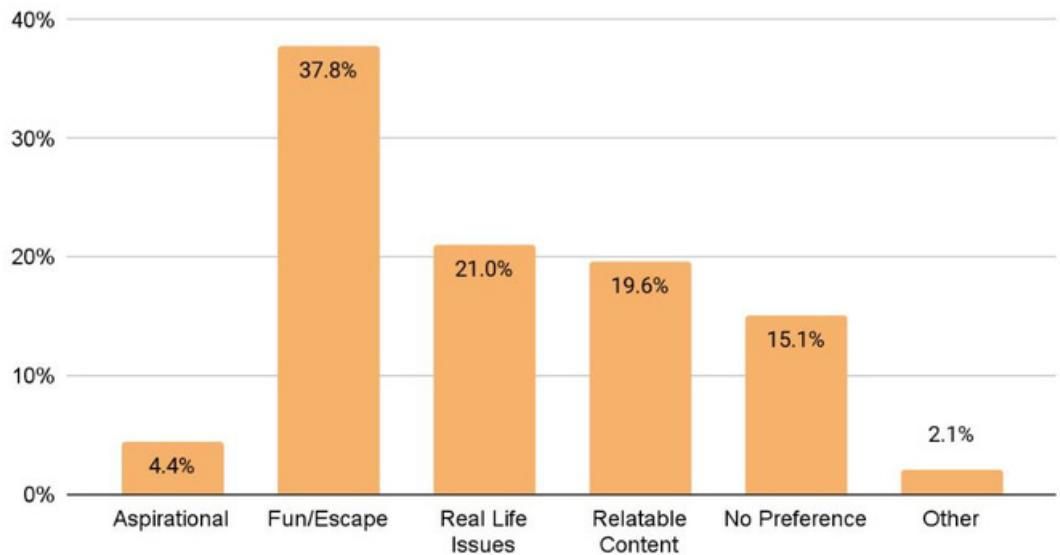
# FINDING ONE



## Teens Resoundingly Rejected Aspirational Stories<sup>2</sup>

Only  
**4.4%**  
of teens said they  
wanted to see  
aspirational content.<sup>3</sup>

Across all demographics (e.g., gender, ethnicity, LGBTQIA+, etc.), teens rejected aspirational content. Their top choice was “to have fun and escape while watching content” (37.8%), followed by “see real life issues that impact society (e.g., systemic injustice, climate change, etc.)” (21%).



Note: These results encompass the answers of the entire sample of teen respondents.

Black teens were the only race/ethnicity group to answer that their top choice was **to see content with real life issues that impact society**, such as systemic injustice (28.6%), followed by to have fun and escape while watching content (27%).

In the **early to mid 2000s**, research found that fame and financial success were the top-ranked values in popular TV consumed by adolescents.<sup>4</sup>



"I want content to be fun and escapist but also address real world issues."  
**(White Male, 17)**

"Depends on how I feel, sometimes [I prefer content with] the ups and downs of real life issues, [or] silly things to escape."  
**(White Nonbinary, 17)**

"I want to see stories of different ethnicities who live different lives than what I am used to seeing, such as [people] with non-mainstream or self-employed careers, but where they are also living a life of freedom."  
**(MENA Female, 15)**

<sup>2</sup> Question asked was, "Some TV shows and/or movies are more escapist and not true to real life, while others address real life issues that mirror real life. Which kind of TV shows and movies do you most like to watch?"

<sup>3</sup> See definitions on page 3 to learn more about how aspirational content was defined in our survey.

<sup>4</sup> Twenge & Campbell. (2009); Uhls & Greenfield. (2011); Uhls & Greenfield. (2012); Uhls, Zgourou, & Greenfield. (2014).

