



YOUNG CANADIANS IN A WIRELESS WORLD
PHASE IV

LIFE ONLINE



MediaSmarts

MediaSmarts is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization for digital media literacy. Our vision is that people across Canada have the critical thinking skills to engage with media as active and informed digital citizens. MediaSmarts has been developing digital media literacy programs and resources for Canadian homes, schools, and communities since 1996. MediaSmarts also conducts and disseminates original research that contributes to the development of our programs and resources and informs public policy on issues related to digital media literacy.

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Land Acknowledgement:

MediaSmarts acknowledges that it is based on the traditional unceded and occupied lands of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg. With gratitude, we acknowledge the territory to reaffirm our commitment and responsibility to building positive relationships with Inuit, First Nations, and Métis peoples from coast to coast to coast.

We strive to ground our research processes in care and reciprocity, and this includes being in a constant state of learning – especially when it comes to understanding the digital well-being and experiences of Indigenous peoples and communities across Canada. We commit to creating and maintaining respectful processes and relationships that recognize and seek to address power imbalances across the digital media literacy landscape.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young Canadians in a Wireless World (YCWW) is Canada's longest-running and most comprehensive research study on young people's attitudes, behaviours, and opinions regarding the internet, technology, and digital media. [MediaSmarts](#) has surveyed over 20,000 parents, teachers, and students through this study since 1999. The study is currently in its fourth phase, and this report is the first in a series of reports that will be published on our [website](#).

Like in previous phases of YCWW, we designed two surveys – one for students in grades 4 to 6 and one for grades 7 to 11. In both surveys, we organized questions into various categories:

- Digital devices at home
- Screen time at home
- Technology at school
- Online privacy and consent
- Trust
- Relationships and technology
- Handling online problems
- Opinions on various digital topics
- Digital and media literacy
- Demographics

From October to December of 2021, surveys were administered online to 1,058 youth across Canada. A total of 79 students participated in a classroom-based survey and 979 youth participated in a GenPop (general population survey).

After several collaborative data analysis sessions, the MediaSmarts research team decided on the following topics and themes for the Phase IV reports:

- Life Online
- Encountering Harmful and Discomfiting Content Online
- Privacy
- Online Meanness and Cruelty
- Sexting
- Digital Media Literacy

Phase IV will conclude with a Trends and Recommendations report to be released in 2023.

This first report – Life Online – provides a glimpse into the online lives of young Canadians and highlights findings related to device use, online activities, screen time, technology in the classroom, household rules, and how young people feel about unplugging and going offline occasionally. This data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic amidst lockdowns and during a time when many students were either returning to the classroom or still learning from home. It is important to consider this context when reading findings regarding device use and screen time.

Importantly, this report lays the groundwork for forthcoming reports on encountering harmful and discomfiting content online, online privacy, online meanness and cruelty, sexting, and digital media literacy.

We want to thank all students, parents, teachers, principals, and school administrators across Canada who engaged with this project in one way or another during Phase IV. YCWW remains the cornerstone of our work at MediaSmarts, and we are grateful for the support – in all forms – that sustains it.

INTRODUCTION

Young Canadians in a Wireless World (YCWW) is Canada's longest-running and most comprehensive research study on young people's attitudes, behaviours, and opinions regarding the internet, technology, and digital media. [MediaSmarts](#) has surveyed over 20,000 parents, teachers, and students through this study since 1999.

The findings from YCWW are used to set benchmarks for research on children's use of the internet, technology, and digital media and have informed policy on the digital economy, privacy, online safety, online harms and digital well-being, digital citizenship, and digital media literacy, among other topics. This research is also used to inform other projects at MediaSmarts and at other organizations, including academic institutions, within our vast and growing network of research partners.

The study is currently in its fourth phase. In 2019, MediaSmarts' research team conducted [focus groups](#) to get a kid's-eye-view of what is working for young people online and what needs to be changed or improved so that they get the most out of their online experiences. Additional focus groups with parents helped to round out discussions about what is needed to foster (collective) online resiliency. This qualitative work helped us prepare for a quantitative survey that began in 2021.

Phase IV of YCWW culminates in a series of research reports that will be published on the MediaSmarts [website](#). Topics include:

- Life Online
- Encountering Harmful and Discomfiting Content Online
- Privacy
- Online Meanness and Cruelty
- Sexting
- Digital Media Literacy

As in previous phases of this study, Phase IV will also conclude with a Trends and Recommendations report.

A departure from previous phases is the inclusion of a longer research methods report as part of the full series of YCWW reports. While each report will contain a brief section on the research method, this separate report offers a deeper dive into the methodological decisions and processes undertaken by the MediaSmarts research team during Phase IV of YCWW. The various pivots and adaptations taken during this phase deserve elaboration and will be of interest to other researchers who have made, and continue to make, shifts in their work due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overview: Young Canadians in a Wireless World

What follows is a summary of the previous three phases of YCWW and an introduction to Phase IV, which began with a [qualitative research report](#) published in January 2020.

Phase I (2000-2001) of YCWW involved 1,081 telephone interviews with parents across Canada and 12 focus groups with children ages 9-16 and parents of children ages 6-16 in Montreal and Toronto. The quantitative component of Phase 1 involved 5,682 self-administered paper-based surveys conducted in French and English classrooms in 77 selected schools across ten Canadian provinces.

At the time, parents were excited about the prospects of having their children use new technologies to help them learn and prepare for their future employment; they tended to exercise benign neglect online, trusting their children to come to them if they ran into problems. Youth participants felt that online media were completely private because adults did not have the skills to find them there, and they enjoyed a wide range of creative uses such as identity play and exploring the adult world. They also tended to trust corporations, calling them “friends.”

In Phase II (2004-2005), we conducted 12 focus groups with children ages 11-17 and parents of children ages 11-17 in Edmonton, Montreal, and Toronto. Additionally, 5,272 self-administered quantitative paper-based surveys were conducted in French and English classrooms in 77 selected schools across Canada with students in grades 4 to 11. We were pleased that 302 of the 319 classrooms from Phase I participated in Phase II.

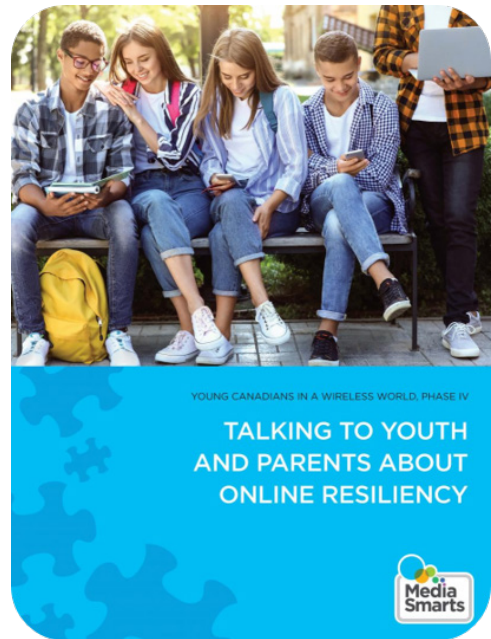
Although youth participants still enjoyed many online activities, they were becoming aware of how often they were being monitored online. In response, they developed several strategies to keep their online lives private. On the other hand, adults were beginning to conclude that young people were mostly “wasting their time” playing games and chatting (precisely the things that drew youth online in the first place).

Phase III (2011-2014) involved ten one-hour key informant interviews with elementary and secondary teachers representing five regions across Canada: the North, the West, Ontario, Quebec, and the Atlantic. In addition to these interviews, MediaSmarts conducted 12 focus groups with children ages 11-17 and parents of children ages 11-17 in Calgary, Ottawa, and Toronto. The quantitative component of Phase III involved 5,436 surveys in school boards and schools in all ten provinces and all three territories.

In this third phase, adults began feeling overwhelmed by the reported dangers their children faced online, especially around cyberbullying. Youth participants indicated that cyberbullying was much less worrisome than adults feared; however, they felt that the protective surveillance they were being placed under in response to cyberbullying, and other perceived dangers, was stultifying and equated it to being “spied on” by family members and teachers. They also argued that this kind of surveillance made it much more difficult for them to receive help from trusted adults when needed. Youth were also much less comfortable with the corporations that owned the sites and apps they used and questioned the regulatory model of click-through consent that meant others could collect and use their data. For example, 95% of the students surveyed said that

the corporations that own the social media sites they use should not be allowed to see what they post there.

[Phase IV of YCWW](#) began with a [qualitative research report](#) that outlines findings from focus groups with youth ages 11 to 17 and a second set of focus groups with their parents in Toronto, Halifax and Ottawa. Generally, we discovered that young people are conscious about spending too much time online or on their digital devices and are also worried about the impact of misinformation on their online and learning experiences. Youth told us that they do not always want to rely on technology in school and some expressed feeling “creeped out” by the various forms of surveillance technology used in the classroom. Other findings related to teacher and parental controls over content and access to technology – both at school and at home – and how young people navigate or sometimes push back against those controls in favour of more creative uses like community engagement and self-expression. We also heard how these controls could contribute to an erosion of trust between young people and the adults in their lives.



Phase IV of YCWW also began with a name change to the project: from *Young Canadians in a **Wired** World* to *Young Canadians in a **Wireless** World*. This change in language speaks to shifts in digital technology and the online world since 1999 from a ‘wired’ to ‘wireless’ technological landscape that presents new opportunities and challenges for youth, parents, educators, policymakers, and the tech sector.

The findings from the qualitative portion of Phase IV helped us develop the surveys used in the quantitative portion. The following section on methods will outline the research plan for this quantitative research, the required shifts we made to that plan due to the COVID-19 pandemic, survey design, participant recruitment, data analysis, and a discussion of some limitations and considerations readers should keep in mind as they read through this report .

METHODS

Survey Design and Administration

As in previous phases of YCWW, we designed two surveys to explore the attitudes, activities, benefits, and challenges young people hold and experience when they are online and using digital devices – one for students in grades 4 to 6 and one for grades 7 to 11.¹ We organized questions into various categories including:

- Digital devices at home
- Screen time at home
- Technology at school
- Online privacy and consent
- Trust
- Relationships and technology
- Handling online problems
- Opinions on various digital topics
- Digital and media literacy
- Demographics

The survey for youth in grades 4 to 6 had 82 questions, and the survey for youth in grades 7 to 11 had 100 questions. The additional questions in the second survey for older youth covered topics like sexting, pornography, and racist or sexist content.²

Also following from previous phases of YCWW, we planned to recruit participants from schools across Canada and hoped to survey between 6,000 and 8,000 students in the fall of 2020. Despite strong support for YCWW and MediaSmarts from school board representatives, fewer than half (n=25) confirmed their participation in Phase IV, citing complications related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to this low uptake, we extended the project timeline and adjusted our recruitment strategy and survey administration options, primarily by including a GenPop survey to reach a total of 1,000 participants.

From October to December of 2021, surveys were administered online, with the support of our partners at [Environics Research Group](#), to 1,058 youth across Canada in two ways:

1. A total of 79 students participated in the classroom-based survey.
2. A total of 979 youth participated in a GenPop (general population) survey.

Young Canadians in a Wireless World: Phase IV Quantitative Survey Participation			
	Younger Grades 4 to 6 Ages 9 to 11	Older Grades 7 to 11 Ages 12 to 17	Total
Classroom Survey	28	51	79
GenPop Survey	371	608	979
Total	399	659	1058

¹ If you are interested in viewing the surveys used in Phase IV of Young Canadians in a Wireless World, please contact our Director of Research at info@mediasmarts.ca.

² Both surveys, along with all the required consent documents, recruitment texts, teacher instructions and method of analysis, were approved by the [Carleton University Research Ethics Board](#).

Data Analysis

To reduce bias in reporting the survey data, MediaSmarts' research team engaged in a collaborative analysis process. We started by reviewing the initial analysis report provided by the team at Environics and used this document to identify the key themes for individual reports. We then revisited the data with our own queries informed by the literature, contemporary discussion and debate around the various topics, and MediaSmarts' established expertise in digital media literacy.

For each report, we identified a lead analyst who offered their initial thoughts on the outline of the report, including the themes and critical data points to be included. Discussion among the research and education teams at MediaSmarts helped confirm (or triangulate) the themes for each report and served to expand on the story we wanted to share based on the survey responses. We then began writing the themed reports based on the outcomes of this collaborative analysis process.

Limitations and Considerations

When we began planning this project in 2019, our initial goal was to reach 6,000 to 8,000 participants. While we did not reach this target – primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic – we still reached over 1,000 survey respondents, thanks to participating principals and teachers and our research firm partner: Environics. Please read this report for full details on our recruitment strategy, including the pandemic pivots we made to reach our study goals.

Of note in this latest phase of YCWW is the additional demographic data (see [Appendix A](#)) we collected to help us understand how gender, race, disability, and sexual orientation might influence what young Canadians are experiencing online. We recognize the limits of making definitive claims due to our sample size, but our analysis of this data reveals important snapshots and stories about young people's attitudes, behaviours, and opinions regarding the internet, technology, and digital media based on these various identity markers. We think this data is especially important given that it was collected during a global pandemic when so much of our lives were thrust online. We will continue to collect these demographic data in future projects and continue to work with other researchers and community partners to enhance and encourage an intersectional approach to digital media literacy studies.

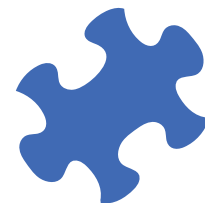
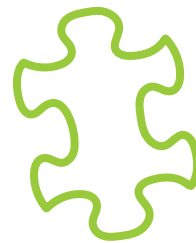
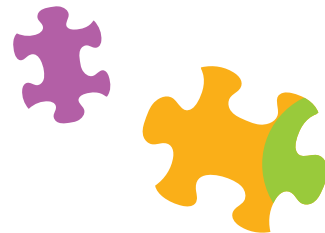
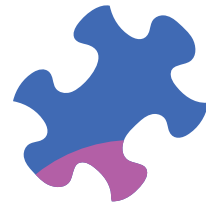
We are also aware of the gaps in geographic representation – especially when it comes to representation from Northern Canada (Nunavut, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories). While complications related to the COVID-19 pandemic are partially to blame, ongoing challenges related to the [digital divide in Canada](#) also contribute to this low representation. MediaSmarts remains committed to [closing the digital divide](#) and will continue to work with partners on future projects that centre the experiences of young people in rural, remote, northern, and Indigenous communities.

The reports in this series present survey data alongside other research and evidence that support analysis and provide important context. Where it makes sense, we speak to the findings alongside [our other research projects](#) and draw on the expertise and

insights of other researchers.

Finally, not only will the findings be used to inform a series of recommendations for educators, policymakers, and decision-makers in various sectors, but they will also inform future research projects at MediaSmarts.

We want to thank all students, parents, teachers, principals, and school administrators across Canada who engaged with this project in one way or another during Phase IV. YCWW remains the cornerstone of our work at MediaSmarts, and we are grateful for the support - in all forms - that sustains it.



LIFE ONLINE

Online Platforms



A small number of commercial platforms, mostly devoted to socialization and entertainment, dominate young people’s online experiences.

In previous phases of YCWW, we asked participants to list their top five favourite websites. In Phase IV, we broadened this question to include apps, social networks, and other online platforms to reflect the findings from our [qualitative research](#). For example, during the focus groups, young people told us that they were more often accessing the internet through apps on mobile devices rather than through browsers.

The top platforms identified by participants, shown on the next page in **Figure 1**, are nearly all devoted to socialization, entertainment, or both – except for Amazon (though participants choosing this may have meant either the e-commerce site or the streaming service) and Google. These responses confirm the rising popularity of some fairly new platforms, like TikTok, and the continued relevance to young people of platforms like Facebook. The high ranking of YouTube, well above streaming services like Netflix and Disney Plus, suggests that youth are drawn to the combination of entertainment, interaction, and **(para)socialization**³ – features also found in TikTok.

Parasocial interactions refer to a one-sided psychological relationship between users and their mediated encounters with performers, celebrities, or personas. These parasocial interactions become parasocial relationships after repeated experiences with the persona cause the user to develop illusions of intimacy or friendship.

Compared to Phase III findings, two significant differences appear regarding this question about online platforms. First, the top twenty responses are now composed entirely of platforms operated for commercial purposes. The only non-commercial platform in the top twenty in Phase III, Wikipedia, was named by just two participants in Phase IV (although we note that Wikipedia does remain a key part of students’ information seeking and verification process, as will be seen in our forthcoming report on Digital Media Literacy).

