



YOUNG CANADIANS IN A WIRELESS WORLD, PHASE IV

ENCOUNTERING HARMFUL AND DISCOMFORTING CONTENT ONLINE



MediaSmarts

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

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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.

Table of Contents

- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 4**

- INTRODUCTION 6**
 - Overview: Young Canadians in a Wireless World 7

- METHODS 9**
 - Survey Design and Administration..... 9
 - Data Analysis 10
 - Limitations and Considerations 10

- ENCOUNTERING HARMFUL AND DISCOMFORTING CONTENT ONLINE 12**
 - Discomforting Content 12
 - Pornography 14
 - Racist and Sexist Content 18
 - Attitudes and Opinions..... 20
 - Adult Involvement and Household Rules 24
 - Safety and Well-Being..... 27
 - Trust and Support 29

- NEXT STEPS..... 32**

- APPENDICES..... 34**
 - Appendix A: Demographics 34
 - Appendix B: Steps Taken to Avoid Online Pornography -
Demographic Differences 37

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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

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

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

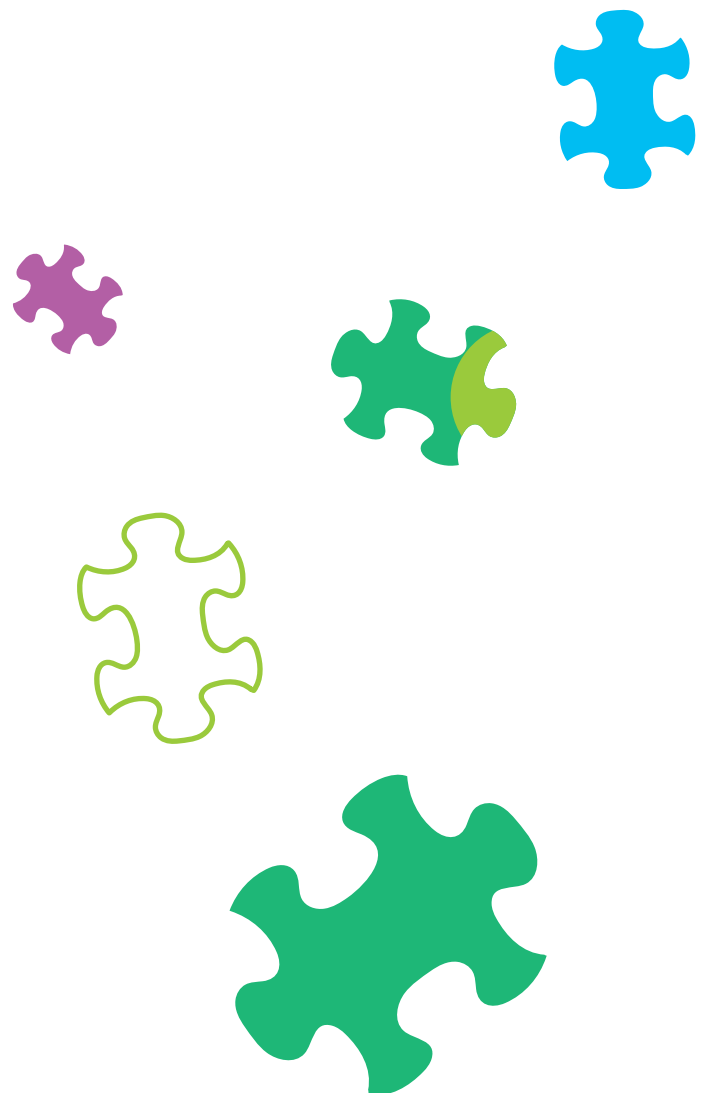
After several collaborative data analysis sessions, the MediaSmarts research team decided on the following topics and themes for the Phase IV reports:

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

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

This report highlights findings related to encountering discomforting and harmful content online. We report on how often youth come across such content, in which online spaces they most often see it, and how they tend to respond to it. The report concludes with a discussion of collective resilience to emphasize the importance of building up trust and support between youth and adults in their lives. We also share resources currently available on the [MediaSmarts website](#) to help everyone learn how to respond to discomforting and harmful content online.

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



INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

- [Life Online](#)
- Encountering Harmful and Discomforting Content Online
- Privacy
- Online Meanness and Cruelty
- Sexting
- Digital Media Literacy

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

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

Overview: Young Canadians in a Wireless World

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

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

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

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

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

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

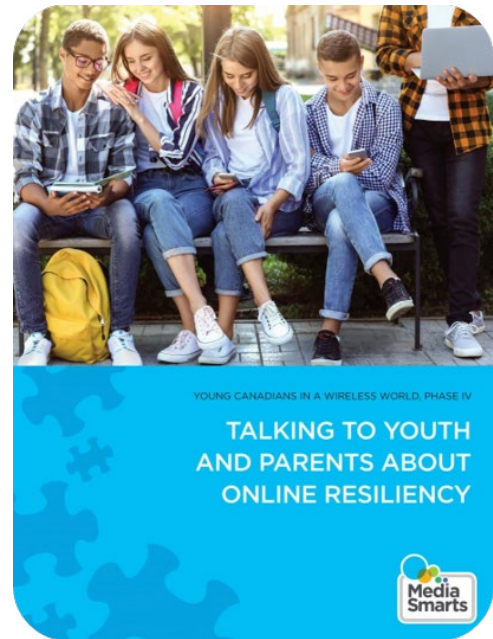
In this third phase, adults began feeling overwhelmed by the reported dangers their children faced online, especially around cyberbullying. Youth participants indicated that cyberbullying was much less worrisome than adults feared; however, they felt that the protective surveillance they were being placed under in response to cyberbullying, and other perceived dangers, was stultifying and equated it to being “spied on” by family

members and teachers. They also argued that this kind of surveillance made it much more difficult for them to receive help from trusted adults when needed. Youth were also much less comfortable with the corporations that owned the sites and apps they used and questioned the regulatory model of click-through consent that meant others could collect and use their data. For example, 95% of the students surveyed said that the corporations that own the social media sites they use should not be allowed to see what they post there.

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

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

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



METHODS

Survey Design and Administration

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

We organized questions into various categories:

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

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

ENCOUNTERING HARMFUL AND DISCOMFORTING CONTENT ONLINE

Discomforting Content



Just over 20% of youth report that they have received discomforting content online.