# FINDING TWO



## Teens Wanted Stories About Hope, Lives Unlike Their Own, Family, and Friendships<sup>5</sup>

CSS provided a list of 15 topics. Teens' top choices were

**HOPEFUL, UPLIFTING STORIES ABOUT PEOPLE BEATING THE ODDS,** & **STORIES ABOUT PEOPLE WITH LIVES UNLIKE THEIR OWN.**

### Rankings for all Teens

- 1 Lives unlike their own AND Hopeful, uplifting stories (tied)
- 2 Friendships and stories about social groups
- 3 Superhero stories
- 4 Mental Health
- 5 Family life and relationships with parents
- 6 Lifestyles of regular people
- 7 Sex and/or Romance
- 8 Guns and Violence
- 9 Sports
- 10 Lifestyles of the super rich or famous
- 11 Systemic Injustice
- 12 Stories about nonbinary and LGBTQ+ identities
- 13 Partying and/or drugs and drinking
- 14 Climate Change

"I prefer shows that can be relatable to the audience, but also have unrealistic components such as supernatural beings or crazy technology."  
(White Male, 14)



Teens listed lifestyles of the rich and famous, which aligns with our definition of aspirational content, as number 10 on the list.

Content about **climate change** was ranked at the bottom of the list. While we do not know why teens rejected these storylines, we believe that existing portrayals of this issue are often pessimistic and may feel overwhelming.<sup>6</sup> Gen Z has also been found to care deeply about climate change, racism, and gun violence, but they don't feel they have the bandwidth and support to get involved.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly enough, both older and younger teens want to see **more stories about family life** and relationships with parents.

LGBTQIA+ teens ranked **LGBTQ+ and Mental Health** as their top 2 topics of content they want to watch, respectively.



### Top 5 Rankings for Younger Teens (ages 13-15)

- 1 Lives unlike their own
- 2 Hopeful, uplifting stories
- 3 Superhero stories AND Stories about social groups (tied)
- 4 Lifestyles of regular people
- 5 Family life AND Mental health, AND Guns/Violence (tied)

### Top 5 Rankings for Older Teens (ages 16-18)

- 1 Hopeful, uplifting stories
- 2 Lives unlike their own
- 3 Mental health AND Stories about social groups (tied)
- 4 Family life and relationships with parents
- 5 Superhero stories



# FINDING THREE



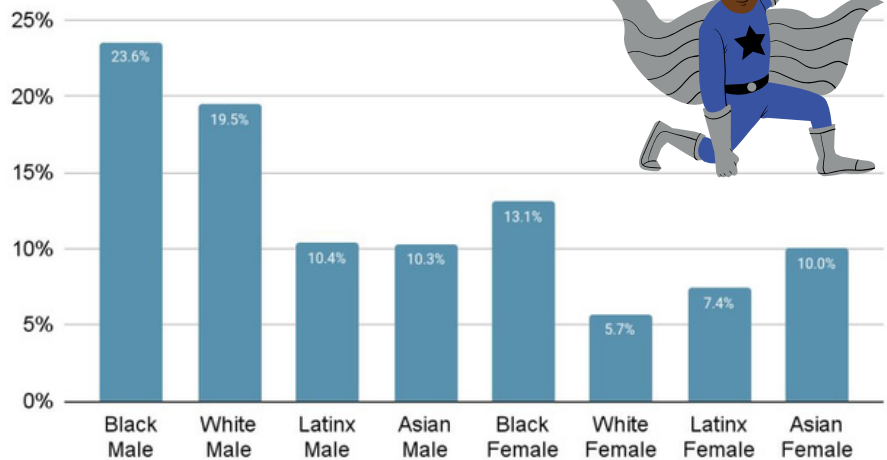
## Teens Cast Black Males as the Hero<sup>8</sup>

The majority of teens cast a **BLACK MALE (23.6%)** as the **HERO**.

An even larger majority cast a **WHITE MALE (34.9%)** as the **VILLAIN**.

