

“I Just Want to Be Accepted by Others”

HOW TRANSGENDER YOUNG
PEOPLE SEEK AND EXPERIENCE
ONLINE SUPPORT



Introduction

Transgender young people have disproportionately high rates of mental health challenges—including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and suicide risk—compared to their cisgender peers.^{1,2} These disparities are rooted in minority stress: the real and anticipated experiences of victimization, rejection, and discrimination based on their gender identity.³ In the U.S., transgender young people navigate a climate filled with harmful rhetoric and limited access to health care and services that have been shown to support their mental health and well-being. In this environment, it is especially critical to identify ways to support their safety, belonging, and overall well-being.⁴

Transgender young people often have little control over their physical surroundings or the level of acceptance in their local communities. However, online spaces can offer an alternative source of support—providing emotional connection, affirming content, and helpful information.⁵ These digital environments can help fill gaps left by unsupportive or unsafe in-person settings by fostering identity pride and meaningful relationships. Understanding how online communities function as sources of affirmation

“... online spaces can offer an alternative source of support—providing emotional connection, affirming content, and helpful information.”

and support is critical, as they may help buffer the effects of social exclusion and minority stress.

This research report draws on data from a survey of 1,267 LGBTQ+ young people ages 15 and 24 in the United States, including 696 who identify as transgender. It explores how transgender young people show resilience, express pride in their identities, and experience online spaces as places of safety and support. Transgender young people shaped this research through youth co-design of the survey and co-distillation of the results.⁶ Their insights ground this work in lived experience and highlight both the unique strengths and unmet needs of transgender young people.

1 Connolly, M. D., Zervos, M. J., Barone, C. J., Johnson, C. C., & Joseph, C. L. M. (2016). The mental health of transgender youth: Advances in understanding. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 59(5), 489–495. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.06.012>

2 Wittlin, N. M., Kuper, L. E., & Olson, K. R. (2023). Mental health of transgender and gender diverse youth. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 19(1), 207–232. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-072220-020326>

3 Delozier, A. M., Kamody, R. C., Rodgers, S., & Chen, D. (2020). Health disparities in transgender and gender expansive adolescents: A topical review from a minority stress framework. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 45(8), 842–847. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jpepsy/jsaa040>

4 Budge, S. L., Abreu, R. L., Flinn, R. E., Donahue, K. L., Estevez, R., Oleszeski, C. L., ... & Allen, B. J. (2024). Gender affirming care is evidence based for transgender and gender-diverse youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 75(6), 851–853. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2024.09.009>

5 Selkie, E., Adkins, V., Masters, E., Bajpai, A., & Shumer, D. (2019). Transgender adolescents' uses of social media for social support. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 66(3), 851–852. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2019.08.011>

6 Winer, E., Bruehlman-Senecal, E., Lara, E., Weinstein, E., & Green, A. (2024). Demystifying Youth-Engaged Research: Practical Insights and Lessons Learned from Two Case Studies. San Francisco, CA, USA: Hopelab. Available at: <https://hopelab.org/stories/demystifying-youth-engaged-research>

Summary of Methodology



A full description of the methodology appears in the complete [report](#).

Instrument development

The research team developed the survey through a collaborative process that included individual interviews with LGBTQ+ young people; conversations with professionals in LGBTQ+ youth research, policy, and direct service; and review by members of Born This Way Foundation’s Youth Advisory Board.

Procedure

Researchers recruited LGBTQ+ young people in the United States, ages 15 to 24, through targeted social media advertisements. [Survey](#) data were collected between August and September 2024. The final analytic sample included 1,094 LGBTQ+ young people who provided valid responses, passed our data-quality checks, and identified as either transgender ($n = 696$) or cisgender ($n = 398$). Respondents who identified as nonbinary but not transgender, or who were unsure about their gender identity, were excluded from this analysis.