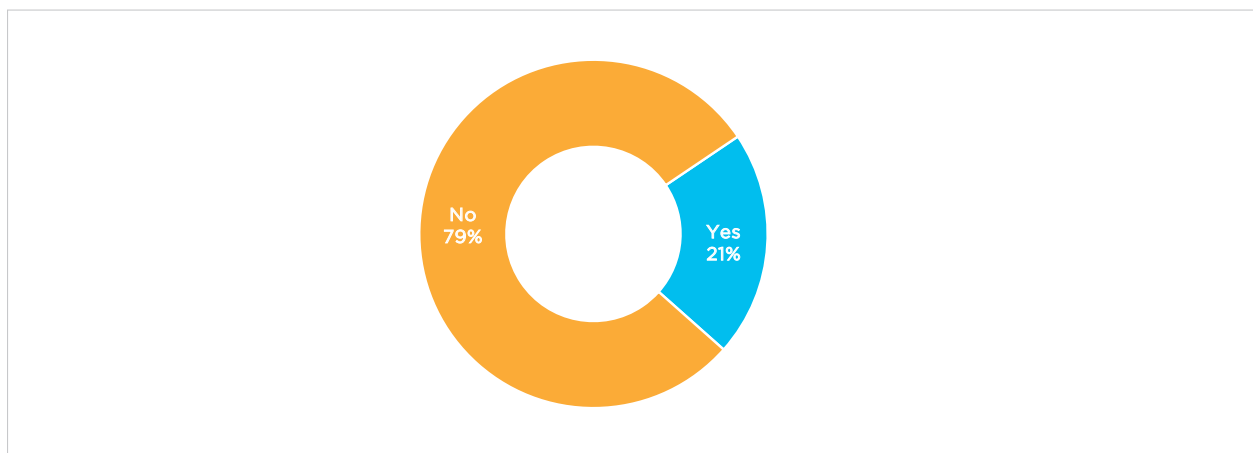
More than half of participants said they would tell a trusted adult in their life about the discomforting content they see or receive.

A series of questions in the Phase IV YCWW survey asked participants to reflect on their experiences encountering various forms of discomforting or harmful content online.

Starting with discomforting content, or content that makes the viewer or receiver feel uncomfortable, two in ten youth reported that they have been on the receiving end (see **Figure 1** below). There are no significant differences based on age, gender, or race, but **LGBTQ+** youth are more likely to see or receive discomforting content (28%, compared to 20% of heterosexual youth) – as are youth with a disability (41%, compared to 15% of youth without a disability).

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

Figure 1: Received Discomforting Content Online

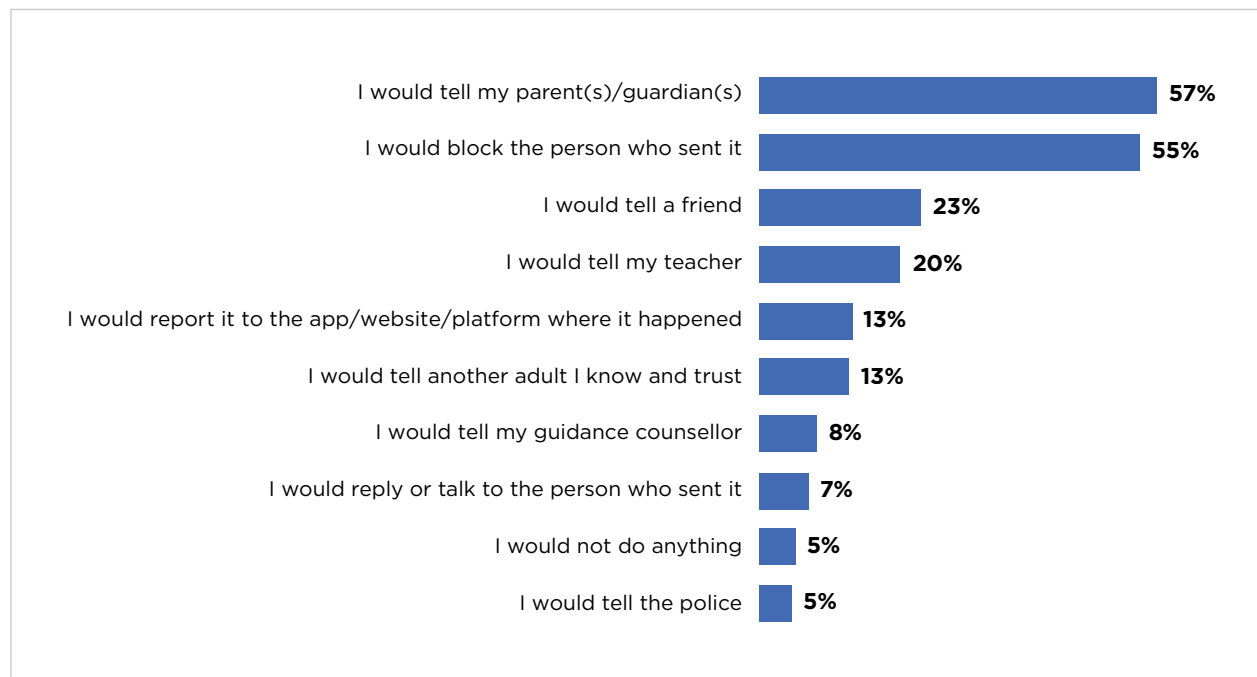


In response to receiving such content, more than half (57%) of participants said they would tell their parent(s) or guardian(s), with roughly the same amount (55%) reporting that they would block the person who sent it to them (see **Figure 2** below). Others indicated that they might approach a friend (23%) or a teacher (20%) about the content, and only 13% said they would report the content via the platform, website, or app through which they received it.

In the Phase IV survey, we asked participants to self-identify regarding physical disabilities, intellectual/cognitive/learning disabilities, and mental illness. The breakdown for each is available in [Appendix A](#). When we say disability throughout the report, we are referring to any of the three categories.

Younger youth are most likely to tell their parents or guardians as a first response to receiving discomfoting content (71%), while older youth are most likely to block the person who sent them the content (60%) – this was the same top response for LGBTQ+ youth (63%) and **youth with a disability** (56%). While the number of participants who identified as transgender and gender diverse is not large enough to be statistically significant (n=13), it is striking that over 8 in 10 of these youth indicated that they would block the person who sent them content before they would tell their parents or guardians. Similarly, while telling the police ranked low for most participants, this response was not selected by either gender-diverse or LGBTQ+ youth.

Figure 2: Responses to Receiving Discomforting Content Online



Some additional key findings related to the top responses to receiving discomfoting content online include:

- Younger youth are more likely to tell a teacher, while older youth are more likely to tell a friend.
- LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to report discomfoting content, while heterosexual youth are more likely to tell a teacher.
- Racialized youth are more likely to tell a friend or a teacher.
- Youth with a disability are more likely to tell a friend.

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

Pornography



Two in ten participants in grades 7 to 11 reported looking for pornography online; most were nine or older when they first looked for it.

