YOUNG CANADIANS IN A WIRELESS WORLD, PHASE IV

TRENDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

MediaSmarts

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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MediaSmarts would like to thank the youth advisors who reviewed and provided valuable input on the survey questionnaires for Phase IV of Young Canadians in a Wireless World.

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 seventh and final in a series of reports—all of which are now 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

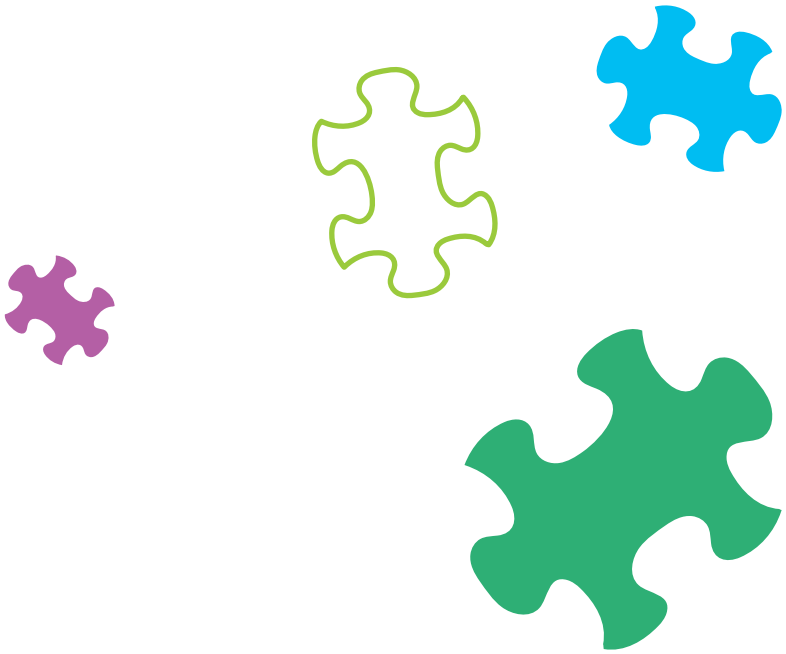
From October to December of 2021, surveys were administered online to 1,058 youth across Canada. A total of 79 students participated in a classroom-based survey, and 979 youth participated in a GenPop (general population) survey.

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 Discomforting Content Online
- Privacy
- Online Meanness and Cruelty
- Sexting
- Digital Media Literacy

This seventh and final report brings together the findings from the qualitative and quantitative portions of this study and offers a series of recommendations based on this data. We end this report with some reflections and conclusions on Phase IV of YCWW, including lessons learned and offer some 'next steps' regarding the development of Phase V and the state of digital media literacy in Canada.

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 are published on the MediaSmarts website. Topics include:

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

Phase IV concludes with this report that outlines the trends and recommendations.

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 contains 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."

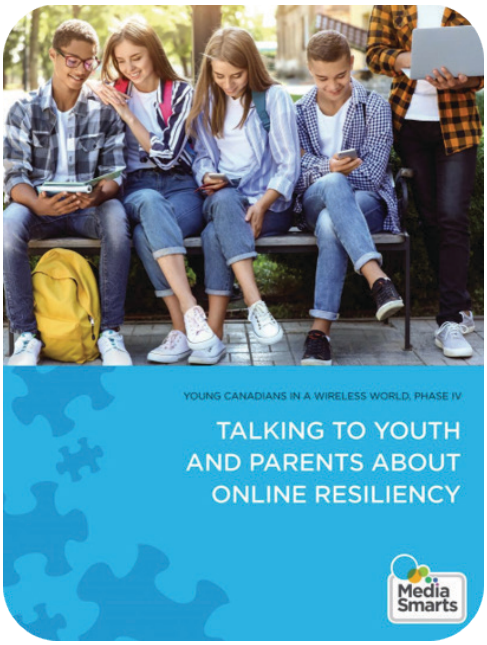
In Phase II (2004-2005), we conducted 12 focus groups with children ages 11-17 and parents of children ages 11-17 in Edmonton, Montreal, and Toronto. Additionally, 5,272 self-administered quantitative paper-based surveys were conducted in French and English classrooms in 77 selected schools across Canada 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 you read through all the reports in this series.

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:

- 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.

[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.

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

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, these findings inform the recommendations presented in this report as well as future research projects at MediaSmarts and beyond.

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.

Key Terms

Algorithm
A set of step-by-step instructions for solving a problem or completing a mathematical or computational task. Algorithms sort data to find patterns and make predictions or recommendations. The term often refers to computer programs trained to make predictions.

Artificial Intelligence
The simulation of human intelligence (for example, learning or problem solving) in machines programmed to think like humans and mimic their actions. Examples include speech recognition, translation between languages, image and facial recognition, and decision-making.

Collective Resilience
Collective resilience is the ability of a community or group of people to collectively respond to or recover from changing and sometimes stressful or adverse environments. In the online context, this can be expressed as a young person's ability to: participate in safe and inclusive online communities, draw strength and support from the people around them, foster trust, and engage in meaningful dialogue.

Discomforting Content
Discomforting content refers to content that makes the viewer or receiver of that content feel uncomfortable.

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

Online Meanness and Cruelty
When we mention *online meanness* or *online cruelty*, we are referring to things like: calling someone a name; threatening to physically hurt someone; spreading rumours; posting or sharing an embarrassing photo or video of someone; making fun of someone's race, religion, or ethnicity; making fun of someone's gender; or making fun of someone's sexual orientation.

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

Racialized Youth
When we say *racialized* throughout this report, we are referring to youth who identified as Indigenous, African/West Indian, Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern, or South/Latin American.

Relational Supervision vs. Corporate Surveillance
Relational supervision refers to more supportive approaches to protect and manage young people's information online. *Corporate surveillance* refers to more concerning practices of collecting and using personal data.

Sexting
Sexting is a combination of one or more behaviours, including sending, receiving, or forwarding sexts.

Youth with a Disability
When we say *disability* throughout this report, we are referring to participants who self-identified regarding physical disabilities, intellectual/cognitive/learning disabilities, and mental illness.

TRENDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final report of the Phase IV YCWW series, we bring together findings from the qualitative and quantitative portions of this study and offer recommendations based on this data. As in previous phases of YCWW, these recommendations are intended for various audiences, including youth, parents, educators, school boards, governments, technology companies, and researchers. Furthermore, this cumulative report is a reference point for MediaSmarts as we continue our work in education, research and evaluation, and public awareness. This national study has guided our efforts in digital media literacy since 1999 and is a touchstone for researchers and policymakers who work within and alongside the education sector.

In preparing this report, we continued to engage in a collaborative analysis process that allowed members of the research and education teams at MediaSmarts to reflect on all the Phase IV reports and craft recommendations based on their review of the findings. To facilitate this process, we created a Miro board where people could post their suggested recommendations for each themed quantitative report. The research team then finalized the recommendations based on these insights and our analysis and reflection — including integrating findings from the qualitative focus groups we conducted with youth and parents in 2019.

We have structured this report to make it easy for other researchers, practitioners, and policymakers interested in digital media literacy to identify trends and recommendations based on their interests or concerns. First, we offer high-level summaries along with key findings and trends for each themed report:

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

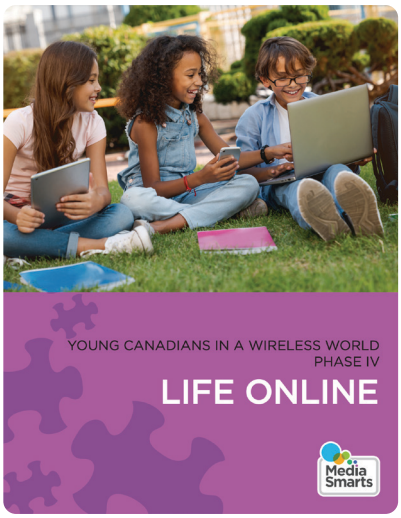
For those interested in more detailed analyses, we have linked to the full reports in each section (all the YCWW reports are available on the MediaSmarts website). Following these summaries, every section lists recommendations specific to each report theme.

We end this report with some reflections and conclusions on Phase IV of YCWW, including lessons learned and offer some 'next steps' regarding the development of Phase V and the state of digital media literacy in Canada.

Life Online

Report Summary

The first report published from the Phase IV YCWW survey —Life Online—highlights findings related to device usage, online activities, screen time, technology in the classroom, household rules and adult involvement, and how young people feel about unplugging and going offline occasionally. This report laid the foundation for the remainder of the reports that detail the challenges and opportunities of being online as well as the relationships, attitudes, and opinions of young Canadians. 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.



Key findings from the Life Online report are also summarized in this infographic.

Key Findings and Trends

Internet Access and Devices

Although a digital divide remains in Canada, especially for rural, remote, northern, and Indigenous communities, internet access was universal for the participants in this phase of YCWW. All participants in this study reported having at least one internet-capable device in the home (it is worth nothing that since we administered the surveys online, it increased the likelihood of participants having access to the internet in their households). Of the devices youth reported having in the home, smartphones and laptops were the most frequently named, followed by smart TVs, tablets, and video game consoles. Despite access to a wide variety of internet-capable devices, youth reported using only a few of them to go online. Smartphones and desktop or laptop computers ranked much higher than any other device, with half of all participants reporting that they use smartphones to go online.

Three-quarters of participants said they have their own smartphone, although older youth were significantly more likely to own a smartphone than younger youth. This does not mean that younger youth have less access to smartphones, however, because just under half of youth who do not have smartphones said they have access to someone else's (for example, one that belongs to their parent or guardian). Most of the youth who have

smartphones said they first received them not because they asked for one, but from their parents or guardians so they could keep in touch with them. This is the first of many findings from our survey highlighting the importance of caring adults in young people's online lives and how social connection is the primary motivation for young Canadians' online engagement.

