



California High School and College Students' Interests in Environmental Messaging through Social Media: Survey Results Report

February 2026

Background

The Student Social Media Ambassador Program (SSMAP) is a youth-focused internship experience hosted by Grades of Green in partnership with CalRecycle, designed to activate young people with a platform and knowledge to promote sustainable habits in their communities through creative digital engagement. The program was intentionally designed to advance CalRecycle's Recycling Reimagined campaign by mobilizing diverse students to amplify waste reduction, recycling, and recovery efforts, driving measurable behavior change and increasing community participation across California (CA). The invitation went out to CA-based high-school and college students with an interest in environmental action, storytelling, and social media, regardless of prior experience or online following. To recruit students, Grades of Green (GoG) distributed an application to CA youth interested in the program through schools, partnering community organizations, and various social media channels. Targeted, relationship-based recruitment was also utilized by contacting University of California and California State University faculty, community-based partners, and school district leadership across the state to request their support in disseminating the opportunity to students. It was further promoted through GoG's extensive statewide network and social media platforms to ensure wide visibility. Recruitment aimed to create on six high school groups (two per region) and three college groups (one per region).

Selected participants are serving as Social Media Ambassadors, developing and sharing educational content that encourages everyday waste-reduction behaviors, including composting, beverage container recycling, and reducing single-use plastics.

Program design

Program requirements include completion of pre-meeting assignments, training modules, and monthly content postings. Participants attended a mandatory online kickoff meeting on December 6, 2025, followed by monthly virtual meetings from December through May, where ambassadors collaborate in teams across CA and engage in sustainability lessons, brainstorming sessions, and skill-building activities, supported by CalRecycle resources for approximately one hour of offline learning. Additional requirements include the creation of at least one social media post per month, weekly submission of engagement metrics, and participation in discussion boards and staff check-ins through GoG's eKadence platform. The program concludes with a culminating showcase event in June 2026, and participants who successfully fulfill all commitments receive a \$1,000 stipend.

Report methodology

This report is based on qualitative data collected through the SSMAF application survey.

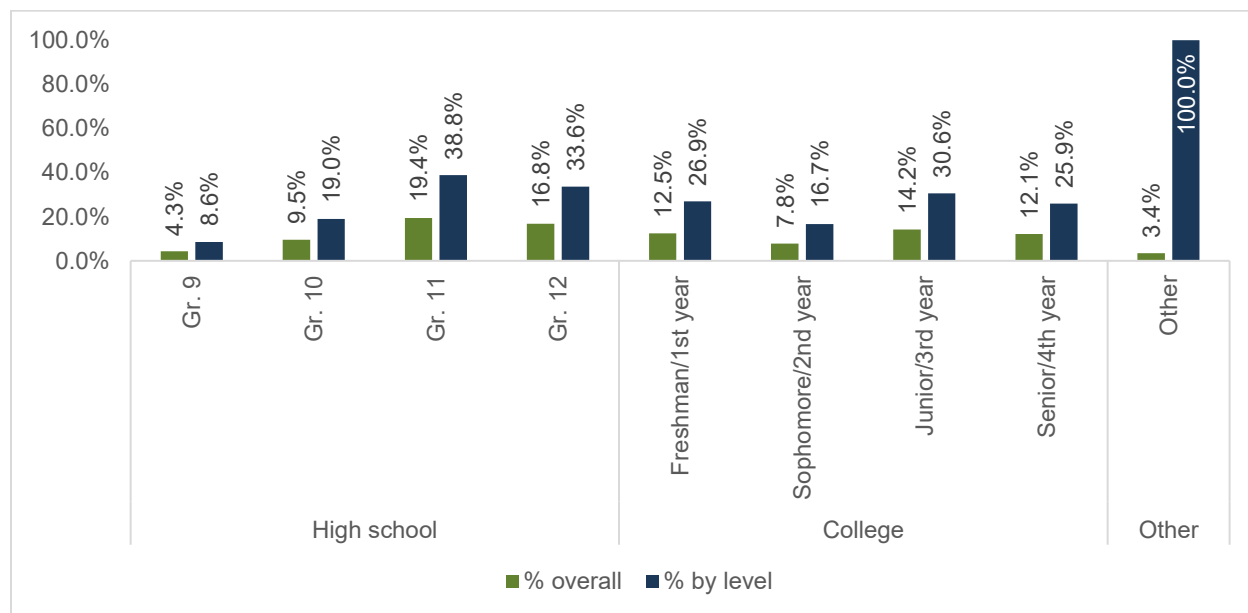
The survey included multiple choice and multiple select questions on applicant demographics, such as the region of CA in which they live, their education level and grade, and whether they are minors. It also included a series of open-ended questions designed to understand applicants' social media use, comfort, engagement and content style; their environmental interests and motivations for applying to the program; as well as original ideas they have for promoting positive environmental behaviors via social media. All qualitative responses were systematically coded using an inductive coding approach to identify recurring themes and patterns. The data was then quantitized to allow for descriptive analysis, including sums, medians, modes, and cross-tabulation of results by demographic group, as well as qualitative interpretation.

Results

Demographics

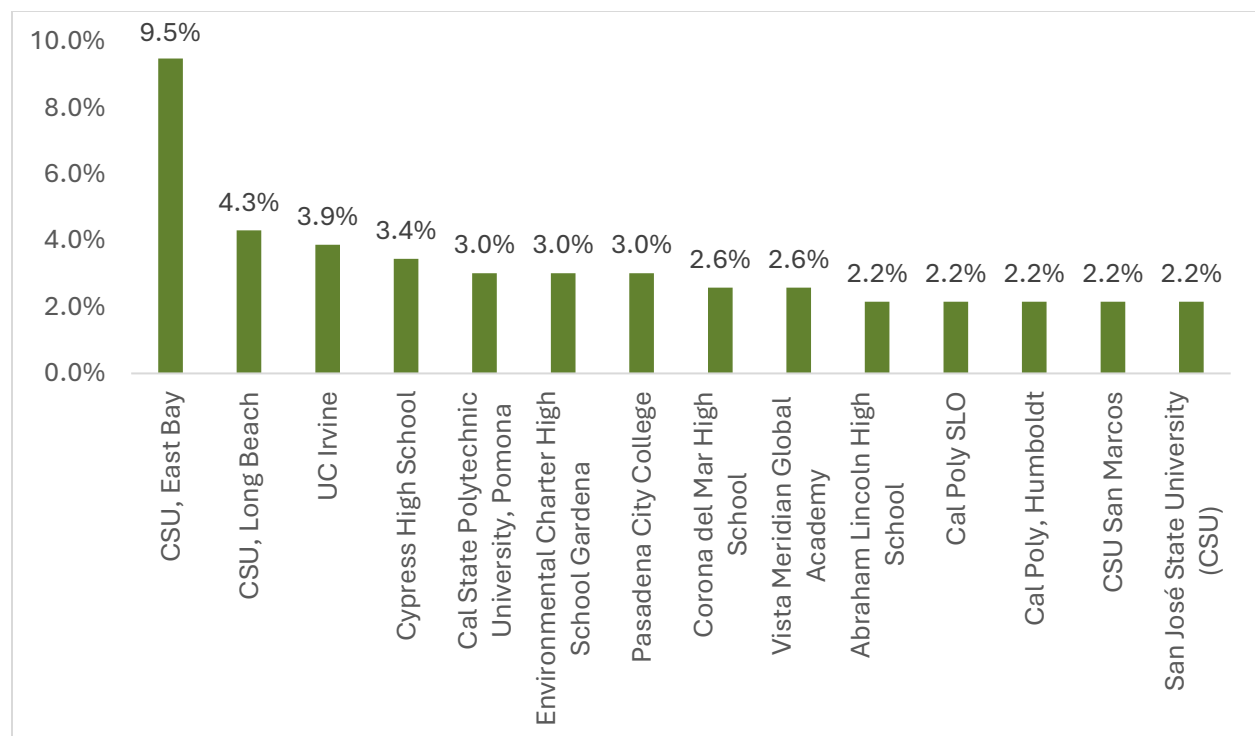
CalRecycle received 232 responses, including **72** (31.0%) from **Northern CA**, **28** (12.1%) from **Central CA**, and **132** (56.9%) from **Southern CA**. A total of **114** (49.1%) **minors** (under age 18) applied for the program. Overall, **116** (50.0%) applicants were **high school** students, of which 10 (8.6% of the high school total) were in Grade 9, 22 (19.0%) in Grade 10, 45 (38.8%) in Grade 11, and 39 (33.6%) in Grade 12. On the other hand, **108** applicants (46.6% of the overall total) were **college/university students**, of which 29 (26.9% of college-level applicants) were college Freshmen, 18 (16.7%) were college Sophomores, 33 (30.6%) were college Juniors, and 28 (25.9%) were college Seniors. Finally, **8** (3.4% of the total applicant pool) identified as “**other**” (e.g., graduate level students) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of applicants, by level and grade



