

Recruiting the Anxious Generation

Insights from Recent Large-Scale Surveys
of the Nation's College-Goers

Your Hosts for This Session



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A Standalone Version of Today's Material

The Content of This Session Comes from a More Extensive Resource



1 Always Online and Highly Distractible

Today's Teens Live Online

Today's teens are constantly checking their phones or being distracted by online content. According to a 2024 Pew survey, 45% say they're online "almost constantly," and 33% say the same about social media. Even when not actively scrolling, they're being pulled back. Haidt estimates the average teen receives 11 push notifications per waking hour, or about one every five minutes.

“

Even when members of Gen Z are not on their devices and appear to be doing something in the real world, such as sitting in class, eating a meal, or talking with you, a substantial portion of their attention is **monitoring or worrying (being anxious) about events in the social metaverse.**”

Jonathan Haidt
The Anxious Generation

Teens Are Constantly Plugged In
Pew Research and The Anxious Generation

- 33% of teens are using social media "almost constantly"
- 45% of teens are online "almost constantly"
- 11 Push notifications received per waking hour, on average

A Double-Edged Sword for Recruitment Marketers

This always-online behavior presents both a challenge and an opportunity for colleges. On one hand, it gives institutions a direct line to students through channels such as search, email, and social media. As the EAB data below illustrates, students report checking email and social media daily. On the other hand, recruitment marketers face stiff competition for students' attention online from the many other, highly engaging types of content, from TikTok trends to video games, and more. Part 2 of this insight paper shares our top survey insights to better understand students' digital habits in college search and win their attention.

How Often Do You Check the Following Platforms?
2025 Student Communication Preferences Survey (n=19,199)

88% of students check email at least once a day

Frequency	Percentage
Several times a day	55%
At least once a day	33%
Every few days	9%
Once a week	2%
Every other week or less	1%
Never	0%

85% of students check social media at least once a day

Frequency	Percentage
Several times a day	64%
At least once a day	21%
Every few days	6%
Once a week	2%
Every other week or less	2%
Never	5%

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- 1 Three key traits of the anxious generation
- 2 What recent large-scale surveys tell us about recruiting today's students

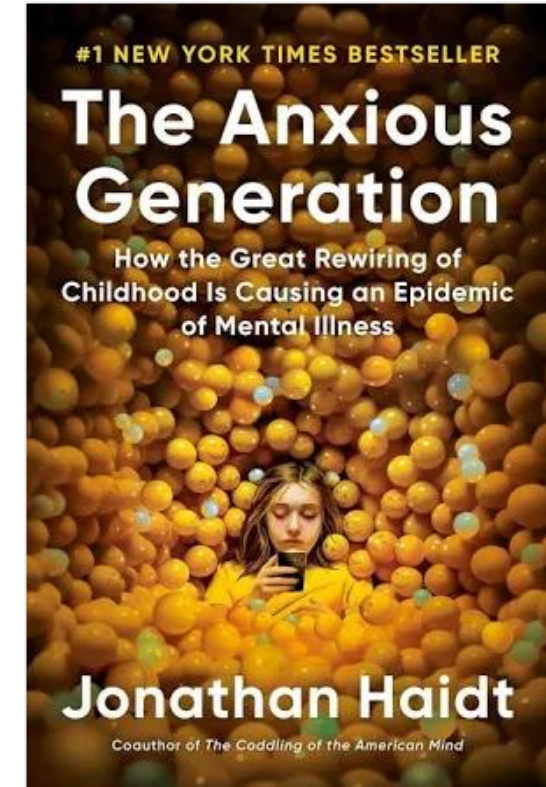
What is the “Anxious Generation”?

A Great Rewiring of Childhood

Theoretical Framework Borrowed from the Theorist of Childhood Development Jonathan Haidt

Thesis

Intensive smartphone use, together with changing parenting norms, have resulted in **profound cognitive and behavioral changes** in Gen Z and Gen Alpha, including a rise in the prevalence of mental illness



Trait 1

Always Online and Highly Distracted

45%

of teens say that they are online “almost constantly”

2024 Pew Survey

33%

of teens use social media “almost constantly”