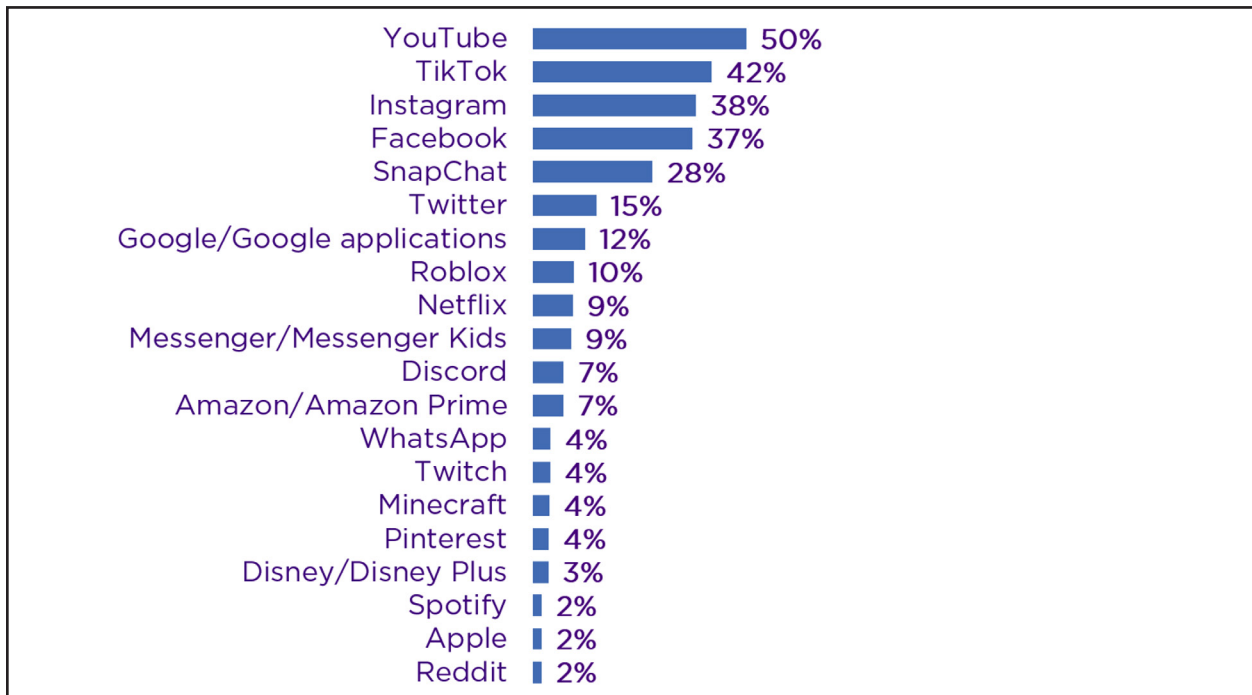
The second difference is that the top twenty list has become much more homogenized. In Phase III, there were substantial differences in which sites were identified depending on participants’ age and gender. In the Phase IV survey, however, the same platforms

³ Horton, D., & Wohl, R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observation on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215-229.; Rubin, R., & McHugh, M. (1987). Development of Parasocial Interaction Relationships. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 31(3), 279-292.

LGBTQ+ is inclusive of any participant who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, questioning, or any other diverse sexual orientation.

largely dominate all demographic categories, with the differences mainly being ones of relative popularity: Instagram is number one on older participants' lists, while TikTok tops the girls' top twenty, but YouTube still ranks fourth for older participants and second for girls. **LGBTQ+** participants are considerably more likely to say that a platform not in the suggested list is one of their top five favourites (39% compared to 24% of participants who identified as heterosexual).

Figure 1: Top twenty online platforms



The only platforms in the top twenty for younger participants but not older ones are **Weibo**, a primarily Chinese-language social network, and **Trill**, a social network which, according to its [Google Play listing](#), “fosters private, supportive communities where you can freely express yourself and connect with others.” Interestingly, all participants who listed Weibo among their favourites identified as having a **disability**. While research does not indicate that Weibo is generally more accessible than other social networks⁴, studies have found that people with disabilities often repurpose devices and platforms not

In the Phase IV survey, we asked participants to self-identify regarding physical disabilities, intellectual / cognitive / learning disabilities, and mental illness. The breakdown for each is available in Appendix A.

When we say disability throughout the report, we are referring to any of the three categories.

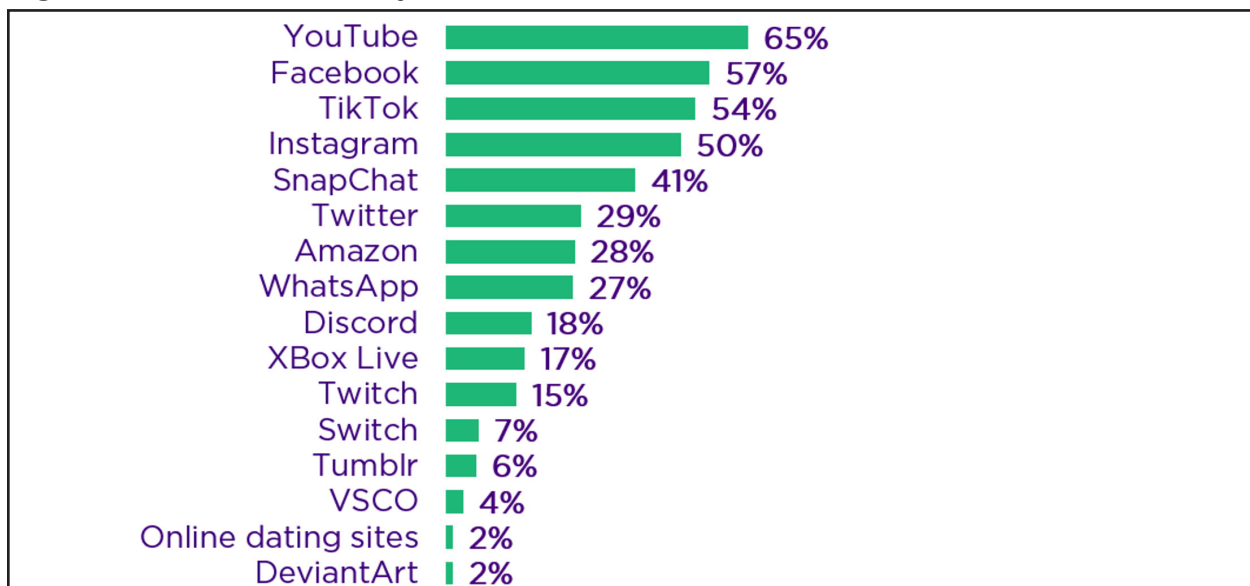
⁴ Liu, Z. & Chen, W. (2017). How Accessible is Weibo for People with Visual Impairments? Studies in Health Technology and Informatics, 242, 894-901.

designed with accessibility in mind⁵. We also found that youth with disabilities are more likely to take steps to control who can see content they have posted online and to try to conceal it from their parents or guardians (something we will explore further in our forthcoming report on privacy). It may be, therefore, that Weibo's relative obscurity makes it popular among youth with a disability.

We noticed similar patterns regarding the platforms on which participants have accounts (see **Figure 2** below). YouTube tops this list as well, which – considering it is possible to view YouTube videos without an account – again suggests young people see this platform as more than just a source of entertainment. As we will see below, relatively few youth post videos to YouTube or elsewhere. Given the important role that YouTubers (people who create and share videos to a YouTube channel) play in youth culture and the extensive scholarship on young people's parasocial relationships with online celebrities⁶, it seems likely that one of the main reasons why they have YouTube accounts may be to interact with their favourite creators.

The list of platforms where youth have accounts is, if anything, even more homogeneous than the list of top platforms. Though girls are more likely to have accounts on TikTok (61%, compared to 46% of boys), Instagram (57%, compared to 44%) and Snapchat (45%, compared to 35%) and boys are more likely to have accounts on Discord (22%, compared to 13% of girls), Xbox Live (25%, compared to 8%), and Twitch (21%, compared to 8%), the ranking of platforms is almost identical for both groups.

Figure 2: Platforms where youth have accounts



The ranking order is also nearly identical for young people of all ages (see **Figure 3** on the next page), though older youth are considerably more likely to have accounts on

5 See, for instance, Baumgartner, A., Rohrbach, T., & Schönhagen, P. (2021). 'If the phone were broken, I'd be screwed': media use of people with disabilities in the digital era. *Disability & Society*, 1-25.

6 See, for instance, Tolbert, A. N., & Drogos, K. L. (2019). Tweens' wishful identification and parasocial relationships with YouTubers. *Frontiers in psychology*, 10, 2781.

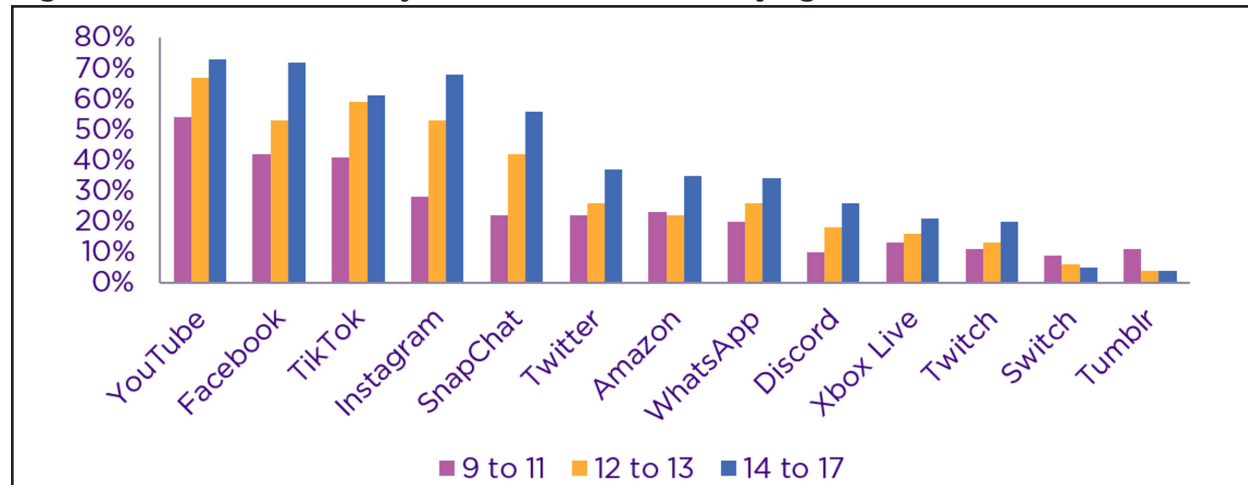
every platform in the top ten list. Interestingly, while only one participant named Tumblr as one of their top platforms, 11% of younger youth have an account on this platform compared to 4% of older participants.

‘Terms of Service’ is the legal agreement between an online business (platforms, apps, websites, social networks) and the person who uses their service.

All platforms listed by participants state in their **terms of service** that users must be 13 or older to create an account. Though it is possible in some cases, particularly on gaming platforms like Switch and Xbox Live, that young people share these accounts with parents or others over the age of 13, it is nevertheless clear that many participants under 13 have successfully created accounts despite being too young to do so legally⁷. All

younger participants have a YouTube account, while roughly 40% have Facebook and TikTok accounts and about a quarter have Instagram and Snapchat accounts. Only 14% of younger participants said they do not have an account on any platform.

Figure 3: Platforms where youth have accounts - by age



There are a few other demographic differences regarding having registered accounts on various online platforms. LGBTQ+ participants are more than twice as likely to say they do not have accounts on any platform (13%, compared to 5% of heterosexual participants); racialized youth are somewhat more likely to have YouTube accounts (74%, compared to 60% of white participants) and WhatsApp accounts (38%, compared to 23%). Youth with disabilities are more likely to have accounts on Amazon (42%, compared to 23% of youth with no disabilities) and Tumblr (7%, compared to 3%).

In the Phase IV survey, we asked youth to self-identify regarding race (see [Appendix A](#) for a breakdown of the response categories). When we say ‘racialized’ throughout this report, we are referring to youth who identified as Indigenous, African/West Indian, South Asian, Middle Eastern, or South/Latin American.

⁷ It should be noted that this cutoff has no legal meaning in Canada; it is based on the [U.S. Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act](#), which requires platforms whose users are predominantly under 13 to get parental consent before collecting any personal information.

Devices

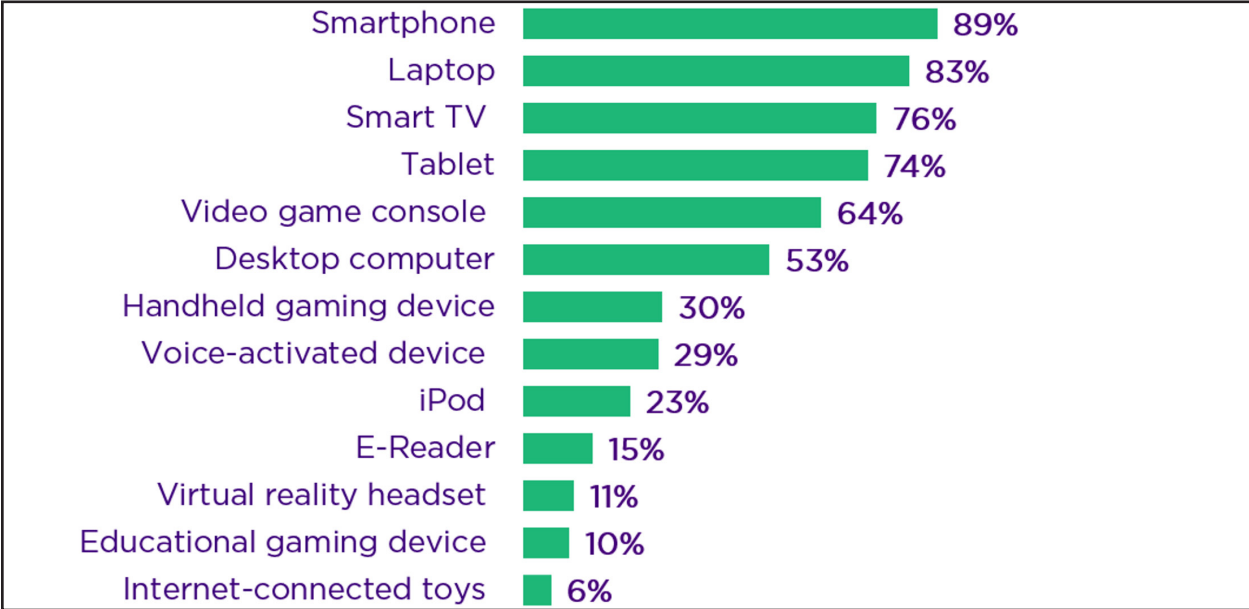


Most young people who participated in the survey have access to a wide variety of internet-capable devices but use just a few to go online.

Youth who have their own smartphones received them primarily from their parents or guardians so that their parents or guardians can keep in touch with them.

Among participants in this phase of YCWW, internet access is universal – all participants report having some kind of internet-capable device in the home (see **Figure 4** below). Smartphones and laptops are the most frequently named devices, followed by Smart TVs, tablets, and video game consoles. Voice-activated devices like Google Home and Amazon Echo are named by just under a third of participants, while e-readers and virtual reality headsets come in at the bottom of this list, along with educational gaming devices and internet-connected toys.

Figure 4: Devices in the home

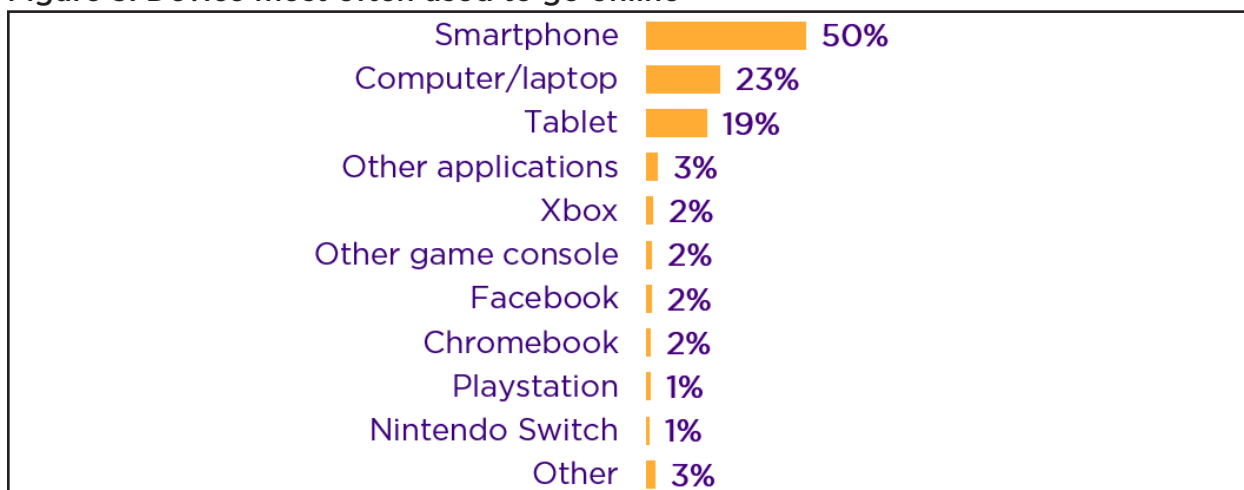


Devices in the home are similar across different demographic groups, though boys are more likely to report having a video game console (69%, compared to 59% of girls) or handheld game device (36%, compared to 23% of girls). Older youth are more likely to say they have more of the listed devices, though the differences are slight and inconsistent, with 12- to 13-year-olds being least likely to have devices like Smart TVs compared to video game consoles, desktop computers, and voice-activated devices in their homes.