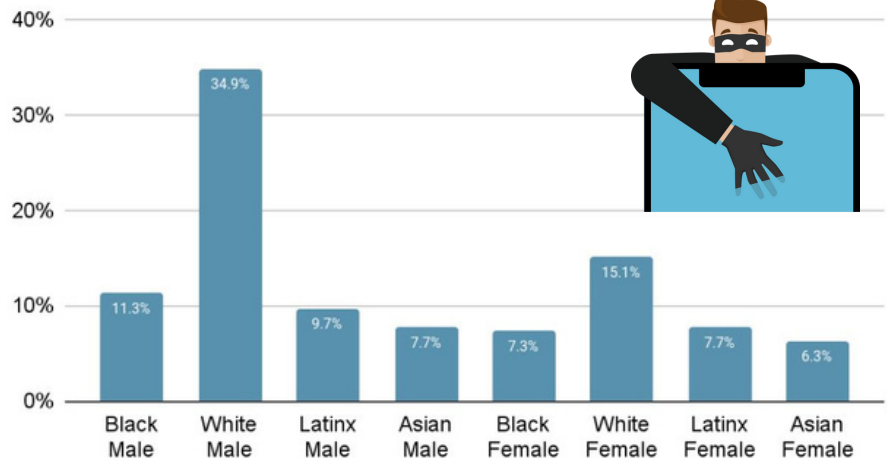
With regard to gender only, **83% of male teens chose a male as a hero, while 50% of female teens chose a female.**

### Hero Casting Preference



Note: These results encompass the answers of the entire sample of teen respondents. Teens were offered a choice of 4 race/ethnicities and 2 gender identities. We acknowledge the limitations of these choices.

### Villain Casting Preference



Note: These results encompass the answers of the entire sample of teen respondents.

In Nickelodeon's 2019-2020 study "Shades of Us"<sup>9</sup> where a similar casting exercise was deployed with children ages 9-12, the majority said they would cast a White boy as the hero (52%) compared to only 19% who would cast a Black boy in the same role; in addition, the children only considered casting Black or Hispanic (but not White or Asian) characters as the bully/villain. The difference in our results from this survey could be because **youth are becoming more progressive, OR because older teens are less inclined to stereotype based on historical representation.**

Research shows that stories that portray the **opposite of what is expected (e.g., Black heroes and White villains) can decrease unconscious bias by as much as 40%.**<sup>10</sup>

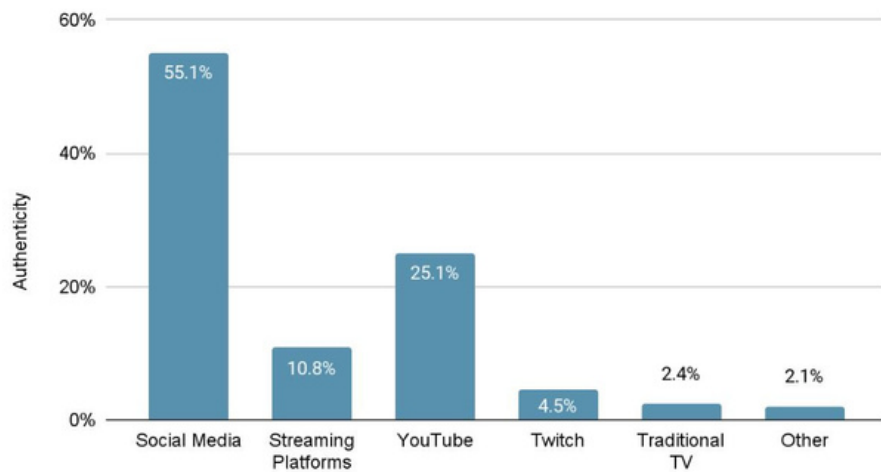
Teens who identified as **White males** were the only **demographic** that cast White males as the hero.

# FINDING FOUR



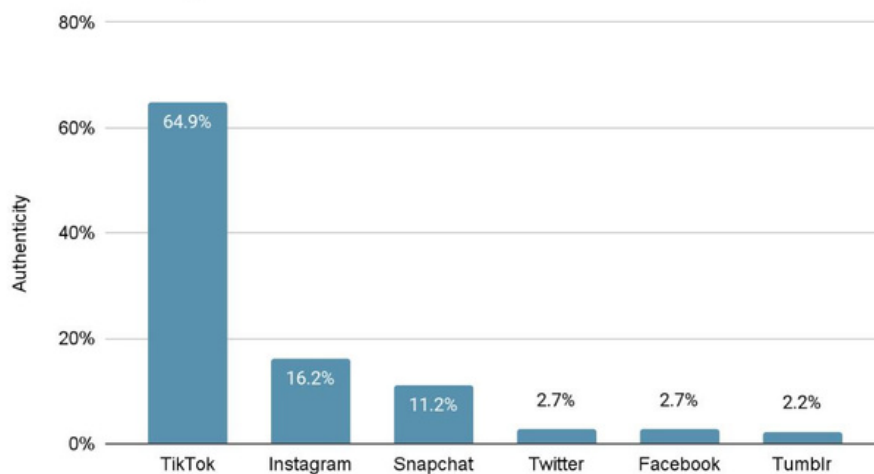
## Teens Said Social Media Was More Authentic Than Any Other Media<sup>11</sup>

Authenticity of Media Platforms



Note: These results encompass the answers of the entire sample of teen respondents.