2024 Pew Survey

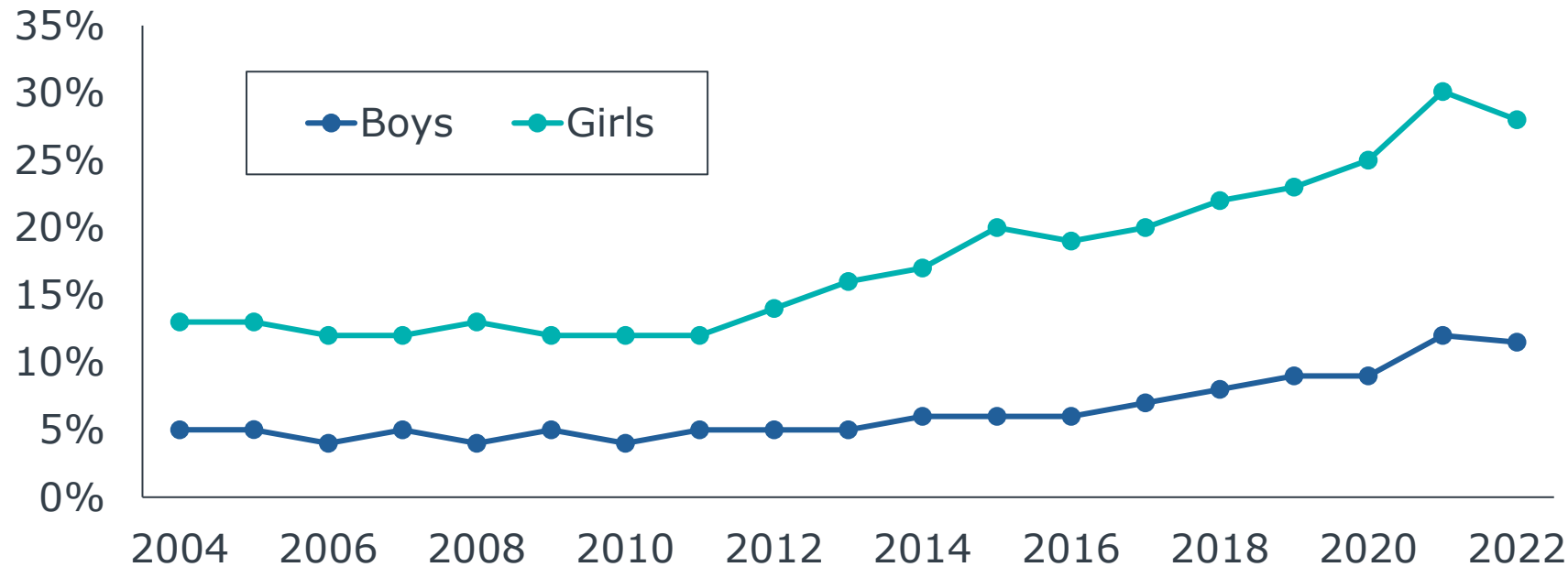
11

push notifications received by teens per hour

Haidt

Trait 2

Increasingly Burdened with Mental Health Challenges % of Teens Reporting a Major Depressive Episode in the Last Year



Proportional Change
2010-2022

133%

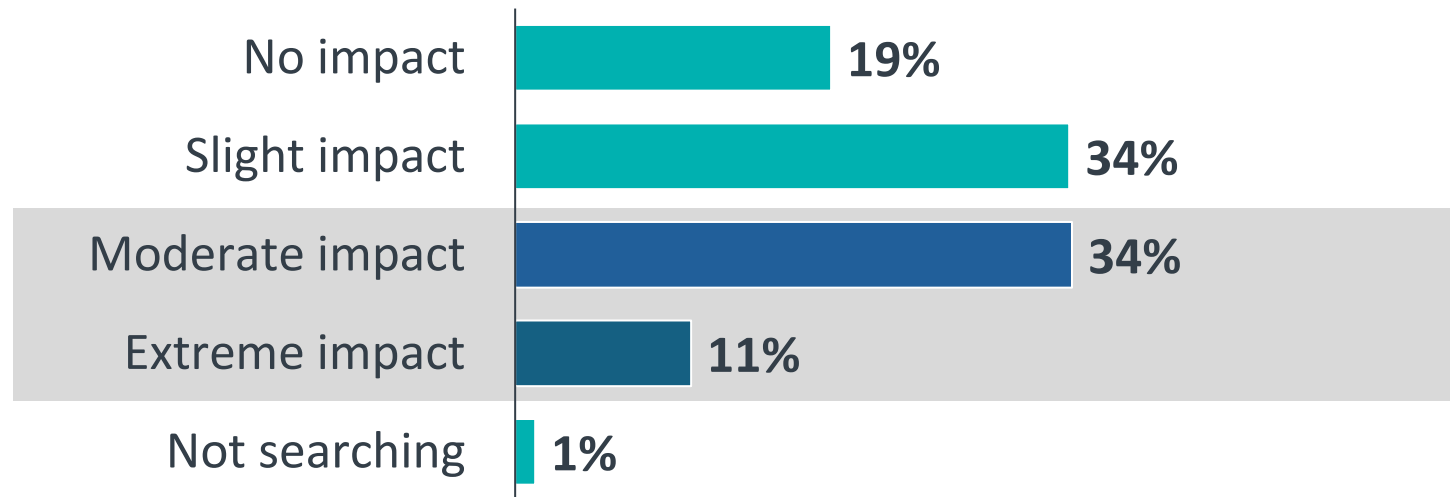
188%

A significantly higher increase than for girls

Impacts on the College-Going Journey

Mental Health Challenges Encroach on Affected Students' Search

Q: "How much do nervousness, anxiety, loneliness, and isolation impact your college search?"¹