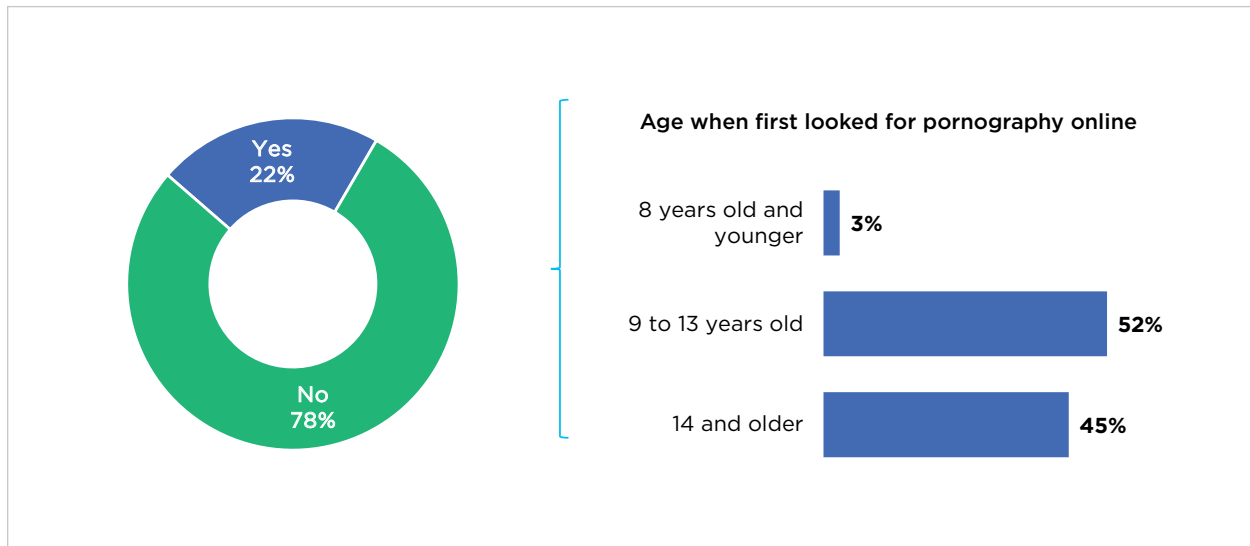
Three in ten youth have seen pornography online when they are not looking for it; most were between the ages of 9 and 13 when this first happened.

Four in ten youth in grades 7 to 11 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.

The next set of questions asked participants to identify whether they have seen pornography online – intentionally or not. It is important to note that **we only asked these questions to participants in grades 7 to 11** (n=656).

First, only two in ten (22%) participants reported looking for pornography online; most were nine or older when they first looked for it (see **Figure 3** below).

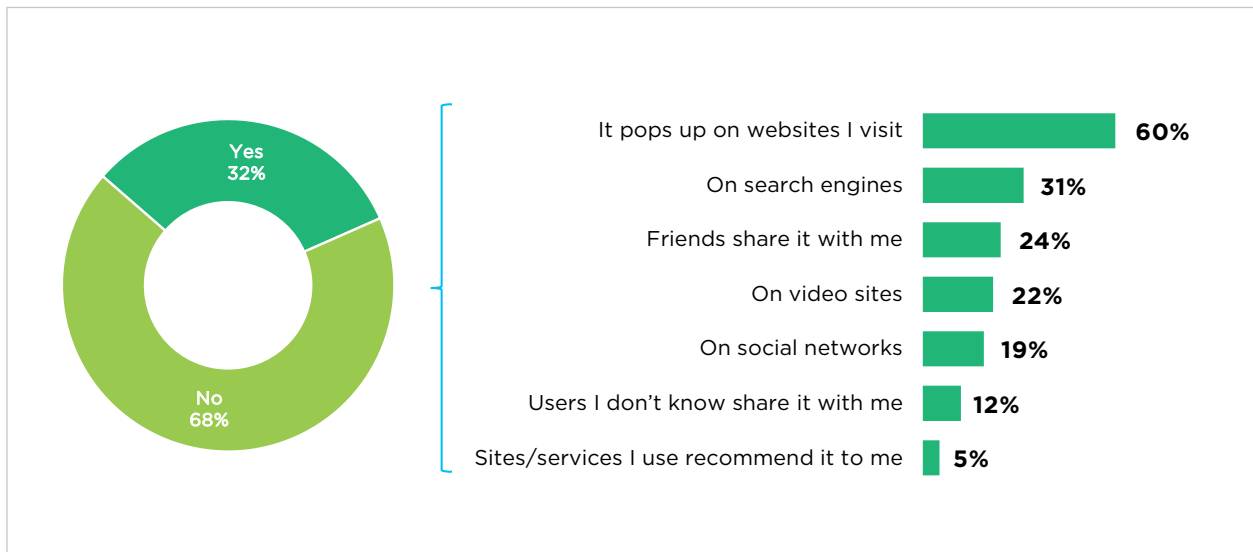
Figure 3: Looked for Pornography Online



Girls are somewhat less likely to say they have looked for pornography online than boys, but the difference is fairly small (18%, compared to 24% of boys). Youth in grades 9 to 11 are more likely to say they have looked for this content (29%, compared to 11% of youth in grades 7 and 8). LGBTQ+ youth are also more likely to report looking for pornography (36%, compared to 21% of heterosexual youth) but were more likely to have started doing so at an older age (70% first did so at 13 or older, compared to 41% of heterosexual youth). Youth with a disability were also more likely to actively search for pornography (34%, compared to 18% of youth without a disability) but the age at which they started doing so was the same.

Three in ten (32%) youth in grades 7 to 11 say they have seen pornography online without looking for it (see **Figure 4** on the next page), and most (91%) were between the ages of 9 and 13 when this first happened. However, youth with a disability are more likely to say they were eight years old and younger when they first saw pornography unintentionally (15%, compared to 6% of youth without a disability). Participants said that they see pornographic content inadvertently on the websites they visit (60%), on the search engines they use (31%) and because their friends share it with them (24%). Others come across this content on video sites (22%) and social networks (19%).