Measures

- **Gender identity:** “Transgender” or “trans” describes people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. “Cisgender” or “cis” describes people whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were

assigned at birth. Participants were classified as transgender if they answered “Yes, I am transgender” to the question, “Some people describe themselves as transgender when their sex at birth does not match the way they think or feel about their gender. Are you transgender?” Participants were classified as cisgender if they answered “No, I am not transgender” and selected either “boy/man” or “girl/woman” to a separate gender identity question.

- **Depression symptoms:** The Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2) asked participants how often they had experienced depressed mood and anhedonia over the past two weeks. A score of 3 or higher indicated likely depression.
- **Flourishing:** The Flourishing Scale measured self-perceived purpose, optimism, self-esteem, and relationship success. A score of 40 or higher indicated positive well-being.

All reported differences are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Co-distillation

Following data analysis, the research team conducted co-distillation interviews with seven transgender young people, ages 20 to 24. These conversations helped contextualize and prioritize findings. Select quotes from these young people—lightly edited for length and clarity—are incorporated throughout the report.

Key Finding 1

Transgender Young People Are More Likely to Describe Online Communities as Important When They Were First Understanding Their Identity

LGBTQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE WHO DESCRIBED ONLINE COMMUNITIES AS IMPORTANT WHEN FIRST EXPLORING OR SEEKING SUPPORT FOR THEIR LGBTQ+ IDENTITY

TRANSGENDER CISGENDER

42%^a

32%^b

NOTE

Differing superscripts reflect significant differences between groups at $p < .05$. Data reflect responses to the item, "When you initially connected to online communities or online friends were you actively seeking a place to explore or feel supported in your LGBTQ+ identity?" Responses represent data from 696 transgender and 398 cisgender young people. Data were collected in August and September 2024.

Source: Born This Way Foundation & Hopelab. (2024). *Survey on online support for LGBTQ+ young people*.

Transgender young people were significantly more likely than cisgender LGBTQ+ peers to describe online communities as "important" or "very important" when they were first exploring their identity (42% vs 32%). This difference may reflect that transgender young people often lack access to affirming, in-person resources and instead rely on digital spaces to meet those needs.

In an open-ended survey response, a white transgender young adult man described how online spaces helped him explore his gender identity:

"[Online communities] were extremely important to me back in high school when I was first exploring my gender and identity in a very religious household. In a time when I could not yet access fundamental support in person, I was able to befriend people like me online."

In co-distillation interviews, transgender young people emphasized that being transgender often requires additional layers of support—but finding others with shared experiences offline can be difficult. As one white transgender young adult man explained:

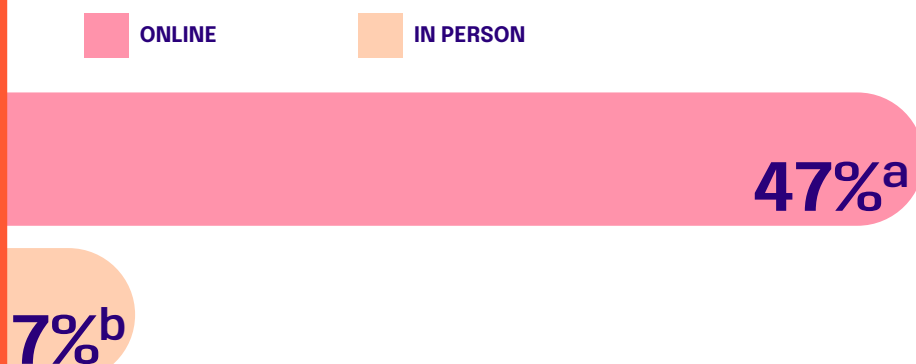
“There were people I knew in person who were gay or lesbian or bisexual. I had those adult role models, but I didn’t know anyone who was transgender in real life. And I didn’t even really know where I would go if I wanted to talk to someone who was transgender, especially someone who is older or could serve as a role model. And so I found online communities where that was an option really important for me when I was discovering that about myself.”