Students from **100 unique institutions** applied, belonging most frequently to the following: California State University, East Bay (22 students, 9.5%); California State University, Long Beach (10 students, 4.3%); UC Irvine (9 students, 3.9%); Cypress High School (8 students, 3.4%); California State Polytechnic University, Pomona; Environmental Charter High School Gardena; and Pasadena City College (each 7 students, 3.0%). Two institutions (Corona del Mar High School and Vista Meridian Global Academy) had 6 applicants (2.6%), while 5 institutions each had 5 applicants (2.2%). The remaining 125 students (53.9%) belonged to other institutions with between 1 and 4 applicants each (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Applicants by institution

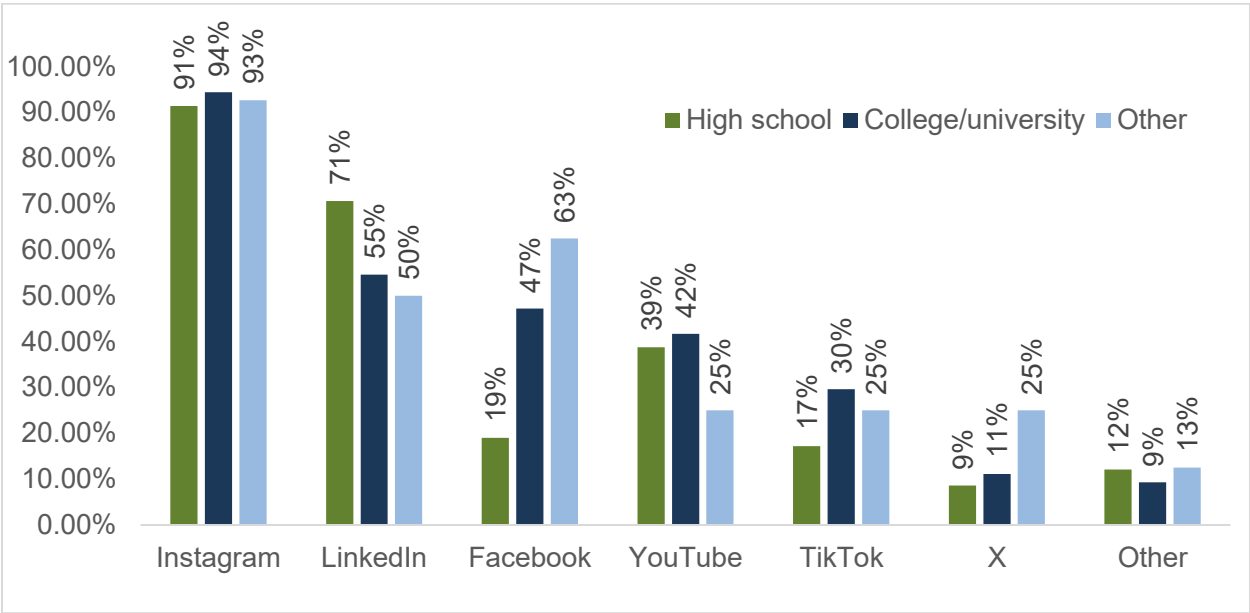


Social media use

The survey also aimed to understand applicants' social media presence. First, it asked them to indicate the social media platforms they use most often. On average (mean), **respondents used 2.75 platforms**, ranging from 0 to 9. High school students reported using, on average, 2.62 platforms, while college/university students reported using, on average, 2.89 platforms.

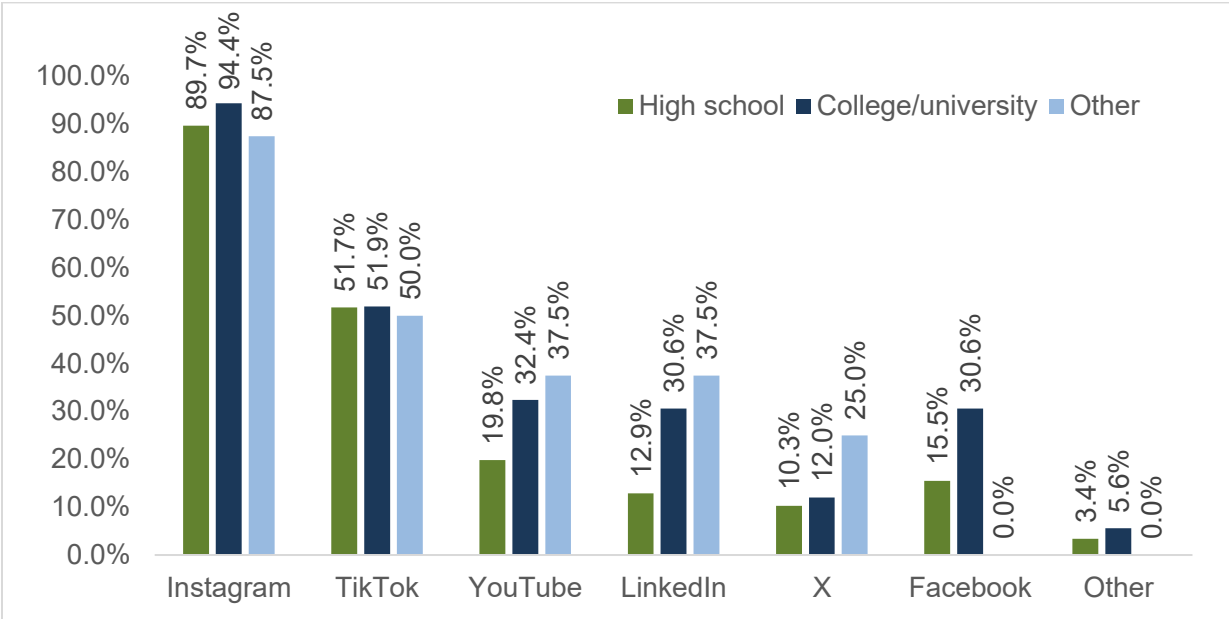
Instagram was the most popular platform, used by 91.4% of high school students, 94.4% of college/university students, and 92.7% of other respondents. **LinkedIn** was noted by 70.7% of high school students, 54.6% of college students and 50.0% of other respondents, while Facebook was reported by just 19.0% of high school students, compared to 47.2% of college students and 62.5% of other respondents (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Platforms used most often, by education level