Figure 4: Seen Pornography Online Without Looking



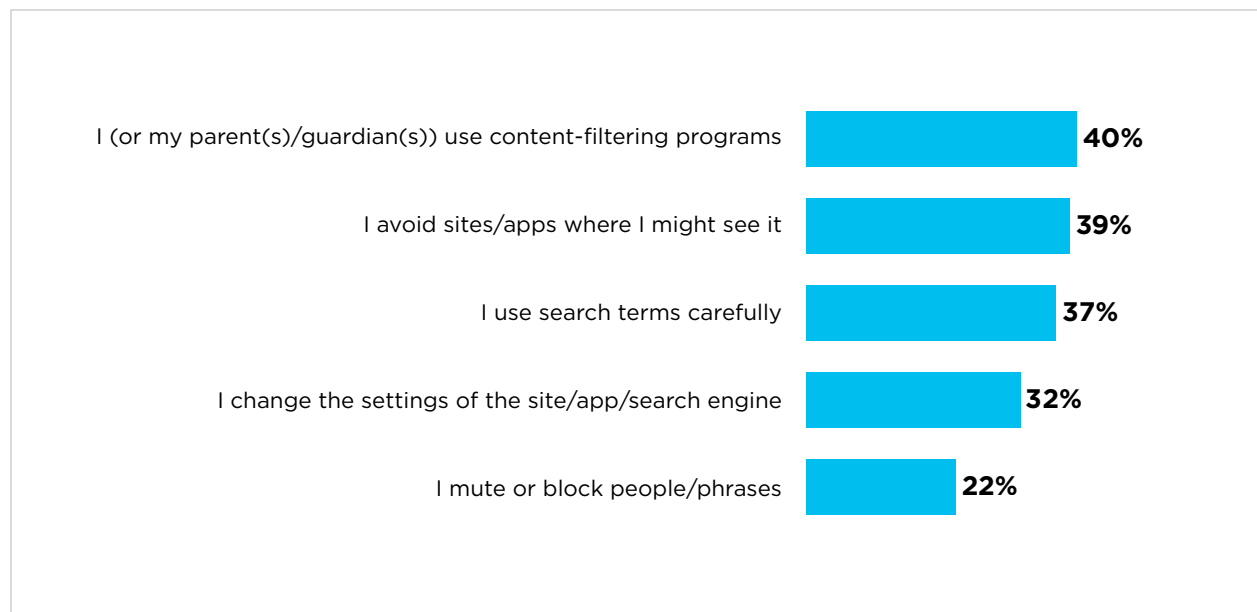
Youth in grades 9 to 11 are more likely to see pornography without looking for it (37%, compared to 25% in grades 7 and 8), and LGBTQ+ youth are also more likely to unintentionally see this content compared to their heterosexual peers (49%, compared to 31%). Racialized youth (38%) and youth with a disability (44%) are also more likely to see pornography without looking for it (compared to 31% of white youth and 29% of youth without a disability).

Compared to girls (18%), boys (30%) are more likely to see pornography without looking for it because their friends share it with them. Boys are also more likely to see pornography unintentionally on video sites (24%, compared to 18% of girls). For girls (67%) and LGBTQ+ youth (69%) who see pornography without looking for it, it tends to pop up on the websites they visit (compared to 53% of boys and 58% of heterosexual youth). Girls (15%), LGBTQ+ youth (24%), racialized youth (17%), and youth with disabilities (20%) are more likely to report that strangers share pornography with them online (compared to 8% of boys, 10% of heterosexual youth, 9% of white youth, and 8% of youth without a disability).

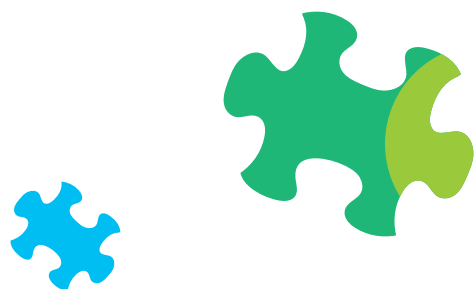
There is a positive relationship between weekday screen time and both intentional and unintentional exposure to pornography. For weekend screen time, the association with looking for pornography only occurs at the highest levels of screen time (three or more hours per day). There is, however, no relationship between screen time and taking steps to avoid seeing pornography.

Four in ten (42%) youth in grades 7 to 11 said that they take steps to avoid seeing pornography online. These steps or strategies (see **Figure 5** below) include using content-filtering programs (40%), avoiding sites or apps where they know they might see pornography (39%), being careful about the search terms they use (37%), changing search settings (32%), and muting or blocking certain people or phrases (22%).

Figure 5: Steps Taken to Avoid Pornography Online



Girls (44%) and youth with a disability (44%) are more likely to avoid specific websites or apps so that they do not see pornography. Older youth in grades 9 to 11 (43%) and girls (43%) are more likely to be mindful of the search terms they use. LGBTQ+ (36%) youth tend to block or mute certain people and phrases to avoid pornography online, and racialized youth (40%) are more likely to change the settings on the websites, apps, or search engines they visit to limit their exposure. See [Appendix B](#) for additional graphs that visualize demographic differences regarding the steps youth take to avoid seeing pornography online.



Racist and Sexist Content



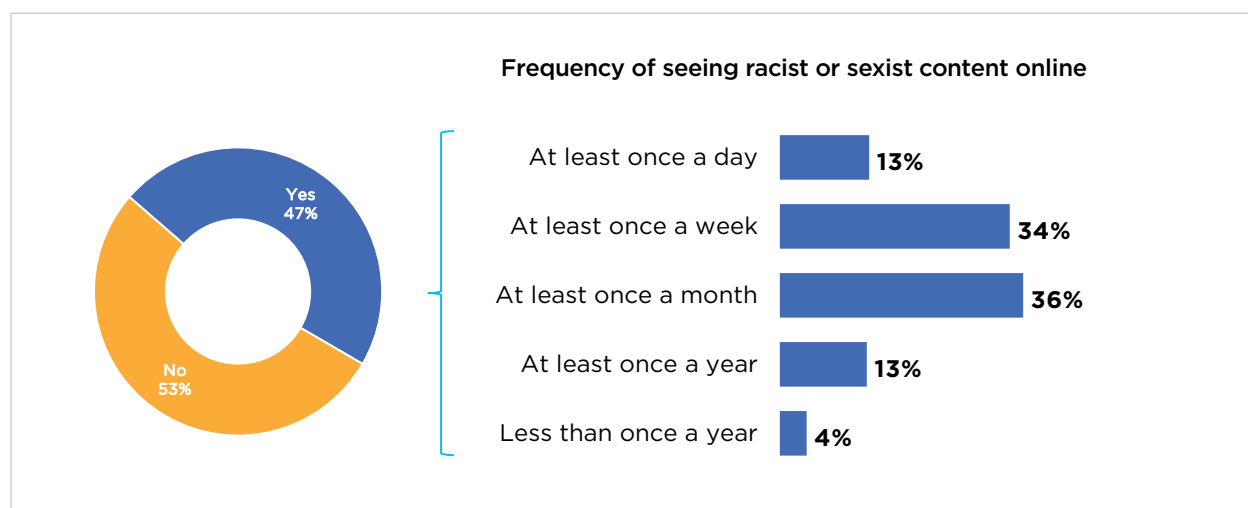
Nearly half (47%) of participants reported seeing racist or sexist content online with relative frequency.

LGBTQ+ youth, racialized youth, and youth with a disability are more likely to encounter racist or sexist content online at least once a week.

We also asked participants about their experiences encountering racist or sexist content online. Again, these questions were only asked of youth in grades 7 to 11. When we asked participants to identify who wrote or shared the racist or sexist content they saw online, most (60%) indicated that it originated from an unknown poster.

