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Social Media and Political Engagement

66% of social media users have employed the platforms to post their thoughts about civic and political issues, react to others' postings, press friends to act on issues and vote, follow candidates, 'like' and link to others' content, and belong to groups formed on social networking sites

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Summary of Findings

The use of social media is becoming a feature of political and civic engagement for many Americans. Some 60% of American adults use either social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter, and a new survey by the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project finds that 66% of those social media users—or 39% of all American adults—have done at least one of eight civic or political activities with social media.

Overall, there are mixed partisan and ideological patterns among social media users when it comes to using social media like social networking sites and Twitter. The social media users who talk about politics on a regular basis are the most likely to use social media for civic or political purposes. And the social media users who have firmer party and ideological ties—liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans—are, at times, more likely than moderates in both parties to use social media for these purposes.

Some of these activities are more likely to be pursued by younger social media users compared with the social media users who are ages 50 or older. Younger users are more likely to post their own thoughts about issues, post links to political material, encourage others to take political action, belong to a political group on a social networking site, follow elected officials on social media, and like or promote political material others have posted.

Here are the key findings in a recent nationally representative survey:

- 38% of those who use social networking sites (SNS) or Twitter use those social media to “like” or promote material related to politics or social issues that others have posted. Liberal Democrats who use social media are particularly likely to use the ‘like’ button—52% of them have done so and 42% of conservative Republicans have also done so.
- 35% of social media users have used the tools to encourage people to vote. Democrats who are social media users are more likely to have used social media to encourage voting—42% have done that compared with 36% of Republican social-media users and 31% of independents.
- 34% of social media users have used the tools to post their own thoughts or comments on political and social issues. Liberal Democrats who use social media (42%) and conservative Republicans (41%) are especially likely to use social media this way.
- 33% of social media users have used the tools to repost content related to political or social issues that was originally posted by someone else. Republican social media users are more likely to do this on social media —39% have used social media to repost content, compared with 34% of social media using Democrats and 31% of independents.
- 31% of social media users have used the tools to encourage other people to take action on a political or social issue that is important to them. Some 36% of social-media-using Democrats have done this as have 34% of Republicans. This compares to 29% of independents who are social media users.

- 28% of social media users have used the tools to post links to political stories or articles for others to read. The social media users who are liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans are the most likely to have used social media this way (39% and 34% respectively).
- 21% of those who use SNS or Twitter belong to a group on a social networking site that is involved in political or social issues, or that is working to advance a cause. There are no major differences by ideology or partisanship when it comes to using social media this way.
- 20% of social media users have used the tools to follow elected officials and candidates for office. Some 32% of the conservative Republicans who use social media follow officials on social media and 27% of liberal Democrats who use social media do so.

About this survey

These findings come from a nationally representative survey of 2,253 adults ages 18 and older that was conducted between July 16 and August 7, 2012. The survey included 900 interviews on cell phones and was conducted in English and Spanish. Some 1,209 of the respondents use either a social networking site such as Facebook, LinkedIn or Google+ or use Twitter. Most of the results in this report are based on that sub-population of social media users. The margin of error on that sample is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

Additional Analysis

Engagement through social networking sites and Twitter has become a marked feature of political and civic life for a significant portion of Americans. Previous work by the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life has documented the key role that the internet and social media play in people’s participation in groups and organizations.¹ Other Project studies have shown how those who use social media, especially Facebook, are more civically and politically active than non-users,² and how those who use social media to participate in civic and political life are more diverse in socio-economic terms than those who participate in civic affairs through more traditional online and offline activities such as signing petitions or interacting with news organizations.³

During the summer of this election year, the Project conducted a nationally representative survey of 2,253 adults ages 18 and older and asked a series of questions about civic engagement through people’s use of social networking sites and Twitter. In the sample, 85% of the respondents are internet users;

¹ See “The Social Side of the Internet.” January 18, 2011. Available at:

<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/The-Social-Side-of-the-Internet.aspx>

² See “Social Networking Sites and Our Lives.” June 16, 2011. Available at:

<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Technology-and-social-networks.aspx>.

And see “Social Isolation and New Technology.” November 4, 2009. Available at:

<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/15--The-Internet-and-Civic-Engagement.aspx>

³ See “The Internet and Civic Engagement.” September 1, 2009. Available at:

<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/15--The-Internet-and-Civic-Engagement.aspx>.