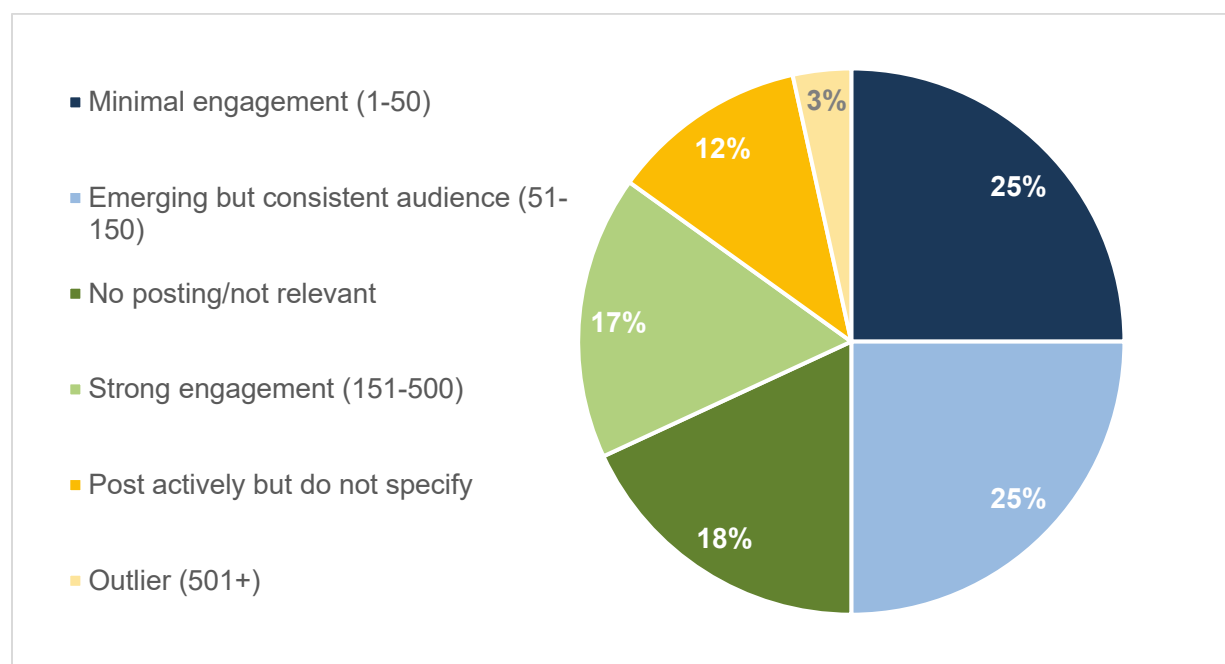
Applicants were also asked to indicate the platforms they feel most *comfortable* using. Respondents reported **2.30 platforms** on average, slightly less than the average they *use*, ranging from 1 to 8 platforms. High school students reported feeling most comfortable with, on average, 2.04 platforms, while college/university students reported using, on average, 2.57 platforms. **Instagram** was again most popular (89.7% of high school students, 94.4% of college/university students, 87.5% of other respondents). **TikTok** was noted by 51.7% of high school students, 51.9% of college students and 50.0% of other respondents, while **Facebook** was reported by just 15.5% of high school students, compared to 30.6% of college students, and no other respondents (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Platforms with which respondents are most comfortable, by education level



Respondents shared their average engagement across platforms. This question was open-ended, and responses were coded into categories, using the highest number of engagement (i.e., likes, shares, comments or re-posts). Most frequently, they reported **minimal engagement** (between 1 and 50 interactions) (25.0%), or **emerging** but consistent interactions (51-150) (25.0%), while 16.8% reported strong engagement (151-500 interactions), and 3.4% were outliers (501+ interactions). On the other hand, 18.1% reported that they do not post on social media, while 11.6% reported posting actively but did not share engagement figures.

Figure 5. Average engagement on social platforms



Next, respondents were asked to share which content styles they prioritize in their posts on social platforms. Responses were coded by theme and categorized into the first mentioned (primary) and second mentioned (secondary) styles, which were analyzed overall (Figure 6) and by education level (Figure 7). This question, however, was optional, and some respondents who indicated an active presence on social media did not respond.

The dominant primary content style was **artistic/creative** (35.3% overall; 37.1% of high school students, 33.3% of college students, 37.5% of other respondents), followed by **educational/informational**, by 23.7% of respondents overall (22.4% of high school students, 25.0% of college students, 12.5% of other respondents). Next was **entertaining** (20.3% overall; 24.1% of high school students, 15.7% of college students, 25.0% of other respondents). Other styles mentioned included inspirational/motivational (9.9% overall; 6.9% of high school students, 13.9% of college students, no other respondents) and relatable or lifestyle content (7.8% overall; 6.0% of high school students, 10.2% of college students, no other respondents).

The secondary style of content noted most frequently was **inspirational/motivational** (22.0% overall; 20.7% of high school students, 23.1% of college students, 25.0% of other respondents), followed by **educational/informational** (17.2% overall; 17.2% of high school students, 17.6% of college students, 12.5% of other respondents), and **artistic/creative** (12.5% overall; 11.2% of high school students, 13.9% of college students, 12.5% of other respondents).