Participants whose first language is French are more likely to have a video game console but less likely to have a desktop computer, a voice-activated device, or an e-reader. Racialized youth are more likely to say they have most devices in the home except for a video gaming console, handheld gaming device, and iPod.

The range of devices that participants frequently use to go online is much more limited. As you can see below in **Figure 5**, Smartphones and desktop or laptop computers ranked much higher than any other device.

Figure 5: Device most often used to go online⁸



When it comes to the devices youth use to go online, there are few demographic differences. Girls are slightly more likely than boys to go online using phones (41%, compared to 36%) and iPhones in particular (14%, compared to 8%). Racialized youth are more likely to go online using a computer (32%, compared to 19% of white participants). There are no significant differences between youth with and without disabilities, which is surprising considering the [impacts of affordances and defaults of different devices on accessibility](#).

Three-quarters (77%) of participants report having their own smartphone. This number is essentially the same across most demographic categories, though older youth are more likely to have their own phone (see **Figure 6** below). The biggest difference is between youth ages 9 to 11 and those ages 12 to 13.

Figure 6: Youth who own a smartphone - by age

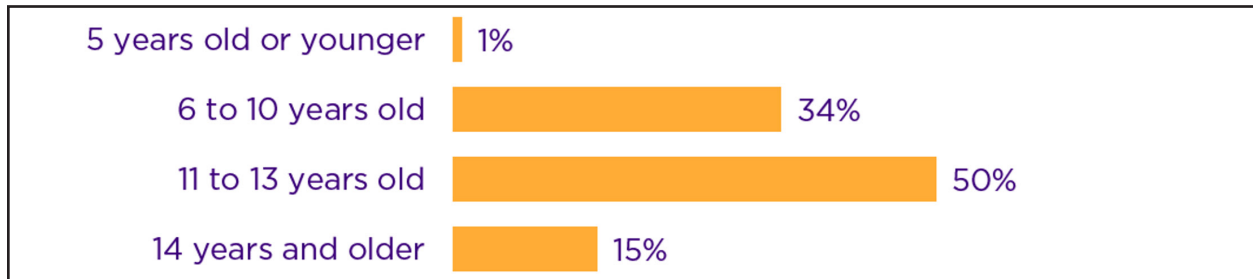


⁸ This question was open-ended (participants were not given options to choose from – instead, they wrote in their responses). Some participants responded with ‘Facebook’ even though it is not a device, but rather a platform used by some to go online.

Young people who own their own smartphone are, not surprisingly, more likely to use them to go online (48%, compared to 6% of those who do not have their own smartphone) and less likely to go online using a computer (19%, compared to 37%), iPad (7%, compared to 20%) or another tablet (6%, compared to 21%).

Half of the participants who have their own smartphone say they received it between the ages of 11 and 13, a third said they received it between ages 6 and 10, and less than a quarter received their first smartphone at age 14 or later (see **Figure 7** below).

Figure 7: Age at which youth received their first smartphone



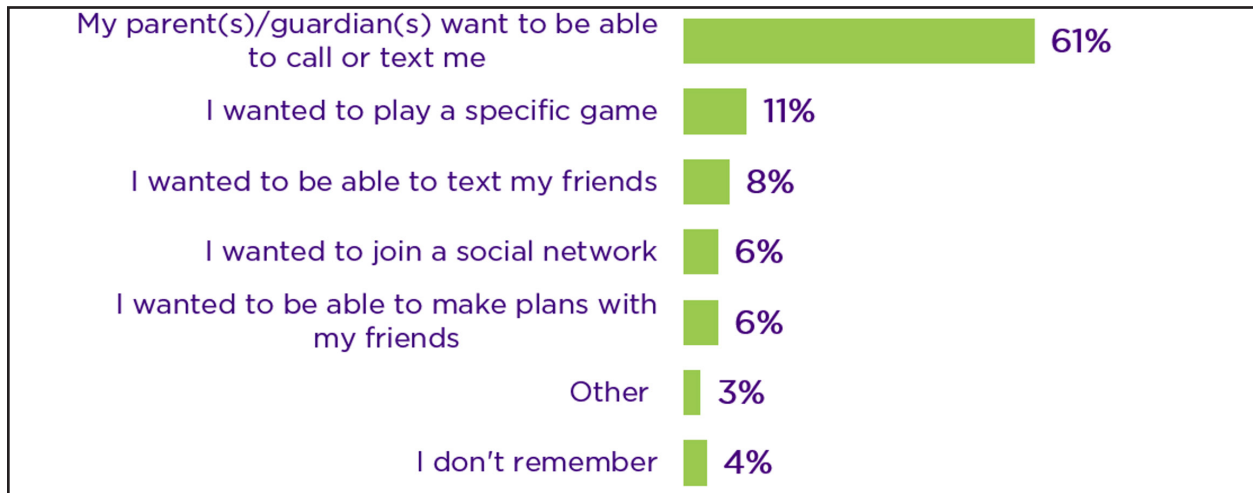
Racialized participants are less likely to have received their first phone before age 11, while participants with a disability are considerably more likely to receive one before age 11. Just under half (44%) of youth who do not have their own smartphone have access to someone else's (for example, one that belongs to their parent or guardian).

The vast majority (92%) of youth who have smartphones received their first phone from their parent(s) or guardian(s). The only demographic difference is that French-speaking participants are slightly less likely to say this (89%, compared to 94% of English-speaking participants.)

Contrary to [media coverage](#) that suggests youth are badgering their parents with demands to get a phone, participants overwhelmingly said they got phones because their parents want to be able to keep in touch with them (see **Figure 8** on the next page). This is consistent with [recent research conducted by Pew](#) that found being able to communicate easily and getting in touch with their child are the major reasons parents gave their child their own smartphone.



Figure 8: Why youth are given their first phone



Social networking, the archetypal use of phones by youth, was named by just six percent of participants, with little variation across demographic groups. Younger youth are somewhat more likely to say they got a phone because they wanted to play a specific game (17% of youth ages 9 to 11, compared to 8% of youth ages 12 to 17).

Youth with disabilities are slightly less likely to get their first phone to keep in touch with parents or guardians. We noticed the most significant difference among youth with physical disabilities: only 44% of these youth get a phone so that their parents can be in touch with them, compared to 64% of youth without a physical disability. These youth are also twice as likely to ask for their first phone so that they can make plans with friends (10%, compared to 5% of youth without a physical disability) or join a social network (11%, compared to 5% of youth without a physical disability), perhaps underlying the important role that phones play in the social lives of youth with disabilities, and those with physical disabilities in particular.

Only one percent of participants report being given a phone for safety reasons, suggesting availability to their parents is primarily a practical concern or motivation for giving young people a smartphone. [While our research with parents](#) has [consistently](#) found that risk significantly influences most parental decisions about digital technology, this parental concern is not directly reflected in young people's responses. We do note that participants who feel that "my parents/guardians are worried that I can get hurt online" are noticeably more likely to get their first phone from their parents or guardians (95%, compared to 85% of those who disagreed that their parents or guardians are worried they can get hurt online) and to get it so that their parents can keep in touch with them (63%, compared to 56%). Participants' views of their own safety, as indicated by whether they agree with the statements "the internet is a safe place for me" and "I know how to protect myself online," has no significant relationship with either who gave them their first phone or why.

This snapshot of the devices used by young Canadians suggests that most are using a smartphone that they own, with a data plan, to go online. However, the type of device that students use can affect the quality of their online activities – [especially](#)

[when it comes to learning](#) (see the section on using [technology at school](#) for more detail). While mobile devices like smartphones, tablets, and e-book readers are often seen as facilitating independent learning, they are primarily designed to receive rather than produce information. According to a [recent Statistics Canada \(StatsCan\) study](#), households in the lowest income quartile are three times higher than those in the highest income quartile to indicate using only mobile devices for accessing the internet. We also know that the number of internet-enabled devices available in the household can affect learning opportunities, and during the pandemic, we saw [a drastic increase in the need for all household members to get online for school and work](#). According to the StatsCan study referenced above, among households in the lowest income quartile, 63% had less than one device per household member compared to 56% of households in the highest income quartile.

Pandemic pivots to online learning also highlight challenges and discrepancies in access to devices faced by Canadian students. For example, right after we completed data collection for this study (in January 2022), the provincial government of [Ontario temporarily closed schools](#) and moved two million (elementary and high school) students to virtual learning. One Ontario school board had to delay the start of their term by one day as it worked to send Chromebooks and other devices to students and [noted in a communication](#) to households that they “do not have sufficient devices for every student, and this initial deployment will focus on one device per household.”

Also, while we did not ask questions specific to internet connectivity in this study, we know that connectivity remains an issue for many young Canadians – especially those in rural, remote, or Indigenous communities. According to the Canadian Radio-Television Commission of Canada, nearly 86% of households have access to broadband at reasonable speeds (50Mbps). However, in rural areas, only 40% do, and in First Nations communities, just 30% of households have internet connections with the recommended speed required to participate in school online. Furthermore, while connection speeds in rural and remote areas are slower than in urban and suburban zones, the services also tend to be more expensive.

Not surprisingly, given the effects of the pandemic, much of the emphasis on the digital divide in Canada has been on digital access and connectivity. However, we have written [elsewhere](#) on how Canada’s digital divide is also embedded in social, economic, and cultural contexts and intersects with categories of race, class, gender, and age. So, while the findings from this study indicate that all participants had access to the internet and a series of internet-connected devices, we know very well that the digital divide remains vast in Canada and requires ongoing efforts from governments and industry to close it.



Online Activities



Youth primarily use digital technology to connect with family and friends, play online games, watch videos, and listen to music. Following celebrities and seeking support from peers or experts are also everyday activities. About two-thirds of youth talk online to people they have never met in person.

Most young people post some content online and use their smartphones to engage in creative online activities like making movies, art or music. While youth are actively engaged in creative uses of digital technology, they are less likely to share personal content online.

About half of all participants said they take notes or journal, read books, and listen to podcasts on their smartphones. Nearly half of all youth use their phones to find local community events.

Social connection: Family and friends

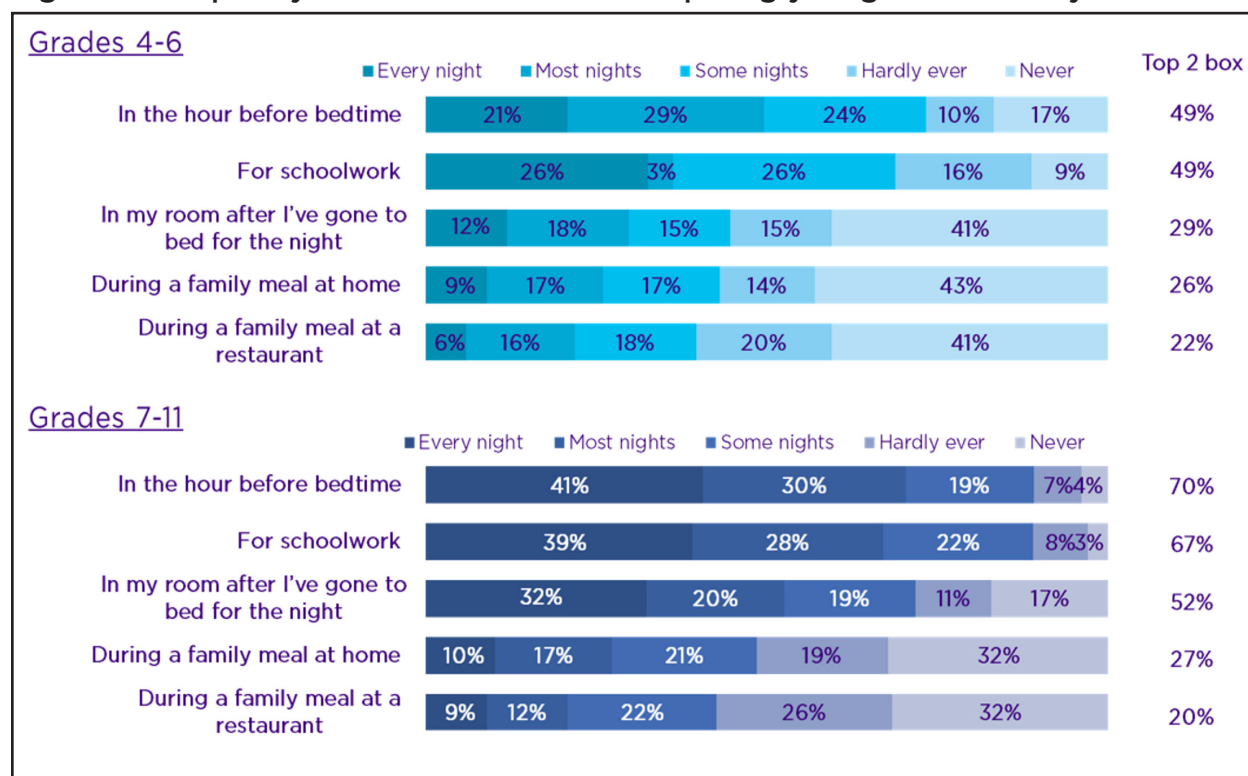
After asking young people about their favourite online spaces and the devices they use to get there, we wanted to know more about their everyday activities in the online world. Responses to the Phase IV survey tell us that much of the time spent on the internet involves social connection (see **Figure 9** on the next page). For example, nine in ten participants said they connect with friends and family on social networks, with almost half (44%) doing so at least daily and another third (34%) doing so once a week. Younger participants are slightly less likely to do so (84%, compared to 91% of those aged 12 to 13 and 95% of those aged 14 to 17).

Among youth who have access to a smartphone, the most frequent uses are to communicate with friends and family members, which nearly all participants (97%) report doing. Roughly two-thirds (70%) of participants with smartphones use them to make plans to meet with friends offline.

About eight in ten participants (79%) said they at least occasionally read or post on other people's social network profiles, with about a quarter (28%) doing so once a week or more and a third (38%) doing so at least daily. Younger youth are most likely to say they never read or post on others' social networks (36%), and when they do, they do so less often than older youth.

Overall, older youth are more active on social media and more likely to post comments, pictures, and videos on a social network than younger youth. Older youth are also more likely to follow celebrities and influencers.

Figure 9: Frequency of online activities – comparing younger and older youth



Social connection: Celebrities and influencers

Eight in ten participants (78%) follow celebrities and influencers on social networks, with just under a third (31%) doing so once a day or more. Boys and girls do so at relatively similar rates, while younger youth are most likely to say they do not follow celebrities at all.