Key Finding 2

Nearly Half of Transgender Young People Report Feeling “Very Safe” Expressing Their Identity Online

TRANSGENDER YOUNG PEOPLE’S FEELINGS OF SAFETY WHEN EXPRESSING THEIR IDENTITY



NOTE

Differing superscripts reflect significant differences between groups at $p < .05$. Data reflect responses of “very safe” to the item, “How safe do you feel in these spaces in expressing your LGBTQ+ identity?” Participants answered with regard to both online spaces and in-person spaces. Values represent the proportion of participants who answered “Very Safe.” Data were collected in August and September 2024. Responses represent data from 696 transgender young people and 398 cisgender young people.

Source: Born This Way Foundation & Hopelab. (2024). *Survey on online support for LGBTQ+ young people*.

Transgender young people feel significantly safer expressing their identity online than in person. Nearly half (47%) say they feel “very safe” expressing their identity online, compared to only 7% who feel “very safe” doing so in person—nearly a sixfold difference.

In open-ended responses and co-distillation interviews, transgender young people noted that the stakes feel lower online: expressing identity in digital spaces may invite judgment, but in-person expression can lead to physical harm. One multiracial transgender young adult man explained:

“Online communities have granted me the ability to express myself freely and be proud of who I am. In the real world, I become a target if I do that, so I tend to keep to myself.”



Many transgender young people also described taking action to protect their safety online, such as using anonymous accounts, blocking harmful users, and selectively sharing personal information. A Black transgender genderqueer young adult shared:

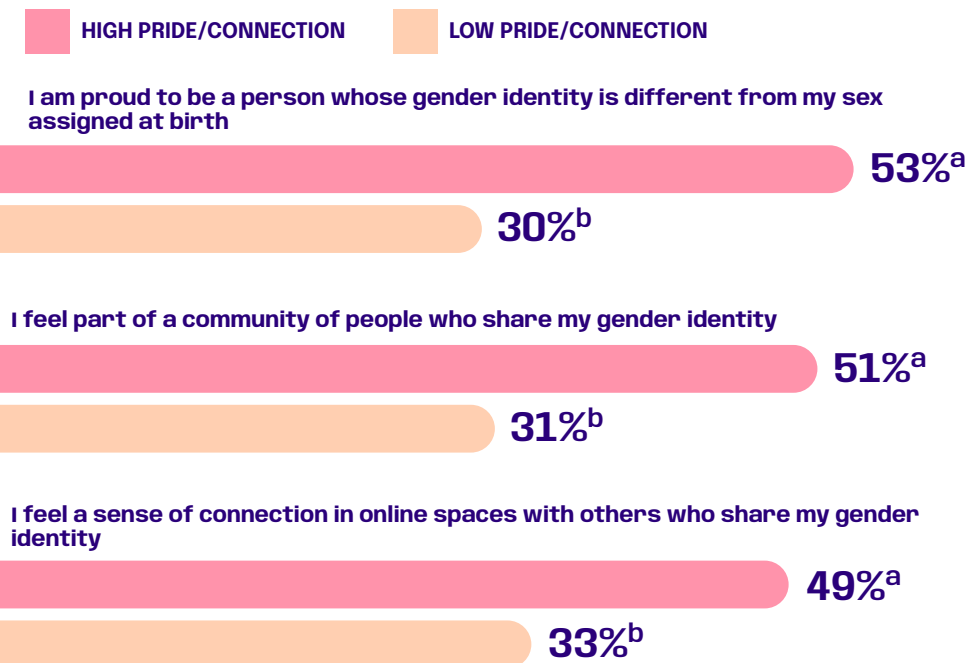
“I made an entirely separate Instagram account and blocked everyone I knew in real life. And so that way, I feel a lot safer going out and about, and I don’t have to worry about anyone seeing and just being like, ‘so you’re LGBT’ or anything like that... And then, if I ever see someone who’s hateful, I block them or just ignore them.”



Key Finding 3

Transgender Young People with Greater Pride and Community Connection Report Higher Flourishing

RATES OF FLOURISHING BASED ON REPORTED TRANS PRIDE AND CONNECTION



NOTE

Differing superscripts reflect significant differences between groups at $p < .05$. Items were based on the Pride subscale and Community Connectedness subscales of the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure.⁷ Flourishing was defined as scores above 40 on the Flourishing Scale. Data were collected in August and September 2024. Responses represent data from 696 participants who identified as transgender.