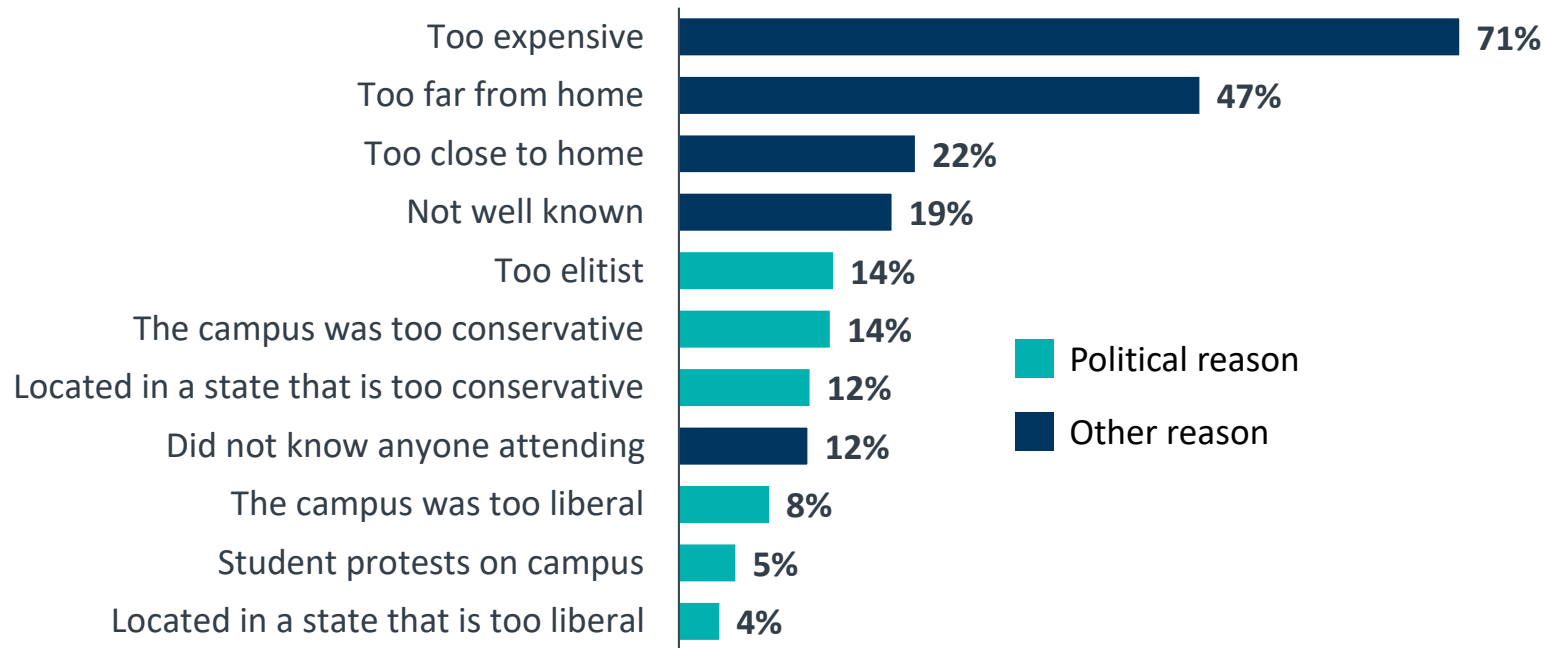
45%

of affected students report significant impact on college search

Trait 3

Values-Focused

Reasons Students Gave for Removing Schools from Their Consideration Set



29%

of students cited **political** factors

53%

of students say a “safe” campus is one that is committed to **DEI**

A roadmap to our presentation

- 1 Three key traits of the anxious generation
- 2 What recent large-scale surveys tell us about recruiting today's students

Some Background on the Surveys

Three Initiatives that Engaged More than 38,000 Students in Total

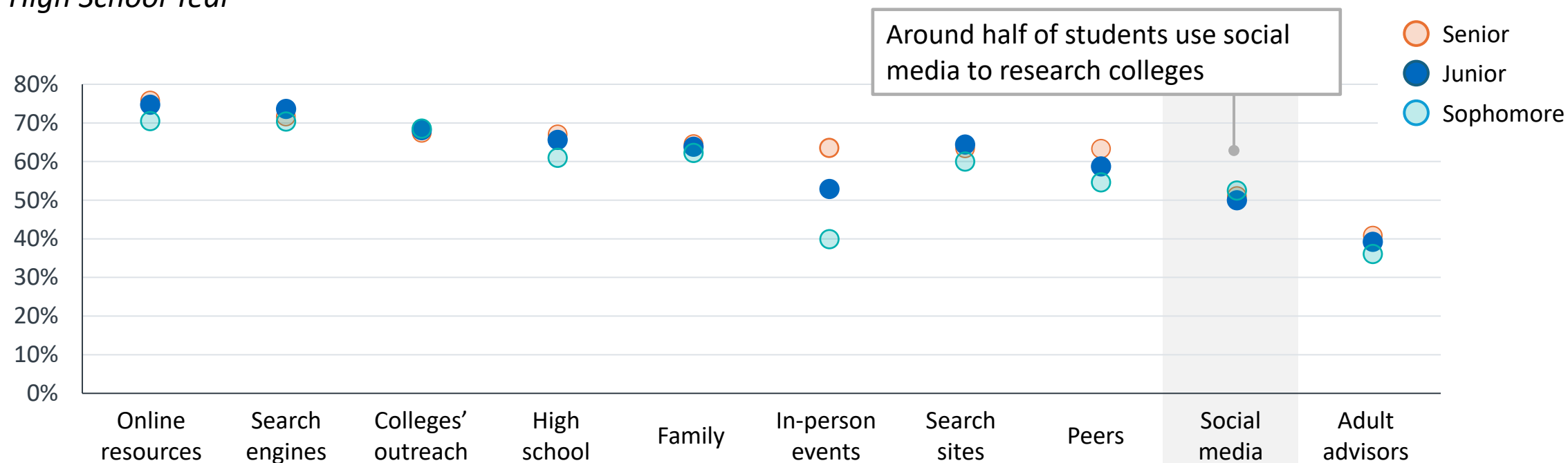
	Participants	Issues examined
Student Communication Preferences Survey (2025)	19,299 current high school students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preferred communication channels in college search • Social media, email, and phone habits • Perceptions of communications from colleges
2025 First-Year Experience Survey (2025)	11,500 recent high school graduates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College search and application behaviors • Factors driving college selection • Satisfaction with college experience thus far
Student Mental Health Survey (2024)	7,720 high school students and college freshmen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiences with mental health challenges • Effects of mental health on the college search process • Anxieties about applying to and enrolling in college