About two-thirds of participants (65%) use digital tools to ask other kids for advice about a personal problem. Younger youth are least likely to do this (57%), while youth ages 12 to 13 are most likely (72%, compared to 68% of those ages 14 to 17). Youth with disabilities are also more likely to reach out to their peers online (72%, compared to 63% of those without disabilities). Participants who reported having all three types of disability (physical disabilities, learning disabilities, and mental illness) have the highest frequency of any category, with 91% saying they do this, 50% saying they do it once a week or more, and 21% saying they do it at least once a day. These findings are consistent with other research showing that people with disabilities rely heavily on digital technology, particularly social media, to access community, support, and resources.⁹

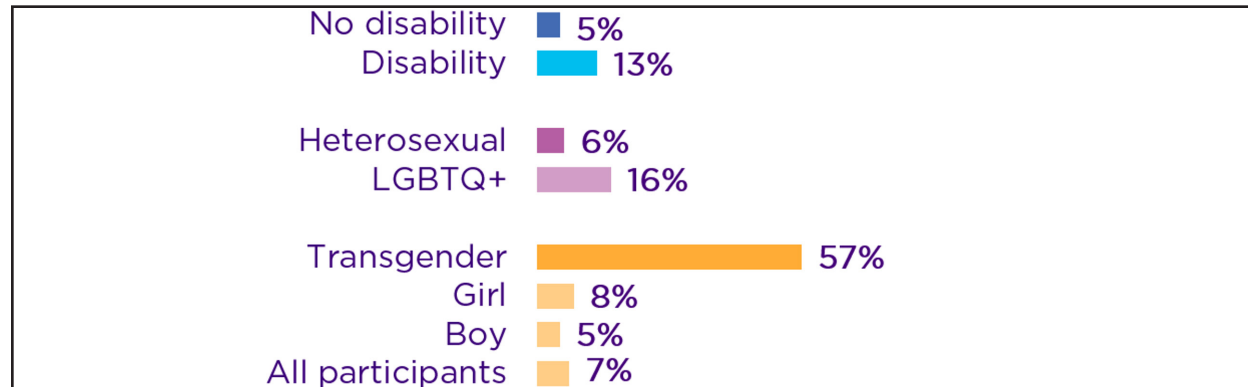
Similar patterns appeared regarding asking an expert or adult for advice about a personal problem. Just over half of all participants (58%) report doing this at least once,

⁹ Livingstone, S., & Stoilova, M. (2021). The impact of digital experiences on adolescents with mental health vulnerabilities. Parenting for a Digital Future – LSE Blogs. Retrieved from: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2021/12/13/the-impact-of-digital-experiences-on-adolescents-with-mental-health-vulnerabilities/>.

with a quarter (24%) doing so once a week or more and just under one in ten (9%) doing so at least daily. Again, youth ages 12 to 13 are most likely to have ever done this. As we see in [studies on adolescent mental health](#), this pattern of seeking help from others online may indicate that 12 to 13 is a particularly vulnerable age. It may also reflect an increased level of privacy when going online since participants indicated having less adult or parent supervision the older they got.

Fewer than one in ten participants (7%) say that they often turn to social networks or online communities for support when they feel sad. While the number of participants who identified as transgender is not large enough to be statistically significant (n=7), it is striking that more than half (57%) agree with this (see **Figure 10** below). Similarly, youth who identify as LGBTQ+ are more likely to turn to social networks or online communities for support – highlighting the importance of online communities in providing support to queer youth. Youth with disabilities are also more likely to agree, though the difference is smaller.

Figure 10: Youth who turn to social networks or online communities for support



The same is true of youth who have had negative online experiences like witnessing cyberbullying (12% turn to social networks or online communities for support compared to 3% of those who have not had this experience) or seeing racist or sexist content (14% turn to social networks or online communities for support compared to 5% who have not seen this content). Our forthcoming reports on sexting and online cruelty will expand on these findings.

Social connection: Online-only contacts

Approximately two-thirds of participants (62%) have talked to someone online whom they have never met in person; roughly a quarter (23%) do so once a week or more, and a fifth (20%) do so at least daily. This is a significant change from Phase III of YCWW, in which just 43% of participants had done this. While some of this change may be related to more frequent online gameplay, that difference is not enough to explain the increase in talking to online-only contacts (48% of participants in this survey play online games at least once a day or more, compared to 31% in Phase III). Because most demographic groups play online games at roughly the same rate, it is hard to say with certainty that there is a connection between playing games and connecting with online-only contacts. Another possible explanation is the number of young people who follow celebrities

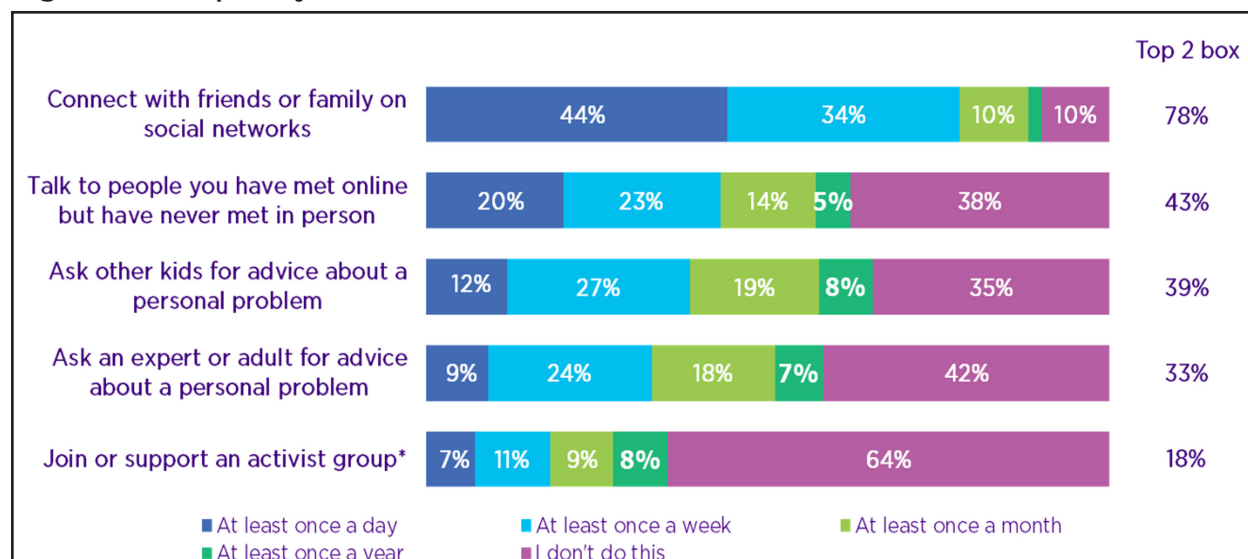
on social networks, which only 36% of participants in Phase III did at least once a year compared to 83% in this survey; however, there is no relationship between following celebrities and talking to online-only contacts, suggesting that if this is a factor, it is not a major one.

Not surprisingly, engaging with online-only contacts is strongly related to age: half (51%) of younger participants (9-to 11-year-olds) have never done this (compared to 37% of 12- to 13-year-olds and 29% of 14- to 17-year-olds). English-speaking participants are also considerably more likely to talk to someone they only know online (66%, compared to 52% of French-speaking youth), as are boys, though the difference is slight (66% of boys have done this compared to 57% of girls).

Youth with disabilities are much more likely to talk to people known only online. Some research concludes that digital technology can make it easier for young people with disabilities to interact with others “by making it possible to compensate for communication difficulties that could be encountered in a face-to-face situation... [and] can help them break isolation and connect with peers.”¹⁰ This may account for greater interest among youth with disabilities in connecting with online-only contacts. It is also possible that mobility issues may play a role here, as youth with physical disabilities were most likely to say they do this. Further study is needed to understand the experiences of youth with disabilities online.

Overall, the most frequent social connection activities are with friends and family on social networks (see **Figure 11** below). However, as we have highlighted in this section, many young people also connect with online-only contacts and seek advice about problems in online spaces. Finally, while we only asked the question of older youth, joining or supporting activist groups online is less common among the participants in this study.

Figure 11: Frequency of online activities



*Asked of older youth only (n=656)

10 Guérin, K. (2019). L'utilisation des technologies de l'information et de la communication et d'Internet par les jeunes âgés entre 14 et 21 ans présentant une déficience intellectuelle: leurs perceptions et celles d'intervenants (Doctoral dissertation, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières).

Creative online engagement: Making media

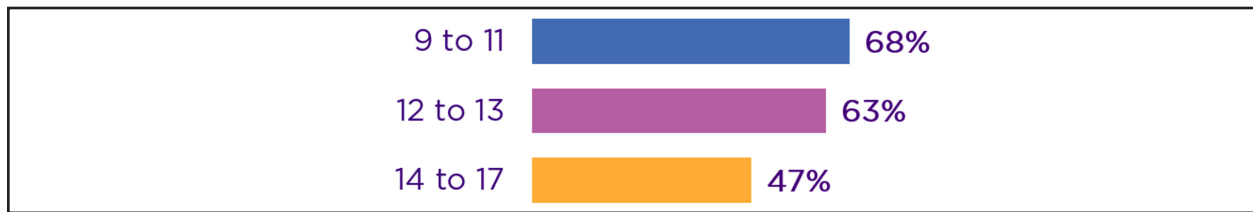
Besides engaging in social connection online, 74% of participants said they also post comments, pictures, videos, or memes on a social network, with 29% doing so at least once a week and 27% doing so daily or more. Younger participants are most likely to never do this (40%) but roughly the same number post at least once a week (30%). This suggests that youth under 13 who have accounts on various platforms are not just consuming others' content but are posting their own as well.

Boys and girls post online content at similar rates, and although our sample of transgender youth was small (n=7), more than half (57%) said they share content online. LGBTQ+ youth share less frequently compared to their heterosexual peers and are more likely to say they do not post content online (34%, compared to 24%). Racialized youth are also more likely to say that they do not post content online (27%, compared to 23% of white youth), and when they do share, it is less frequent than their white peers. French-speaking participants are also more likely to say they do not share (35%, compared to 22% of English-speaking) and less likely to post often (21% posted daily compared to 30% of English-speaking; 23% posted at least once a week compared to 32% of English-speaking youth). Youth who spoke a language other than English, French, or Indigenous languages are even more likely to say they do not share content online (41%). Youth with a disability are somewhat more likely to post content to social network platforms (80%, compared to 72% of those without a disability).

A slight majority of youth (57%) post videos of themselves (for example, videos of them singing, dancing, or reviewing or 'unboxing' a product.) This is also a less frequent activity than posting in general, with just 9% saying they do so once a day or more and 22% saying they do it at least once a week. Youth ages 12 to 13 are most likely to say they post these types of videos of themselves (61%, compared to 53% of 9- to 11-year-olds and 57% of 14- to 17-year-olds). While girls (58%) and boys (55%) share these videos at relatively similar rates, 71% of transgender youth (n=7) and 83% of non-binary youth (n=6) said they post videos of themselves (singing, dancing, or reviewing or 'unboxing' a product). LGBTQ+ youth are less likely to post videos of themselves (47%, compared to 59% of heterosexual youth). Racialized youth are slightly less likely to post videos of themselves (54%, compared to 59% of white youth). French-speaking youth are also less likely than English-speaking youth to post videos of themselves (47%, compared to 61%). Youth who speak a language other than English, French, or Indigenous languages are least likely to share videos of themselves (only 46% of these youth had ever done so). While [research](#) suggests that YouTube, at least, hosts a significant amount of francophone Canadian content, it may be that there is little opportunity for young, non-English speaking creators to find an audience there.

A similar number of participants with access to smartphones – just over half (57%) – use them to make videos, art, or music (see **Figure 12** on the next page). This activity was most common among those in the youngest age group – an intriguing finding given that it is the only online activity we asked about that follows this pattern.

Figure 12: Youth who use a smartphone to make video, art or music - by age



While older youth are more active on social media platforms, they are less likely than younger youth to use their smartphone to create and share their own media (videos, art, music). This may suggest that older youth are more likely to use video sharing sites like TikTok and YouTube as sources of entertainment rather than creative outlets. While this data is a snapshot of different age groups at a single time, rather than a longitudinal study, this may reflect a change in young people’s online culture as they enter their mid-to-late-teens, reflecting findings from our study [To Share or Not to Share](#) that older teens posted a narrower range of content and tended to be more conscious of what their peers might think when posting.

Boys and girls use their smartphones to make media at relatively similar rates (53% of boys and 59% of girls), while a large majority of gender-diverse youth say they use their phones to create media (80% of transgender youth (n=5), 83% of questioning youth (n=6), and 100% of non-binary youth (n=5)). LGBTQ+ youth use their phones to make media at similar rates to their heterosexual peers (58%, compared to 57%), with gay or lesbian identifying youth saying they do this most often (77%) compared to either heterosexual or LGBTQ+ peers. English-speaking youth engage in media making more than French-speaking youth (61%, compared to 43%), but there are no differences in youth media-making based on race. As with posting videos, participants with disabilities are more likely to engage in making media (66%, compared to 54% without disabilities).

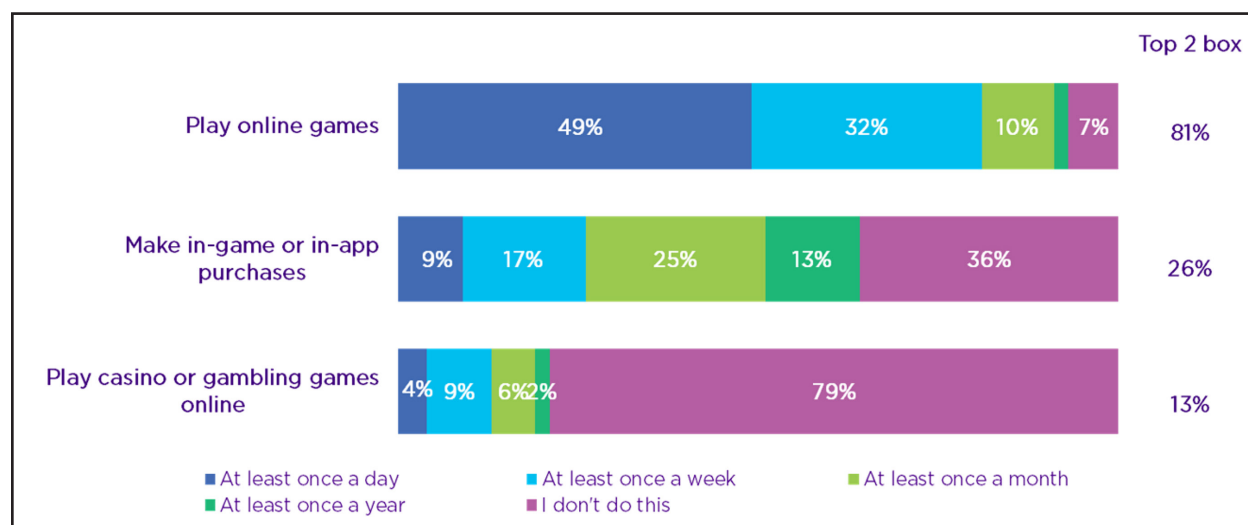
Cheating, trolling, and covert communication

Relatively few participants with smartphones reported using them to prank or “troll” someone (17%) or cheat on a test at school (9%), though a more significant number use them to chat with their friends during class without their teachers knowing (40%). Older youth (50% of 14- to 17-year-olds compared to 35% of 12- to 13-year-olds, and 27% of 9- to 11-year-olds), girls (42%, compared to 36% of boys), LGBTQ+ youth (46%, compared to 40% heterosexual youth), youth with disabilities (18%, compared to 6% without a disability), racialized youth (45%, compared to 38% of white youth) and French-speaking youth (46%, compared to 38% of English-speaking youth) are all more likely to use their phones to chat with friends during class without a teacher knowing.

Gaming and gambling

Nearly all participants (81%) play online games (see **Figure 13** on the next page). Unlike other activities noted above, this does not vary with age.

Figure 13: Online gaming



Most demographic differences in gaming are found in how often participants play games. For example, boys are more likely to play games more often than girls (54%, compared to 43% of girls once a day), and transgender youth (n=7) indicated that they play games most often (86% once a day) compared to either boys or girls. Otherwise, boys and girls play games at about the same rates. LGBTQ+ youth are also more likely than their heterosexual peers to play games once daily (59%, compared to 48%). Youth with a disability are slightly more likely to play games more often than youth without a disability (53% once a day, compared to 47%). Racialized youth and white youth play games at similar rates.

Boys are considerably more likely to make in-game or in-app purchases (72%, compared to 56% of girls), and heterosexual youth are more likely to do so than LGBTQ+ youth (66%, compared to 55%). Youth with a disability are also more likely to make in-game or in-app purchases (71%, compared to 62% of youth without a disability).

A relatively small number of participants play casino or gambling games (21%) though this number is considerably higher than in Phase III (11%)¹¹. Worryingly, this online gambling does not vary meaningfully by age. Boys are more likely than girls to gamble or play casino games online (25%, compared to 18%), as are heterosexual youth (22%, compared to 9% of LGBTQ+ youth) and youth with disabilities (22%, compared to 16% of youth without disabilities). It is unclear whether these youth are playing so-called “free-to-play” or “social” casino games; however, there is [evidence](#) that games without real-money stakes can still cost players significant amounts of money and may lead to problem gambling¹².

¹¹ This change may reflect a growing popularity of online gambling in Canada. For instance, in 2022 Ontario established iGaming Ontario to license online gambling operators.