Figure 6. Primary and secondary style of content noted by respondents

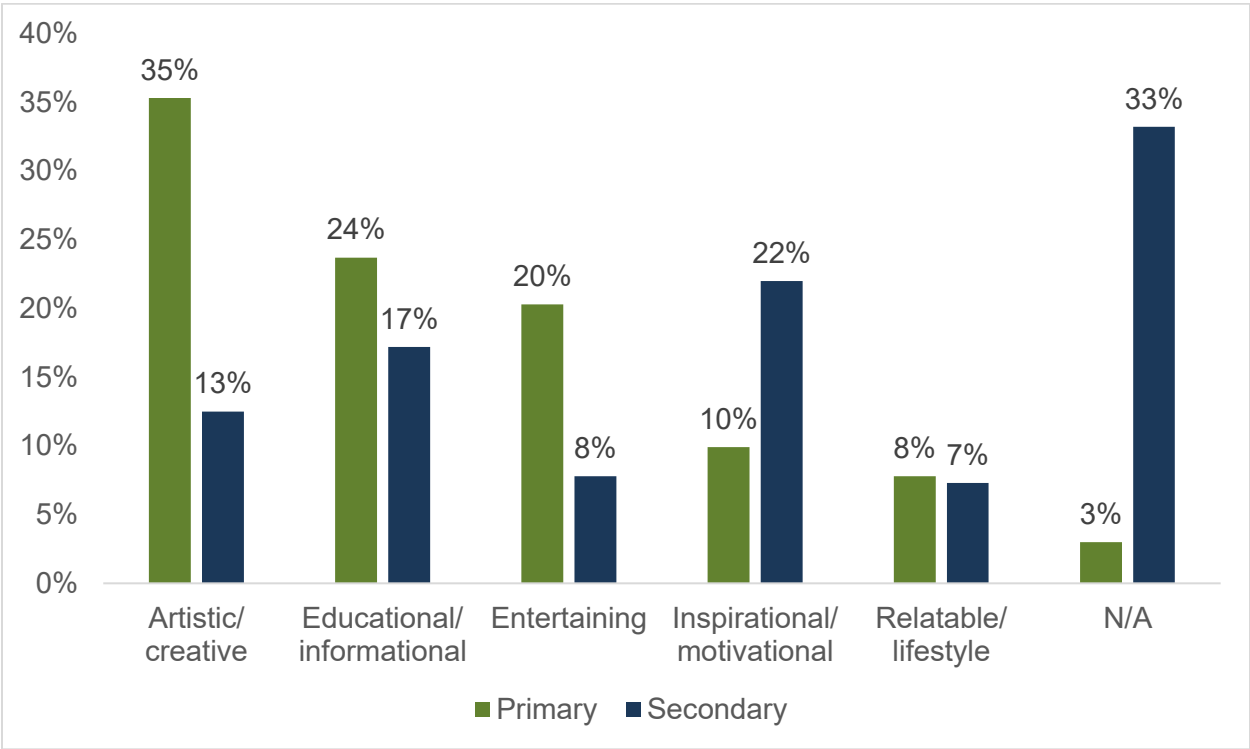


Figure 7. Primary and secondary content style, by education level

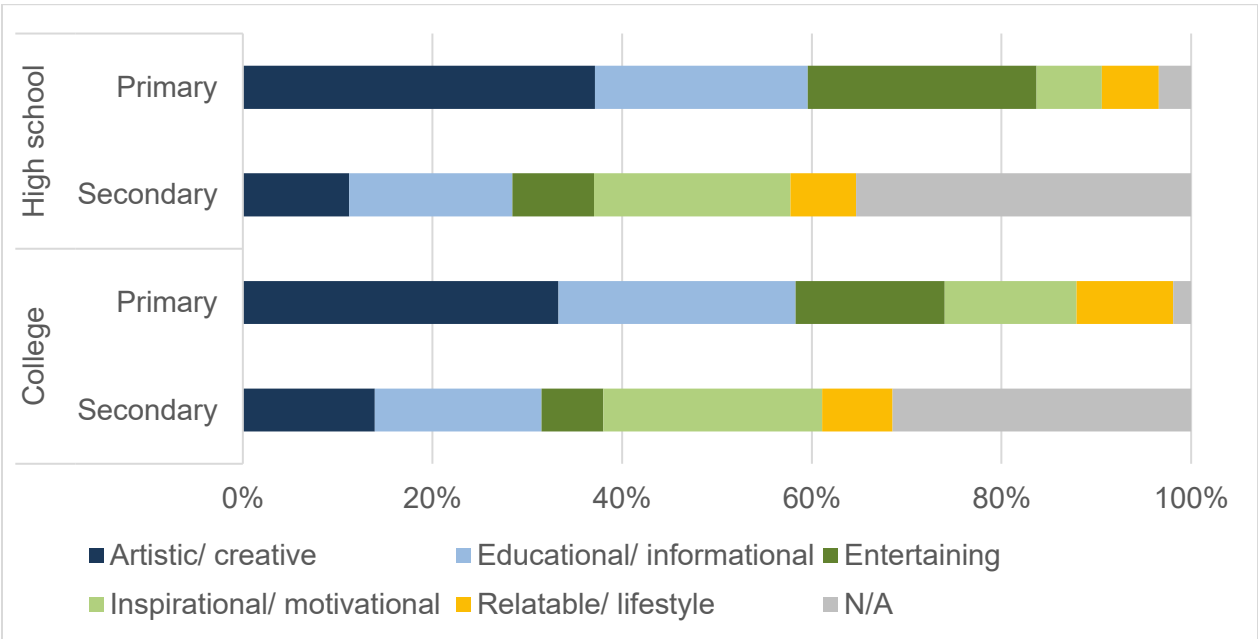
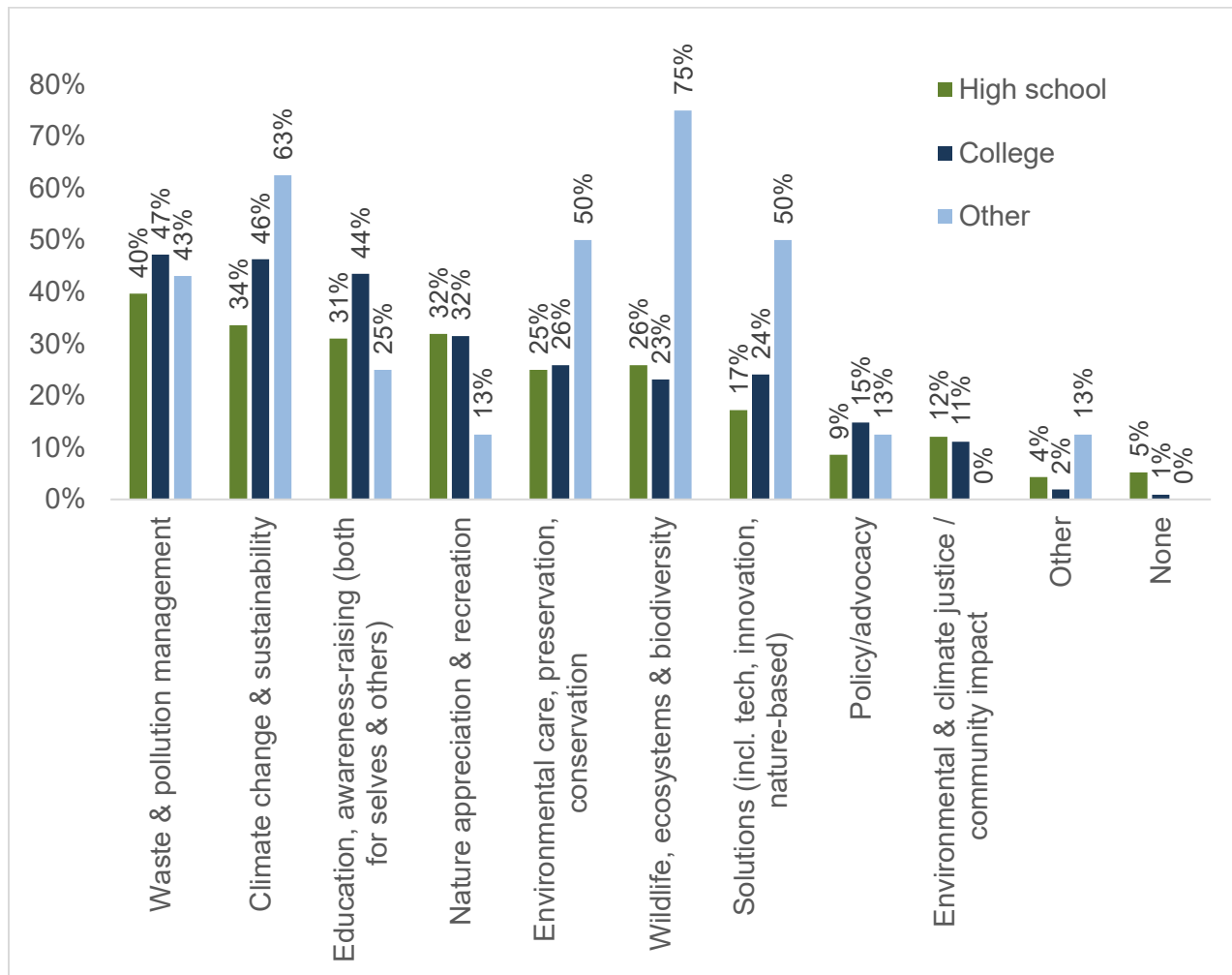