Insight 1

Students Consult Many Information Sources in Their College Search

Resources Students Reported Using to Gather Information About Colleges

By High School Year

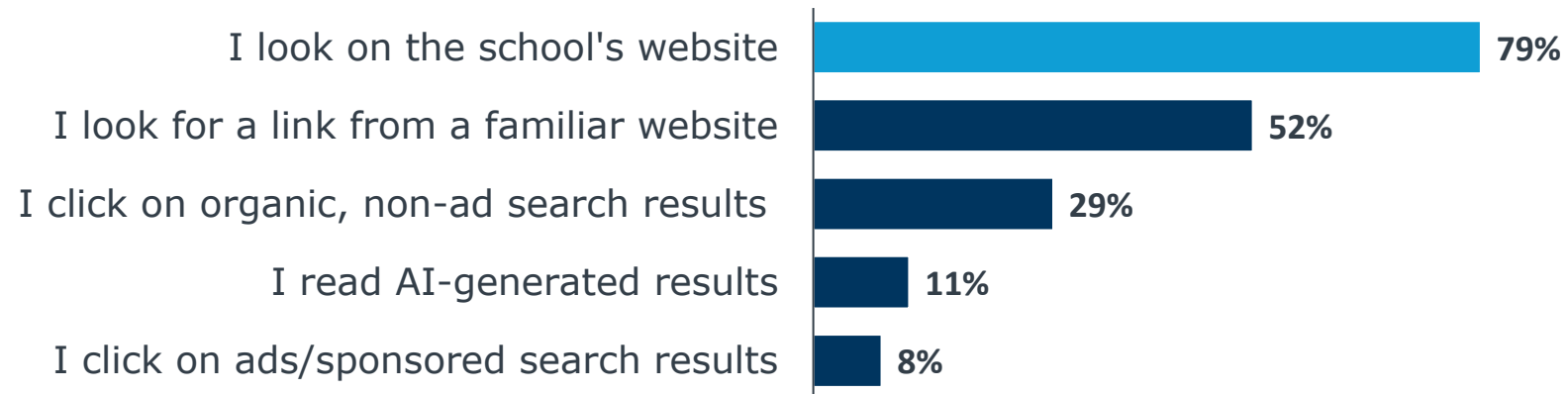


Put Your .edu to Work

Schools' Websites Are Students' Main Search Resource

At the Center of Students' Search

Q: "When searching for information about colleges online, which of the following scenarios reflect how you gather information?"