¹² Drummond, A. & Daur, J.D. (2018). Video game loot boxes are psychologically akin to gambling. *Nature human behaviour*, 2(8): 530–532.

Online shopping

About two-thirds (63%) of youth use their smartphones to shop online. Girls (66%) and non-binary youth (80%, n=5) are more likely to shop online compared to boys (59%). Older youth (70%) are more likely than younger youth to shop online (59% of 12- to 13-year-olds and 55% of 9- to 11-year-olds). Heterosexual youth (65%, compared to 54% of LGBTQ+ youth), white youth (66%, compared to 61% of racialized youth), and youth with a disability (72%, compared to 60% of youth without a disability) are also all more likely to shop online.

Directions and transit

About two-thirds (63%) of youth use the mapping functions on their smartphones to get directions or consult maps, whereas nearly half of youth (47%) use their phones to look up bus schedules. Not surprisingly, older youth are more likely to use their phones to look up bus schedules (54% of 14- to 17-year-olds, compared to 42% of 12- to 13-year-olds and 41% of 9- to 11-year-olds), maps or get directions (71% of 14- to 17-year-olds, compared to 60% of 12- to 13-year-olds and 53% of 9- to 11-year-olds). Using phones for maps and directions is relatively similar for youth regardless of gender, race, sexuality, and disability. Youth with a disability are more likely to use their phones to look up bus schedules (53%, compared to 45% of youth without a disability).

Civic engagement

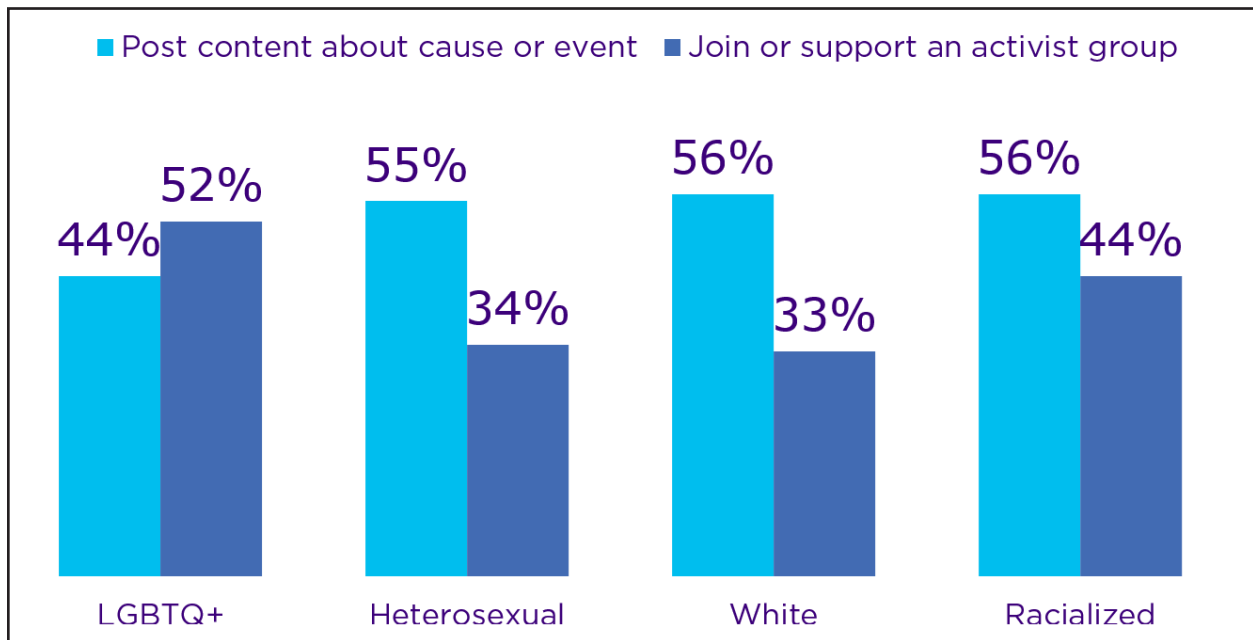
Just over half (54%) of participants post content about a cause or event they care about. Older youth are most likely (62%) to do this compared to younger youth (54% of 12- to 13-year-olds and 44% of 9- to 11-year-olds). Boys and girls are just as likely to post this sort of content (55%), whereas gender-diverse youth post content about a cause or event they care about more than boys or girls (71% of transgender youth, n=7 and 67% of non-binary youth, n=6). Heterosexual youth (57%, compared to 45% of LGBTQ+), white youth (57%, compared to 55% of racialized youth), English-speaking youth (61%, compared to 40% of French-speaking), and youth with a disability (58%, compared to 53% of youth without a disability) are all slightly more likely to post about an event or cause they care about.

Fewer young people join or support an activist group online¹³, with only 35% saying they do this. There is little difference across ages (31% of 12- to 13-year-olds compared to 38% of 14- to 17-year-olds), and while boys and girls support or join activist groups at similar rates (35%), gender-diverse youth are more likely to support or join these groups (60% of transgender youth, n=5, 80% of non-binary youth, n=5, and 43% of questioning youth, n=7). As with the previous question, youth with a disability (43%, compared to 34% of youth without a disability) and English-speaking participants are more likely to do this (40%, compared to 25% of French-speaking youth). While LGBTQ+ and racialized youth are less likely to post content about a cause or event they care about (see **Figure 14** on the next page), they are more likely to join or support an activist group (52% of LGBTQ+

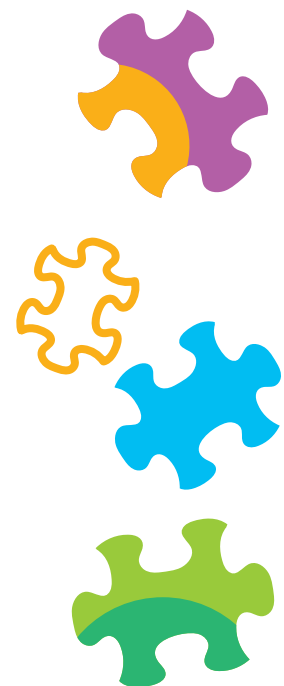
13 This question was only asked of participants in grades 7 to 11.

youth compared to 34% of heterosexual youth and 44% of racialized youth compared to 33% of white youth).

Figure 14: Online engagement and activism



It is possible that for racialized and queer youth, a benefit of digital media is that it provides an opportunity for civic engagement in spaces that are not necessarily visible.



Times and Places



For a slight majority (51%) of young Canadians, weekday screen use falls within recommended guidelines.

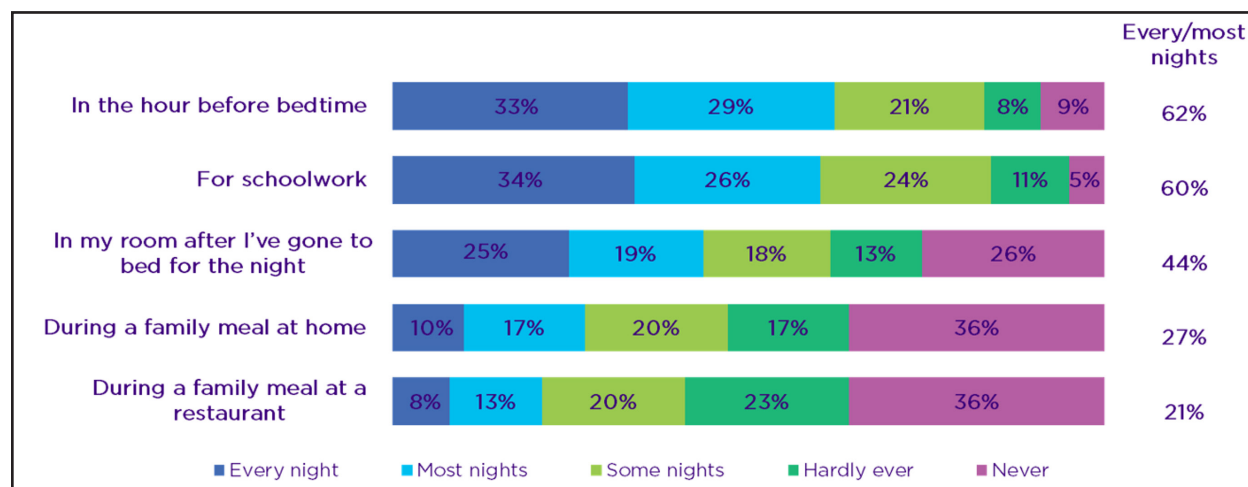
For most participants, their weekday (Monday to Friday) screen use is mostly for schoolwork. Outside of schoolwork, youth spend more time on a digital device on weekends (Saturday to Sunday). Almost two-thirds (62%) frequently use digital devices during the hour before bedtime, and almost half (44%) do so after going to their bedroom for the night.

Seven in ten young people say their school has given them an e-mail account and that they are required to access an online learning management system like Google Classroom. Six in ten youth have permission to use their own digital device in the classroom, but only for certain times and mainly for research for assignments and projects.

At home

On a typical weeknight, youth most frequently use digital devices for schoolwork during the hour before bedtime (see **Figure 15** below). Consistent with our [previous research](#), youth are least likely to use a device during a family meal, either at a restaurant or at home – 36% of youth reported never doing this.

Figure 15: Weeknight usage of digital devices



Boys are slightly more likely than girls to say they use devices on weeknights and during a meal in particular: 24% of boys use a device during a meal at a restaurant compared to 18% of girls, and 30% of boys use a device during a meal at home compared to 24%

of girls. Gender-diverse youth reported higher levels of most of these weeknight screen use habits compared to boys and girls. For example, 86% of transgender youth (n=7) use a device in the hour before bedtime (compared to 63% of boys and 61% of girls), and 71% of transgender youth (n=7) use a device for schoolwork (compared to 61% of boys and 59% of girls).

Older youth are also more likely than younger youth to engage in most of these weeknight screen use habits, especially using a digital device for schoolwork (72% of 14- to 17-year-olds, compared to 58% of 12- to 13-year-olds, and 47% of 9- to 11-year-olds) and in the hour before bedtime (75% of 14- to 17-year-olds, compared to 64% of 12- to 13-year-olds, and 47% of 9- to 11-year-olds). Heterosexual youth are more likely than LGBTQ+ youth to engage in all weeknight screen use habits, especially for schoolwork (63% compared to 46% of LGBTQ+ youth). Racialized youth are also more likely to use devices on weeknights for schoolwork (65%, compared to 59% of white youth). Youth with a disability are more likely to engage in all weeknight screen use habits, especially in the hour before bedtime (72%, compared to 59% of youth without a disability).

Most young people do not follow the recommendation¹⁴ against using screen devices in the hour before bedtime: almost two-thirds (62%) say they do this most nights or every night, and just 17% hardly ever or never do. There is also a considerable jump between younger and older youth: 47% of youth ages 9 to 11 do this most nights or every night, compared to 64% of 12- to 13-year-olds and 75% of 14-to-17-year-olds. Boys and girls use screens in the hour before bed at similar rates (63% of boys and 61% of girls), while gender-diverse youth report using screens before bed more than boys or girls (86% of transgender youth, n=7, 50% of non-binary youth, n=6, and 88% of questioning youth, n=8). Heterosexual youth were slightly more likely to use a device in the hours before bed than LGBTQ+ youth (64%, compared to 57%). Racialized and white youth used screens before bed at similar rates (64% of white youth compared to 60% of racialized youth). Youth with disabilities are also more likely to say they do this most or every night (72%, compared to 59% of youth without disabilities.)

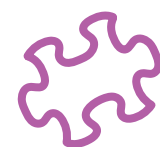
Almost three-quarters (74%) of youth said they use digital devices after they go to bed, with a quarter (25%) doing this every night. Among youth who have their own smartphones, 79% keep them in their bedrooms so they can check messages or use social networking apps after they go to bed. As with the other device use questions, this is strongly related to age, with just one in ten 9- to 11-year-olds saying they use devices after they go to bed every night, compared to a quarter of 12- to 13-year-olds and a third of 14- to 17-year-olds. Boys and girls use a device after they go to bed at similar rates (43% of boys and 44% of girls), while some gender-diverse youth report doing so at higher rates (86% of transgender youth, n=7 and 63% of questioning youth, n=8). LGBTQ+ and heterosexual youth (40%, compared to 45%), as well as racialized and white youth (44%, compared to 46%), use a device after they go to bed at similar rates. Youth with a disability are more likely to say they use a device after going to bed than youth without a disability (56%, compared to 40%).

14 Canadian Paediatric Society, Digital Health Task Force. (2019). Digital media: Promoting healthy screen use in school-aged children and adolescents. *Paediatrics & Child Health*, 24(6), 402-408.

Interestingly, few participants reported feeling ‘FOMO’ (fear of missing out), with 14% saying “I worry that I would feel left out if I was not online” and 9% saying “I often feel left out of things that are happening online.” LGBTQ+ youth are somewhat more likely to agree with both of these statements, with 20% agreeing they would feel left out (compared to 13% of heterosexual youth) and 16% agreeing they often do feel left out (compared to 8% of heterosexual youth). However, there is no significant relationship between youth agreeing with either of these statements and keeping their smartphone in their bedroom, which is interesting since the question about keeping their phones in their room after they went to bed asked youth if they do this so they can check messages or use social networking apps.

While there are safety and well-being factors to consider for why youth might be using their phones in their bedrooms after going to bed, even among the youngest participants, the rates are considerably high. Compared to the previous phase (III) of this study (in 2013), the number of youth who say they keep their phones in their bedrooms has increased significantly (from 39% to 79%). This increase deserves further attention and study since keeping phones in bedrooms has been associated with increased daytime tiredness among teens.¹⁵

Outside of schoolwork, youth are most likely to spend one to two hours per day on a digital device on weekdays and three or more hours on the weekend (see **Figure 16** on the next page). While this might appear to be high, we ought to keep in mind that this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when young people were faced with restrictions that limited their ability to socialize, learn, and play in any other context other than being online or using digital devices. [Research studies](#)¹⁶ on children’s screen time during the pandemic have confirmed these findings regarding the relationship between increased screen time and pandemic restrictions. While we may not come to know the full effect of the pandemic on young people’s lives for years to come, for many, access to digital devices and creative and civic online engagement has [been a lifeline](#).¹⁷

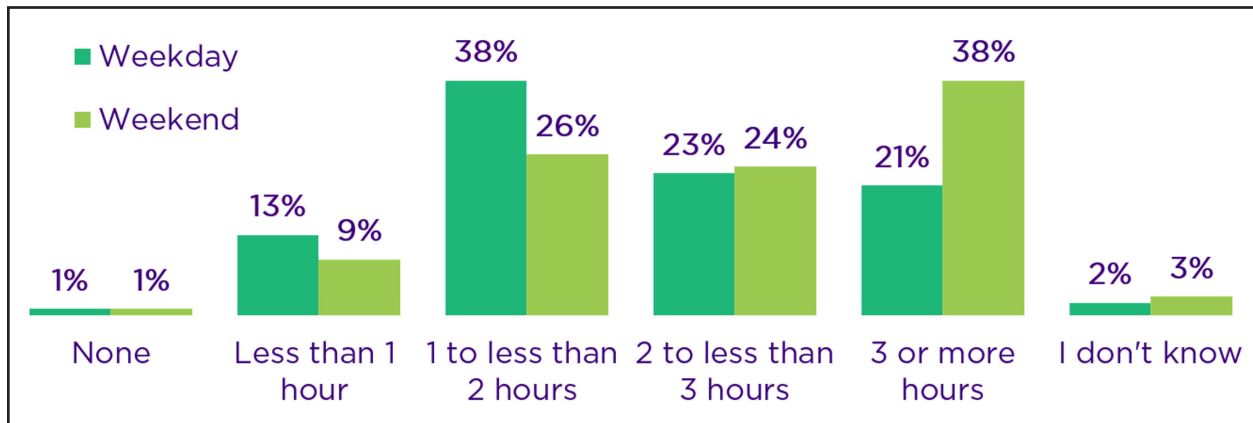


15 Karsay, K., Schmuck, D., Stevic, A., & Matthes, J. (2022). Sleeping with the smartphone: a panel study investigating parental mediation, adolescents’ tiredness, and physical well-being. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 1-12.

16 See also: Gregory, A. (2022). Primary-age children’s screen time went up by 83 minutes a day during pandemic – study. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jun/24/primary-age-children-screen-time-went-up-83-minutes-day-pandemic>.

17 See also: Magis-Weinberg, L., Gys, C. L., Berger, E. L., Domoff, S. E., & Dahl, R. E. (2021). Positive and negative online experiences and loneliness in Peruvian adolescents during the COVID-19 lockdown. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 31(3), 717-733.