Figure 10. Environmental interests by theme

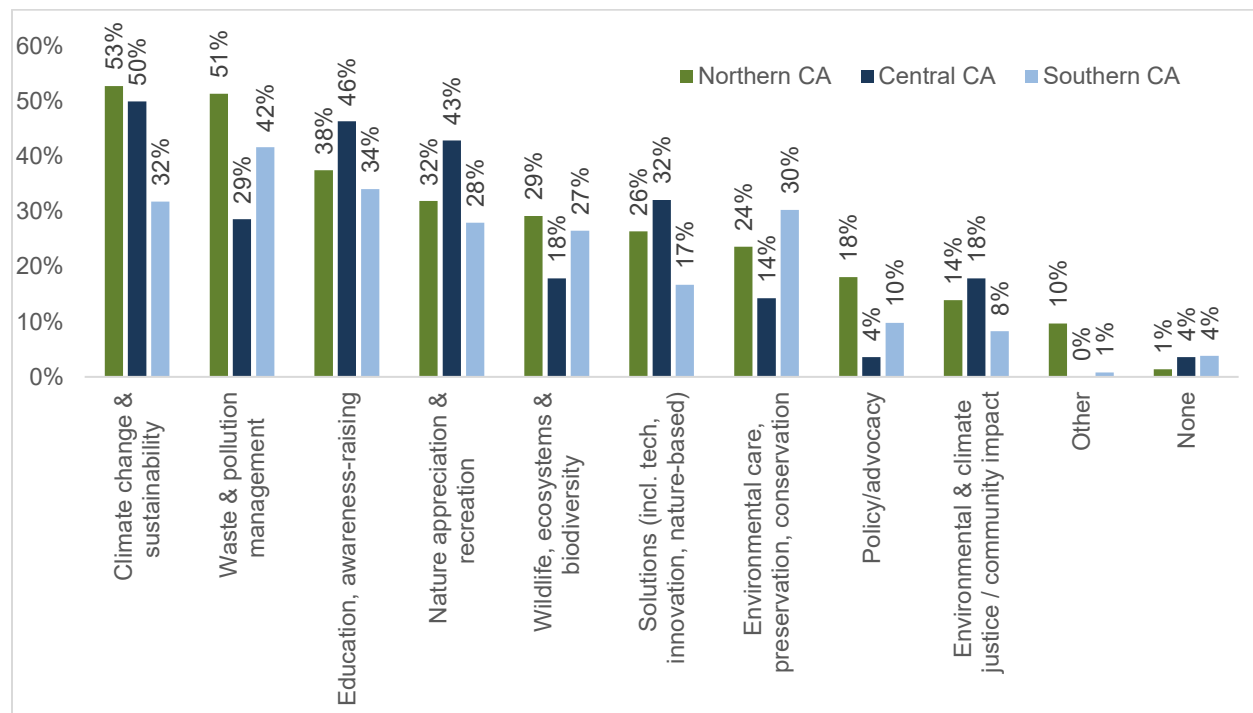


Notably, environmental interests varied by region. **Climate change** and **sustainability** was the **primary environmental interest** noted by respondents from Northern CA (52.8%), followed by waste and pollution management (51.4%), education and awareness raising (37.5%) and nature appreciation/recreation (31.9%).

Among respondents from Central CA, climate change and sustainability was again the primary interest (50.0%) but was followed next by education and awareness raising (46.4%), nature appreciation/recreation (42.9%), and solutions (32.1%). However, because only 12.1% of all respondents were from Central CA, this pattern should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size.

Southern CA respondents, however, prioritized waste and pollution management (41.7%), education and awareness raising (34.1%), climate change and sustainability (31.8%), and environmental care, preservation and conservation (30.3%).

Figure 11. Environmental interests by region



In other words, **climate change and sustainability and education and awareness raising were top interests across regions**. Waste pollution and management was a much greater priority for respondents from Northern and Southern CA, while nature appreciation/recreation was important for those from Northern and Central California. Respondents from Central CA were more interested in solutions to environmental challenges, while those from Southern CA were more interested in environmental care, preservation and conservation.

Interest in the Student Social Media Ambassador Program

Applicants were also invited to share their motivations and interests in applying to participate in the program. Responses were coded and analyzed by theme, with interests most commonly falling into five themes. First, applicants were primarily interested in the program's focus on **education and awareness**, especially among college-level or other respondents (63.4% overall; 59.5% of high school students, 66.7% of college students, 75.0% of other respondents). Responses in this category centered around teaching others, spreading awareness, and sharing information. Next, **environmental values** were a motivating factor, especially for students from other levels of education (53.4% overall; 52.6% high school, 51.9% college, 87.5% other), including passion for environment, stewardship, helping the planet, or an interest in climate change, nature, or sustainability.

This was followed by applicants', especially high school students', interests in **developing skills**, such as editing, content creation, storytelling, advocacy, communication skills, digital literacy, or climate literacy (39.2% overall; 47.4% high school, 32.4% college, 12.5% other).

Community representation and impact were key factors for 32.8% of applicants (32.8% high school, 34.3% college, 12.5% other) and included an interest in representing their school, their community, their demographic, connecting with like-minded peers, community engagement, or amplifying marginalized voices. For example, one college student noted:

- *“I think it’s important to use social media, visuals, and exposure to model, motivate, and educate behavior and environmentally conscious actions that translate into a culture where these concepts...of composting, recycling, or reducing single use plastics are factored into our daily lives, innovations, businesses, jobs and ideas.” – College student, Central CA*

Career and academic advancement and other interests received fewer responses (Figures 12 and 13). Most students shared intersecting motivations:

- *“I want to be part of the Student Social Media Ambassador Program because I’m passionate about storytelling and digital creativity. Social media has such a powerful role in shaping how others see our school community, and I’d love to contribute to that by highlighting student experiences, events, and achievements. This program would also give me the opportunity to strengthen my communication and content creation skills while representing a community I care deeply about. I love connecting people and sharing positive stories. I see this as a great opportunity to promote school spirit, encourage involvement, and help prospective students see what makes our community special. I also want to grow as a leader and learn how to use social media effectively and responsibly.” – College student, Southern CA*