69% of the internet users say they use social networking sites, and 16% use Twitter. In all, 60% of all American adults use either a social networking site (like Facebook, LinkedIn, or Google+) or use Twitter.

Among those social media users, the survey found:

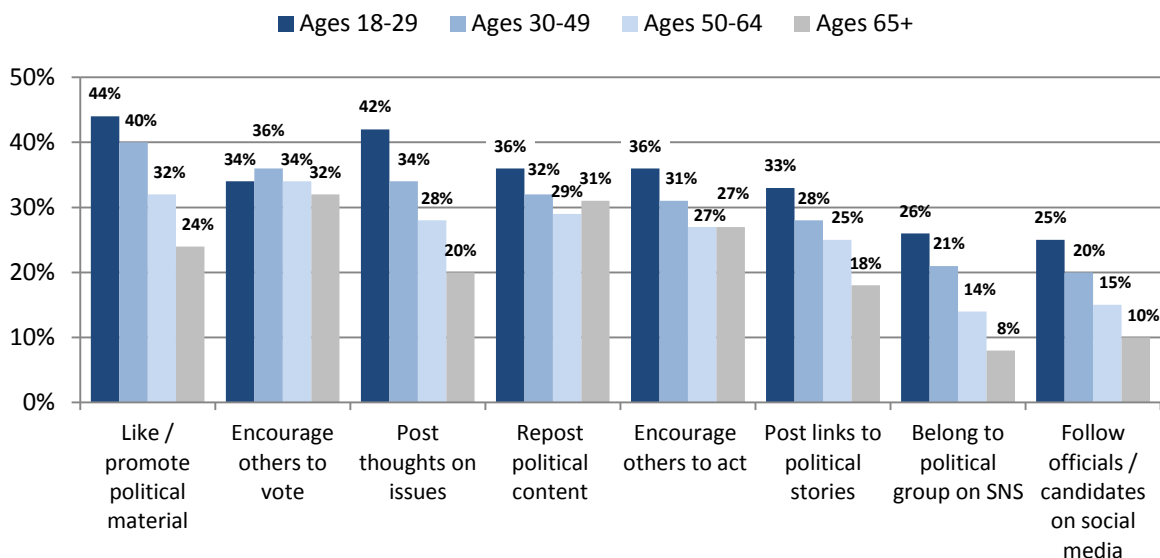
- 38% of those who use social networking sites (SNS) or Twitter use those social media to “like” or promote material related to politics or social issues that others have posted. The social media users under age 50 and those who have at least some college experience are more likely than others to use social media this way.
- 35% of social media users have used the tools to encourage people to vote. There is not notable variance among different age groups on this activity. Those who have some college experience are more likely than others to have used social media this way.
- 34% of social media users have used the tools to post their own thoughts or comments on political and social issues. The social media users who are ages 18-29 are notably more likely than older users to have posted their own comments, as are those who have at least some college experience.
- 33% of social media users have used the tools to repost content related to political or social issues that was originally posted by someone else. The social media users who are college graduates (39%) are more likely than others to have used social media this way.
- 31% of social media users have used the tools to encourage other people to take action on a political or social issue that is important to them. Younger adults (ages 18-29) who use social media are a bit more likely than older users to have done this. And those with some college experience are more likely than others to have done this.
- 28% of social media users have used the tools to post links to political stories or articles for others to read. Young adults who use social media are more likely than others to have done this, as are those with some college experience.

In addition to asking about the use of social media for those activities, we also asked about group engagement via social media and engagement with public officials and candidates. The results:

- 21% of those who use SNS or Twitter belong to a group on an SNS that is involved in political or social issues, or that is working to advance a cause. Whites who use social media (24%) are more likely than the social media users who are black (13%) or Hispanics (12%) to belong to such groups. And adults under age 50 are more likely than older social media users to belong to such groups.
- 20% of social media users have used the tools to follow elected officials and candidates for office. Whites (22%) and blacks (25%) who use social media are more likely than Hispanic social media users (8%) to follow public officials or candidates. The same holds true for social media users under age 50 and those with at least some college experience.

Younger social media users are more likely to use the tools for civic activities

% of users of social networking sites or Twitter who use social media these ways



Source: Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project Civic Engagement Survey, conducted July 16-August 7, 2012 on landline and cell phones and in English and Spanish. N for social media users ages 18-29=323. N for social media users ages 30-49=388. N for social media users ages 50-64=323. N for social media users ages 65+=167.