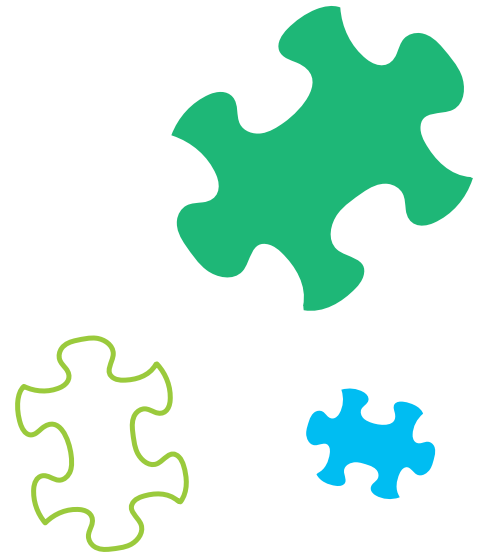
Nearly half (47%) of participants said they see racist or sexist content online with relative frequency (see **Figure 6** below). Compared to our [YCWW Phase III survey](#),³ the reported rate of seeing racist and sexist content online is on the rise. In 2013, 21% of youth reported seeing this harmful content once a week, with the same amount reporting having seen it once a month. We can see in the graph below that these rates have risen to 34% and 36%, respectively.

Figure 6: Seeing Racist or Sexist Content Online



³ Phase III of YCWW was conducted in 2013 and included a sample size of 5,436 students in grades 4 to 11 from across Canada.

Youth who are more likely to see racist or sexist content online are in grades 9 to 11 (52%, compared to 39% of those in grades 7 and 8), LGBTQ+ youth (73%, compared to 44% of heterosexual youth), and youth with a disability (62%, compared to 42% of youth without a disability). LGBTQ+ youth (52%), racialized youth (44%), and youth with a disability (41%) are also more likely to encounter this content at least once a week (compared to 31% of heterosexual youth, white youth, and youth without a disability). Youth who report seeing pornography unintentionally also report seeing racist or sexist content more frequently (71%, compared to 35% of youth who do not see pornography unintentionally).



Youth who have their own smartphone reported seeing racist and sexist content more frequently (49%, compared to 30% of youth without their own smartphone); if the smartphone has a data plan, this increases the likelihood that young people will encounter this content (53%, compared to 39% of youth who do not have a data plan).

There is a positive relationship between screen time and seeing racist or sexist content online in that youth who spend more time online are more likely to encounter this harmful content. Youth who keep their phones in their bedrooms at night are also slightly more likely to say that they see racist and sexist content online (50%, compared to 43% of youth who do not keep their phones in their bedrooms at night). Interestingly, using an app or device to limit screen time does not seem to significantly impact young people's encounters with racist or sexist content online. These findings emphasize what MediaSmarts often reminds people about screen time – that it is less about quantity and more about quality. Limiting screen time (whether through an app or other non-technical approach) is not the solution to ensuring that young people do not encounter harmful content online. Instead, we focus on the importance of building [trust and support](#) between young people and the trusted adults in their lives so that when youth encounter harmful content, they feel better prepared to understand and respond to it.

Attitudes and Opinions



Most youth surveyed (88%) agree that it is important to say something in response to seeing racist or sexist content online so people know it is wrong; many (81%) want companies to do more to stop the spread of this content.

Compared to Phase III, young people have increased awareness and concern about the impacts of racist and sexist content online and an increased desire to speak out.

We asked older youth (participants in grades 7 to 11) whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about racist and sexist content online. Overall, there is a high degree of awareness that racist and sexist content is wrong and hurtful and should be reported when encountered. However, consistent with our [research](#) on online hate, there remains a lack of awareness and understanding among young people about how to respond to harmful content and doubts about the intent of this content.

Almost nine in ten (88%) older youth agree that it is important to say something so that people know racist and sexist content is wrong (see **Figure 7** on the next page). Our previous study, [Young Canadians Pushing Back Against Hate Online](#), established that youth hold platforms responsible for creating and maintaining safe online spaces and want platforms to respond to reports and publicize enforcement. In this study, 81% of youth agree that companies should do more to stop racist and sexist things from being posted or shared online. A majority of youth (74%) also agree that people say racist and sexist things to pick on other people, suggesting a link between racist and sexist content and online meanness and cruelty – which we will return to in a future YCWW Phase IV report (to be published in 2023) on that topic.

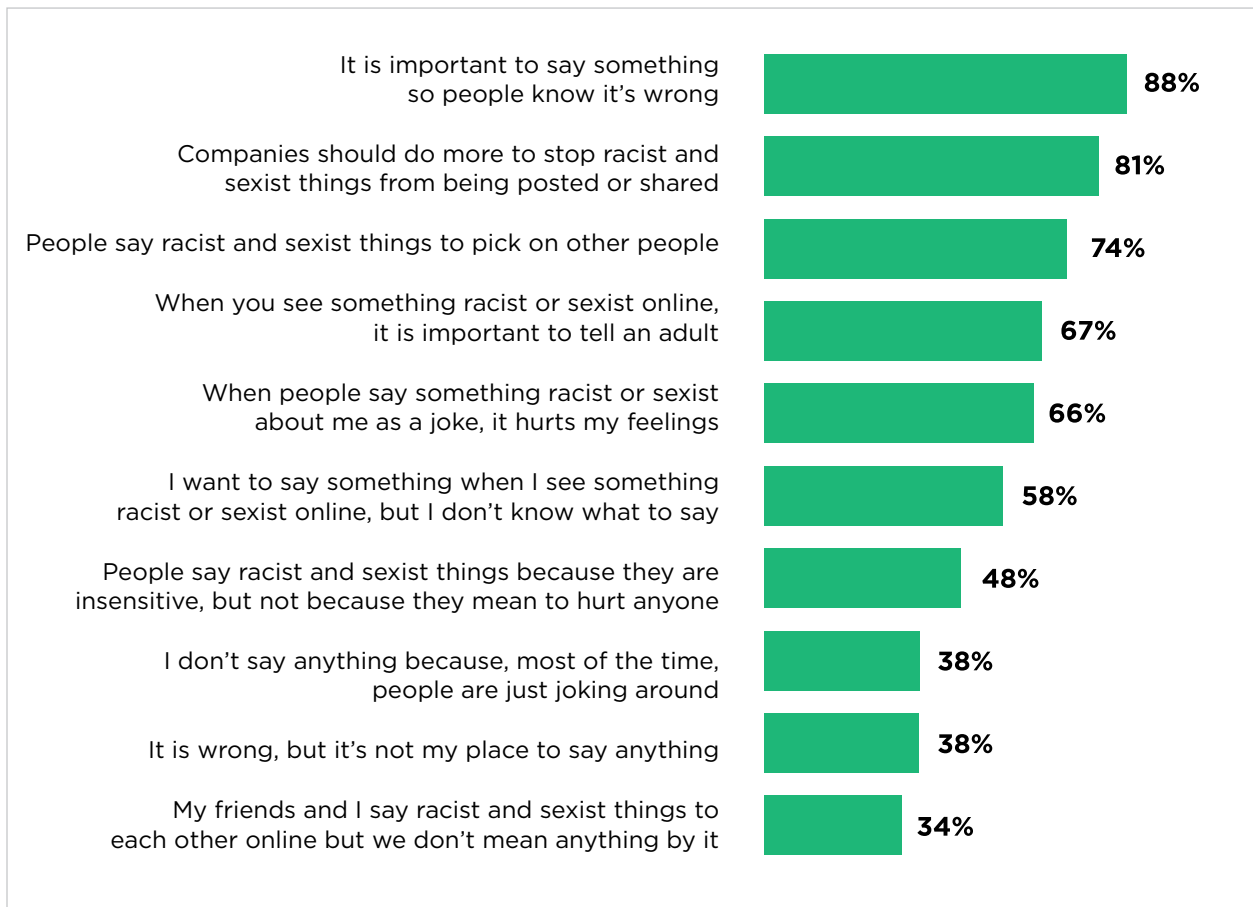
Generally, girls are somewhat more likely than boys to indicate concern and a likelihood that they would intervene.⁴ For example, girls are slightly more likely than boys to agree that it is important to say something about racist or sexist content (91%, compared to 85%). While the number of transgender and gender-diverse participants is not large