Online Platforms, Trust, and Support

Young Canadians' online experiences are dominated by a few commercial platforms, mostly devoted to socialization and entertainment. When asked to list their top five favourite platforms, the top responses were (in order): YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat. The top twenty responses to this question were largely consistent across all demographic categories and were all platforms operated for commercial purposes. The commercialized environment that backdrops young people's online lives is essential to note, given that youth largely say they do not trust online platforms and would like platforms to do more to keep them safe online (a reoccurring theme in many of the Phase IV reports).

In our Phase III findings, the top twenty favourite platforms identified by participants were much less homogenized across demographic categories and included one non-commercial website (Wikipedia).

The same platforms identified by participants as their favourites also topped the list of platforms where youth have accounts. Responses revealed that only 14% of younger participants (under 13) *do not* have an account on any platform, even though all platforms listed by participants state in their terms of service that users must be 13 or older to create an account.

One significant thread throughout each report is the presence and impact of adult involvement in the online lives of youth. Participant responses to this survey revealed that caring adults are meaningfully involved in their online lives, although the nature of that involvement varies. Regarding direct forms of supervision, just over four in ten youth said they are usually online with a parent or other adult, while nearly six in ten are rarely or never supervised. A lack of direct or constant supervision for most youth correlates with participants' reports of having less adult or parent supervision the older they get. More importantly, it supports our key finding that Canadian youth feel their parents and guardians trust them to make good decisions online, and

those parents and guardians opt for supporting youth with less direct forms of supervision such as boundaries and rules to guide their online lives.

Nine in ten young people said their parents or guardians trust them to make good decisions online, and most youth also reported having at least one rule in the home relating to digital technology. The most common rules were related to which websites they were allowed to visit, talking to people they did not know online, and not posting contact information online. Only one in ten youth said they do not have any of these rules in their home. Additionally, participants' responses revealed that 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 reported was setting times and places where devices are not allowed.

According to Young Canadians, most parents or guardians trust their children and forgo more direct and potentially invasive forms of online surveillance in favour of the kinds of supervision that leave space for trust, learning, and what experts call joint-media management with youth.

These findings about adult supervision echo what participants in our (2019) Phase IV focus groups told us: They explained that while balance between control and support is tough to manage, the key element to striking this balance is trust.

Online Activities

Social connection is at the heart of internet use for young Canadians, along with entertainment. Youth reported primarily using digital technology to connect with family and friends, play online games, watch videos, and listen to music. A significant number also said they use technology for online shopping and looking up directions and transit schedules. When we asked how often youth engage in various online activities, we found that connection with friends and family was a substantial part of their time spent online. Almost half of the participants said they connect with friends and family on social networks at least daily, while another third said they do so once a week. Furthermore, among youth with access to a smartphone, the most frequent uses were to communicate with friends and family members, which nearly all participants (97%) reported doing.

Responses also highlighted other forms of social connection. Nearly half of all youth said they use their phones to find local community events, and about two-thirds said they talk online to people they have never met in person. Youth are also civically engaged, with just over half reporting that they post content about a cause or event they care about. Most youth also reported following celebrities and seeking support from peers or experts as everyday activities.

An important demographic finding was that youth with disabilities were more likely to report reaching out to their peers online, particularly on social media, to access community, support, and resources. Similarly, we noticed that LGBTQ+ youth were more likely to turn to social networks or online communities for support, highlighting the importance of online communities for these two groups of young Canadians.

Compared to our Phase III findings in 2013, the number of youth who play casino or gambling games is considerably higher (from 11% to 21%).

In addition to social connection, youth value creative online activities like making movies, art, or music online. Most youth said they post content online and use their smartphones to engage in these creative activities. About half of all participants said they also use their smartphones to take notes or journal, read books, and listen to podcasts. Further, almost all participants play online games and while a much smaller number play casino or gambling games specifically, it is concerning that online gambling did not vary meaningfully by age.

Times and Places

For a slight majority of young Canadians, weekday screen use falls within the recommended guidelines of no more than two hours per day of screen time.[3] Most participants said they spend most of their weekday screen time doing schoolwork. 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. We asked about when youth use digital devices at home and found that almost two-thirds frequently use digital devices during the hour before bedtime, and almost half do so after going to their bedroom for the night.

Compared to our Phase III findings in 2013, the number of youth who say they keep their phones in their bedrooms for the night has increased significantly (from 39% to 79%).

[3] 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

We also asked about participants' access and use of digital devices at school. Some key findings were:

- Seven in ten young people said their school had given them an e-mail account and that they must access an online learning management system (LMS) like Google Classroom. It is worth noting here that although 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.
- Six in ten youth said they have permission to use their own digital device in the classroom, but only at certain times and mainly for research for assignments and projects.
- Four in ten youth reported that they can access a site their school has blocked.

Unplugging & Going Offline

Survey responses revealed that young people have conflicting views regarding their device use and time online. Nearly half of participants worried they spend too much time online, but most said they would be unhappy if they had to go offline for a week. Their conflicted responses did not seem to be affected by screen time, as youth who worry they spend too much time online reported the same screen time levels as those who do not. These findings, therefore, suggest that their worry does not spur meaningful behavioural changes. More importantly, however, they tell us that while disconnecting completely or for extended periods of time might not be realistic in this digital era, some young people are looking for additional support when stepping away or better managing their time, focus, and energy online.

Finally, it is worth noting that LGBTQ+ youth and youth with disabilities were more likely to say they would be upset if they could not be online (other than for schoolwork) for a week, which directly supports the previously mentioned findings on the importance of online community and support to these demographics.

Participants in our (2019) Phase IV YCWW focus groups appreciated the increased opportunities for communication and collaboration that LMS offered them. However, youth also expressed concerns about privacy and surveillance—both from teachers and the technology companies that own these platforms.

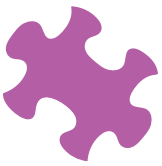
Findings about devices in the classroom echo what participants in our (2019) Phase IV YCWW focus groups told us: Access to online information in the classroom was seen as an aid to conducting research and completing assignments. However, many participants complained that their schools made it difficult to access educational content, especially by blocking YouTube and not allowing them the use of their personal devices.

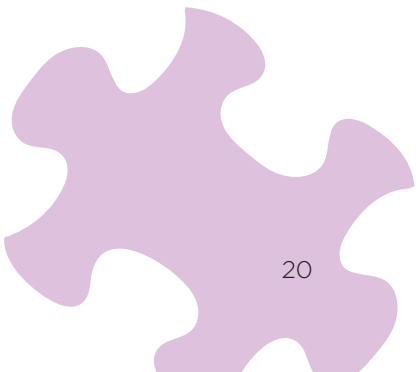
Participants in our (2019) Phase IV YCWW focus groups also expressed this contradiction between worrying about spending too much time online and being unhappy if they had to go offline for a prolonged period of time. In 2019, this inconsistency made sense because focus group participants approached social media as an amusing facilitator of offline connection. In 2021, during pandemic lockdowns, this inconsistency was most likely due to the fact that survey participants were almost entirely reliant on technology for social connection, resulting in concerns about the amount of time spent online while recognizing the necessity of being online.

Recommendations

- Sustained efforts should be made to close the digital divide in Canada, especially considering the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing shift of many services, supports, resources, and programs to online spaces and digital platforms.
- Ongoing development and delivery of digital media literacy education should be supported, particularly that which centres critical thinking skills regarding making and sharing content on social media platforms.
- Additional support and resources should be provided for parents, guardians, and caregivers to recognize and address the increased presence of younger children (especially those under 13) on social media apps, platforms, and websites.
- The conversation about young people and smartphones should be reframed to recognize that rather than asking for one, most youth were given one by their parents or guardians out of necessity—to stay in touch.
- Resources should be developed and promoted to support parents, guardians, and caregivers as they decide when and how to give children and youth devices. Specifically, they should address any potential alternative modes of communication and connection for younger children who might not be ready for a smartphone (or connected device).
- Ongoing development and promotion of resources to support parents, guardians, and caregivers should be supported as they navigate screen time and device use with young people. Specifically, resources on the risks and challenges that come with using devices in the hour before bed or after a young person has gone to bed for the night. Resources should highlight the importance of non-technological approaches to managing screen time —including the co-creation of rules and boundaries — and the necessity of building trust.
- Continued development and promotion of digital well-being resources for youth should be supported, with a focus on better managing their time, focus, and energy online.

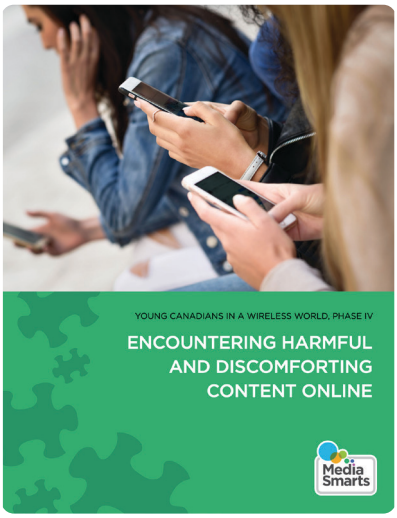
- Because risky and positive online activities are correlated with one another, the conversation around online safety should be reframed from limiting risk to maximizing opportunity and participation while managing and mitigating risks.
- Platforms and technology companies should consider the quality of online experiences and content offered to young people, especially as it impacts their sense of well-being, safety, and equitable inclusion in online communities.
- Policymakers should review regulations around online gambling in Canada, especially as it pertains to youth. This is particularly important given the increase in advertising for sports gambling in 2023.
- Research should be conducted to understand the impact of the pandemic on screen time. Specifically, qualitative research with parents/guardians and caregivers to gauge their understanding of and response to the Canadian Pediatric Society recommendations.
- Research should be conducted to better understand the impacts of online learning, especially with the increased turn to learning management systems (such as Google Classroom, Brightspace, and Blackboard), on educators' and students' privacy and data collection, learning loss, mental health, and their social and emotional experiences with learning online.
- Research, specifically qualitative focus groups and interviews with school boards, should be conducted to better understand how school boards and districts across the country are navigating and developing policies to address the increased reliance on the internet and digital technology in classrooms.
- Research should be conducted to better understand how youth find and create communities in online spaces—specifically among groups like LGBTQ+ youth, racialized youth, and youth with disabilities.