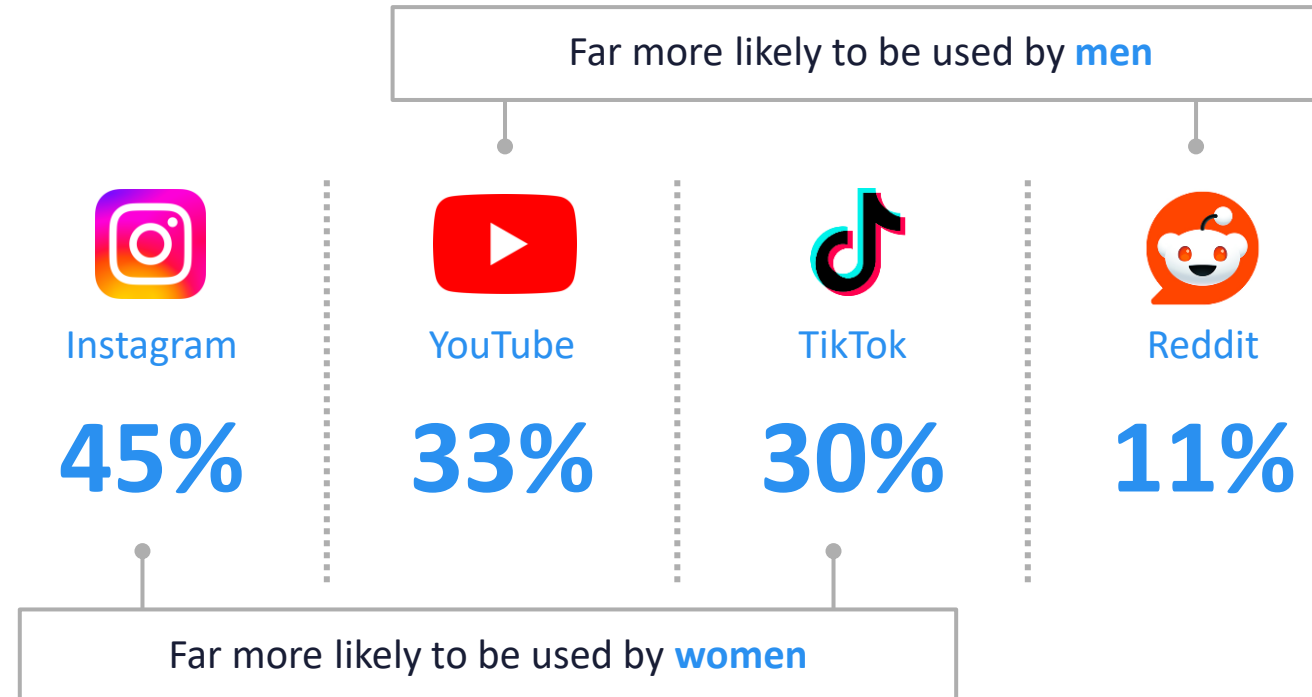


Normalize the support services you offer via your website, to reassure Anxious-Generation prospects that they can succeed at your institution

Insight 2

Social Media Is a Key College Search Tool for Today's Youth

Percentage of Students
who Reported Using
Various Social Media
Platforms to Learn
About Colleges



Insight 3

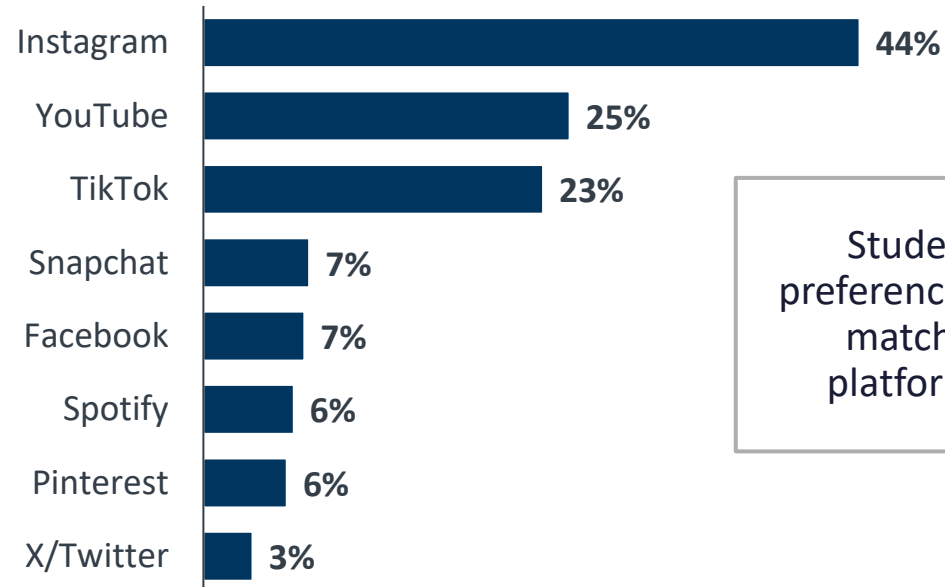
Today's Students Are Open to Digital Ads from Colleges



66%

of students say they're open to being served ads from colleges and universities via their social platforms

Students' Platform Preferences for Social Ads

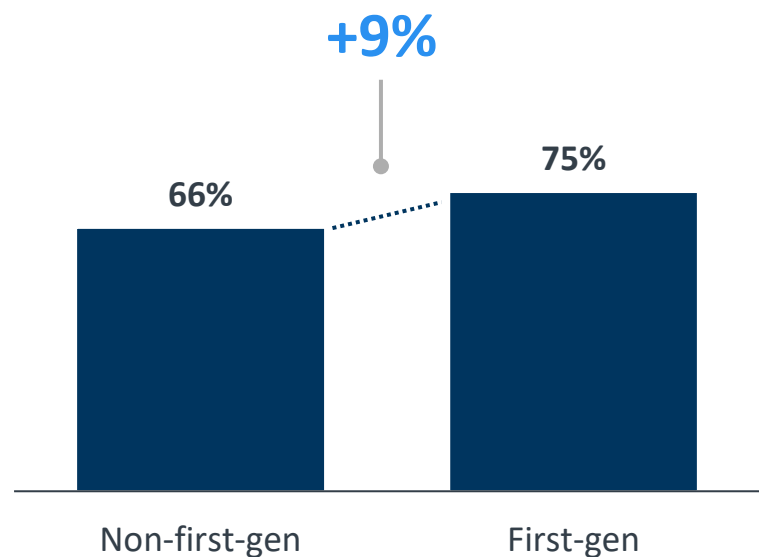


Students' platform preferences for ads closely match their overall platform preferences