Source: Born This Way Foundation & Hopelab. (2024). *Survey on online support for LGBTQ+ young people*.

Transgender young people who are proud of having a gender identity different from their sex assigned at birth are significantly more likely to report flourishing. Over half (53%) of transgender young people who reported pride in their identities met the cutoff for flourishing, compared to 30% of those who did not report pride.

Similarly, transgender young people who felt a sense of belonging to a community of people who share their gender identity were more likely to meet the flourishing threshold (51% vs. 31%). This positive association also held true for those who reported a sense of connection in online spaces with others who share their gender identity (49% vs. 33%).

⁷ Testa, R. J., Habarth, J., Peta, J., Balsam, K., & Bockting, W. (2015). Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure (GMSR) [Database record]. APA PsycTests. <https://doi.org/10.1037/t39597-000>

In an open-ended response, a white transgender nonbinary teen reflected on the impact of online communities:

“I remember being first introduced to the LGBTQ+ community when I was about 11, and I was lucky enough to find [online] communities of people who supported me, and I know that their unconditional support and love is part of why I am so confident with my identity and so unapologetically myself today. I wish everyone like me could have that because it’s so freeing.”



RATES OF DEPRESSION BASED ON REPORTED TRANS PRIDE AND CONNECTION

■ HIGH PRIDE/CONNECTION ■ LOW PRIDE/CONNECTION

I am proud to be a person whose gender identity is different from my sex assigned at birth



I feel part of a community of people who share my gender identity



I feel a sense of connection in online spaces with others who share my gender identity



NOTE

Differing superscripts indicate statistically significant differences between groups at $p < .05$. Pride and community connection were measured using subscales from the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure.⁸ Depression was defined as a score of 3 or higher on the PHQ-2. Data were collected in August and September 2024. Responses represent data from 696 transgender participants.

Source: Born This Way Foundation & Hopelab. (2024). *Survey on online support for LGBTQ+ young people*.

Transgender young people who are proud to have a gender identity different from their sex assigned at birth are significantly less likely to meet the cutoff for depression (46% vs. 61%) compared to those who were not proud. In open-ended responses, transgender participants described how online communities helped them develop a sense of pride in their identity.

⁸ Testa, R. J., Habarth, J., Peta, J., Balsam, K., & Bockting, W. (2015). Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure (GMSR) [Database record]. APA PsycTests. <https://doi.org/10.1037/t39597-000>

A Latinx transgender nonbinary young adult shared:

“[A] Facebook genderfluid group helped me discover and be proud of my gender when I was questioning and being shunned by my family.”



In addition, transgender young people who feel like a part of a community of others who share their gender identity are also less likely to meet the cutoff for depression (47% vs. 62%). However, the difference in depression rates between those who felt connected to others in online spaces and those who did not was not statistically significant.

In co-distillation interviews, transgender participants explained that while online connections can be affirming, in-person community support has a stronger impact on reducing depression. A Black transgender genderqueer young adult said:

“[It] definitely helps having a community online, but it’s still essentially in your phone or in your computer. So it’s small. You can put it away... It’s a lot easier to just forget about it in a way, as opposed to when you can see it in person, when you can feel it more in person.”



Key Finding 5

More than 9 in 10 Transgender Young People Feel Comfortable with Their LGBTQ+ Identity

LGBTQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE COMFORTABLE WITH THEIR IDENTITY

TRANSGENDER

CISGENDER

91%^a

84%^b

NOTE

Differing superscripts reflect statistically significant differences between groups at $p < .05$. Data reflect responses to the item “*I am comfortable with my LGBTQ+ identity*,” with values representing the proportion of participants who selected “Agree” or “Strongly Agree.” The item was based on the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Positive Identity Measure.⁹ Data were collected in August and September 2024. Responses represent data from 696 transgender young people and 398 cisgender young people.

Source: Born This Way Foundation & Hopelab. (2024). *Survey on online support for LGBTQ+ young people*.