Encountering Harmful and Discomforting Content Online

Report Summary



The second report published from the Phase IV YCWW survey—Encountering Harmful and Discomforting Content Online—highlights findings related to how often young Canadians come across harmful or discomforting content online and how they tend to respond to it. We asked youth about their experiences with pornography, racist and sexist content (these questions were only asked of students in grades 7 to 11), and other posts that they see online that cause them discomfort or harm. We also asked about what youth do when they see such content and analyzed survey responses to understand the impact of adult involvement (including household rules) on seeing and responding to harmful and discomforting content online. The report ends with a section on trust and support and emphasizes the importance of building collective resilience in response to ever-changing and sometimes stressful and harmful digital environments.

Key findings from the Encountering Harmful and Discomforting Content Online report are also summarized in this infographic.

Key Findings and Trends

Discomforting Content

Just over two in ten youth said they had received discomforting content online. Young people's responses to receiving such content were split between seeking support from caring adults and taking action themselves. More than half of participants said they would tell a caring adult in their life about the discomforting content they see or receive and roughly the same amount said they would block the person who sent it to them. We observed some significant demographic differences within this divide. Younger participants were most likely to tell a parent or guardian, while older youth, youth with a disability, LGBTQ+ youth and especially transgender and gender-diverse youth (n=13) were most likely to block the person who sent them the content.

We also asked about young people's feelings and attitudes related to receiving discomforting content. Most participants reported that they know how to protect themselves online. Of the youth who did *not* feel they can protect themselves online, most reported telling a parent or guardian when they receive discomforting content.

Our findings about young Canadians' responses to discomforting content were complicated. While most youth believed they could protect themselves online, there was less agreement among them that the internet is a safe place. Additionally, despite over half of participants feeling that the internet is safe, demographic differences revealed that girls, LGBTQ+ youth, and racialized youth were least likely to feel that the internet is a safe place. It is also worth noting that most participants agreed that their parents or guardians were worried they could get hurt online.

Pornography

When we asked about where and how youth (in grades 7 to 11) come across pornography, we learned that more youth have come across pornography *unintentionally* than intentionally. Two in ten participants reported looking for pornography online and most said they were nine or older when they first looked for it. In contrast, three in ten youth said they have seen pornography online when they were not looking for it and most were between the ages of nine and 13 when this first happened.

Most participants said they came across pornographic content inadvertently on the websites they visit, on the search engines they use, and because their friends share it with them. Four in ten youth said that they take steps to avoid seeing pornography online, like using content-filtering programs, avoiding specific sites or apps, and being careful about the search terms they use. Again, speaking to intentionality, more youth said they try to avoid seeing pornography (42%) than have looked for it online (22%).

Racist and Sexist Content

Nearly half of all participants (in grades 7 to 11) reported seeing racist or sexist content online with relative frequency, and most said that this content originated from someone they did not know. Just over three in ten youth said they see this kind of content at least once a week and slightly more participants reported seeing it at least once a month. LGBTQ+ youth, racialized youth, and youth with a disability were more likely than other groups to encounter racist or sexist content online at least once a week.

Compared to our Phase III findings in 2013, young people in this phase demonstrated an increased awareness and concern about the impacts of racist and sexist content online and an increased desire to speak out.

Furthermore, youth who use an app or device to limit screen time were just as likely as those who do not to encounter racist or sexist content online. This is significant, as it suggests that the quantity of screen time does not necessarily affect whether young people will encounter harmful content online.

When asked about their responses to this content, most youth surveyed agreed that it is important to say something in response to seeing racist or sexist content online so that people know it is wrong. Although participants showed a high degree of awareness that racist and sexist content is wrong and hurtful, and should be reported when encountered, over half of participants said they do not know what to say in response. In other words, most youth lacked an understanding of how to respond to racist and sexist content online.

Adult Involvement and Household Rules

Adult involvement and supervision are positively related to young people's awareness of and desire to intervene when they encounter harmful and discomforting content. Younger youth (12-13) who are usually with an adult when they go online were more likely to:

- agree that it is important to speak up about racist and sexist content;
- tell an adult when they see that kind of content; and
- take steps to avoid seeing pornography.

However, while rules (both at home and school) positively impacted young people's ***behaviours,*** specifically how they respond to racist and sexist content online, rules had little to no impact on whether young people encountered harmful content online. Again, these findings on the persistence of harmful and discomforting content flag the issue of *quality* of online experience for youth.

Trust and Support

When encountering harmful and discomforting content online, youth said they feel most supported by parents, teachers, and friends. This is unsurprising as most youth (86%) said they have

people in their lives who can help solve the online problems they experience. However, this finding was in direct contrast to how youth felt about online companies. Many participants expressed a lack of trust in online corporations and wanted these corporations to do *more* to stop the spread of racist and sexist content online. We observed some important relationships between young people's encounters with harmful content and their trust in online corporations:

- Youth who saw pornography online without looking for it (*unintentionally*) had lower levels of trust in online corporations.
- Youth who had fewer encounters with racist or sexist content had higher levels of trust in online corporations.

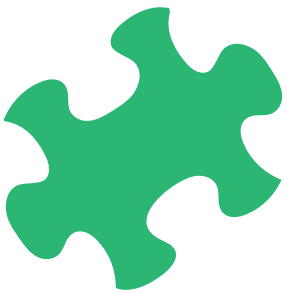
Finally, youth said they want to learn more about how to be safe online, how to report inappropriate behavior or content, and how to deal with hateful, racist, or sexist online content.

Recommendations

- Youth feel that platforms and technology companies should address the quality of online experiences and content offered to youth, especially given the regularity with which they encounter harmful and discomforting content. Specifically, youth want to see more accessible and transparent reporting functions on platforms, apps, and websites.
- Platforms and technology companies need to do more to combat racist and sexist content, especially since racialized youth and LGBTQ+ youth report seeing this content more frequently than other groups. Specifically, youth called for platforms to 'take down' this content.
- Platforms and technology companies need to do more to address the pornographic content that youth are unintentionally coming across when they engage online. Age-gating tools may be of limited effectiveness since youth are more likely to unintentionally encounter this content in their 'everyday' uses of the internet.
- Policymakers ought to consider increased consequences for platforms, websites, and apps that do not prioritize the safety

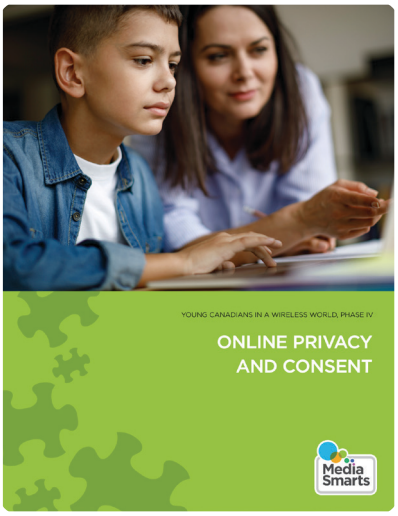
and well-being of users. Any regulations enacted should make clear that online businesses and corporations are responsible for flagging harmful content and addressing online hate and harassment. Specifically, youth want more transparency and clear and accessible communication regarding *how* governments and platforms are working to keep users safe online.

- Policymakers ought to consider the unique needs of young Canadians in developing and adapting regulations (policies and practices) that address online harms. The needs of equity-deserving groups including girls, LGBTQ+ youth, and racialized youth ought to be at the forefront of any policy development.
- Ongoing development and delivery of resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators that help in limiting, responding to and navigating harmful and discomforting content online should be supported.
- Ongoing promotion and uptake of educational resources like *My Voice is Louder Than Hate* that support youth in recognizing and responding to online hate (especially racist and sexist content) in safe and respectful ways should be supported.
- Future research projects should be expanded to include perspectives from younger youth when it comes to encountering racist, sexist, and other harmful or discomforting content online.
- Additional qualitative research should be conducted to better understand the experiences of young Canadians—especially gender-diverse youth, racialized youth, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth with disabilities—and their sense of safety and well-being in online spaces.



Online Privacy and Consent

Report Summary



The third report published from the Phase IV YCWW survey —Online Privacy and Consent—highlights findings related to how young Canadians share and protect their personal information online and how they manage their identities in online spaces; how youth do or do not engage in various privacy practices like reading terms of service or using privacy settings; how youth feel about various forms of interpersonal and corporate surveillance online; and how various rules and practices in the home and between adults and youth can impact online privacy.

This quantitative data complements findings from our two recent qualitative projects on privacy and consent and artificial intelligence and algorithms and once again highlights the importance of building collective resilience so youth can better understand and navigate issues related to privacy online. More specifically, we note the difference between what we see as *relational supervision* (more supportive approaches to protecting and managing young people's information online) and *corporate surveillance* (more concerning practices of collecting and using personal data). Young people across Canada are becoming increasingly aware of how their personal information is collected, used, and shared by online corporations and platforms, and they are looking for more information and resources on how to maintain control over their data. *Relational supervision* plays a critical role here, providing the trust and support needed to keep young people informed and safe online.

Key findings from the Online Privacy and Consent report are also summarized in this infographic.

Key Findings and Trends

Protecting Information and Managing Identities

Our research revealed that young people are generally mindful of what they post and share while engaging in online spaces. Eight in ten youth reported that they do not share their personal information online (like their home address, phone number, or birthday). Youth were not only mindful of their own content but also of content posted and shared about them by others online. Nine in ten participants in this study said they would take

action to address unwanted personal content posted about them by others. Most youth said they would ask the person who posted it to take it down, or they would tell their parents or guardians. Participants also reported taking action to protect their information and manage their identities. Half of youth said they have posed as someone else online or used a fake account to engage in various online spaces for reasons such as:

- protecting their privacy;
- playing a joke on a friend;
- posting anonymously; and
- pretending they are older.