Know Your Ad Audience

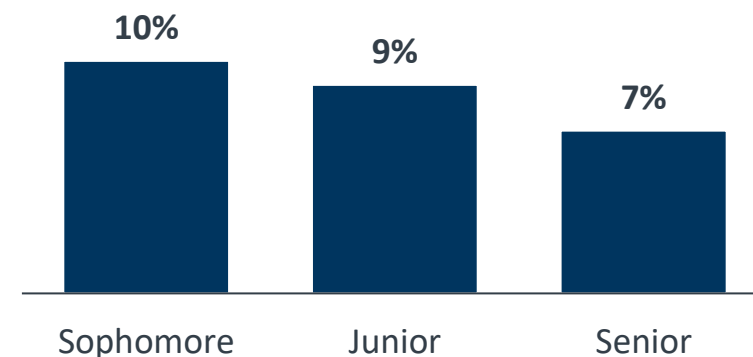
Significant Differences by Demographic and High School Year

**% of Students Willing
to be Served Social Ads**
By First-Gen Status



Click Rates

By Students' High-School Year

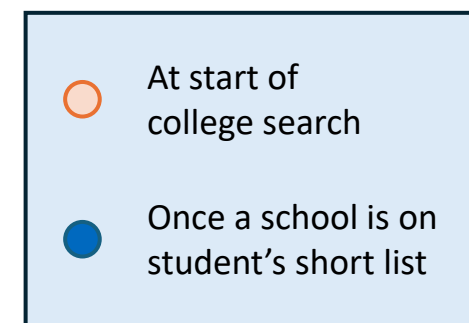
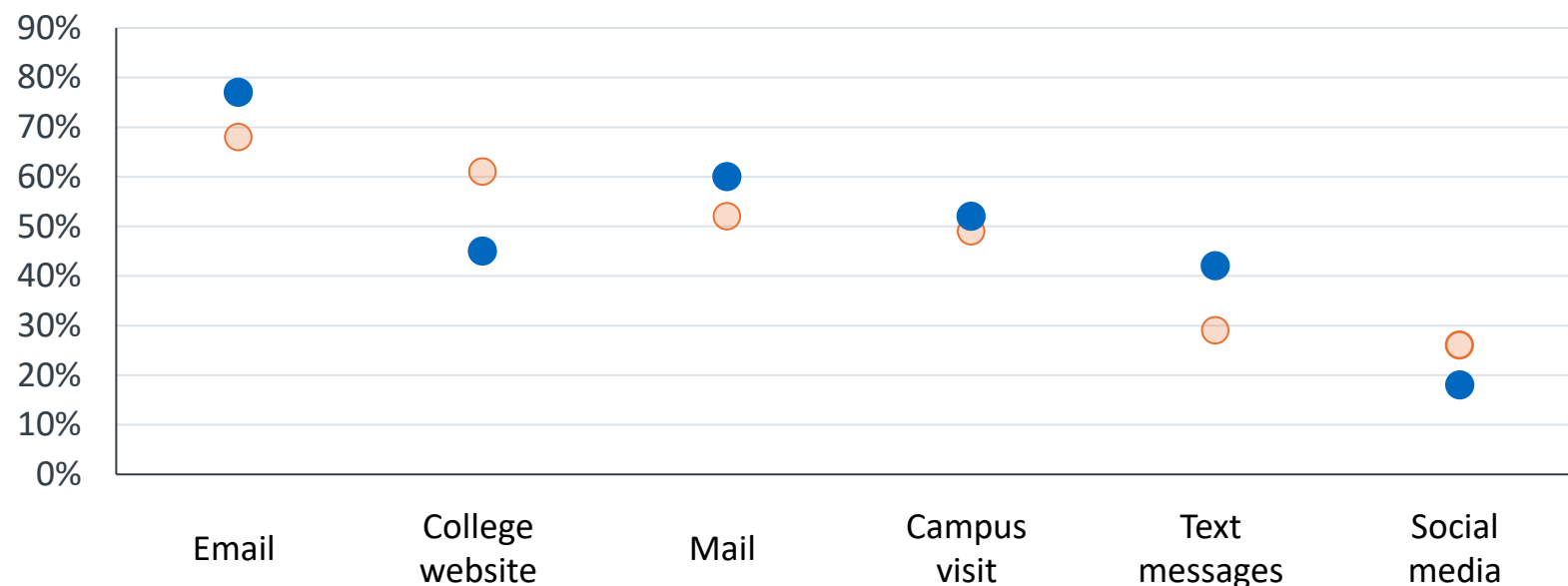