Figure 16: Hours spent on devices outside of schoolwork



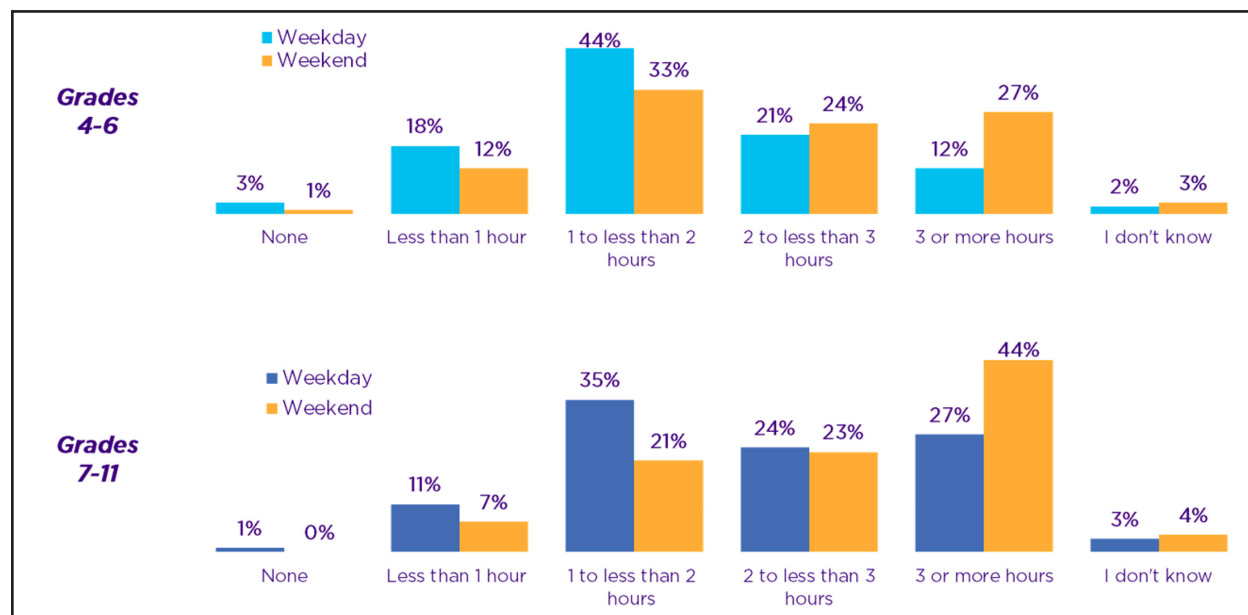
Weekday and weekend screen time are associated with one another, though the relationship is not consistent. Typically, youth with higher weekday screentime rates (e.g., three or more hours per weekday) are also more likely to have higher weekend screentime rates (e.g., three or more hours per weekend day).

The Canadian Paediatric Society recommends no more than two hours per day of screen time for school-aged children and teens.¹⁸ Just over half of participants (51%) said their use of digital devices on weekdays was within this range (though this does not include use for schoolwork or use of non-digital devices, like televisions). The median amount of time spent using digital devices on weekdays (not including use for schoolwork) is between one to two hours, though just under a quarter of participants (23%) reported spending two to three hours, and a fifth (21%) reported three or more. On weekends the median time spent on devices is higher (38% of youth say they spend three or more hours on devices on weekends).

Boys and girls reported relatively consistent screen time, with both saying their use of devices on weekdays is primarily within the one-to-two-hour range (39% of boys and 37% of girls). Gender-diverse youth reported slightly higher levels of weeknight screen time: 43% of transgender youth (n=7) reported one to two hours and three or more hours, 50% of non-binary youth (n=6) reported two to three hours per day, and 75% of questioning youth (n=8) reported three or more hours per day. LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to spend three hours or more on weekdays (35%, compared to 20% of heterosexual youth). Racialized youth are more likely to spend less than one hour per weekday (17%, compared to 12% of white youth). Youth with a disability are more likely to spend three hours or more on weekdays (29%, compared to 19% of youth without a disability). Older youth are more likely to spend three hours or more per day both on weekdays (27% compared to 12% of younger youth) and weekends (44% compared to 27%).

¹⁸ Canadian Paediatric Society, Digital Health Task Force, Ottawa, Ontario. (2019). Digital media: Promoting healthy screen use in school-aged children and adolescents. *Paediatrics & Child Health*, 24(6), 402-408.

Figure 17: Hours spent on devices outside of schoolwork - by grade



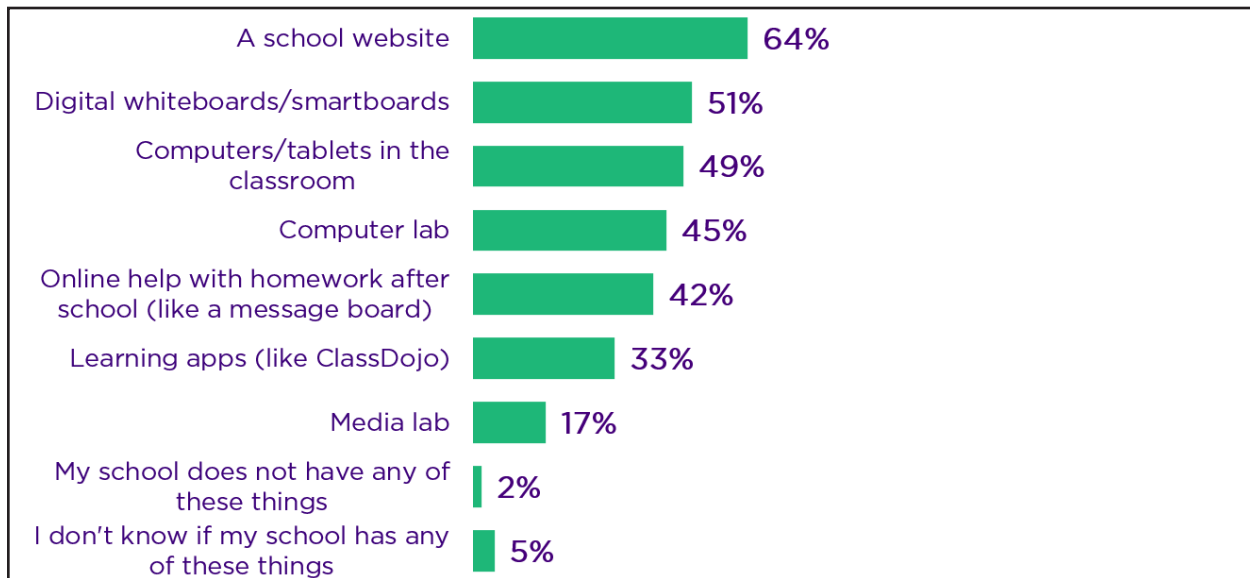
The biggest increase in screen time, relative to age, occurred between 9- to 11-year-olds and 12- to 13-year-olds (see **Figure 17** above for differences based on grade). On weekdays, 12% of 9- to 11-year-olds reported three or more hours of screen time compared to 24% of 12- to 13-year-olds. On weekends, 27% of 9- to 11-year-olds reported three or more hours of screen time compared to 43% of 12- to 13-year-olds. This pattern suggests a watershed between the ages of 11 and 12 relating to screen time.

Similar to weeknights, girls and boys are both as likely (37%) to say they have three or more hours of weekend screen time. Gender-diverse youth are more likely to indicate three or more hours of weekend screen time (71% of transgender youth, n=7, 50% of non-binary youth, n=6, and 75% of questioning youth, n=8). Again, like weeknights, LGBTQ+ youth are slightly more likely to report three or more hours of weekend screen time than their heterosexual peers (46%, compared to 37%). Racialized and white youth report relatively similar rates of weekend screen time, with the majority spending three or more hours on a device (39% of white youth compared to 36% of racialized youth). Youth with and without a disability report similar levels of weekend screen time (41% of those with a disability reported three or more hours compared to 37% of those without a disability).

At School

We asked participants several questions about their access to and use of digital technology in the classroom. **Figure 18** (see next page) gives us information about what kind of technology and online learning resources and supports young people have through their schools. Two-thirds (64%) say their school has a website, and just over a half (51%) say their classroom uses digital whiteboards or smartboards. About half (49%) of participants report having access to computers or tablets in the classroom, with almost the same (45%) saying that their school has a computer lab.

Figure 18: Technology at school



Younger youth report having more access to learning apps like [ClassDojo](#) (38%, compared to 31% of older), while older participants are more likely to say that they have access to a media lab at their school (19%, compared to 14%). Regarding differences based on race, we note that white youth report greater access to classroom-based technology like digital whiteboards and smartboards than their racialized peers (55%, compared to 45%).

Seven in ten youth say their school has given them an e-mail account, and most (62%) are school board accounts (see **Figure 19** on the next page). One-third of the e-mail accounts that young people use for school are Gmail accounts – this is likely because [Google Classroom](#) is the most used online learning management system, as reported by youth in this study.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, older youth are more likely to have access to an e-mail account than younger youth (76%, compared to 66%), and participants with a disability also report being more likely to have a school e-mail (80%, compared to 70% of youth without a disability).

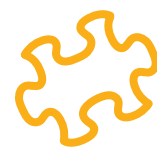
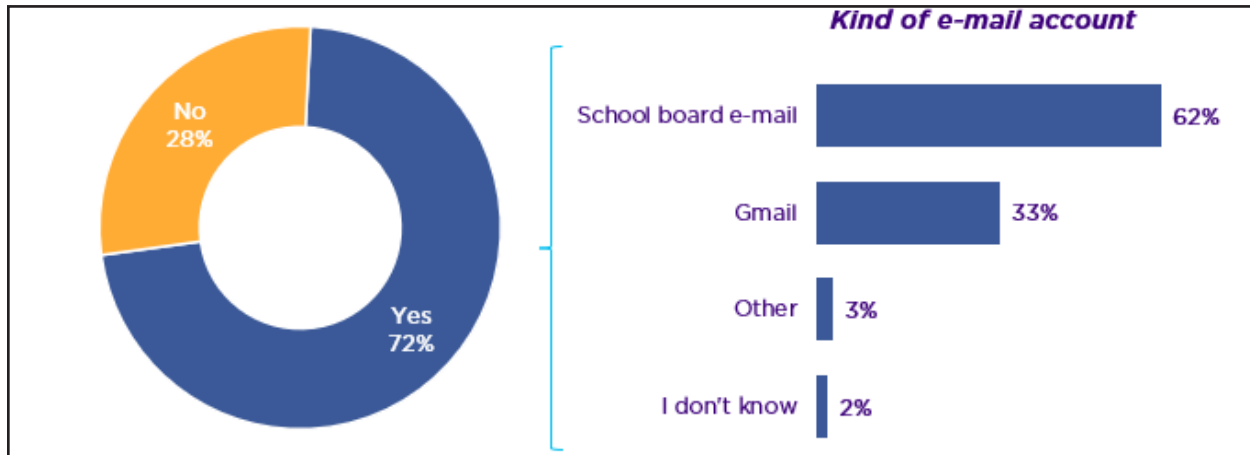
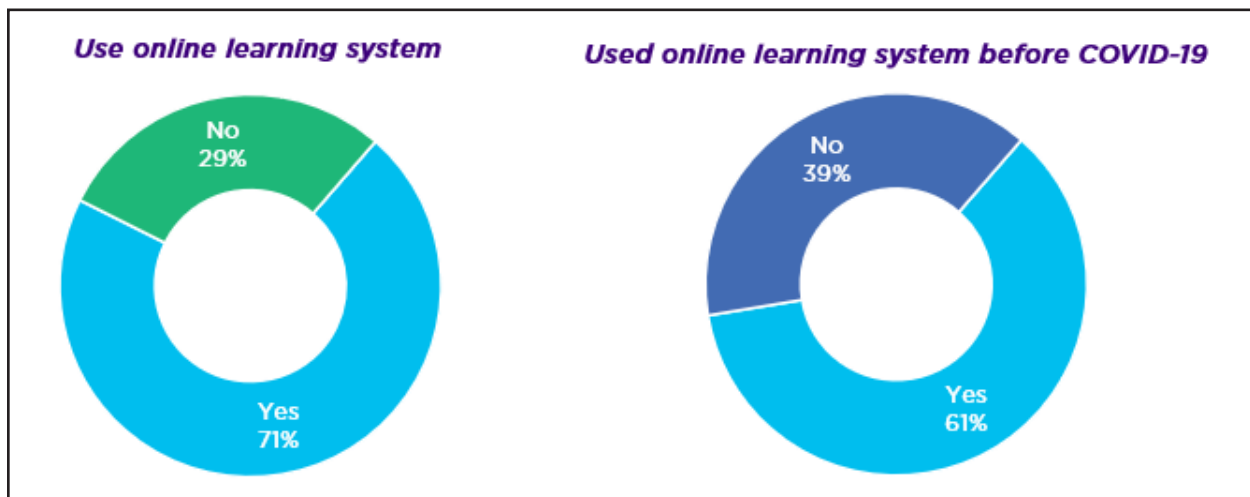


Figure 19: School e-mail accounts



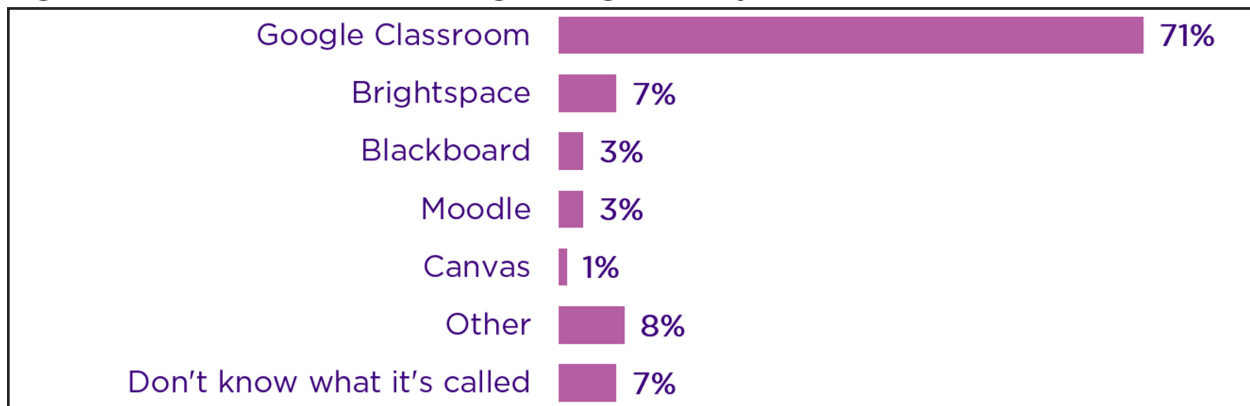
Most participants (71%) say they must access and use an online learning management system at school (see **Figure 20** below). While most students were already using learning management systems before the pandemic, almost 40% of youth reported not using an online learning management system until after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 20: Use of online learning management systems



The same demographic trends noted above for school e-mail accounts appear again for online learning management systems. Older youth are more likely to have an online learning management system at their school (74%, compared to 67% of younger youth), and youth with disabilities also report higher use (80%, compared to 68% of youth without a disability). As noted previously, participants report that Google Classroom is the online learning management system of choice (see **Figure 21** on the next page).

Figure 21: Name of online learning management system



Next, we asked youth whether they are allowed to bring their own devices into the classroom and what they are or are not permitted to do with those devices. Six in ten youth say they have permission to use their own digital device in class, though only at certain times – and the incidence of permission increases as youth get older (see **Figure 22** below).