Engaging in Privacy Practices

Regarding privacy practices, we asked about participants' awareness of privacy policies online. Almost half of the participants said they never read privacy policies or terms of services, regardless of whether they read them on their own or have someone's help. Of the 52% who said they do read them, older youth were considerably more likely to have read these documents on their own, while younger youth were more likely to do so with the help of a parent or guardian. We found that a worryingly large number of youth (63%) mistakenly believe that the presence of a privacy policy means a website will not share their personal information with others. Interestingly, those who believe this are *more* likely to say they have read a privacy policy or terms of service. These findings, consistent with our qualitative research, highlight the opacity of many privacy policy documents produced by various online platforms. Furthermore, because we know that many platforms, specifically social media platforms, share and broker personal information regularly, it is concerning that young Canadians are interacting in these online spaces with a false sense of privacy and community.

Just over half of youth said they use privacy *settings* when using digital devices or engaging in online spaces. Most participants said that they use privacy settings to hide the content they post online from strangers, and a significantly smaller number of young people said they do so to hide content from friends and trusted adults in their lives. It is worth noting that of the 46% of youth who did not use privacy settings, 25% said they did not do so because they did not know how. Again, this shows some lack of understanding of privacy practices among youth. Young Canadians did express a desire to improve their understanding, as 37% of youth reported that they would like to learn more about how to use privacy settings.

Trust, Setting Boundaries, and Questioning (Corporate) Surveillance

Young Canadians conveyed complex attitudes and opinions about surveillance, supervision, and the involvement of others in their online lives. Three-quarters of youth thought that family members should be allowed to use devices or apps to track where they are, but only two percent of youth agreed that online companies (like marketing companies) should be allowed to track their location. Following a similar pattern, most participants reported that they want their social media content to be seen by their friends, or their parents, guardians, or other family members, but few wanted their content to be accessible to the police, online companies, or future employers.

Participants in our (2019) Phase IV focus groups also expressed this catch 22: That no matter how hard they tried, they could not opt out of the systemic surveillance that comes with being online.

Although youth generally expressed a high level of trust in family members and a low level of trust in online corporations in the context of surveillance, our research revealed further complexities in young people's attitudes towards these groups. For instance, just over half of youth said they trust online companies to make good decisions about their privacy and safety online. Additionally, most youth agreed that parents or guardians should respect their online privacy (e.g., by not reading their texts or listening to their conversations), despite a majority also agreeing that parents or guardians should keep track of what their children are doing online and almost half of youth saying that they would share their passwords with a parent or guardian. This indicates that while young people think adults should have a *general* sense of what they are doing online and engage in some supervision, they are more uneasy about sharing the *specifics* of their online lives and being surveilled.

Young Canadians trust in online corporations has been on a steady decline (since Phase III in 2013) rooted in longstanding concerns about corporate monitoring; our most recent YCWW participants are simply more aware of the extent to which corporate monitoring occurs.

Adult guidance and supervision positively impacted young Canadians' navigation of online privacy and consent. Most youth said they learn how to use privacy settings from parents, guardians, or teachers. Furthermore, youth who said they are usually with an adult when they go online were:

- more likely to tell their parents or guardians about unwanted personal content posted by others;
- more likely to read privacy policies and terms of service; and
- least likely to hide content from a parent, guardian, or someone else in their family.

Recommendations

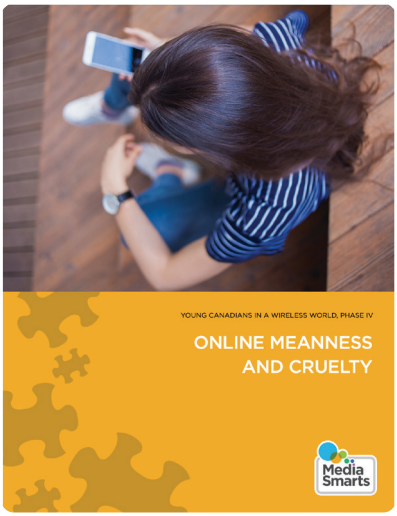
- Support ongoing development and delivery of resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators that help young Canadians understand how personal information is collected, used, and shared by online corporations.
- Support ongoing development and delivery of resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators that help young Canadians better understand privacy settings, platform defaults, and terms of service and privacy policies. (Specifically, resources that communicate the importance of data privacy as well as interpersonal privacy.)
- Support ongoing development and resources for parents, guardians, and caregivers that emphasize co-creating household rules related to sharing personal information online.
- Communicate with parents, guardians, and caregivers the importance of *relational supervision*—over surveillance and control—which is positively correlated to building the trust needed for young people to feel safe and supported, resulting in greater uptake of privacy settings, features, practices, and awareness amongst youth.
- Work with school boards and Ministries of Education to better understand and navigate the privacy impacts of the increased reliance on technology and online learning management systems in classrooms. Specifically, conduct a qualitative needs assessment both for students and educators with an emphasis on how this increased reliance on technology and online learning systems potentially impacts trust between them.

- Continue to communicate and mobilize recommendations from MediaSmarts' qualitative research on privacy and consent, specifically those that call on online platforms and policymakers to consider the unique needs of young people in developing meaningful online consent policies and practices.
- Policymakers ought to consider increased consequences for platforms, websites, and apps that do not prioritize the privacy and data protection of children and youth. Any regulations enacted ought to make clear that platforms have a responsibility to clearly communicate, in ways that children and youth can understand, how their data is used—especially if it is shared with third parties.
- This and past MediaSmarts research suggests that youth support increased uptake by policymakers and technology companies of 'right to erasure' or 'right to be forgotten' policies that respect young people's requests to fully delete content and data about them from apps, platforms, and websites.
- Platforms and technology companies need to do more to make privacy policies and terms of service agreements easier to read and understand. Consider designing child-friendly terms of service and/or privacy policies in consultation with youth.
- Platforms and technology companies ought to consider privacy-by-design practices for children and youth, including the use of privacy defaults that implement the highest privacy standards and data protection, as well as greater user control and increased options for audience settings.
- Additional research should be conducted to understand how (in what contexts and for what purposes) young Canadians navigate privacy and manage their identities online—mainly when using fake or anonymous accounts on specific platforms.
- Further qualitative research should be conducted examining young Canadians ongoing concerns about corporate surveillance, data collection, and data sharing in the classroom.

Online Meanness and Cruelty

Report Summary

The fourth report published from the Phase IV YCWW survey—Online Meanness and Cruelty—is the first of two reports focused on relationships and technology. This report highlights how often and where young Canadians experience, witness, and engage in online cruelty and the reasons or motivations for their engagement. We also summarize findings related to how young people respond to online meanness and cruelty and from whom they seek support in navigating these harmful experiences. Findings presented in this report, like in previous reports, highlight the importance of interpersonal and relational support and building collective resilience to respond to the challenges that can come from interacting with others in online spaces.



Additionally, this report highlights the complex intersections between how youth experience, engage in and respond to online meanness and cruelty. Rather than showing clear differences (in behaviour and interactions) between youth who experience and youth who engage in online meanness and cruelty, our analysis reveals an overlap of experiences, engagements, and responses. These findings highlight the need to develop diverse interventions that acknowledge the complicated nature of various online harms. Specifically, we note within the report a need for resources that emphasize the interpersonal and relational responses that many young people seem to prefer when it comes to responding to online meanness and cruelty.

Key findings from the Online Meanness and Cruelty report are also summarized in this infographic.

Key Findings and Trends

Experiencing Online Meanness and Cruelty

In this study, almost half of youth said they have witnessed some form of online meanness and cruelty (towards others) and about one-third of youth said they have personally experienced it. Youth were most likely to experience online meanness and cruelty in the context of online gaming, by text or private messaging, or in comments and posts on social media platforms.

A few demographic differences stood out in participants' responses. LGBTQ+ youth and youth with a disability were considerably more likely to say they experienced online cruelty. Additionally, while the number of participants who identified as transgender (n=7) and gender diverse (n=6) is not large enough to be statistically significant, it is notable that nine in ten transgender youth and seven in ten gender-diverse youth said they had experienced online meanness and cruelty. Lastly, in this phase of YCWW, boys and girls reported experiencing online meanness or cruelty at the same rate.

In our (2013) Phase III findings, girls were nearly a third more likely to experience online meanness and cruelty than boys. However, in this phase of YCWW, boys and girls experience online meanness and cruelty at the same rate.

Engaging in Online Meanness and Cruelty

Just under two in ten youth admitted to engaging in online meanness or cruelty, and most said they rarely engage in this kind of behaviour online. Youth who reported engaging in online meanness or cruelty did so mostly in the context of online gaming or through texts and private messages, which reflects the findings on where youth experience online meanness and cruelty. When we asked youth how they engage in online meanness and cruelty:

- three-quarters of youth said they had called someone a name;
- half said they do it as a joke; and
- just over a third said they do it in response to someone who hurt them first.

Responding to Online Meanness and Cruelty

In response to *experiencing* online meanness or cruelty, youth were most likely not to do anything or ignore the behaviour. However, two-thirds of participants said they had responded after *witnessing* online meanness or cruelty. In other words, youth were more likely to respond if they witnessed someone *else* experiencing meanness and cruelty rather than if they experienced it themselves. Youth also preferred a relational approach in responding to online meanness and cruelty. Most said they would respond by communicating privately online or talking face-to-face with either the person who was hurt or the person who was mean or cruel. In contrast, very few young people said they would report cruelty to the platform(s) where it occurs or call the police.

Rules, Trust, and Support

Our research revealed that different forms of adult supervision impact young people's experiences of online meanness and cruelty differently. When parents or guardians managed screen time using technological solutions, young people were more likely to experience, witness, or engage in online meanness and cruelty than if their screen time was managed using non-technological approaches. Additionally, youth who were usually with an adult when they went online were less likely to experience, witness, and engage in online meanness or cruelty and were more likely to respond to it when they witnessed it. Youth with any household rules around technology use were:

- less likely to engage in online meanness and cruelty or say they were 'just joking around' as motivation for engaging in online meanness and cruelty, and
- more likely to respond when they witness online meanness and cruelty or ask parents or guardians for help in situations of online meanness and cruelty.