⁴ These findings are consistent with our previous research on online hate which established that girls are more likely to rate highly on empathy factors (such as knowing someone's feelings were hurt by the content) as motivation for intervention or pushing back against online hate.

enough to be statistically significant (n=10),⁵ 100% of these youth agree that it is important to say something so that people know racist and sexist content is wrong.

Girls (72%, compared to 64% of boys), youth ages 12 to 13 (75%, compared to 63% of 14- to 17-year-olds), and heterosexual youth (68%, compared to 62% of LGBTQ+ youth) are more likely to agree that it is important to tell an adult about seeing racist or sexist content online. Girls (72%, compared to 59% of boys), LGBTQ+ youth (74%, compared to 64% of heterosexual youth), youth with a disability (72%, compared to 64% of youth without a disability), and racialized youth (71%, compared to 63% of white youth) are more likely to agree that when people say something racist or sexist about them as a joke, it hurts their feelings. Youth in grades 9-11 (77%, compared to 68% of youth in grades 7 and 8), LGBTQ+ youth (86%, compared to 73% of heterosexual youth), and youth with a disability (78%, compared to 72% of youth without a disability) are more likely to agree people say racist and sexist things to pick on other people.

Figure 7: Attitudes Towards Racist or Sexist Content



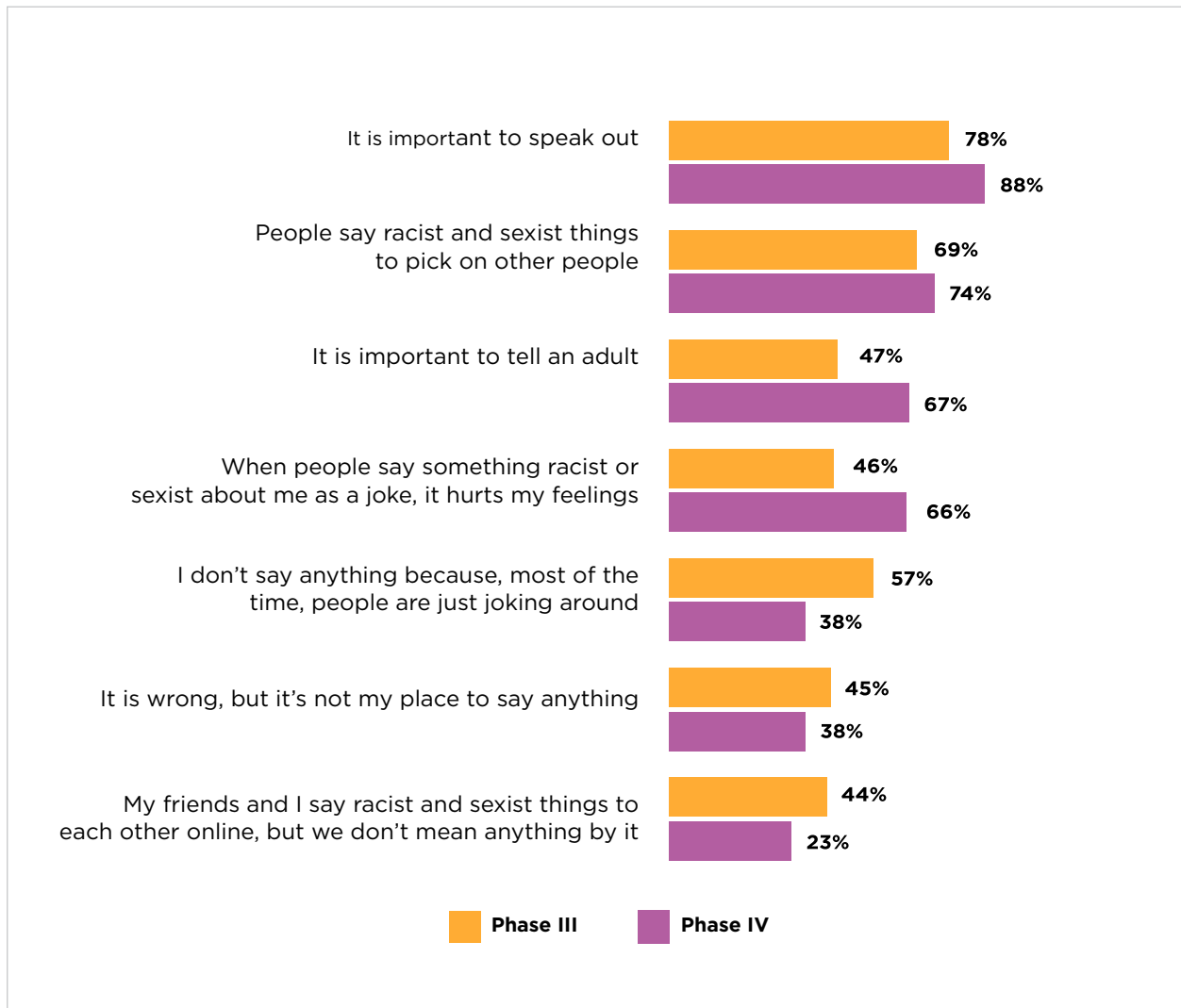
⁵ N=5 for transgender identifying participants and n=5 for genderqueer identifying participants.

Boys (44%, compared to 33% of girls) and heterosexual youth (40%, compared to 24% of LGBTQ+ youth) are more likely to agree they do not say anything because, most of the time, people are just joking around. Boys (38%, compared to 29% of girls) and heterosexual youth (35%, compared to 25% of LGBTQ+ youth) are also more likely to agree that they and their friends say racist and sexist things to each other online, but they do not mean anything by it. Youth with a disability are more likely to agree that they want to say something when they see racist or sexist content online, but they do not know what to say (66%, compared to 56% of youth without a disability).

Compared to Phase III of YCWW (see **Figure 8** on the next page), youth in Phase IV are more likely to agree that it is important to say something about racist or sexist content so that people know it is wrong (78% in Phase III, compared to 88% in Phase IV). Phase IV participants are also more likely to agree that people say racist and sexist things to pick on other people (74%, compared to 69% in Phase III), that racist and sexist jokes directed at them hurt their feelings (66%, compared to 46% in Phase III), and that it is important to tell an adult about racist and sexist content (67%, compared to 47% in Phase III).