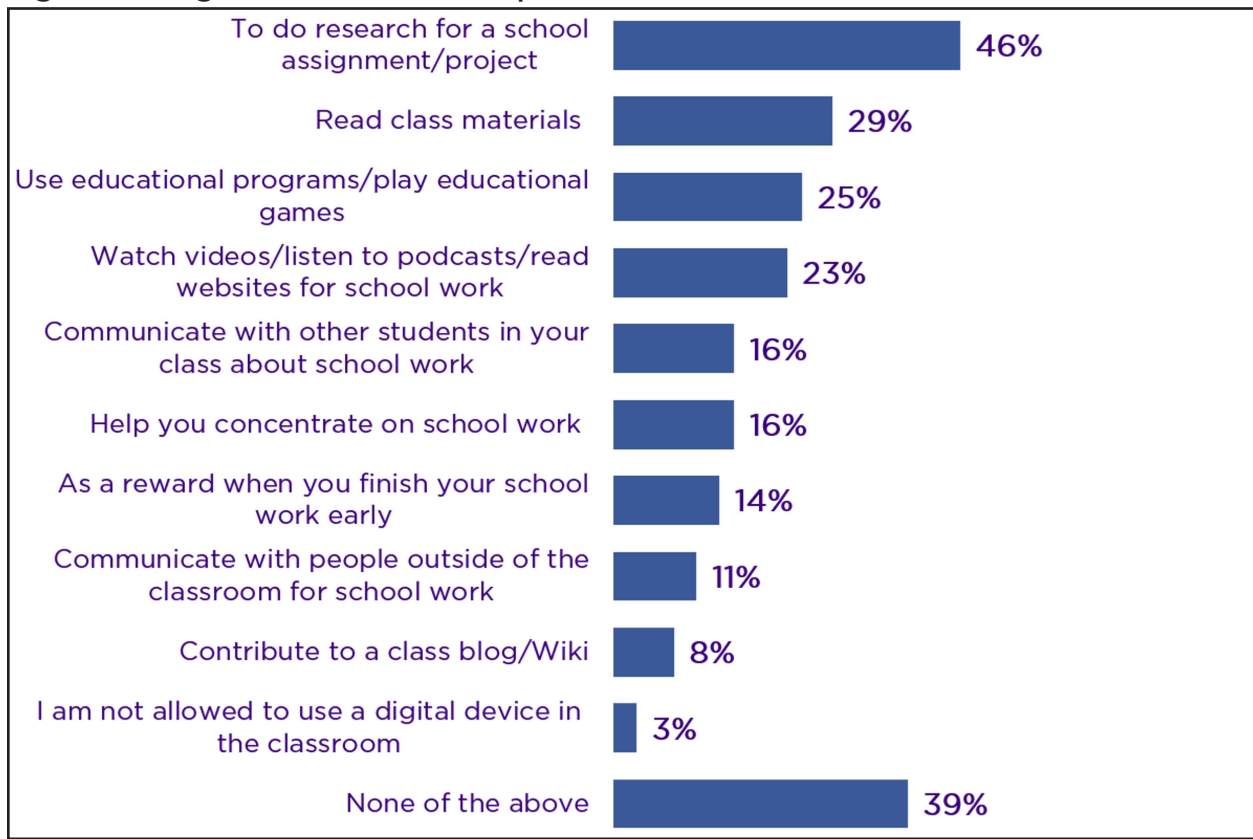
Figure 22: Permission to use own device in classroom – by grade.



Girls (63%, compared to boys 59%) and gender-diverse youth were more likely to say they are allowed to use their own digital device(s) in the classroom (57% of transgender youth, n=7 and 67% of non-binary youth, n=6). Heterosexual youth (63%, compared to 52% of LGBTQ+ youth) and racialized youth (65%, compared to 60% of white youth) were more likely to report using their own device in the classroom. Youth with a disability are also more likely to be allowed to use their own digital device(s) in the classroom (71%, compared to 58% of youth without a disability).

When able to bring their own device into the classroom, youth are mainly allowed to use it to do research for assignments or projects (46%) and to read class materials (29%). Other activities, as you can see on the next page in **Figure 23**, include: using education programs or playing educational games (25%), communicating with other students in the class about work (16%), and contributing to a class blog or Wiki (8%). Some participants (14%) reported that teachers allow them to access their device(s) as a reward for finishing their work early. However, 39% of youth said they cannot use their device(s) for any of the activities we asked about in the survey.

Figure 23: Digital device activities permitted in class

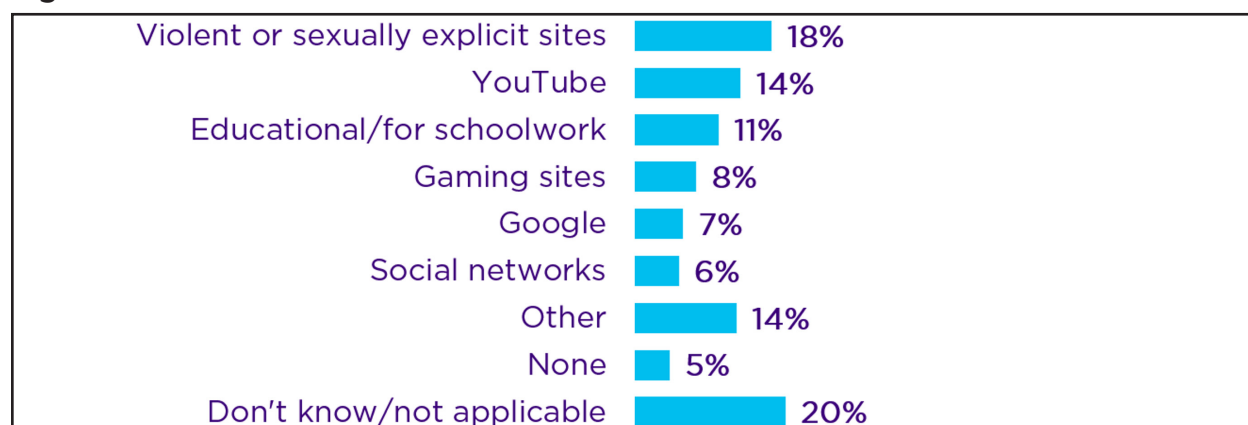


Generally speaking, younger youth are less likely to be allowed to use digital devices in the classroom for any of the activities listed above, and the usage of devices for the activities increases as youth get older. Demographic differences regarding the activities permitted in class when students use their own device(s) are the same as what we observed for students who have permission to use their own device(s) in the classroom.

Finally, regarding using digital devices and the internet at school, we asked participants about their experiences with blocked websites and how this practice might impact their ability to complete their schoolwork. Fewer than two in ten youth have trouble finding something for a school project or assignment on a digital device at school because it was blocked. LGBTQ+ youth (26%, compared to 15% of their heterosexual peers) and youth with a disability (37%, compared to 9% of youth without a disability) are more likely to encounter an issue due to a blocked site.

Participants mostly encounter technological fences or barriers on violent or sexually explicit sites and YouTube (see **Figure 24** on the next page). Older youth are blocked more frequently from social networks (9%, compared to 2% of younger youth) and younger youth are blocked more frequently from gaming sites (18%, compared to 2%). LGBTQ+ youth are blocked more frequently from YouTube (32%, compared to 11% of heterosexual youth). Racialized youth are blocked more frequently from sites for schoolwork (17%, compared to 9% of white youth). Youth with disabilities are blocked more frequently from gaming sites (13%, compared to 3% of youth without a disability).

Figure 24: Websites blocked on school browsers and devices



During the [qualitative focus](#) groups for Phase IV of YCWW, we heard from young people about their ability to circumvent various blocks and controls to access the content or apps they need or want to use. Through the survey in the quantitative portion of Phase IV, four in ten youth reported that they can access a site their school has blocked. Younger youth (45%, compared to 39% of older youth), girls (45%, compared to 37% of boys), heterosexual youth (44%, compared to 32% of LGBTQ+ youth), racialized youth (55%, compared to 37% of white youth), and youth with a disability (47%, compared to 33% of youth without a disability) are more likely to be able to access blocked sites.

Both educators and students faced unprecedented learning challenges over the pandemic, including, in many instances, having to embrace technology as the only way to continue education. However, these pivots to online learning and the subsequent adoption of more learning management systems in Canadian schools do not come without challenges. For example, teachers in large urban school districts [reported a troubling drop in attendance](#) over the course of the pandemic (especially for middle and high school students) and were concerned about the ability to locate absent students and re-integrate them into classrooms (virtual or in-person). These absent students “have been labelled as having behavioural issues, are often racialized, marginalized, and teetering on the edge of dropping out of school completely.” Recognizing that parents and guardians were in survival mode, educators often went above and beyond to try to connect with students -including reaching out through social media. Teachers heard from students who increasingly felt ‘checked-out’ mentally, physically, and emotionally – especially amid a revolving door of online and in-person learning.

As discussed in the [section on devices](#), the type of device a student has access to directly impacts their ability to learn. While most youth in this study (77%) indicate they have a smartphone, [these devices have limited capacity for online learning](#) – specifically accessing learning management systems and class video calls. As we also noted, inequities in internet connectivity and access to devices other than a smartphone [are especially difficult for children in lower-income households](#) (in the bottom 25% of the income distribution).

Shifts to online learning also meant less instructional time for many students. While we do not yet know the extent to which pandemic disruptions and pivots will impact student

performance in Canada, [earlier StatsCan studies](#) have indicated that less instructional time is associated with poorer performance in reading, math, and science. Another consideration is [parental or guardian involvement in children’s learning activities](#), which may be amplified when children are engaged in online learning. While parental involvement is positively associated with student education outcomes, lower-income parents are more likely to work long hours, hold multiple jobs, or have less flexibility in their work than parents in higher-income families with the [flexibility to work from home and offer more support to students](#). Higher-income parents also typically [have higher levels of education](#) which might benefit students engaged in online learning at home and may be in a better position to help children understand more advanced material, particularly at the high school level.

While we are beginning to understand the impact of online learning on the health and safety of students, on learning loss, and on mental health, we also need to better understand the impact of pandemic-related disruptions and pivots on the [social and emotional implications for students and educators](#). One Canadian study¹⁹ that examined students’ perceptions of “mattering”²⁰ during the pandemic found that students who felt they mattered the least were those who learned online (full-time) during the pandemic (either in elementary or high school). [This study](#) suggests that as we continue to navigate shifts and pivots in education during the pandemic and beyond, it is essential to consider students’ and educators’ social and emotional experiences along with health, safety, and learning loss.

19 Vaillancourt T, Brittain H, Krygsman A, Farell, A, Pepler, D, Landon, S, Saint-Georges, Z, Vitoroulis, I. (2021). “In-Person Versus Online Learning in Relation to Students’ Perceptions of Mattering During COVID-19: A Brief Report.” *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*. 40(1):159-169. doi:[10.1177/07342829211053668](https://doi.org/10.1177/07342829211053668)

20 Meaning feeling like they are significant to others.

Adult involvement



Parents and guardians are more likely to manage screen time through non-technological approaches rather than using devices or apps to limit their child's screen time. The most popular approach is setting times and places where screen devices are not allowed.

When young people are online, just over four in ten say they are usually with a parent or other adult, while nearly six in ten are rarely or never supervised. Nine in ten young people say their parents or guardians trust them to make good decisions when they are online.

Most youth have at least one rule in the home relating to digital technology. The most common rules relate to which websites they are allowed to visit, talking to people they do not know online, and not posting contact information on the internet.

Managing screen time

According to our past research with Canadian families, screen time is not the top parental concern. It is, however, often a source of technology-related conflict between parents or guardians and youth. In this previous study, we found that only about a quarter of parents or guardians use an app or device to limit their children's screen time; a finding echoed in Phase IV of YCWW: 31% of participants said their parents or guardians do this. Generally, using apps or devices to limit screen time is associated with lower weekend screen time but only slightly associated with lower weekday screen time.

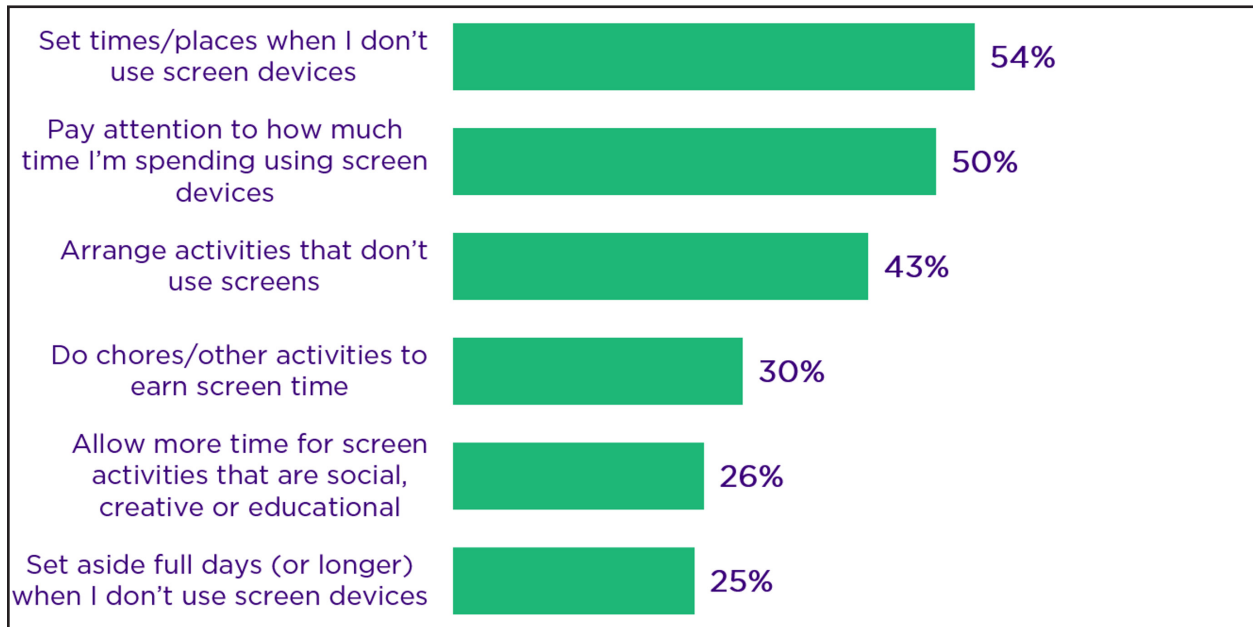
Younger participants are more likely to report that their parents or guardians limit their screen time using an app or device (41%, compared to 29% of those ages 12 to 13 and 23% of those ages 14 to 17). Racialized youth (36%, compared to 30% of white youth) and youth with disabilities (43%, compared to 27% of those without a disability) are also more likely to experience these limits – the latter finding may reflect research suggesting that parents of youth with learning disabilities are more likely to take a restrictive, rather than empowering, approach to managing their children's online experiences.²¹

Consistent with the approaches parents identified in our previous study, more participants (79%) reported that their parents or guardians adopt non-technological approaches to managing screen time (see **Figure 25** on the next page). Boys (82%, compared to 76% of girls), LGBTQ+ youth (86%, compared to 80% of heterosexual youth), and youth with a disability (82%, compared to 77% of youth without a disability) are all more likely to say their parents limit screen time in non-technological dependent ways. More than half

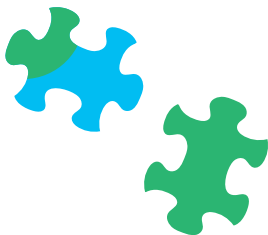
²¹ Cavallini, M. C., & Cavallini, F. (2021). Online Risks in Children with Special Educational Needs: An exploratory study. *Journal of Clinical & Developmental Psychology*, 3(1).

(54%) said their parents or guardians set times and places when they are not allowed to use screen devices, while others arrange activities that do not involve screens (43%), require them to do chores or other activities to earn screen time (30%), and allow more time for screen activities that are social, creative, or educational (26%).

Figure 25: Non-technological approaches to managing screen time



None of these strategies vary much by demographic group, though older youth are more likely to get more time for what are considered 'positive' screen uses²² (37%, compared to 22% of younger participants), as are racialized participants (35%, compared to 24% of white participants). LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to say their parents/guardians pay attention to how much time they spend on devices (60%, compared to 48% of heterosexual youth). Whereas heterosexual youth are more likely to say their parents/guardians set times and places where they cannot use devices (54%, compared to 48% of LGBTQ+ youth) and that their parents/guardians arrange activities that do not require screens (43%, compared to 36% of heterosexual youth). Youth with disabilities are slightly less likely to say their parents/guardians set times and places where devices cannot be used (51%, compared to 55% of youth without disabilities), to arrange non-screen activities (39%, compared to 45%), and to require them to do chores to earn screen time (23%, compared to 34%), though the differences were small in each case.