Transgender young people are significantly more likely than their cisgender LGBTQ+ peers to report feeling comfortable with their LGBTQ+ identity (91% vs. 84%). In co-distillation interviews, they described how living as a transgender person can be difficult, but those challenges often foster self-acceptance. One Black transgender young adult man explained:

“A lot of [transgender] people, they have this feeling that they push down for most of their lives, like myself, or maybe they have to hide for a while because of family or the environment they’re in. But then, when they’re finally able to be themselves or they start to recognize who they are in the mirror, that’s very exciting and rewarding. And I think it’s like you go through all these things, and eventually, you’re just proud to finally be who you are.”

⁹ Riggle, E. D. B., Mohr, J. J., Rostosky, S. S., Fingerhut, A. W., & Balsam, K. F. (2014). Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Positive Identity Measure (LGB-PIM) [Database record]. APA PsycTests. <https://doi.org/10.1037/t37069-000>

In open-ended survey responses, transgender young people shared that discomfort comes from a lack of acceptance in in-person spaces, rather than from within or from online spaces. One Black transgender young adult said:

“[In online spaces] I’m not treated as if the only way I am allowed to live is appearing a certain way, speaking a certain way, and acting a certain way. Everyone around me otherwise just wants me to be more manly, and I just want to be able to be accepted by others regardless of how I view or present myself.”



Key Finding 6

Nearly Three in Four Transgender Young People Regularly Support Others Online

LGBTQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE WHO GIVE SUPPORT ONLINE SEVERAL TIMES A MONTH OR MORE

TRANSGENDER CISINGENDER

74%^a

63%^b

NOTE

Differing superscripts reflect significant differences between groups at $p < .05$. Data reflect responses to the item, “How often did you give support (such as listening to someone, encouraging someone, or helping someone) to your online friends or online communities in the past year?” Data were collected in August and September 2024. Responses represent data from 696 transgender young people and 398 cisgender young people.

Source: Born This Way Foundation & Hopelab. (2024). *Survey on online support for LGBTQ+ young people*.

Transgender young people were significantly more likely than their cisgender LGBTQ+ peers to give support to others online several times a month or more (74% vs. 63%).

Open-ended responses offer a window into the types of support shared. An American Indian/Native American transgender young adult man noted:

“I’ve seen and been in chats about ways to help masculinize yourself as a trans man, I’ve seen people ask and receive workout advice, people share resources for different charities or places to get gender-affirming things like binders, trans tape, testosterone, etc. I’ve also seen people help people pay for gender-affirming surgeries through GoFundMe and other apps.”

Transgender young adults ages 18-24 also serve as mentors for younger members of the community. A white transgender young adult woman also shared:

“I have ... noticed that younger trans folk now ask me for advice about navigating gender and I feel deeply honored to now be that person for others.”



In co-distillation interviews, participants explained that this difference may reflect the unique types of support transgender people offer one another—especially around navigating identity and transition. A multiracial transgender young adult man reflected:

“There’s a lot that can be a little more complicated depending on what you wanna do with your transition ... [it was] probably only when I got into undergrad and started testosterone that I noticed myself also starting to mentor other trans people, and talking to them about what they were going through.”



Key Finding 7

Transgender Young People Are More Concerned About Restricted Access to LGBTQ+ Online Content

LGBTQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE’S CONCERN THAT THE GOVERNMENT MIGHT LIMIT ACCESS TO LGBTQ+-AFFIRMING ONLINE COMMUNITIES AND CONTENT

TRANSGENDER CISCENDER

91%^a

83%^b

NOTE

Note. Differing superscripts reflect significant differences between groups at $p < .05$. Data reflect responses of “a little concerned,” “concerned,” or “very concerned” to the item, “How concerned are you that your state or the federal government might limit online access to LGBTQ+-affirming online communities and content?” Data were collected in August and September 2024. Responses represent data from 696 transgender young people and 398 cisgender young people.

Source: Born This Way Foundation & Hopelab. (2024). *Survey on online support for LGBTQ+ young people*.