The politics of social networking site users and Twitter users

Some 60% of all American adults use either social networking sites or Twitter. Some 69% of online adults use SNS and 16% use Twitter and, of course, a notable number of internet users exploit both platforms.

The internet users who are liberals are more likely than their ideological counterparts to use social networking sites and Twitter for all kinds of reasons—not just for political purposes. The table below shows the partisan and ideological composition of the SNS user population and Twitter users and some of their other key demographic information.

Who uses social networking sites and Twitter

% of internet users in each group who use either kind of these social media platforms

	Social networking sites	Twitter
All internet users (n=1,873)	69%	16%
Republicans (n=449)	65	12
Independents (n=667)	71	18*
Democrats (n=600)	71	18*
Ideology		
Conservative (n=702)	63	10
Moderate (n=631)	70*	16*
Liberal (n=420)	79**	25**
Gender		
Men (n=886)	63	16
Women (n=987)	75*	17
Age		
18-29 (n=351)	92***	32***
30-49 (n=524)	73**	15**
50-64 (n=567)	57*	9*
65+ (n=404)	38	4
Race/ethnicity		
White, Non-Hispanic (n=1,355)	68	14
Black, Non-Hispanic (n=217)	68	22*
Hispanic (n=188)	72	17
Annual household income		
Less than \$30,000/yr (n=469)	73*	15
\$30,000-\$49,999 (n=356)	66	17
\$50,000-\$74,999 (n=285)	66	12
\$75,000+ (n=501)	74**	21**
Education level		
No high school diploma (n=129)	65	16
High school grad (n=535)	65	13
Some College (n=513)	73*	20*
College + (n=692)	72*	17
Geographic location		
Urban (n=544)	69	16*
Suburban (n=956)	71*	18*
Rural (n=304)	63	10

* indicates statistically significant difference compared with others in same grouping
Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project Civic Engagement Survey, conducted July 16-August 7, 2012 on landline and cell phones and in English and Spanish. N for internet users=1,873.

Survey questions

Civic Engagement Tracking Survey 2012

Final Topline

08/14/2012

Data for July 16–August 7, 2012

Princeton Survey Research Associates International for
the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project

Sample: n=2,253 national adults, age 18 and older, including 900 cell phone interviews
Interviewing dates: 07.16.2012 – 08.07.2012

Margin of error is plus or minus 2 percentage points for results based on Total [n=2,253]

Margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points for results based on internet users [n=1,873]

Margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points for results based on cell phone owners [n=2,032]

Margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points for results based on cell phone owners who text message
[n=1,409]

Margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points for results based on SNS or Twitter users [n=1,209]

INTUSE Do you use the internet, at least occasionally?

EMLOCC Do you send or receive email, at least occasionally?

INTMOB Do you access the internet on a cell phone, tablet or other mobile handheld device, at least occasionally?⁴

USES INTERNET

DOES NOT USE
INTERNET

⁴ The definition of an internet user varies from survey to survey. From January 2005 thru February 2012, an internet user is someone who uses the internet at least occasionally or sends/receives email at least occasionally (two-part definition with question wording "Do you use the internet, at least occasionally?" OR "Do you send or receive email, at least occasionally?"). Prior to January 2005, an internet user is someone who goes online to access the internet or to send and receive email (question wording "Do you ever go online to access the Internet or World Wide Web or to send and receive email?").

Current	85	15
April 2012	82	18
February 2012	80	20
December 2011	82	18
August 2011	78	22
May 2011	78	22
January 2011	79	21
December 2010	77	23
November 2010	74	26
September 2010	74	26
May 2010	79	21
January 2010	75	25
December 2009	74	26
September 2009	77	23
April 2009	79	21
December 2008	74	26
November 2008	74	26
August 2008	75	25
July 2008	77	23
May 2008	73	27
April 2008	73	27
January 2008	70	30
December 2007	75	25
September 2007	73	27
February 2007 ⁱ	71	29
December 2006 ⁱⁱ	70	30
November 2006	68	32
August 2006 ⁱⁱⁱ	70	30
April 2006	73	27
February 2006 ^{iv}	73	27
December 2005 ^v	66	34
September 2005 ^{vi}	72	28
June 2005 ^{vii}	68	32
February 2005 ^{viii}	67	33
January 2005	66	34
Nov 23-30, 2004	59	41
November 2004	61	39
June 2004	63	37
February 2004 ^{ix}	63	37
November 2003 ^x	64	36
August 2003 ^{xi}	63	37
June 2003 ^{xii}	62	38
May 2003 ^{xiii}	63	37
March 3-11, 2003 ^{xiv}	62	38
February 2003 ^{xv}	64	36
December 2002 ^{xvi}	57	43
November 2002	61	39
October 2002	59	41
September 2002 ^{xvii}	61	39
July 2002 ^{xviii}	59	41
March/May 2002 ^{xix}	58	42
January 2002 ^{xx}	61	39
December 2001 ^{xxi}	58	42