Figure 12. Program interests by theme, overall and by education level

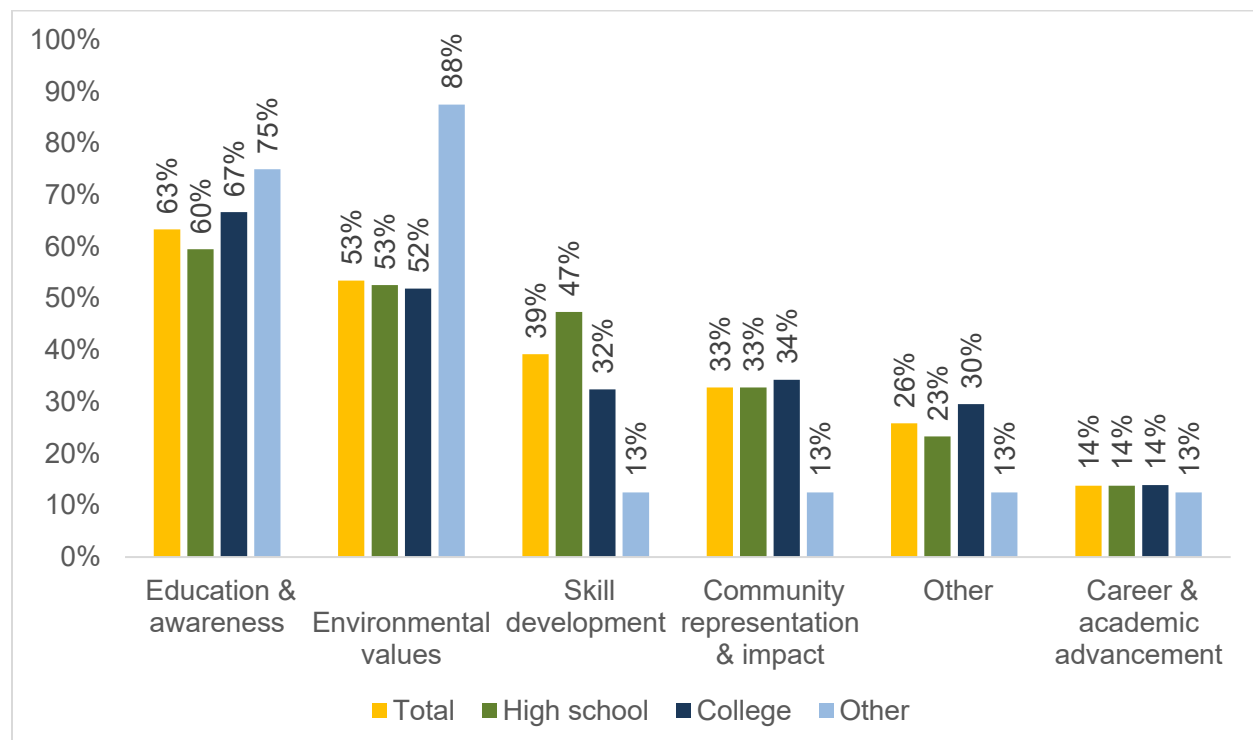


Figure 14. Program interests by region

Responses were also analyzed to identify the most frequent intersections of applicants' interest in the program and their interests in the environment. Most often (each noted by 43.5% of respondents), applicants were motivated by environmental values, education / awareness, skills development, community representation and impact, and career and academic advancement, in combination with waste / pollution management as the primary environmental interest (Table 1).

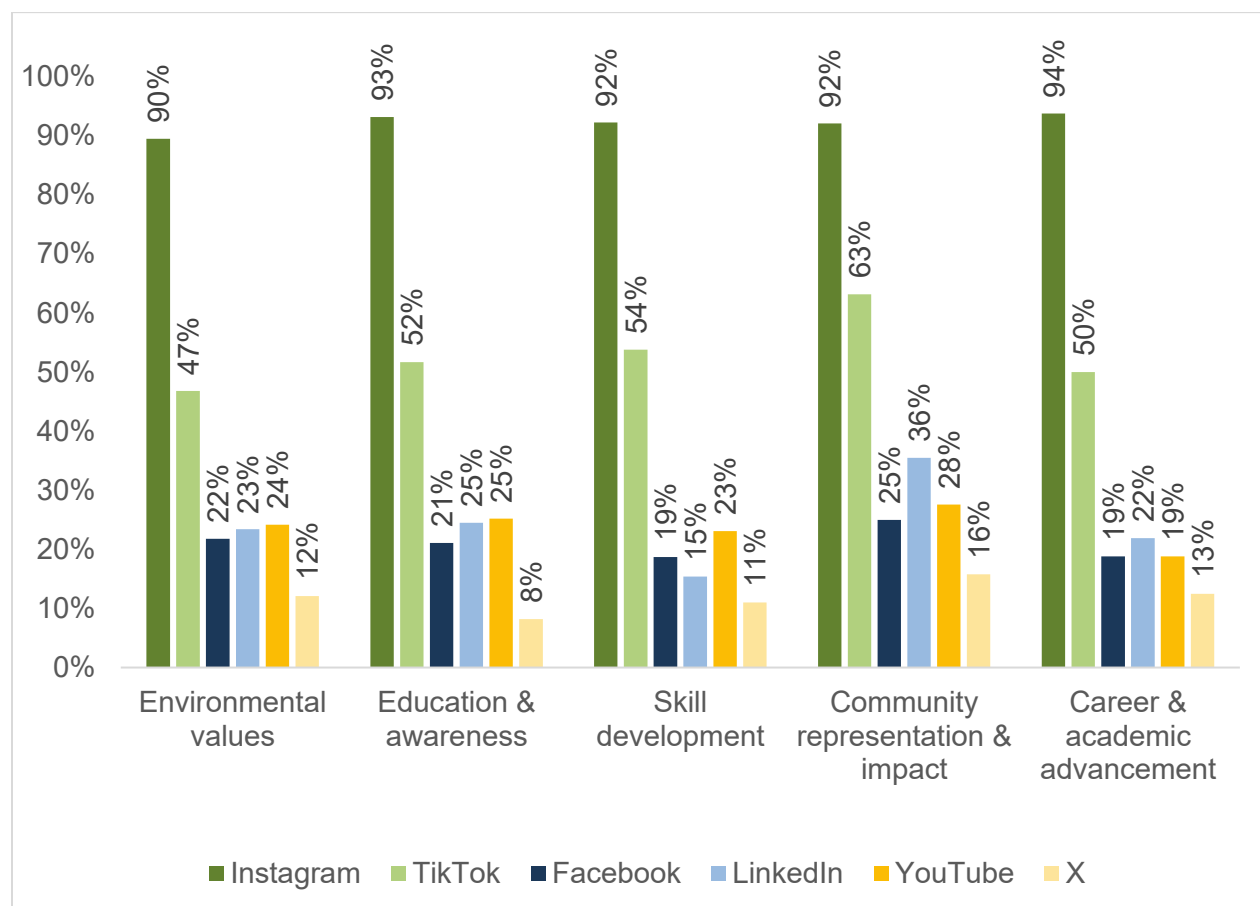
Table 1. Most frequent combinations of program + environmental interests

Program interests	Environmental interests
Environmental values	Waste/ pollution management
Education	Waste/ pollution management
Skills	Waste/ pollution management
Community	Waste/ pollution management
Career	Waste/ pollution management

Applicants' interest in the program was cross-tabulated with their preferred social media platforms (i.e., the platforms they feel comfortable using, nonexclusively). As seen in Figure 15, differences in platform comfort by motivation for joining the program were minimal. **Instagram was, consistently, the platform with which applicants were most comfortable.** Comfort with TikTok was next, but was **most evident among those who reported an interest in community representation and impact** (63.2%) and least pronounced among those who reported an interest in environmental values (46.8%). **Comfort with Facebook was similarly more pronounced among those interested in community representation and impact** (25.0%) versus skill development (18.7%) or career and academic advancement (18.8%). Similar patterns were found for LinkedIn. Comfort with YouTube ranged from 18.8% among those interested in career and academic advancement to 27.6% among those interested in community representation and impact. On the other hand, respondents were consistently least comfortable with X, least of all (8.2%) among those motivated to join the program because of their interest in education and awareness.