In our (2019) Phase IV YCWW focus groups, parents explained that they controlled their child's online engagements in an attempt to prevent them from experiencing online harms. However, YCWW survey results suggest that parental control could have an inverse effect on young people's experiences of online harms, like meanness and cruelty.

Youth reported having rules related to online cruelty in other contexts. Seven in ten youth said that their school has rules about cyberbullying, and significantly, most participants reported finding these rules helpful. At school, youth said they typically learn about the rules and policies on cyberbullying through lessons in the classroom, school assemblies and handouts they take home. Although most youth reported that they have learned how to deal with cyberbullying from parents/guardians and teachers, one-quarter of youth said they want to learn more about how to deal with it.

Understanding Online Meanness and Cruelty

We noted some connections between online meanness and cruelty, racist and sexist content, and time spent online:

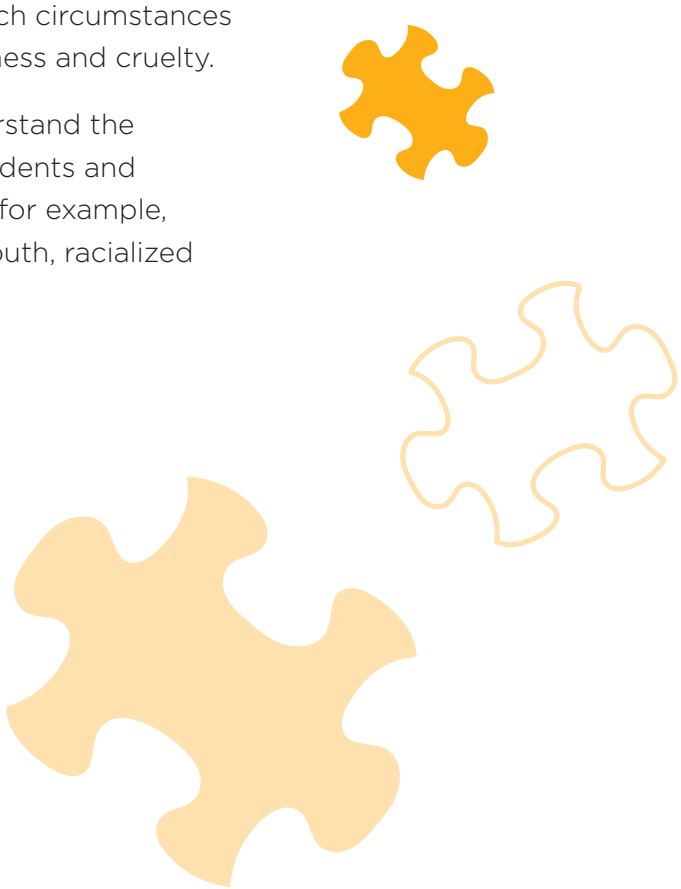
- Youth who have experienced online cruelty were more likely to say that they've also seen racist and sexist content online.
- Both youth who have experienced online meanness and cruelty and engaged in it were more likely to worry that they spend too much time online.
- Youth with high levels of weekday screen time were most likely to witness online meanness and cruelty frequently.

Additionally, rather than providing clear differences (in behaviour and interactions) between youth who experience and youth who engage in online meanness and cruelty, our analysis revealed a complex intersection of experiences, engagements, and responses. For example, youth who engaged in online meanness and cruelty also had experiences of online meanness and cruelty, and vice versa. These findings highlight the need to complicate our understanding of online meanness and cruelty to avoid oversimplifying the dynamics of 'victims' and 'perpetrators.'

Recommendations

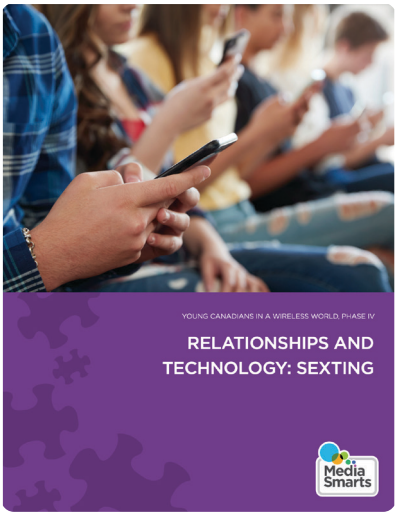
- Support ongoing development and delivery of resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators that help young Canadians navigate experiences of online meanness and cruelty. Specifically, resources should be developed that acknowledge and emphasize the complex intersections of experiences, engagements, and responses to online meanness and cruelty.
- Support development and promotion of resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators that address the primary online contexts in which youth experience online meanness and cruelty: online gaming, texts and private messages, and social media posts and comment threads. Resources should reject victim-blaming approaches such as suggesting youth stop engaging in these spaces.
- Support development and promotion of resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators that address the primary motivations for engaging in online meanness and cruelty: name-calling, as a joke, and in retaliation to their own experience of online meanness.
- Support development and promotion of resources for helping youth respond to online meanness and cruelty. These resources should embrace the interpersonal or relational approaches preferred by youth and encourage youth (especially LGBTQ+, trans and gender-diverse youth, racialized youth, and youth with disabilities) to safely advocate for themselves and their sense of safety and well-being in online communities.

- Communicate and mobilize findings about online meanness and cruelty with community organizations that support LGBTQ+, trans and gender-diverse youth, racialized youth, and youth with a disability.
- Communicate with parents, guardians, and caregivers the value of *relational supervision* over surveillance and control, emphasizing how supportive adult involvement (e.g., the co-creation of household rules) can decrease the likelihood that young people will experience or engage in online meanness and cruelty.
- Work with school boards and Ministries of Education to revise and adapt 'bullying' policies to reflect the complexity of this behaviour, overlapping experiences, and various forms of engagement. Reinforce that students find school rules helpful, but schools and school boards ought to consider reframing policies and practices to focus on social-emotional learning, managing online conflict, and promoting positive social norms (such as publicizing the relatively low rates of online conflict among youth.)
  Conduct research, specifically qualitative discussions with youth, to better understand why and in which circumstances they ignore or disengage with online meanness and cruelty.
- Conduct additional research to better understand the experiences of youth who report higher incidents and frequency of online meanness and cruelty—for example, LGBTQ+ youth, trans and gender-diverse youth, racialized youth, and youth with a disability.



Sexting

Report Summary



The fifth report published from the Phase IV YCWW survey—Sexting—is the second of two reports focused on relationships and technology. This report highlights findings related to sending, receiving, and forwarding sexts and what the survey data tell us about young Canadians' motivations and attitudes toward sexting. Within the Phase IV YCWW survey, questions related to sexting were only available to participants in grades 7 to 11 (n=659). Overall, the sample size for youth who indicated they engaged in sexting (either sending, receiving, or forwarding sexts) was very small; in most cases, **n=110 or less**.

In this report we examined the role of trust and support in sexting behaviours among youth, focusing specifically on the impact of adult involvement and supervision and the desire for further educational support on this topic. Like the previous report on online meanness and cruelty, this report also highlights complex intersections between the sending, receiving, and forwarding behaviours that comprise sexting. For the most part, there are no clear divisions between these behaviours, as young people who engage in one sexting behaviour frequently also engage in others.

Key findings from the Sexing report are also summarized in this infographic.

Key Findings and Trends

Sending, Receiving, and Forwarding Sexts

Only **one in ten** youth reported that they had **sent** a sext. Among those, most (63%) said they had sent them to someone they are in a relationship with, one-third of youth sent them to someone they only knew online, and only 3% of youth who sext reported sending a sext to someone they do not know at all.

Just under **two in ten** youth said that they had **received** a sext. Of those who reported receiving a sext, almost identical numbers of participants reported receiving it from someone they were in a relationship with and from someone they did not know at all. An important demographic difference to note is that girls were significantly more likely than boys to receive a sext from someone they do not know.

In total, **three in ten** youth said they had **forwarded** a sext. Of those who reported *sending* a sext, four in ten reported that the person they sent a sext to had forwarded that sext to someone else. Of those who reported *receiving* sexts, just under two in ten said that they had received a sext that was forwarded to them by someone else.

Overall, these findings indicate that sexting among Canadian youth occurs primarily within the context of a romantic relationship, and there are no clear divisions between sexting behaviours (i.e., sending, receiving, and forwarding sexts), as young people who engage in one sexting behaviour often also engage in others. We noted relationships between sexting and other online behaviours and attitudes. Youth who engaged in sexting were:

- less likely to say they know how to protect themselves online;
- less likely to agree that the internet is a safe place; and
- more likely to worry about spending too much time online.

Digital Well-Being, Trust, and Support

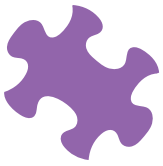
For youth in grades 7 to 11, parents or guardians played a predominant role in learning about sexting and handling relationships online, followed by teachers and friends. Youth with household rules around technology were less likely to:

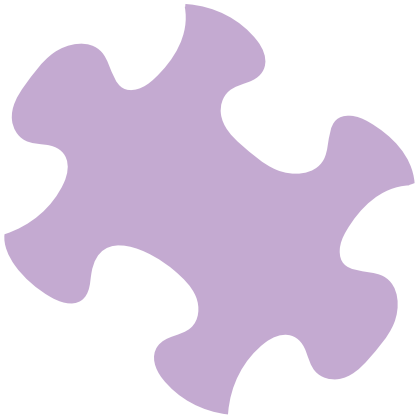
- engage in sending sexts;
- report receiving sexts; and
- report receiving forwarded sexts (by someone other than the original sender).

Very few participants reported wanting to learn more about issues related to sexting and relationships. Those who had sent sexts were somewhat more likely to want to learn about sexting-related topics, and those who had *received* sexts were much more likely (17%, compared to 5% of those who had not sent sexts), but those who had forwarded sexts were actually *less* likely to want to learn about these topics. Furthermore, despite reporting that they learn from trusted adults and peers, it is interesting to note that youth who engaged in sexting behaviours were less likely to agree that they have people in their lives who can help them with online problems. This finding is particularly concerning because while there is evidence that sexting is not an inherently harmful activity, it does involve some risks, and significant harm is possible when sexts are shared without the original sender's consent. It is also concerning that certain demographics may be more impacted than others. For instance, more youth agreed that people would say mean things about girls who post photos of themselves deemed too sexy or revealing online than about boys who do the same, indicating that girls may be especially and unequally impacted by the risks and harms associated with sexting.