High proportions of both transgender and cisgender LGBTQ+ young people expressed being concerned that their state or the federal government might limit their access to LGBTQ+-affirming online communities and content. However, transgender young people were significantly more likely than cisgender LGBTQ+ young people to report this concern (91% vs. 83%).

Open-ended survey responses revealed that transgender young people often rely on these online communities for essential—and sometimes lifesaving support. A white transgender young adult man shared:

“Without access to trans elders, neurodiverse folks, resources, and safe communities online, I would not be here.”

While transgender young people emphasized the need to protect access to these spaces, they also called for improvements to platform moderation and safety. A multiracial transgender nonbinary young adult highlighted the need for online platforms to:

“Keep moderating fairly and remove hate speech or add official notes on posts that spread misinformation. (A platform I use) has become more hateful and allows anti-queer remarks, especially against transgender people.”

Conclusion

This report underscores the essential role that online communities play in the lives of transgender young people. These digital spaces offer emotional support, identity affirmation, practical resources, and opportunities for connection that are often missing in their offline environments. For many, the internet is one of the only places where they can safely express their identity and build relationships with others who understand their experiences.

Connecting with affirming online communities allows transgender young people to flourish and demonstrate remarkable resilience. In co-distillation interviews, participants described how online spaces offer mentorship, often from older transgender individuals who share advice, encouragement, and access to gender-affirming resources. They also emphasized that being transgender is not an online trend. Rather, transgender and questioning young people seek out these communities because they already hold those feelings—and online support helps them better understand and accept who they are. As one multiracial transgender young adult man put it:

“I think there’s this constant assumption... that online spaces create trans people, whereas that’s not the case. It’s people coming to these online spaces because they already have those thoughts, those feelings, and just further finding themselves.”



Although supportive online spaces remain critical, they are not a substitute for safety and affirmation in the physical world. The fact that only a small fraction of transgender young people feel “very safe” expressing their identity in person highlights an urgent need for more inclusive, affirming environments across the settings where transgender young people live, learn, and grow—schools, homes, workplaces, and health care systems.

Allies have an important role to play. Beyond offering kindness and individual support, allies must advocate for inclusive policies and practices that protect transgender young people and affirm their right to live as their authentic selves. In co-distillation interviews, young people shared how meaningful it is when allies offer protection and solidarity. A white transgender young adult man said:

“I think the biggest support that [allies] can give is just being affirming and being understanding of anyone they know who might want to come out or might want to explore that sort of thing. Just really being open and supportive and being able and willing to protect them if it comes down to it. Because I think that can really help if they know that an ally is standing up for them and at least trying to be there for that person.”



This report also highlights the generosity and leadership of transgender young people. They are recipients of support and they offer it freely and often, helping others navigate identity, access, resources, and feel less alone. It’s a system of giving and receiving care. In a moment where the rights and existence of transgender young people is being debated, it’s essential that society listen to their stories, learn from their lived experiences, and work collectively toward a future where transgender young people are affirmed and can thrive—online and offline.

If you want to support the transgender young people

in your life, start by using their preferred pronouns, affirming their gender exploration, and listening with openness and respect. For more ideas, this [family support resource guide](#) offers actionable steps to help build safer, more affirming environments for transgender young people.

Acknowledgments

We extend our deepest gratitude to the young people who generously shared their time, insights, and lived experiences to shape this study. Their contributions—informing the study’s design, completing the survey, and helping interpret and present the findings—were invaluable.

About

Hopelab envisions a future where all young people have equitable opportunities to live joyful and purposeful lives. As a funder, connector, and science translator, Hopelab supports and builds equity-centered solutions for the mental health of Brown, Black, and Queer young people. For more information, visit hopelab.org.

Born This Way Foundation, co-founded and led by Lady Gaga and her mother, Cynthia Bissett Germanotta, empowers and inspires young people to build a kinder, braver world that supports their mental health. Based on the scientific link between kindness and mental health and built in partnership with young people, Born This Way Foundation leverages research, programs, grantmaking, and partnerships to engage young people and connect them with accessible mental health resources. For more information, visit bornthisway.foundation.

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