November 2001 ^{xxii}	58	42
October 2001 ^{xxiii}	56	44
September 2001 ^{xxiv}	55	45
August 2001 ^{xxv}	59	41
February 2001 ^{xxvi}	53	47
December 2000 ^{xxvii}	59	41
November 2000	53	47
October 2000 ^{xxviii}	52	48
September 2000 ^{xxix}	50	50
August 2000 ^{xxx}	49	51
June 2000 ^{xxxi}	47	53
May 2000 ^{xxxii}	48	52

WEB-A Next... Please tell me if you ever use the internet to do any of the following things. Do you ever...[INSERT ITEM; RANDOMIZE]?⁵

Based on all internet users [N=1,873]

	total have ever DONE THIS	DID YESTERDAY	have not done this	don't know	refused
Use a social networking site like Facebook, LinkedIn or Google Plus⁶					
Current	69	n/a	31	0	*
February 2012	66	48	34	*	0
August 2011	64	43	35	*	0
May 2011	65	43	35	*	0
January 2011	61	n/a	39	0	0
December 2010	62	n/a	38	*	0
November 2010	61	37	39	*	*
September 2010	62	39	38	*	0
May 2010	61	38	39	0	0
January 2010	57	32	43	*	0
December 2009	56	33	44	0	*
September 2009	47	27	52	*	*
April 2009	46	27	54	*	*
Use Twitter					
Current	16	n/a	84	*	0
February 2012	15	8	85	*	0
August 2011	12	5	88	*	0
May 2011	13	4	87	*	0
January 2011	10	n/a	90	*	*
December 2010	12	n/a	88	*	0
November 2010	8	2	92	0	*

⁵ Prior to January 2005, question wording was "Please tell me if you ever do any of the following when you go online. Do you ever...?" Unless otherwise noted, trends are based on all internet users for that survey.

⁶ From April 2009 thru August 2011, item wording was "Use a social networking site like MySpace, Facebook or LinkedIn." In December 2008, item wording was "Use a social networking site like MySpace or Facebook." In August 2006, item wording was "Use an online social networking site like MySpace, Facebook or Friendster". Prior to August 2006, item wording was "Use online social or professional networking sites like Friendster or LinkedIn"

SNS1 Do you currently [INSERT ITEM; RANDOMIZE]?

Based on SNS or Twitter users [N=1,209]

	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW	REFUSED
a. Belong to a group on a social networking site that is involved in political or social issues, or that is working to advance a cause	21	79	*	*
b. Follow any elected officials, candidates for office or other political figures on a social networking site or on Twitter	20	80	0	0

SNS2 Do you ever use social networking sites or Twitter to... [INSERT ITEM; RANDOMIZE]? (Next,) do you ever use social networking sites or Twitter to...[INSERT ITEM]?

Based on SNS or Twitter users [N=1,209]

	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW	REFUSED
a. Post links to political stories or articles for others to read	28	72	*	0
b. Post your own thoughts or comments on political or social issues	34	66	0	*
c. Encourage other people to take action on a political or social issue that is important to you	31	69	0	*
d. Encourage other people to vote	35	65	0	0
e. Repost content related to political or social issues that was originally posted by someone else	33	67	*	*
f. "Like" or promote material related to political or social issues that others have posted	38	61	*	*

Survey Methodology

This report is based on the findings of a survey on Americans' use of the Internet. The results in this report are based on data from telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International from July 16 to August 7, 2012, among a sample of 2,253 adults, age 18 and older. Telephone interviews were conducted in English and Spanish by landline (1,353) and cell phone (900, including 469 without a landline phone). For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling is plus or minus 2.3 percentage points. For results based Internet users⁷ (n=1,873), the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 2.5 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting telephone surveys may introduce some error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

⁷ Internet user definition includes those who access the internet on their cell phones or other mobile handheld device.