Authenticity of Social Media Platforms



Note: The question was, "Please rank the social media platforms listed below from BEST (1) to WORST (6) job of reflecting content that feels authentic (or that makes you feel seen)." We did not list YouTube as a social media platform. These results encompass the answers of the entire sample of teen respondents.

Across all demographics, a majority of teens (**55.1%**) reported that **SOCIAL MEDIA** did the best job of reflecting content that felt authentic to them.

For those who ranked social media as the most authentic, a resounding **64.9%** ranked **TIKTOK** as the most authentic social media platform.

Social media is also the media space where the majority of teens (52.7%) reported they spent the most time (please see Methods on page 10 for more reporting on where teens spent their media time).

"TikTok. Honestly there's so much movement there, I've learned more from TikTok than in school and not just about history, but about injustice around the world."  
(Latinx Male, 13)

"I like TikTok because of the diversity of creators."  
(Multi-Ethnic Male, 15)



The majority (79.2%) of teens reported that they found themselves **feeling sometimes or always isolated and upset** when media lacked accurate identity representations.

# CONCLUSION & FUTURE WORK



Our findings indicate that **today's teens want to see authentic, inclusive, and positive storytelling that reflects their full lives, including their families.** American adolescents reported that they valued media that reflected what they knew about the real world, but they were also interested in the lives of people different from themselves (perhaps from other cultures). **Teens seemed to want their media to reflect a world characterized by genuine diversity and uplifting experiences.**

We hope that the industry will begin to shift away from aspirational content that does not reflect the real world of most adolescents which is filled with nuance and diversity. Hopeful messaging could also be used to engage teens with important and complex subjects in the future, such as climate change.

Future work could look into what factors from social media have successfully catered to teens' need for authenticity, and how the definition of authenticity for social media versus TV shows and movies may have changed over time. Contemporary teens' rejection of traditionally aspirational content that valorizes higher social status and material gain may signal a substantial shift in the evolving definition of success, which differs from previous generations. More in-depth questions about American teens' changing core values, hopes, and fears for the future will unearth other under-explored themes to inform the next directions for entertainment media.

Please see our 2021 report, [\*Authentic is the New Aspirational\*](#), to learn more about what the programming that adolescents currently watch reflects on race and class.