Recommendations

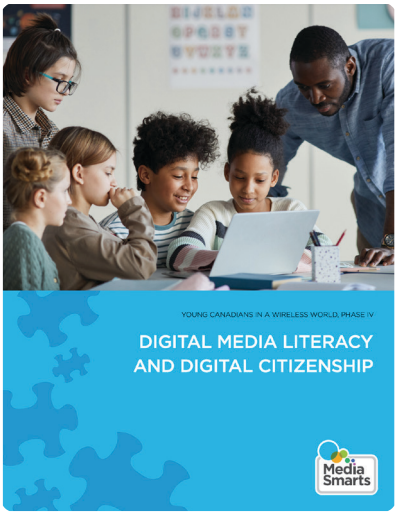
- Reframe the conversation about young people and sexting to recognize the overall low rates of sexting behaviour, that sexting is most likely to occur within a romantic relationship or to develop intimacy with a romantic partner, and the complex intersection of sexting behaviours.
- Develop and incorporate materials on healthy online relationships into sexual education curriculum and resources for youth, parents, guardians, and caregivers.
- Support ongoing development and delivery of resources to help youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators navigate conversations about sexting. Specifically, resources ought to differentiate between consensual and non-consensual sexting; avoid victim-blaming; confront gender stereotyping and moral disengagement; and focus on the harm that is possible when sexts are shared without the original sender's consent.
- Sexting resources for youth need to remain connected to young people's experiences and lead from a place of non-judgmental support. Specifically, resources ought to avoid overreaction, victim blaming and shaming, and criminalization which reduces trust and decreases the likelihood that young people will seek adult support. Work with community justice and youth-serving organizations to investigate non-legal resources and responses to non-consensual sexting. Conduct additional research to better understand the associated risks and protective factors for sexting behaviours among young Canadians, including demographics that may be unequally impacted by potential risks.
- Research, specifically qualitative discussions with youth, should be conducted to better understand their motivations for engaging in sexting behaviours (especially forwarding sexts). Research is needed to examine whether moral disengagement mechanisms (including double-standards and stereotypes) remain motivating factors for youth or whether new factors are at play.





Digital Media Literacy

Report Summary



The sixth report published from the Phase IV YCWW survey —Digital Media Literacy and Digital Citizenship—highlights findings related to verifying information online, learning digital media literacy skills, and ethical digital citizenship. Data collected through the survey helps us better understand how young Canadians determine the reliability of the sources they come across online and whether they understand the benefit of some verification practices over others. This report also includes a brief case study on whether youth understand the business model and general operation of search engines.

Additionally, the report highlights the digital media literacy skills young Canadians are learning, from whom, and what skills they are interested in learning more about. Knowing more about how youth navigate and participate in online spaces gives us some insight into their ability to actively and positively participate in online communities as digital citizens. This report also solidifies the need for a national strategy to prioritize digital media literacy education in classrooms and communities across Canada.

Key findings from the Digital Media Literacy and Digital Citizenship report are also summarized in this infographic.

Key Findings and Trends

Finding and Verifying information

Most youth said they use the internet to find information related to their hobbies and interests, get updates on entertainment news and celebrities, and keep up with sports, news, current events, or politics. Young Canadians reported using relatively savvy searching practices when looking for information online. For instance, seven in ten youth understood that different search terms can generate different results, and eight in ten said they accessed information from sites they believe are reliable. Youth were most likely to check whether the content they found online was reliable when they needed it for schoolwork or personal interests and less likely to do so for the content they see or plan to share on social media. To confirm the reliability of the information they find online, youth tended to:

- ask teachers for advice (this was especially true of younger youth);
- check sources already known to be reliable; and
- look at other websites to see if they say the same thing.

In this study, we also asked participants to indicate whether they believed a series of statements about how Google operates to be true or false, to identify young people's level of understanding of Google's business model and how the search engine operates. Participants' responses revealed a lack of confidence in their knowledge of this topic and a poor understanding of how the online corporate business model works, echoing findings on young Canadians' understanding of online privacy policies.

Compared to Phase III (in 2013), in this Phase, we observed an increased use of almost all search practices as well as practices for determining the reliability of information by participants.

Learning Digital Media Literacy Skills

Young Canadians reported learning how to find and verify information online primarily from their parents or guardians and teachers. Aside from these trusted adults, about one-third of youth also reported that their friends teach them how to find information online, although they did not rely on these relationships as much to verify if that information is true. Friends, teachers, and parents or guardians were also predominantly responsible for teaching youth more technical online skills (e.g., learning about algorithms, coding, and making media). However, some youth reported a lack of knowledge in technical skills (three in ten youth said they have never learned what an algorithm is or how it works). That young Canadians reported relying on parents and teachers most often for learning digital media literacy skills is unsurprising, given that about two-thirds of youth said they believe their parents or guardians and teachers know more about digital technology than they do. Significantly, many young people expressed a desire to learn more about digital media literacy skills, especially those related to finding and verifying information.

Digital Citizenship

Findings from previous Phase IV reports reveal that young Canadians were already engaged in aspects of responsible digital citizenship by:

- reaching out to others in instances of online meanness and cruelty;
- being aware of the time and energy they spend online;
- using digital technology for social connection with friends and family;
- using a variety of verification skills and privacy practices.

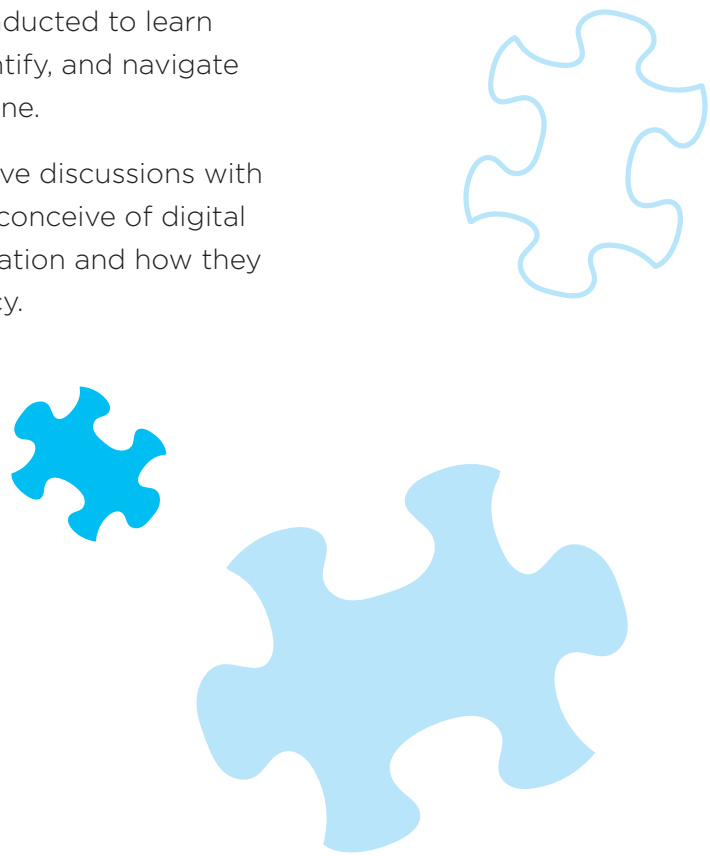
In addition to these actions, our findings revealed that youth are further engaged in responsible digital citizenship by contributing positive things online and engaging in online advocacy. Three-quarters of young Canadians said they feel like they contribute positive things online. Positive participation in online communities appeared to be an important consideration for many participants since about one-third of youth said they only post things online that they are sure will not offend or upset others. Around the same number of participants also felt they are expected to only post positive things online.

In addition to posting positive content online, most youth were engaged in online advocacy. More than half of the participants said they post content online about a cause or event they care about, and just over one-third said they have joined or supported an activist group online. Finally, we shifted focus from the actions of participants to their thoughts on the role of online platforms. Eight in ten youth agreed that online platforms should supervise what people post and comment in online spaces and take down bad content.

Recommendations

- Support ongoing development and delivery of comprehensive digital media literacy resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators in schools, communities, and homes across Canada.
- Work with Ministries of Education to integrate holistic digital media literacy curriculum for K-12 students across Canada. This must include greater resources and support for teachers (such as MediaSmarts' lesson plans, Civix CTRL-F program, AML lessons, and ACTUA's coding program among others) as well as increased access to devices, technology, and technical support in the classroom.
- Continue to grow MediaSmarts' Teacher's Champion program.
- Continue to increase the number of collaborators who participate in Media Literacy Week and Digital Citizen Day.
- Ongoing development and promotion of resources for educators on media-making in the classroom.
- Support ongoing development and promotion of authentication and verification resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators. Specifically, resources are needed to address verification practices on social platforms as well as how search engines operate and are impacted by corporate business models.
- Support ongoing development and promotion of resources for younger Canadians on determining the reliability of information.
- Ongoing development and promotion of resources for youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators that empower young Canadians to engage as active and informed digital citizens.
- Reframe the conversation about young people and their technical skills to recognize that youth are not de facto experts—even if they appear to 'take-up' technology with ease. Communicate with parents, guardians, caregivers, and educators that young people consider ***them*** to be trusted sources of expert advice and support.
- Support ongoing communication and promotion of best practices in authenticating and verifying information online, specifically; the need to shift from outdated close reading strategies to more effective lateral readings strategies.
- Continue to advocate with policymakers and government officials for a national digital media literacy strategy for Canada, including the development of a framework and measurable benchmarks.