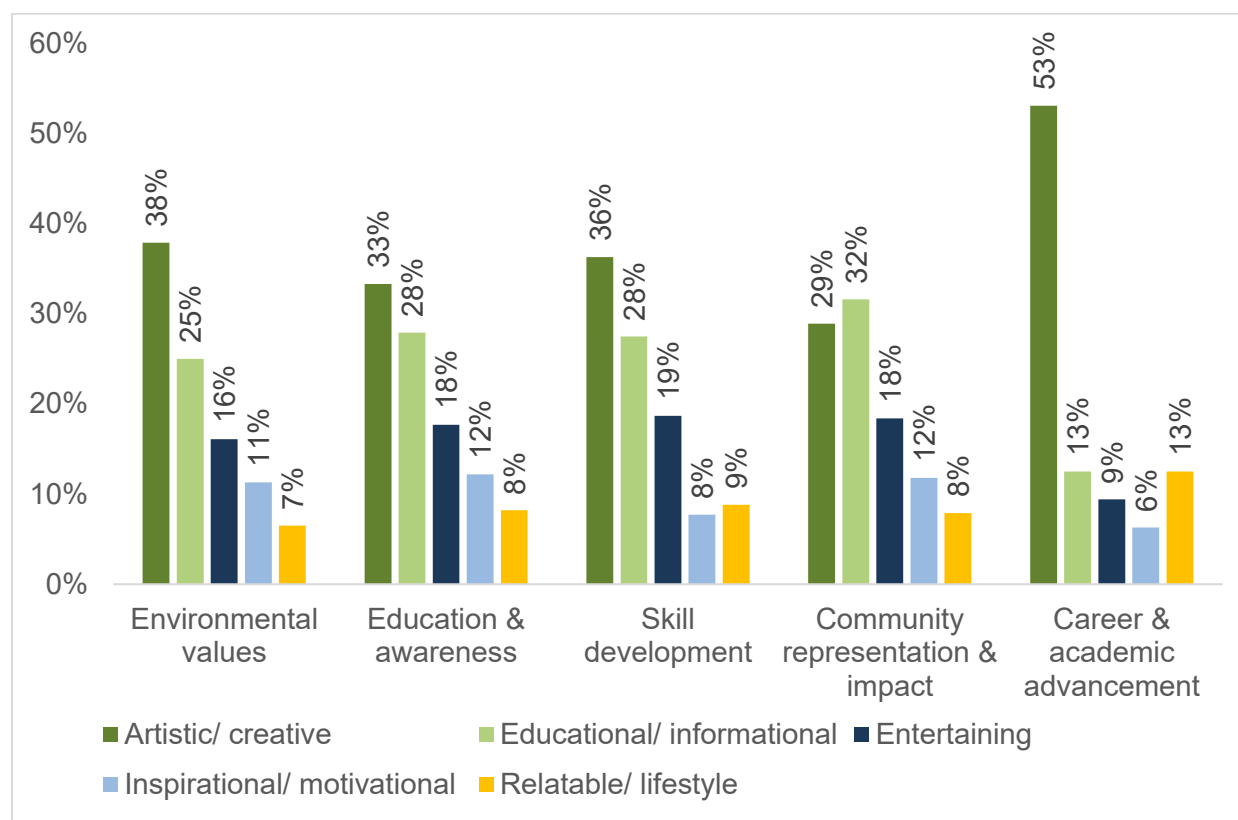
Together, these findings suggest that a multi-platform approach may be most effective. Instagram and TikTok appear most suited for youth with diverse motives to reach a broad audience. TikTok and Facebook may be particularly effective for engaging youth motivated by community representation and impact. YouTube and LinkedIn may better support education and awareness efforts, with YouTube offering strong potential for skills development through longer-form content and LinkedIn resonating more with those interested in academic and career advancement.

Figure 15. Interest in the program by social media platform with which applicants are comfortable



Applicants' interests in the ambassador program were also cross-tabulated with their primary style of content that they use on social media. Figure 16 below shows interesting patterns. **Most interest groups followed a consistent pattern, with an artistic/creative content style being most common, followed by educational/informational, entertaining, inspirational/motivational and finally relatable/lifestyle content.** However, **those interested in the program for its career and academic advancement opportunities** deviated from this pattern, with a **much higher percentage naming artistic/creative (53.1%) and relatable/lifestyle content (12.5%)** than in any other group. Also noteworthy is that those interested in community representation and impact were more likely to employ primarily an educational/informational style (31.6%) than were other groups, especially those interested in career and academic advancement (12.5%).

Figure 16. Interest in the program by primary social media content type



Fresh ideas

Applicants were also invited to describe any fresh ideas they wished to share regarding social media content for environmental advocacy. A total of 141 applicants responded to this question. Percentages in this analysis represent a proportion of respondents to this question rather than a proportion of total survey respondents. Most often, ideas focused on **educational intent** (48.9% of ideas shared), such as information- or knowledge-sharing series or other concrete ideas.

This might be driven by the program's educational mission and outreach specifically to students, but it might also offer insights into how young people view and use social media. For example, they could believe that sharing information offers credibility or it could be the most direct route for them to translate what they learn into action to achieve a sense of personal impact. It could also indicate that they themselves seek out educational content on these platforms, wish to see more of it, or have ideas for how to improve information sharing that already exists. However, respondents did not provide their motivation for why they suggested these ideas.

A total of 43.3% of responses mentioned the **type of content** they would use (e.g., carousel versus reel posts). A notably high percentage (32.6%) expressed a desire to ensure their post was **attention-grabbing**, mentioning aesthetic appeal, trendiness, engaging content, or alignment with the platform's algorithm. A much smaller percentage mentioned specific ideas for post content. Just 14.9% of ideas focused on featuring the actions of individuals, clubs, or other key actors, such as through highlight posts or interviews, while 13.5% of responses each

featuring a specific location (e.g., a beach, park, nature reserve or other outdoor space) or making the post relatable (e.g., by highlighting their own first-person perspective, experience or actions or other “lifestyle” content). Other themes included interactive posts (e.g., games, polls, or quizzes); challenges (e.g., the audience makes pledges, signs up for certain actions, or shares their concrete steps); using animation, comics, mascots, cartoons, or other characters; and storytelling (e.g., documentaries or cinematic posts) (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Applicants' ideas for social media content

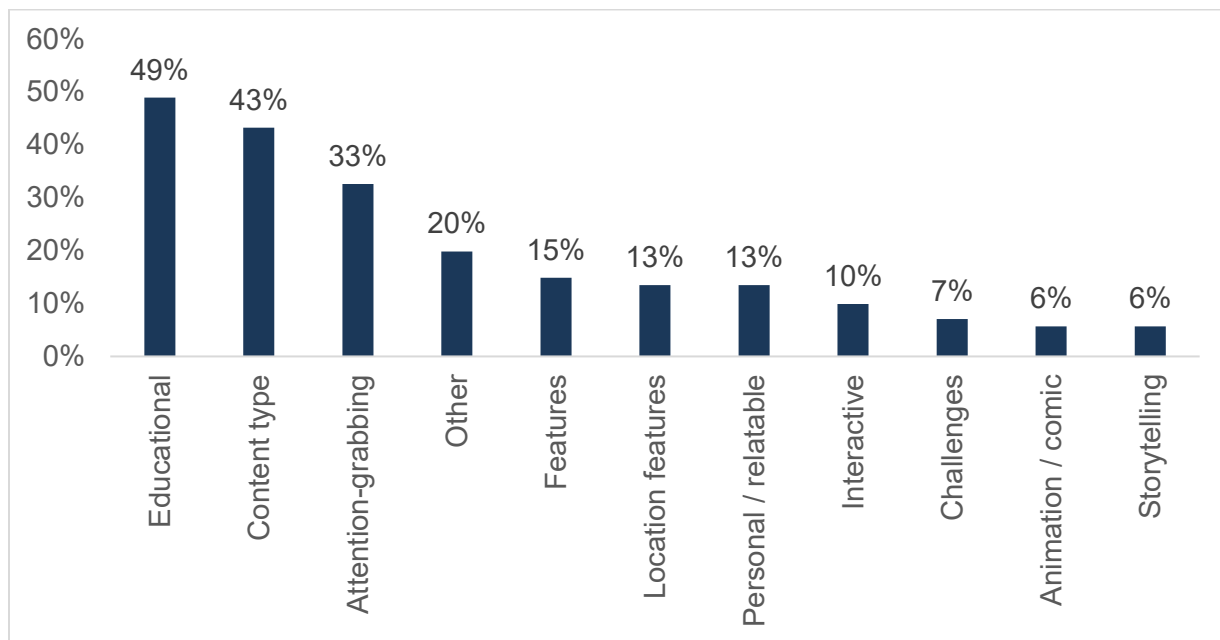


Figure 18. Respondents' ideas for social media posts, by frequency



Discussion and conclusions

The results presented in the previous section highlight that the GoG & CalRecycle SS MAP attracted broad interest from both high school and university students across all regions of CA, representing approximately 100 unique institutions, with particularly strong participation from California State University and University of California. Applicants included not only students with established social media presences, but also many who were interested in becoming more active online. On average, respondents reported being present on nearly three platforms while feeling comfortable using closer to two, most commonly Instagram and TikTok. Reported engagement levels were generally modest, indicating that applicants were not primarily experienced influencers but rather emerging or casual users seeking growth and guidance.