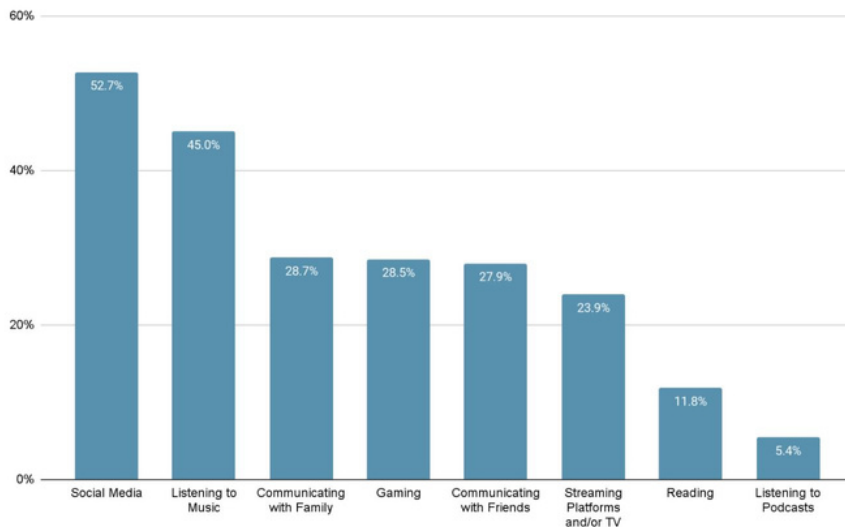
# METHODS



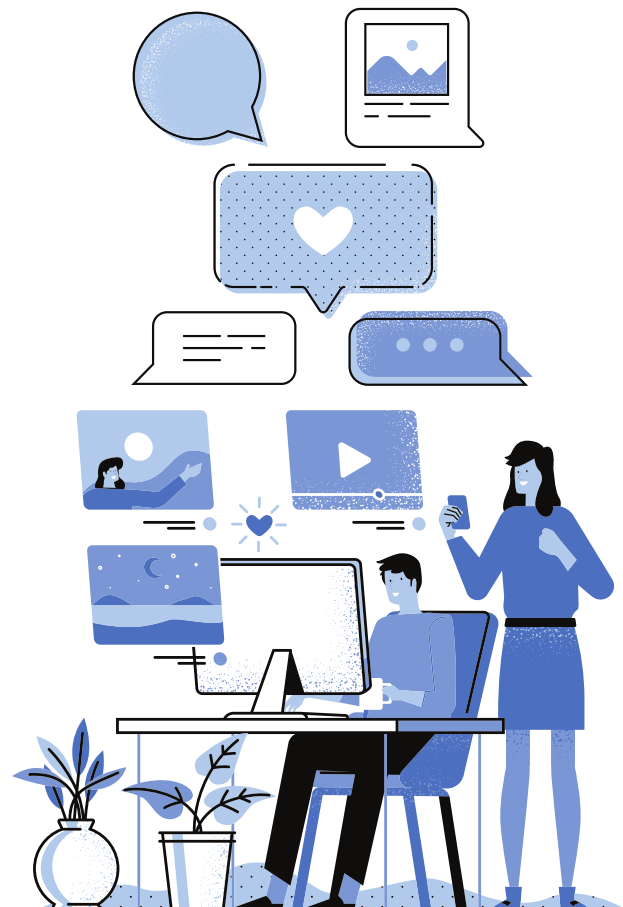
## Sample:

CSS utilized a research panel from Alchemer, an online survey data-collection platform, to sample adolescents from across the United States during July 2022. Responses were collected from 662 adolescents (average age = 15.45; age range = 13-18 years old). 47.6% identified as female, followed by 46.2% as male, with other gender nonconforming respondents and respondents unsure of their gender identity, comprising the remaining 6.2%. The sample contained adolescents who identified as Asian/Asian American (6.2%), Black/African American (19%), Hispanic/Latinx (21.6%), Indigenous American (0.2%), Middle Eastern/North African (0.8%), Multi-Ethnic (2.9%), Other (2.1%), or White/Caucasian (47.3%). Respondents were from the Midwest (23.4%), Northeast (16.6%), South (35%), and West (24.9%) in the United States. The majority of the respondents identified as heterosexual or straight (52.1%), with the minority reflecting other sexual orientations such as bisexual (16.9%), asexual (5.3%), homosexual (5%), pansexual (6%), and other (8.5%). 6.2% of the adolescents were unsure of their sexuality. About 5.3% of the sample identified as transgender. Respondents self-reported how much time they spent on entertainment media<sup>12</sup> on a daily basis, with reports of spending none (3.2%), less than two hours (14.4%), two to four hours (30.7%), four to eight hours (32.5%), or more than eight hours (19.3%) of their time on media.

## Where/How Teens Spend Their Time on Media



Note: The question asked was, "Think to last week about how much time you spent with the entertainment media you use. In this question, we want to get a sense of what you spend the most and least time with outside of school over a week (so include weekend). How much time do you typically spend on the following media..."