Ads are most impactful with students earlier in their college search

Insight 4

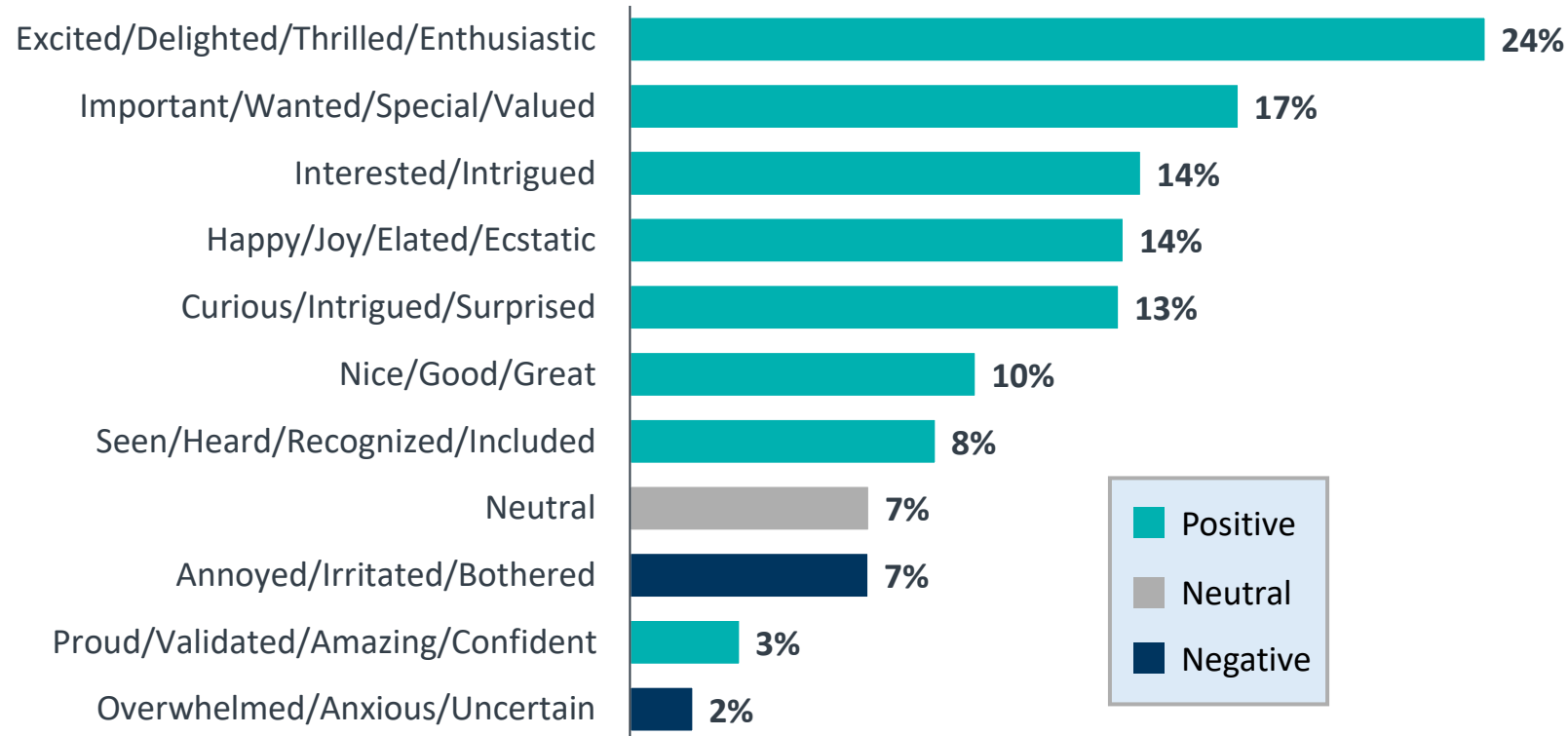
Lasting Relevance for Legacy Channels

Through What Channels Do Today's Students Prefer to Receive Communications from Colleges?



Physical Mail is Emotionally Powerful

How Receiving Physical Mail from Colleges Makes Students Feel



84%

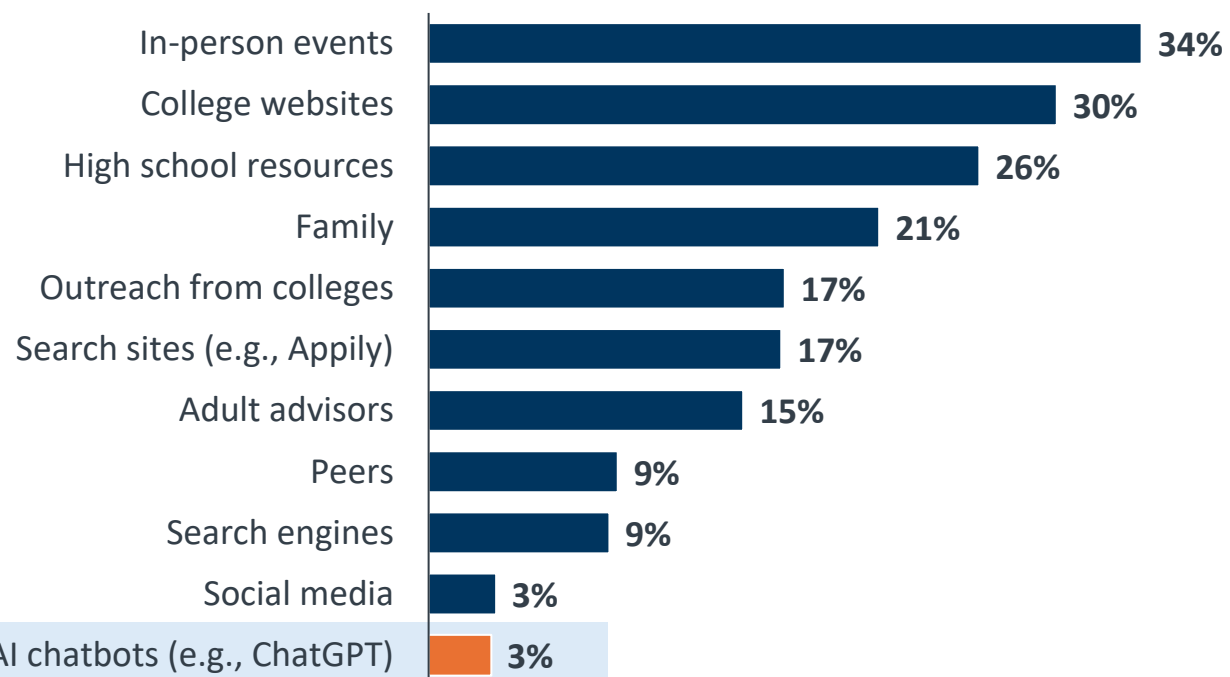
of students say they use QR codes at least sometimes