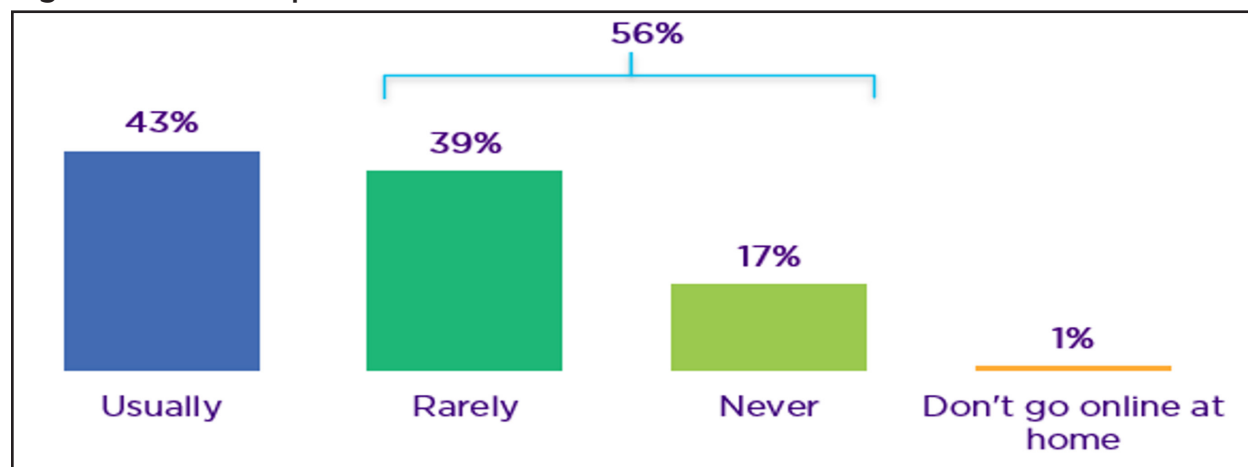


²² Referring to creative, social, and/or educational uses of devices.

Parent and adult supervision

When young people are online, just over four in ten say they are usually with a parent or other adult, while nearly six in ten are rarely or never supervised (see **Figure 26** below).

Figure 26: Adult supervision while online



Younger youth are more likely to be usually supervised when online (58%, compared to 35% of older youth), while older youth are more likely to never be supervised (22%, compared to 8% of younger youth). Girls are more likely than boys to be usually supervised (46%, compared to 42%); the same is true for heterosexual youth (43%, compared to 39% of LGBTQ+ youth) and racialized youth (50%, compared to 41% of white youth). Youth with a disability are more likely to say they are never supervised (22%, compared to 15% of youth without a disability).

One question that emerged from our [Phase IV qualitative report](#) was whether there is a connection between parental surveillance or supervision and creative online engagement. For example, in one family where a parent “exercised a degree of benign neglect and trusted [her children] to come to her when a problem came up” also contained two of “the very few young people in our sample that used online technology creatively for their own purposes.” This study found mixed evidence to support that idea: There was no meaningful relationship between adult supervision and whether youth posted videos of themselves, while those who “usually” had a parent or other adult in the room were most likely to use their phones to make videos, art, or music (65%) compared to those who “rarely” (56%) or “never” (38%) did. However, those whose parents/guardians used an app or device to limit screen time were considerably less likely to use their phones to make videos, art, or music (73%, compared to 50% of those whose parents/guardians did not use an app) though equally likely to post videos of themselves (19%). The relationship between adult supervision and creative use of digital tools, therefore, is complex: while the use of technological tools to surveil and control young people’s online experience is associated with their being less likely to use digital tools creatively, supervision and support may enable doing so.

The market for technological tools and apps geared to help parents/guardians monitor their children, specifically location-track, [is rapidly expanding](#). While these apps

emphasize that they provide safety and security for the child and peace of mind for the parent or guardian, they are highly invasive and often involve monitoring that borders on stalking. Since 2013, [our research](#) has consistently identified an inverse relationship between adult surveillance and trust. In short, the more surveillance and control adults enforce, the less likely youth are to trust or turn to them for support when they encounter problems online. Fortunately, what we find in this phase of YCWW (confirmed by [other recent research with Canadian parents](#)) is that most parents and guardians trust their children. Nine in ten youth in this study agreed that their parents or guardians trust them to make good decisions when they are online. Consistent with our [qualitative research findings](#), parents or guardians are choosing to forgo tech-facilitated surveillance of young people in favour of supervision or what experts call joint-media engagement. As we have identified in [previous research](#), of importance are the boundaries and rules²³ youth and their parents or guardians set and uphold together.

Household rules

Nine in ten youth report having household rules for online activities. The most common rules (see **Figure 27** below) deal with posting contact information and interacting with strangers, prohibited websites, treating people with respect, and telling a parent or guardian about uncomfortable situations online. Consistent with the [research we conducted with Canadian families](#), the most common household rules for young people are about **contact, content, and conduct**.

Figure 27: House rules for online activities

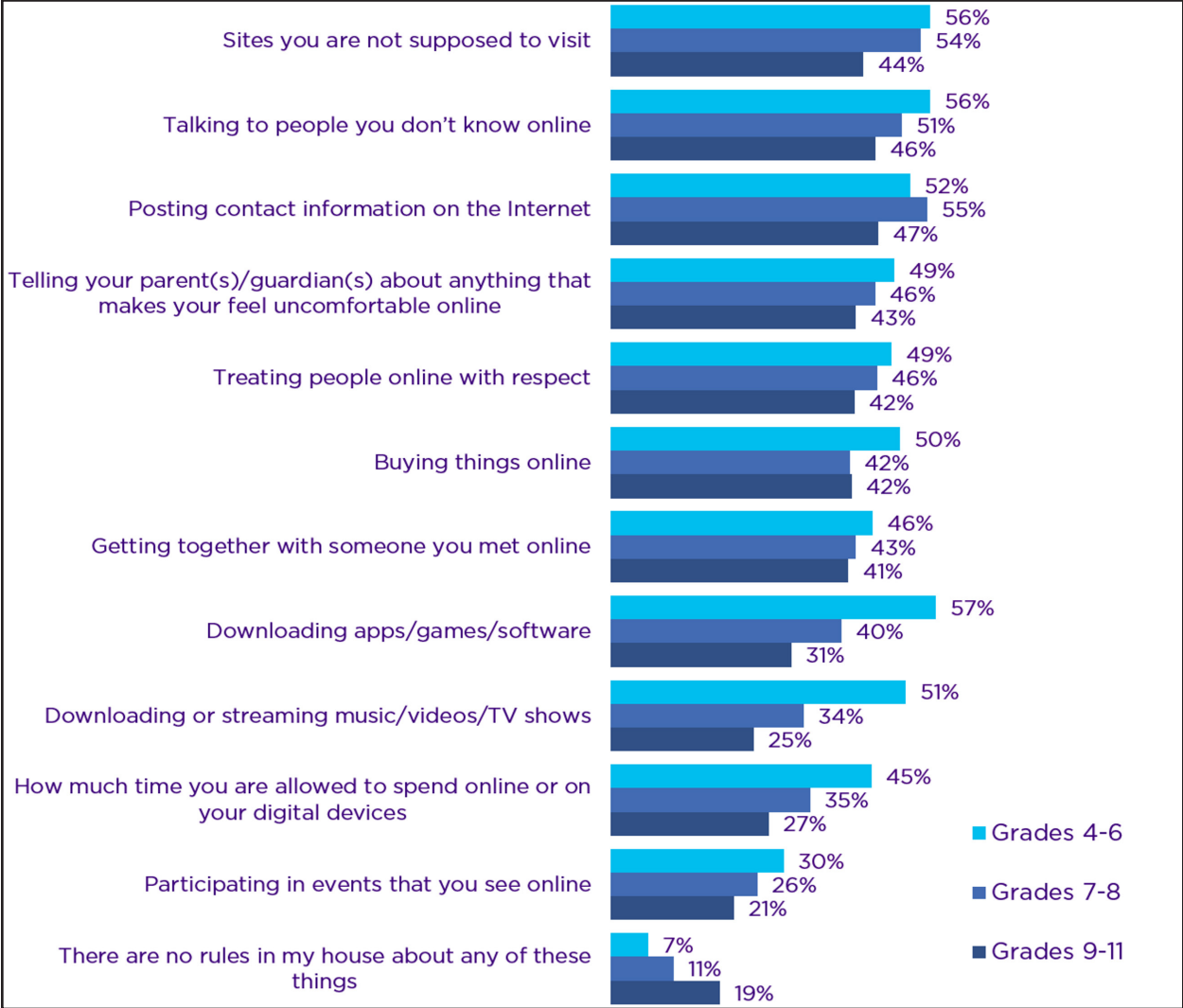


23 See: Gee, E., Takeuchi, L.M., Wartella, E. (Eds). (2018). *Children and Families in the Digital Age: Learning Together in a Media Saturated Culture*. Routledge.

Girls are slightly more likely than boys to report having any of these rules, though the differences are small. These findings are also consistent with [our previous research](#), which found that girls are typically subject to more rules when it comes to digital technology and the internet, though gender differences are considerably smaller than in past phases. Girls are most likely to have rules related to **content** (sites they are not supposed to visit, 55% of girls compared to 47% of boys) and **contact** (talking to strangers, 56% compared to 46% of boys, and posting contact information, 52% compared to 49% of boys).

Younger youth are more likely than older youth to report having each of the household rules (see **Figure 28** below). Younger youth are most likely to have rules related to **conduct** (downloading apps, games, and software and screen time).

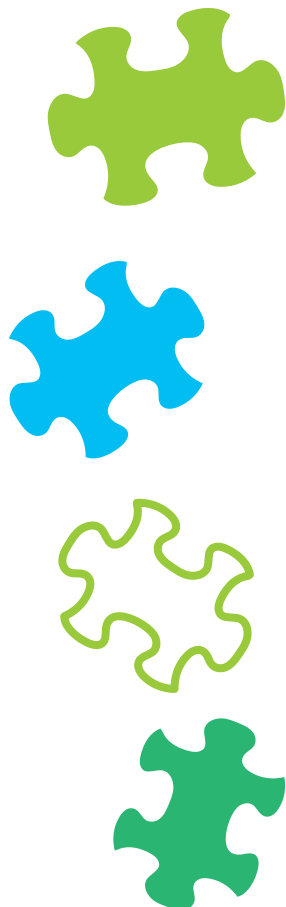
Figure 28: House rules for online activities - age



LGBTQ+ youth are more likely than heterosexual youth to report having each of the household rules. They are considerably more likely to have rules related to contact than their heterosexual peers – especially regarding posting contact information online (74% of LGBTQ+ youth compared to 48% of heterosexual youth) and meeting strangers offline (59% of LGBTQ+ youth compared to 41% of heterosexual youth).

Household rules do not vary significantly by race or (dis)ability. The most common rules for racialized and white youth are about **contact** (talking to strangers, 54% of racialized youth compared to 50% of white youth, and posting contact information, 50% racialized youth compared to 52% of white youth) and **content** (sites they are not supposed to visit, 51% racialized youth compared to 50% white youth). Youth without a disability are slightly more likely to say they do not have any household rules (13%, compared to 8% of youth with a disability), and youth with a disability are more likely to report a rule about telling their parents about an uncomfortable situation (49%, compared to 45% of youth without a disability).

Only one in ten youth said they do not have any of these rules in their home, suggesting the importance of rules as non-technological mechanisms for managing young people’s device use and online behaviour. While, in general, the presence of any household rule means a lower likelihood of undesirable behaviours, it is difficult to tease out the possible impacts of *specific* rules on *specific* behaviours.



Unplugging and Going Offline

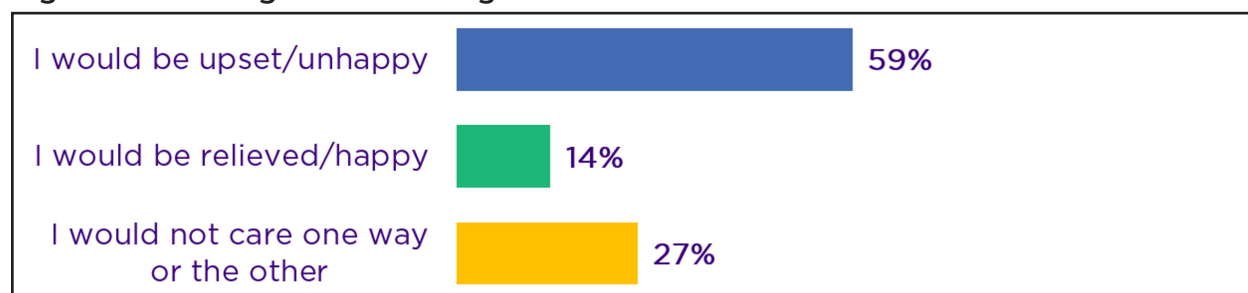


Nearly half of the participants in this study worry that they spend too much time online, but most would be unhappy if they had to go offline for a week. LGBTQ+ youth and youth with disabilities are more likely to say they would be upset if they could not be online (other than for schoolwork) for a week.

In the final section of this report, we want to draw attention to the moments when young people decide to unplug or go offline – something that has become harder to do, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Responses to the Phase IV YCWW survey tell us that young people have conflicting views regarding their own device use. For example, just under half (44%) worry that they spend too much time online, but about 6 in 10 indicate that they would be upset or unhappy if they were prevented from going online for an entire week other than for schoolwork (see **Figure 29** below).

Figure 29: Feelings if unable to go online other than for schoolwork for a week



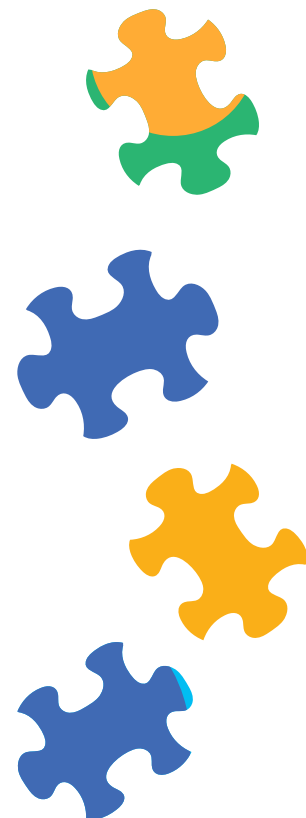
Youth who worry they spend too much time online report the same screen time levels as those who do not, suggesting that this worry does not spur meaningful behavioural changes. The presence or absence of household rules, including a rule specifically related to time spent online, is also not associated with young people’s concerns about screen time. However, youth who keep their phones in their bedrooms at night were considerably more likely to worry about their screen time (50%, compared to 38% of those who do not keep their phones in their bedrooms).

LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to say they would be upset or unhappy if they could not go online other than for schoolwork for a week (71%, compared to 57% of heterosexual youth), and we see the same directional correlation with youth with a disability (64%, compared to 57% of youth without a disability). This is perhaps reflective of the role that online platforms play in providing both groups with much-needed community, support, and resources.

Even though almost 60% of participants said they would be upset or unhappy if they were prevented from going online, relatively few (14%) indicated worry about feeling left out if they were not online. Furthermore, only 35% of participants said spending time on social media usually makes them feel happy – this response was slightly higher (41%) for youth with a disability.

While disconnecting completely or for extended periods of time might not be realistic in this digital era, these findings tell us that some young people are looking for additional support when stepping away or better managing their time, focus, and energy online. In our YCWW Phase IV [qualitative research report](#), we talked about the importance of a more collective approach to building resilience and fostering digital well-being – an approach that recognizes youth as active participants in online spaces and in generating solutions to the problems they encounter online alongside the trusted adults in their lives. This collective and cooperative strategy to navigating life online must be grounded in trust, information, and empowerment so that young people have the skills and resources they need to be online as safe, responsible, and ethical digital citizens.

We will return to this idea of building collective digital resilience throughout the remaining reports in this series, as it remains an essential piece of the digital media literacy puzzle .



NEXT STEPS

This report provides a glimpse into the online lives of young Canadians including:

- the [devices](#) they use to go online;
- [where](#) they go when they are online;
- [what](#) they are doing when they are online;
- [screen time and device use in the home](#);
- [access and device use in the classroom](#);
- the role of [adult involvement](#) (time management, supervision, and rules); and
- how they feel about [unplugging and going offline](#).

This snapshot is especially important because it summarizes data collected during the global pandemic, allowing us to reflect on what life online was like for some Canadian youth during this time. This report lays the groundwork for a series of reports that will follow detailing the online experiences, attitudes, and opinions of young Canadians. In the analyses to come, we will unpack how access, device use, activities, and adult involvement shape the contexts in which young people:

- handle online problems;
- understand and negotiate online privacy;
- witness, experience, or engage in online cruelty;
- send, receive, or forward sexts; and
- develop and expand their digital media literacy skills.

Altogether, these reports and the [Phase IV qualitative findings](#) will help us better understand what is working and what needs to be changed or improved so that young Canadians get the most out of their online experiences. This research will inspire future projects at MediaSmarts and within the broader research community. In addition, a final trends and recommendations report will provide educators, policymakers, and other critical decision-makers in government, the technology industry, education, and community organizations with the foundation to build and support collective digital resilience and well-being for young Canadians.

Appendix A

Appendix A: Demographics