- Increase long-term and sustained government funding and resources to support digital media literacy education both in schools and communities.
- Enable better coordination and collaboration between digital media literacy organizations across Canada that results in more robust development and effective delivery of education and programming. Engage policymakers and platforms in conversations about the responsibilities of technology companies for fostering safer and healthier spaces online with the goal of bolstering ethical and responsible digital citizenship.
- Conduct research that examines the potential impacts of artificial intelligence-driven search tools—like Chat GPT—on young people's authentication and verification skills and practices. As well as the potential for young people to form parasocial relationships with the chatbots behind these search tools and whether this parasocial relationship impacts their authentication and verification practices.
- Additional research should also be conducted to learn more about how youth encounter, identify, and navigate misinformation and disinformation online.
- Conduct research, specifically qualitative discussions with youth, to better understand how they conceive of digital citizenship and positive online participation and how they engage in online activism and advocacy.



REFLECTIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND NEXT STEPS

At a time when our lives were quickly shifting online due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, Phase IV of YCWW provided us with a unique opportunity to pause and reflect on what life online was like for some young people in Canada. Over the course of several reports, we have presented a 'kid's-eye-view' of:

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

Each report examines the experiences, attitudes, and opinions of young Canadians. This final trends and recommendations report brings these findings together to emphasize, from the perspective of young Canadians, what is working for youth online and what needs to be changed or improved. Our primary objective has been to provide youth, parents, guardians, caregivers, educators, policymakers and other critical decision-makers in government, the technology industry, education, community organizations, and researchers with the knowledge to build and support collective resilience. In other words, to empower young people—drawing on the support of the people they trust—to cultivate positive online experiences and be prepared to manage harms and challenges as they arise.

Reflections and Conclusions

Phase IV of YCWW has been a lesson in flexibility, adaptation, and perseverance, so much so that we wrote an additional report on methods to share lessons learned with other researchers. As the pandemic necessitated, we made several pivots to our research design, methodology, and approach to maintain the integrity of the study and to meet our project objectives. This phase has also been a lesson on the strength, reflexivity, tenacity, and resolve of young Canadians to make the most of technology and the internet.

While this report offers key findings, trends, and recommendations for each of the themed reports in this Phase of YCWW, we want to offer a few final thoughts regarding what we have learned.

First, we learned that young Canadians are informed and responsible digital citizens who navigate their safety, well-being, and privacy online and make intentional choices about how they can participate positively in online spaces. While youth are supported by caring

adults in their lives, they are clear that they expect *more* from platforms and technology companies—who appear opaque and untrustworthy to them—to feel included, safe, and informed online.

Not surprisingly, given the pandemic context, we saw screen time increase in this phase of YCWW, but so too did young people's awareness of the time they are spending online and their desire to do so meaningfully (e.g., for social connection, learning, creativity, and online advocacy). This is particularly impressive, given that they had little choice but to 'be online' during the pandemic. Similarly, the timing of this study provided a unique glimpse into continued access, inclusion, and digital equity challenges in Canada. The unpredictable and unequal impacts of online learning in the context of the digital divide were even more evident due to pandemic-related disruptions and an increased reliance on devices and online learning management systems (like Google Classroom) in schools.

We also observed complex interactions between and insights into the behaviours, attitudes, and motivations that define young people's online experiences. Not only did we learn about how youth can be better supported in the various online challenges they navigate, but this phase of YCWW also validated the need for more digital media literacy resources in Canadian classrooms, communities, and homes. In this regard, the specific recommendations within each report theme converge to reveal some important conclusions:

- Digital media literacy resources should highlight the importance of forms of support that build trust, allow for co-creation of rules and boundaries, and foster open and supportive communication between youth and the caring adults in their lives. **The use of technology-facilitated surveillance to monitor, control, and spy on young people erodes trust and does not work as a meaningful form of guidance and support.**

- Online harms are complicated and often overlap with one another and with positive online engagement. Actions taken by youth and their caregivers, including limiting screen time, do not eliminate exposure to online harm. **Online platforms and technology companies have a responsibility to create safer and healthier online spaces and must be held accountable for improving the quality of online experiences and content offered to young people.**

- **We need to learn more about the experiences of young Canadians—especially gender-diverse youth, racialized youth, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth with disabilities—to improve their sense of well-being, safety, and equitable inclusion in online communities.**

The importance of building collective resilience to support youth online is woven throughout each of the reports and all the recommendations in Phase IV of YCWW. At MediaSmarts, we know it is crucial to move beyond an individualized model of resiliency, to pay attention to structural barriers to digital well-being, and the importance of the families, educators, and communities that are a predominant part of young people's lives. Approaches towards fostering digital well-being among youth should recognize youth as experts on their own lives and active participants in online spaces, capable of generating solutions to the problems they encounter online alongside the caring 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.

Next Steps

This project contributes to academic knowledge across many fields and strengthens an evidence base upon which policymakers, platforms, and practitioners develop models, policies, and procedures to bolster digital media literacy. We have already begun to increase the reach and impact of this research through social media posts and engagement, blog posts, media interviews and presentations.

Over the next several months, we will continue to engage in knowledge mobilization activities, including:

- presenting the results of this study within the research community at academic conferences;
- communicating key findings, trends, and recommendations in easy-to-understand and accessible ways on MediaSmarts' social platforms;
- advocating for the implementation of recommendations with policymakers and government decision-makers through consultations, invited presentations, and requests to testify before parliamentary committees;
- advocating for implementing recommendations with platforms and technology companies through MediaSmarts' established partnerships with platforms, including Meta (Instagram and Facebook), TikTok, Google (YouTube), Amazon, TELUS, Bell, and Wattpad; and
- sharing the key findings, trends, and recommendations with youth-serving community organizations, especially those that work with Indigenous, Black, and racialized youth, gender-diverse youth, 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, and youth with disabilities.

Finally, following our research-to-resource model, the Phase IV YCWW findings will be used by MediaSmarts' education team to update various lesson plans, workshops, tip sheets, tool kits, interventions, and other existing digital media literacy resources. These findings will also be used to develop and design new resources and interventions to address issues highlighted in the research while also drawing on promising practices—especially those directly surfaced by young Canadians.

As we conclude Phase IV of YCWW, we are already thinking ahead to Phase V and note the following future research considerations:

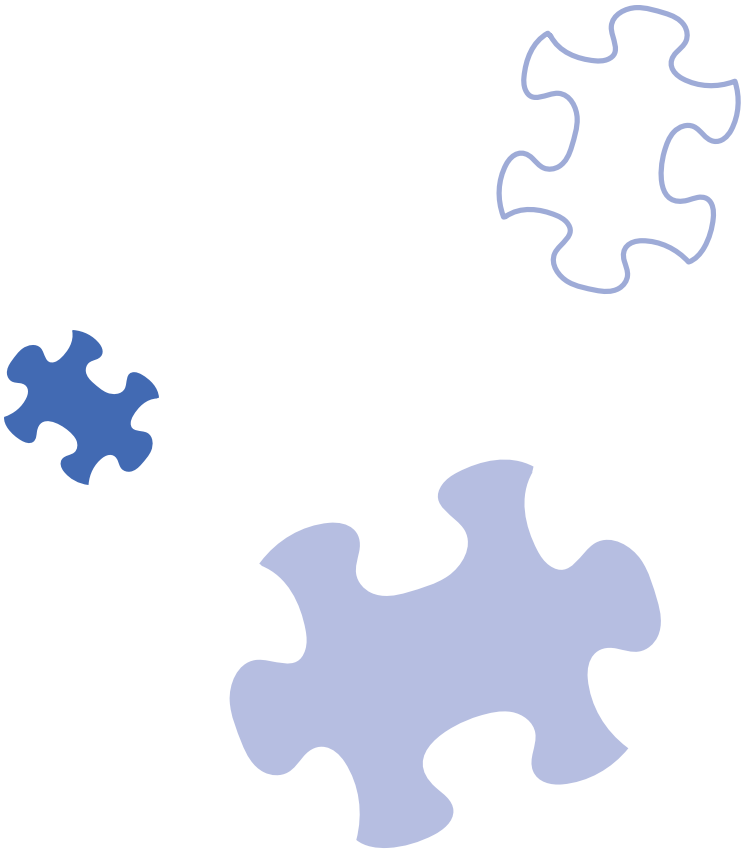
- Reflecting on the limitations and considerations raised in this phase will be essential in designing a more equitable and inclusive Phase V study. We note the need to work with *more* community partners to expand the diversity of participants in this project. Specifically, we recognize the need for more geographic representation, especially from rural, remote, and Northern communities. Similarly, we recognize the need for greater engagement with youth belonging to equity-deserving groups, including:
    - youth with disabilities;
    - trans and gender-diverse youth;
    - two spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, and asexual youth; and
    - Indigenous, Black, and racialized youth.
- When we began this phase (in 2019), we never could have imagined the virality with which AI-driven search engines and assistants, like ChatGPT, would develop and disrupt the fields of education and digital media literacy. But such is the nature of technological development—it is often unforeseen and rapidly evolving. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is a lot of concern about the potential impacts of these developing technologies on education and learning. Given what we've learned in Phase IV regarding young people's concerns about privacy, corporate surveillance, and data use we need to examine the risks and opportunities afforded by AI-driven chatbots and search engines, especially as they are understood by youth, to develop and design interventions to address them.

- Our 2019 quantitative research study with Canadian parents, guardians, and caregivers began to surface a sort of burnout for parents overwhelmed by opinions, approaches, and 'best practices' for navigating screen time and digital technology with children and youth. However, the inventory of online parenting expertise has seemingly imploded in the months since we released Phase IV of YCWW. Future research, specifically discussions with parents, guardians, and caregivers, needs to explore:
    - how they navigate the advice and opinions coming their way;
    - whether they see this as beneficial;
    - how they feel about the parenting 'spotlight' social media can place on them; and
    - if and how this impacts their parenting style or approaches.
- We are seeing increasing research and public awareness campaigns that speak to perceived mental health concerns for young people engaged in online (especially social) platforms. Most of these are designed from the perspective of adult experts with adult concerns and fears about young people's digital well-being. However, young people ought to be considered experts on their own well-being and must have the opportunity to think through this problem and to generate solutions (including those that draw on the support of caring adults) to improve their digital well-being (recognizing that this will be different for different groups of youth) and mitigate any negative impacts on their mental health. Future research needs to centre the voices of children and youth, to develop a *youth-led* understanding of and promising practices for addressing digital well-being.