A combination of landline and cellular random digit dial (RDD) samples was used to represent all adults in the United States who have access to either a landline or cellular telephone. Both samples were provided by Survey Sampling International, LLC (SSI) according to PSRAI specifications. Numbers for the landline sample were selected with probabilities in proportion to their share of listed telephone households from active blocks (area code + exchange + two-digit block number) that contained three or more residential directory listings. The cellular sample was not list-assisted, but was drawn through a systematic sampling from dedicated wireless 100-blocks and shared service 100-blocks with no directory-listed landline numbers.

New sample was released daily and was kept in the field for at least five days. The sample was released in replicates, which are representative subsamples of the larger population. This ensures that complete call procedures were followed for the entire sample. At least 7 attempts were made to complete an interview at a sampled telephone number. The calls were staggered over times of day and days of the week to maximize the chances of making contact with a potential respondent. Each number received at least one daytime call in an attempt to find someone available. For the landline sample, interviewers asked to speak with the youngest adult male or female currently at home based on a random rotation. If no male/female was available, interviewers asked to speak with the youngest adult of the other gender. For the cellular sample, interviews were conducted with the person who answered the phone. Interviewers verified that the person was an adult and in a safe place before administering the survey. Cellular sample respondents were offered a post-paid cash incentive for their participation. All interviews completed on any given day were considered to be the final sample for that day.

Weighting is generally used in survey analysis to compensate for sample designs and patterns of non-response that might bias results. A two-stage weighting procedure was used to weight this dual-frame sample. The first-stage corrected for different probabilities of selection associated with the number of adults in each household and each respondent's telephone usage patterns.⁸ This weighting also adjusts for the overlapping landline and cell sample frames and the relative sizes of each frame and each sample.

The second stage of weighting balances sample demographics to population parameters. The sample is balanced to match national population parameters for sex, age, education, race, Hispanic origin, region (U.S. Census definitions), population density, and telephone usage. The Hispanic origin was split out based on nativity: U.S. born and non-U.S. born. The White, non-Hispanic subgroup is also balanced on age, education and region. The basic weighting parameters came from a special analysis of the Census Bureau's 2011 Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) that included all households in the United States. The population density parameter was derived from Census 2000 data. The cell phone usage parameter came from an analysis of the July-December 2011 National Health Interview Survey.⁹

Following is the full disposition of all sampled telephone numbers:

⁸ i.e., whether respondents have only a landline telephone, only a cell phone, or both kinds of telephone.

⁹ Blumberg SJ, Luke JV. Wireless substitution: Early release of estimates from the National Health Interview Survey, July-December, 2011. National Center for Health Statistics. July 2012.

Sample Disposition		
Landline	Cell	
33,411	22,498	Total Numbers Dialed
1,226	341	Non-residential
1,269	51	Computer/Fax
2	----	Cell phone
16,637	8,624	Other not working
2,714	317	Additional projected not working
11,563	13,166	Working numbers
34.6%	58.5%	Working Rate
905	106	No Answer / Busy
2,548	4,225	Voice Mail
54	15	Other Non-Contact
8,056	8,820	Contacted numbers
69.7%	67.0%	Contact Rate
499	1,392	Callback
6,091	5,953	Refusal
1,466	1,475	Cooperating numbers
18.2%	16.7%	Cooperation Rate
59	55	Language Barrier
----	500	Screen-out - Child's cell phone
1,407	920	Eligible numbers
96.0%	62.4%	Eligibility Rate
54	20	Break-off
1,353	900	Completes
96.2%	97.8%	Completion Rate
12.2%	11.0%	Response Rate

The disposition reports all of the sampled telephone numbers ever dialed from the original telephone number samples. The response rate estimates the fraction of all eligible respondents in the sample that were ultimately interviewed. At PSRAI it is calculated by taking the product of three component rates:

- Contact rate – the proportion of working numbers where a request for interview was made
- Cooperation rate – the proportion of contacted numbers where a consent for interview was at least initially obtained, versus those refused
- Completion rate – the proportion of initially cooperating and eligible interviews that were completed

Thus the response rate for the landline sample was 12 percent. The response rate for the cellular sample was 11 percent.