In Phase III, participants were more likely to agree that most of the time, they did not say anything because people were just joking around (57%, compared to 38% in Phase IV). In the previous phase of YCWW, participants were also more likely to agree that it is not their place to say anything (45%, compared to 38% in Phase IV) and that they and their friends say racist and sexist things to each other online, but they do not mean anything by it (44%, compared to 34% in Phase IV).

Figure 8: Comparison of Attitudes Towards Racist and Sexist Content



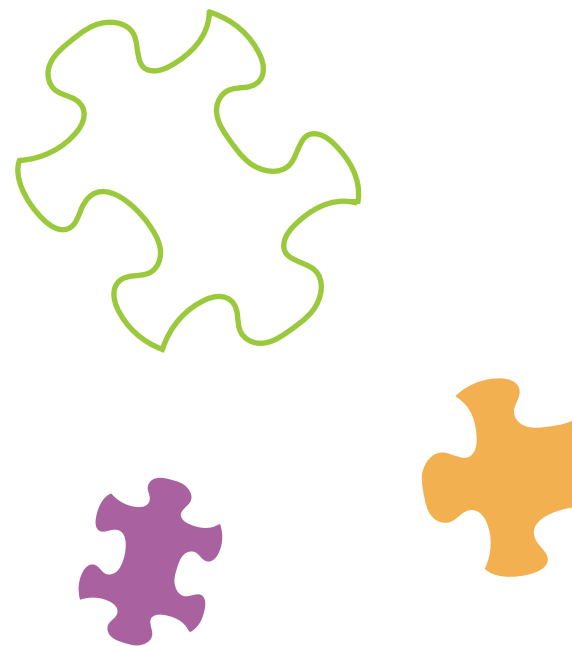
These findings suggest that compared to our last phase of Young Canadians research in 2013, youth have increased awareness and concern about the impacts of racist and sexist content online and an increased desire to speak out. However, it is crucial to remember that while almost nine in ten (88%) participants *want* to say something when they see racist and sexist content, more than half (58%) feel they do not know what to say. This uncertainty prevents youth from intervening when they see harmful 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 discomfoting content. For example, youth who are usually supervised by an adult are more likely to agree that it is important to say something about racist and sexist content so that people know it is wrong (93%, compared to 89% of youth who are never supervised). Youth who are usually supervised are also more likely to tell an adult about seeing racist and sexist content online (72%, compared to 64% of youth who are never supervised). Young people who are never supervised online by an adult are more likely to agree that people say racist and sexist things online to pick on others (80%, compared to 69% of youth who are usually supervised by an adult).

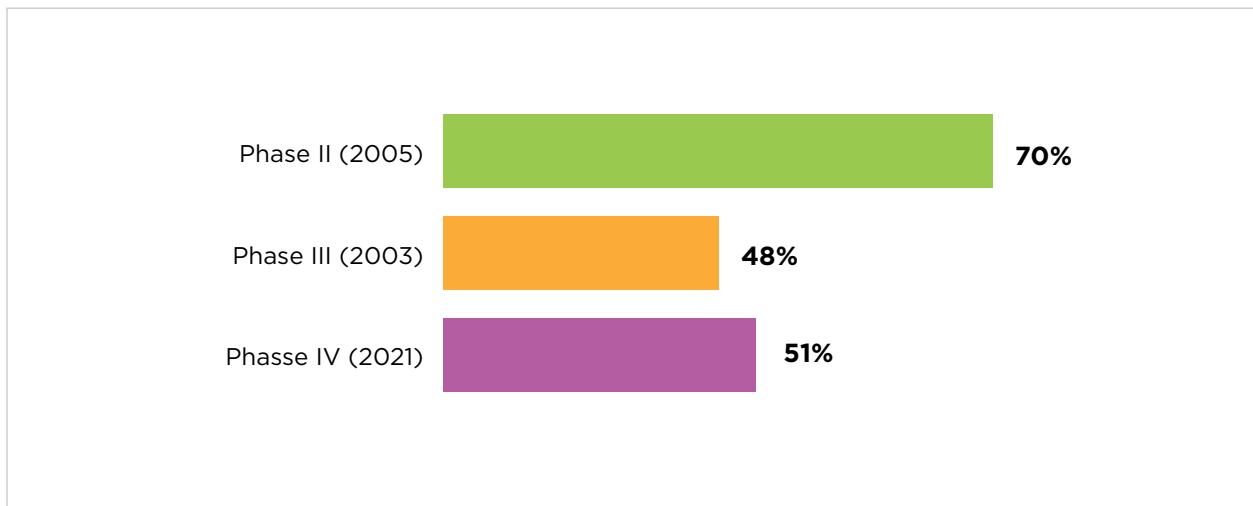
Further, young people who are usually supervised online by an adult are less likely to see pornography unintentionally compared to youth who are never supervised online (29% of supervised youth reported seeing pornography unintentionally, compared to 36% of youth who are never supervised). Youth who go online with adult supervision are also more likely to take steps to avoid seeing pornography compared to youth who are rarely supervised by an adult (52% of supervised youth take steps to avoid seeing pornography online, compared to 34% of unsupervised youth).

Consistent with our findings in the [Life Online report](#) and our previous research with [Canadian families](#), non-technological-based strategies for supervision foster trust and make it more likely that youth will go to parents or guardians and older adults they trust when they need help navigating harmful content online. In this study, 71% of youth who have a household rule about telling a parent or guardian when they encounter discomfoting or harmful content online reported that they do just that – they turn to the trusted adults in their lives when they see or receive content that causes them harm or discomfot. On the other hand, youth who reported having no household rules were most likely to say they do not do anything when they see or receive discomfoting content online.



Just over half (51%) of participants indicate that they have a household rule about sites they are not supposed to visit – a slight increase from Phase III when 48% of youth said they had this rule but continues to remain well below the results from Phase II,⁶ when 70% of youth said they had this rule (see **Figure 9** below).

Figure 9: Change in Household Rules about Restricted Sites Over Time



Having a household rule about what websites youth are not supposed to visit is positively related to taking steps to avoid seeing pornography: 61% of youth with the rule take steps to avoid seeing pornography, compared to 38% of youth without the rule. Having a household rule about sites youth are not supposed to visit slightly *decreases* the occurrence of racist or sexist content: 11% of youth with the rule see racist or sexist content daily compared to 16% of youth without the rule. Further, participants with a household rule about treating people with respect are more likely to agree that it is important to speak out when they encounter racist and sexist content online (90% of youth with the rule, compared to 87% of youth without the rule). In general, the presence of household rules makes it more likely that young people disagree that people are just joking about racist and sexist content and that they and their friends say racist and sexist things to each other online but do not mean anything by it.

⁶ Phase II of YCWW was conducted in 2005 and included a sample size of 5,272 students in grades 4 to 11 from across Canada.