QR codes are a powerful means of linking the digital and paper realms

Insight 5

Many Students Use AI for Search, Even though Few Trust It

Percentage of Students Rating Various Information Sources as Trustworthy



26%

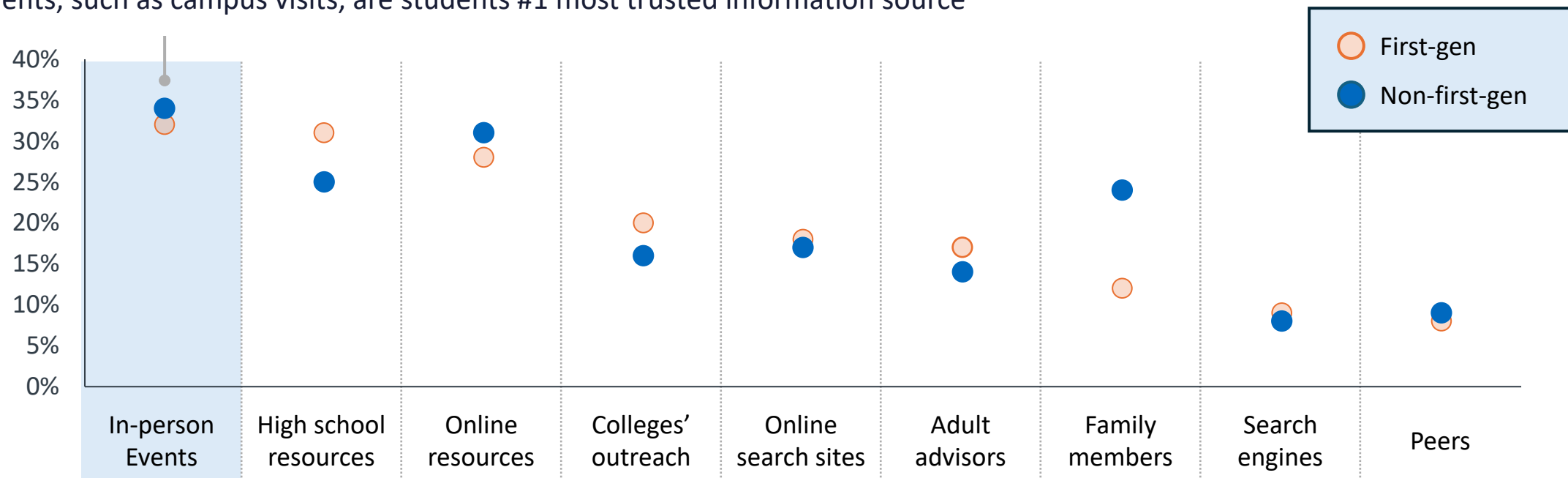
of students use AI chatbots like ChatGPT to search for information about colleges

Insight 6

In-Person Interactions Are Important to the Anxious Generation

Percentage of Students Rating Various Information Sources as Trustworthy

Events, such as campus visits, are students #1 most trusted information source



Takeaways

Communication is more central than ever

The anxious generation's media habits have everything to do with the problems they're experiencing; understand your own media strategy in that context.

Legacy channels are a "safe space"

Traditional communication channels offer students a welcome place of calm, simplicity, and familiarity in an otherwise chaotic and overwhelming media environment; use them to your advantage.

Reassurance front and center

More so than students of the past, the anxious generation are looking for affirmation, reassurance, and support; audit the communications you're having with them to ensure you're meeting that need.

Continue the Conversation



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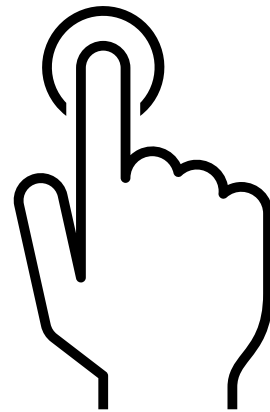
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