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- ⁱ February 2007 trends based on daily tracking survey conducted February 15-March 7, 2007 [N=2,200].
- ⁱⁱ December 2006 trends based on daily tracking survey, conducted November 30 - December 30, 2006 [N=2,373].
- ⁱⁱⁱ August 2006 trends based on daily tracking survey, conducted August 1-31, 2006 [N=2,928].
- ^{iv} February 2006 trends based on the Exploratorium Survey, conducted Jan. 9-Feb. 6, 2006 [N=2,000].
- ^v December 2005 trends based on daily tracking survey conducted Nov. 29-Dec. 31, 2005 [N=3,011].
- ^{vi} September 2005 trends based on daily tracking survey conducted Sept. 14-Oct.13, 2005 [N=2,251].
- ^{vii} June 2005 trends based on the Spyware Survey, conducted May 4-June 7, 2005 [N=2,001].
- ^{viii} February 2005 trends based on daily tracking survey conducted Feb. 21-March 21, 2005 [N=2,201].
- ^{ix} February 2004 trends based on daily tracking survey conducted February 3-March 1, 2004 [N=2,204].
- ^x November 2003 trends based on daily tracking survey conducted November 18-December 14, 2003 [N=2,013].
- ^{xi} August 2003 trends based on 'E-Government' survey conducted June 25-August 3, 2003 [N=2,925].
- ^{xii} June 2003 trends based on 'Internet Spam' survey conducted June 10-24, 2003 [N=2,200].
- ^{xiii} May 2003 trends based on daily tracking survey conducted April 29-May 20, 2003 [N=1,632].
- ^{xiv} March 3-11, 2003 trends based on daily tracking survey conducted March 3-11, 2003 [N=743].
- ^{xv} February 2003 trends based on daily tracking survey conducted February 12-March 2, 2003 [N=1,611].
- ^{xvi} December 2002 trends based on daily tracking survey conducted Nov. 25-Dec. 22, 2002 [N=2,038].
- ^{xvii} September 2002 trends based on daily tracking survey conducted September 9-October 6, 2002 [N=2,092].
- ^{xviii} July 2002 trends based on 'Sept. 11th-The Impact Online' survey conducted June 26-July 26, 2002 [N=2,501].
- ^{xix} March/May 2002 trends based on daily tracking surveys conducted March 1-31, 2002 and May 2-19, 2002.
- ^{xx} January 2002 trends based on a daily tracking survey conducted January 3-31, 2002 [N=2,391].
- ^{xxi} December 2001 trends represent a total tracking period of December 1-23, 2001 [N=3,214]. This tracking period based on daily tracking surveys conducted December 17-23, 2001 and November 19-December 16, 2001.
- ^{xxii} November 2001 trends represent a total tracking period of November 1-30, 2001 [N=2,119]. This tracking period based on daily tracking surveys conducted October 19 - November 18, 2001 and November 19 - December 16, 2001.
- ^{xxiii} October 2001 trends represent a total tracking period of October 1-31, 2001 [N=1,924]. This tracking period based on daily tracking surveys conducted September 20 - October 1, 2001, October 2-7, 2001, October 8-18, 2001, and October 19 - November 18, 2001.
- ^{xxiv} September 2001 trends represent a total tracking period of September 1-30, 2001 [N=742]. This tracking period based on daily tracking surveys conducted August 13-September 10, 2001, September 12-19, 2001 and September 20 - October 1, 2001.
- ^{xxv} August 2001 trends represent a total tracking period of August 12-31, 2001 [N=1,505]. This tracking period based on a daily tracking survey conducted August 13-September 10, 2001.
- ^{xxvi} February 2001 trends based on a daily tracking survey conducted February 1, 2001-March 1, 2001 [N=2,096].
- ^{xxvii} December 2000 trends based on a daily tracking survey conducted December 2-22, 2000 [N=2,383].
- ^{xxviii} October 2000 trends based on a daily tracking survey conducted October 2 - November 1, 2000 [N=3,336].
- ^{xxix} September 2000 trends based on a daily tracking survey conducted September 15 - October 1, 2000 [N=1,302].
- ^{xxx} August 2000 trends based on a daily tracking survey conducted July 24 - August 20, 2000 [N=2,109].
- ^{xxxi} June 2000 trends based on a daily tracking survey conducted May 2 - June 30, 2000 [N=4,606].
- ^{xxxii} May 2000 trends based on a daily tracking survey conducted April 1 - May 1, 2000 [N=2,503].