For over 20 years, YCWW has deepened our understanding of the digital media literacy needs of Canadian students, educators, and families. In addition to advancing our research agenda at MediaSmarts, YCWW demonstrates the need for a national digital media literacy strategy in Canada. A meaningful commitment to digital media literacy requires a collaborative and relational approach to strengthening digital citizenship and closing the digital divide. It also requires long-term support for intentional efforts to address the social determinants of digital well-being and the intersection of online harms. We at MediaSmarts continue to advocate for a national commitment to digital media literacy including: universal access to education and training, community-based solutions and resource development, and research and evaluation supported through sustained funding. While a national strategy requires a whole-of-society approach to digital media literacy (as a life-long learning process), ongoing communication and collaboration with the education sector ensures that we remain aware of and adaptive to emerging digital media literacy needs.

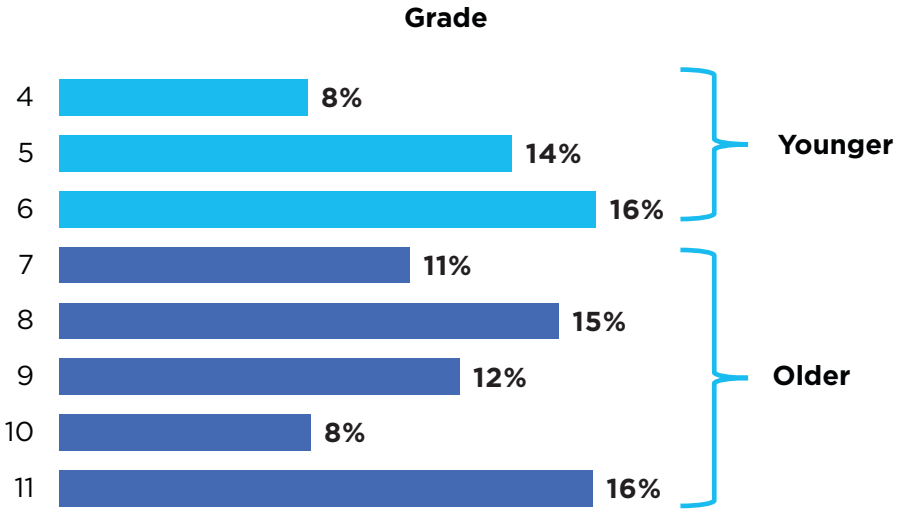
Conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, Phase IV of YCWW captures an essential moment in time in the online lives of young Canadians. However, the pandemic also made it impracticable for the dozens of districts and hundreds of schools who regularly participate in this project to do so during this phase of the study. Over the next few years, as we work towards implementing Phase V of YCWW, we intend to return to our long-standing partners in the education sector. It is our hope that in working with districts, schools, and classrooms across the country, Phase V will generate even greater participation than previous phases, deepening our understanding of the state of digital media literacy and the needs of students, parents and guardians, educators, administrators, and school equity committees in Canada.

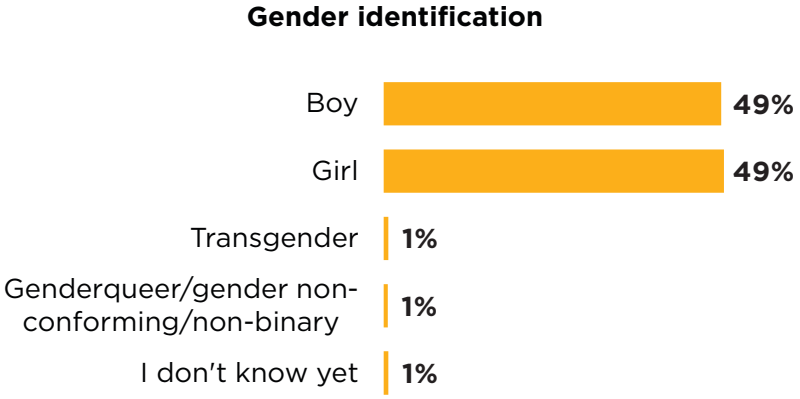
MediaSmarts remains committed to continuing the research of YCWW, helping to close digital divides, advancing digital media literacy as a core curriculum objective, and working alongside our partners to transform the educational system in Canada in ways that promote and ensure equity and inclusion.

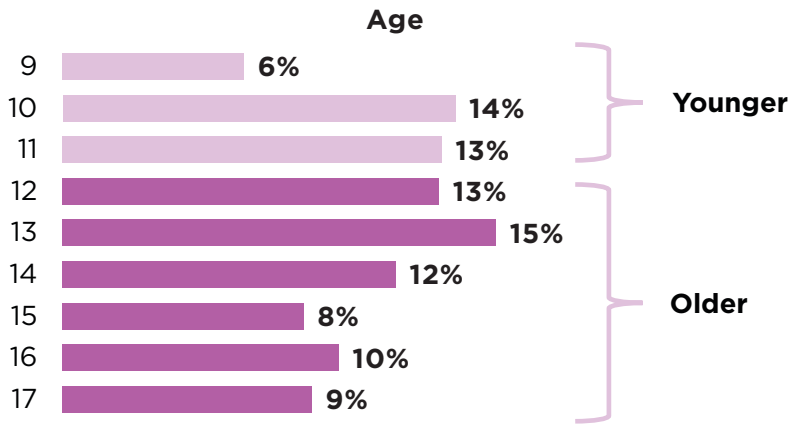


APPENDICES

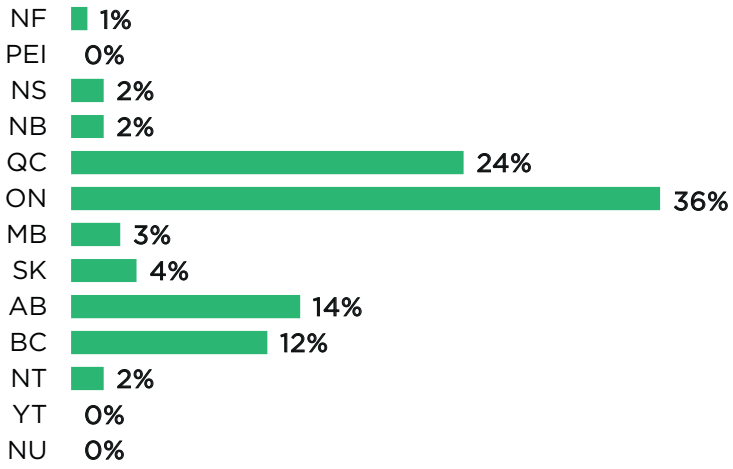
Appendix A: Demographics



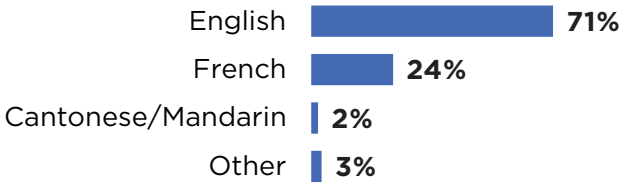




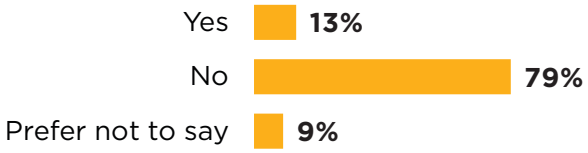
Province of residence



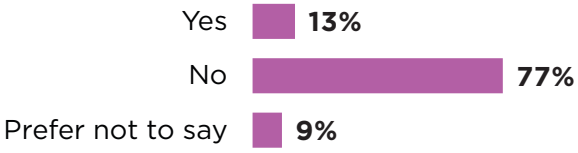
First language



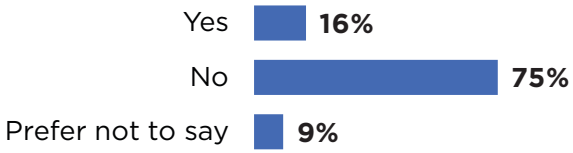
Identifies as having a physical disability



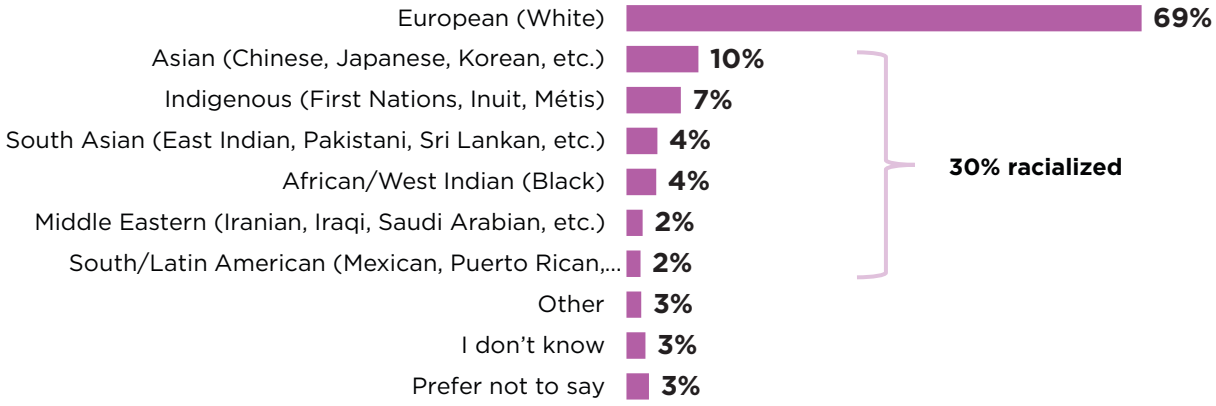
Identifies as having intellectual/cognitive/learning disability



Identifies as having a mental illness



Race identification



Sexual orientation