The applicant pool also reflected diverse social media styles and motivations. High school students most often described using social media for creative expression or entertainment. College students, on the other hand, more frequently combined creative expression with educational goals, while motivating or inspiring others was a common objective across both groups. Environmental interests reflected a similar intersectional approach, with respondents motivated to learn about climate change and sustainability, as well as enact positive behaviors, particularly around waste and pollution management, and to share that knowledge with others.

The application invited respondents to share original social media content ideas, which offered insight into how applicants envisioned using social media in practice. Close to half of responses described posts centered on education and awareness-raising, while approximately one in three emphasized the need for content that would be engaging and attention-grabbing, demonstrating an appreciation for the educational potential of social media alongside an awareness of the realities of environments and effective online communication. Their ideas for content connected to their reasons for applying to the program and underscored shared interests in environmental learning, communication, and skill development, reflected in the following three key takeaways.

Participants believed the program's use of social media offered potential for influencing behavior and advancing environmental education.

Respondents consistently described social media as a powerful **tool for overcoming a lack of awareness and connection, which students viewed as one of the biggest barriers to environmental action**. They emphasized its ability to reach broad and diverse audiences, particularly students and community members who may not initially view sustainability as their responsibility, and to **make environmental concepts more accessible** through visuals, storytelling, and repeated exposure. Social media was seen as especially effective in translating complex ideas into culturally relevant, everyday actions focused on topics such as recycling, composting, and reducing single-use plastics.

- *“Social media can be used to share infographics and heartfelt messages that tap into people's empathy and connect them with outlets to practice conservation and sustainability. It also can be used to lighten the heaviness of social justice spaces with lighthearted content that nourishes the soul, not just drains it.” – College/university student, Northern CA.*

Participants also stressed that social media can help **normalize and motivate pro-environmental behavior** with joy and encouragement, by highlighting positive actions and solutions rather than relying solely on negative or fear-based messaging. By **showcasing real**

examples from schools and local communities, respondents believe platforms can foster collective buy-in, empower individuals, and demonstrate how small actions can lead to **larger cultural change**. Many viewed social media as a way to **connect people across communities**, elevate underrepresented regions, and inspire participation through hopeful, engaging content.

- *“Social media, in particular, is a powerful and accessible platform for spreading awareness and inspiring engagement across diverse audiences.” – College/university student, Southern CA.*

Their hopes for the program lie in translating skills into meaningful impact.

Respondents expressed strong hopes that the program would help them build practical skills in leadership, communication, storytelling, social media management, and environmental advocacy. Many viewed the program as an opportunity to gain the **confidence and tools** needed to effectively educate others and influence behavior, which many felt they currently lacked despite having strong personal concern about environmental issues. They discussed that learning how to communicate ideas persuasively and strategically was seen as essential to **enabling action**.

Notably, respondents described feelings of urgency around climate change and a wish to contribute more effectively, particularly by inspiring peers and communities to take simple, achievable steps. They felt that the program could **provide an outlet for translating that concern and desire to help into concrete actions with tangible impact**. In addition to hoping that the program would connect their personal interests and career pathways with environmental behavior, many also hoped the program would **amplify marginalized voices** and **support creative expression**.

- *“Since people in power often ignore the Central Valley of California, allowing incinerators (which have been shut down thanks to local advocates), and inadequate waste infrastructure to roam, our community has had to face the disastrous consequences... I hope to amplify the stories of my community and give back to my community.” – 11th grade student, Central CA.*

The integration of environmental learning, activism, and hands-on experience sets the program apart.

Respondents frequently noted that the SSMAF offers a **rare combination of environmental education, social media activism, and hands-on professional experience**. Importantly, students' responses suggested that similar opportunities, especially those which link environmental values with creative and relevant career skills, are difficult to find. They appreciated that the program goes **beyond education to provide a platform for students' own voices** to address key concerns such as climate justice and intergenerational dialogue.

- *“I want to join the SSMAF because it directly aligns with the work I'm already passionate about—waste reduction, composting education, and inspiring communities to adopt sustainable habits—while giving me the platform and training to amplify that impact through strategic social media storytelling.” – 12th grade student, Northern CA.*

The program's **structured guidance and support** was viewed positively, especially by those who previously lacked the confidence or skills to advocate publicly. Similarly, the program's

collaborative nature emphasized **community building**, which they viewed as essential in exchanging knowledge and shifting local and broader culture. The **funding support** was seen as a further enabling factor for many who noted financial constraints and poverty as barriers to their participation in such spaces. Together, these factors suggest that many applicants viewed the program as an opportunity for **empowerment**. These beliefs reflect the uniqueness of the SSMAP, as, to the best of GoG's knowledge, a similar program does not exist.

- *This program will give me the support, guidance, and motivation to do outreach work and educate others on a topic that is not only important to me but should be important to everyone. I also have a passion to create content...and this program will support me in doing that as well. – College/university student, Southern CA.*

More information on the program and next steps

Program implementation has had a strong start, with high participant retention. Forty students were selected, only three of whom withdrew at the start due to scheduling or capacity constraints, with 37 students actively engaged. Participants are organized into high school-only and college-only regional cohorts to strengthen peer connection, collaboration, and sustained participation. To date, the program has successfully launched its remote learning model, initiated monthly collaborative meetings and begun content production. GoG has also directly supported CalRecycle leadership to establish clear program goals and define shared measures of success, including the submission and analysis of monthly engagement metrics. The program anticipates that over 200 youth-led posts will be shared over the course of implementation.

A central focus is centering young people's knowledge and experience and amplifying their ideas and voices, grounded in the belief that students are the most effective ambassadors for their own communities and can share culturally relevant messaging. Participants themselves review performance data and learn how to refine their messaging strategies, directly addressing their expressed intention to learn social media skills, such as communication and campaign impact. The program model also intentionally blends independent learning and collaborative engagement, with students completing 30 to 60 minutes of pre-meeting learning using CalRecycle resources. Then, monthly Zoom sessions are discussion-based and oriented toward skill-sharing (e.g., what has worked, what has not, and how to drive results). This positions participants as developing leaders and peer educators and ensures that passive learning occurs offline while live sessions remain interactive and youth-driven.

- *CalRecycle is thrilled with the content students created through the Social Media Ambassadors Program and grateful for the opportunity to engage the next generation in reshaping how California recycles, composts, and thinks about waste. We are inspired by the young people who brought their creativity and passion to the program and used their voices to encourage environmental stewardship in their communities. –*

Katrina Leni-Konig, Deputy Director, Office of Environmental Justice, Tribal Relations, Education and Outreach, CalRecycle

Looking ahead, the program will continue to support students in launching and refining their social media engagement. Insights from program participants in high school and college will also inform the development of a K-8 lesson plan, expanding access to environmental communication skills and school campaign opportunities for younger students who were not eligible for the program.

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