# METHODS



## *Materials:*

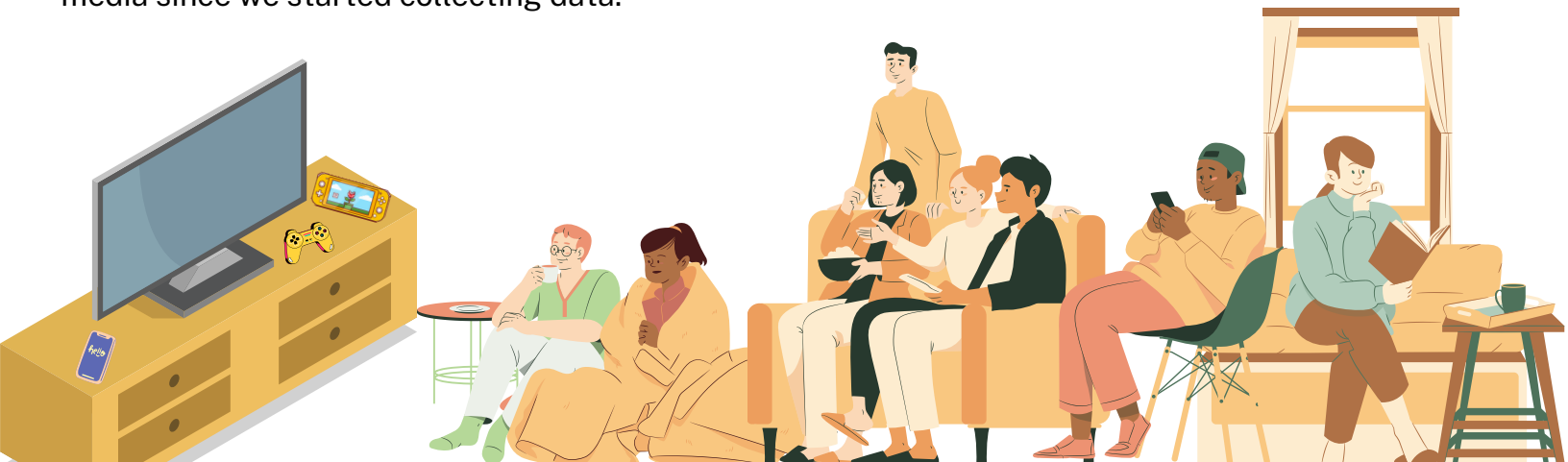
The survey questions were created and programmed by CSS ahead of data collection. All questions were piloted with a convenience sample of Los Angeles-based teens through CSS' Youth Engagement Team. A research panel was accessed with preset quotas for gender, race/ ethnicity, and United States region. Respondents were presented with questions and responded online through Alchemer.

## *Data Analysis:*

Descriptive statistics were calculated to compare how participants responded to each question. We looked at responses by the overall sample, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and geographic region to compare how different groups felt about the media they consume and what they wish to see change. Prior to analysis, data were checked and cleaned for any missing responses, and were subsequently coded to enable statistical analysis. Analyses were conducted with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Version 25 (SPSS V25).

## *Limitations:*

These findings only offer a brief overview of what content adolescents within the United States wish to see on-screen, and which media platforms they use to seek authentic content on a daily basis. The reported survey data cannot explain any causal relationships between the identity variables and the research questions, thus results should be interpreted with caution to this fact. We acknowledge the limitation of certain questions that stuck to a gender binary and that limited its answer choices to a certain set of race/ethnicities rather than encompassing the spectrum and multitude of identities, such as the imaginative exercise asking participants to cast certain roles. Although we strived to have our sample as close as possible to the U.S. Census, this is not a complete representative sample. Also, there is a lack of greater in-depth discussion about other serious topics of today's times, such as guns and violence, systemic injustice, and trends that have become popularized in the media since we started collecting data.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



*Thank you to Maira Karan and Jamie Azar for helping kickstart this project.*

*To Gabriel Evers and Walker Uhls, two of our interns whose timely and sharp contribution made this process as efficient as possible.*

*To our Youth Engagement Team, an amazing group of teens whose opinions aided in our piloting phase—your feedback is invaluable.*

*To our members at the Center for Scholars & Storytellers Lab, your feedback and passion are always appreciated and continue moving us forward.*

*And to all our young survey respondents, we thank you for sharing your voices and making it clear what is important to you now — your opinions matter and we hope to make a difference for you.*

*For more information about the methods or details about this study, please contact us at [info@scholarsandstorytellers.com](mailto:info@scholarsandstorytellers.com).*



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