Similarly, youth who are aware of school rules about cyberbullying are more likely to agree that it is important to speak out about racist and sexist content (90% of youth who are aware of cyberbullying rules, compared to 73% of youth who are not aware of cyberbullying rules). School rules about cyberbullying also made it more likely that youth would tell an adult if they encountered racist or sexist content online (71% of youth who are aware of cyberbullying rules, compared to 53% of youth who are not aware of cyberbullying rules).

However, the presence of rules generally does not seem to provide a strong protective factor against seeing pornography online without looking for it, or against seeing racist and sexist content. This might be explained by increased awareness and concern among youth regarding racist and sexist content online. However, it could also be the result of new and ever-evolving technologies and online architectures, including algorithms and artificial intelligence. Our [previous research](#) explains how these always-already changing processes impact our online experiences, including our ability to recognize and respond to online information and online harms. In fact, there is significant [research](#)⁷ on how online platforms and technology are designed to amplify inequities and online harms – for more views, more engagements, and ultimately more profits – and how youth are particularly vulnerable to discrimination.

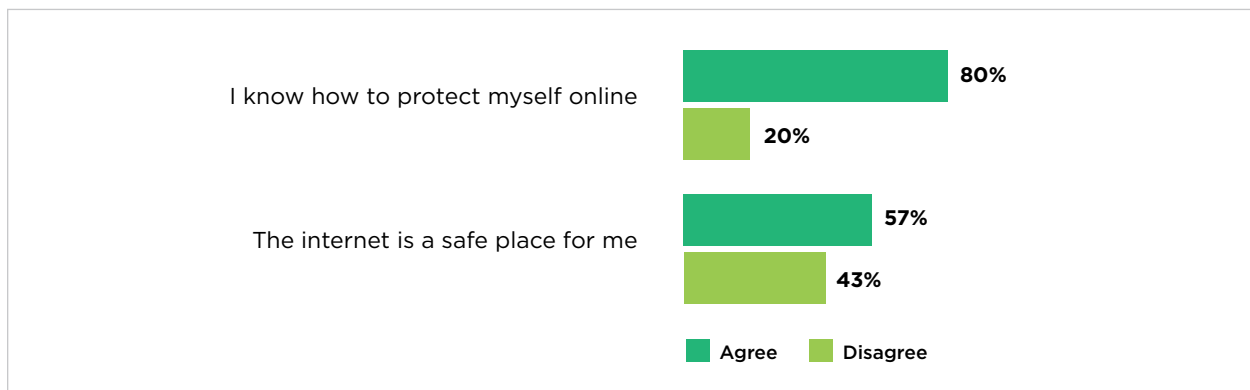
While the findings regarding the impacts of rules on harmful and discomfoting content are complex, they suggest that rules (both at home and school) positively impact young people's *behaviours*, specifically how they respond to racist and sexist content online. However, rules have little to no impact on whether young people will encounter harmful content online. As a result, it is even more vital that we heed the calls of youth (over eight in 10) who agree that companies should do more to stop racist and sexist content from being posted or shared online, and companies should take down this content when it is shared.

7 See also: Akselrod, O. (2021). How artificial intelligence can deepen racial and economic inequities. ACLU. <https://www.aclu.org/news/privacy-technology/how-artificial-intelligence-can-deepen-racial-and-economic-inequities>; McCabe, D. (2021). Lawmakers target big tech 'amplification.' What does that mean? The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/01/technology/big-tech-amplification.html>

Safety and Well-Being

While most youth (80%) believe they can protect themselves online, there is less agreement among participants that the internet is safe (see **Figure 10** below). Just over half (57%) of the young people we surveyed in this phase agree that the internet is a safe place for them. However, girls (54%, compared to 61% of boys), LGBTQ+ youth (45%, compared to 59% of heterosexual youth), and racialized youth (52%, compared to 60% of white youth) are less likely to agree that the internet is a safe place.

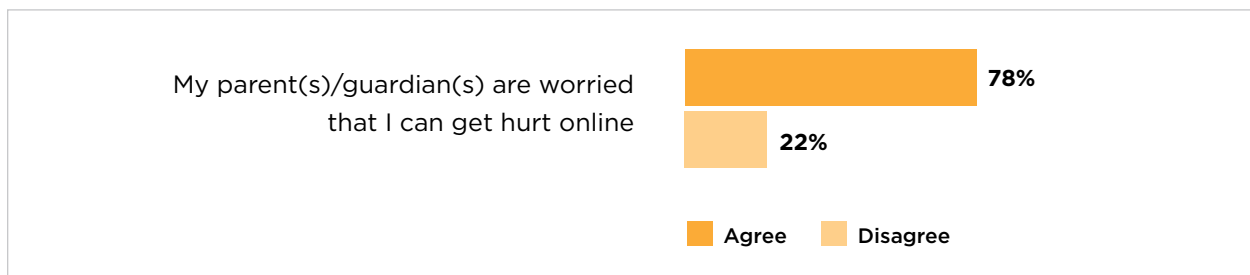
Figure 10: Protection and Safety Online



Older youth are more likely to say they can protect themselves online (84%, compared to 74% of younger youth), while younger participants were more likely to agree with parental supervision (73% agree that parents or guardians should keep track of their kids online all the time, compared to 55% of older youth).

Most youth (78%) agree that their parents or guardians are worried they could get hurt online (see **Figure 11** below). However, racialized youth (82%, compared to 76% of white youth), girls (82%, compared to 74% of boys), transgender youth (n=7, 86%), gender-diverse youth (n=6, 83%), and younger youth (83% of 9- to 11-year-olds, compared to 79% of 12- to 13-year-olds and 72% of 14 to 16-year-olds) are all somewhat more likely to agree that their parents or guardians are worried they could get hurt online.

Figure 11: Parental Concern



Whether youth feel they can protect themselves online or that the internet is a safe place for them impacts their experiences of and responses to harmful and discomfoting content. We have summarized the findings related to protection and safety below.

Youth who say they know how to protect themselves online:

- block the sender from whom they received discomfoting content;
- take steps to avoid seeing pornography specifically, avoiding sites and apps; and
- say companies should do more about racist or sexist content.

Youth who do not feel they can protect themselves online:

- tell a parent or guardian if they received discomfoting content.

However, being exposed to pornography or seeing racist or sexist content is not significantly correlated with whether youth feel they can protect themselves online.

Youth who agree the internet is a safe place:

- avoid sites and apps where they believe they might see pornography;
- are less likely to say they have seen racist or sexist content; and
- are more likely not to say anything about racist or sexist content because they believe people are just joking around.

Youth who do not believe the internet is a safe place:

- have seen pornography unintentionally; and
- take steps to avoid seeing pornography.

Youth who agree their parents are worried they could get hurt online:

- have seen pornography unintentionally; and
- take steps to avoid seeing pornography.

Overall, youth who encounter racist or sexist content online are more likely to agree that spending time on social media can be stressful.

Trust and Support

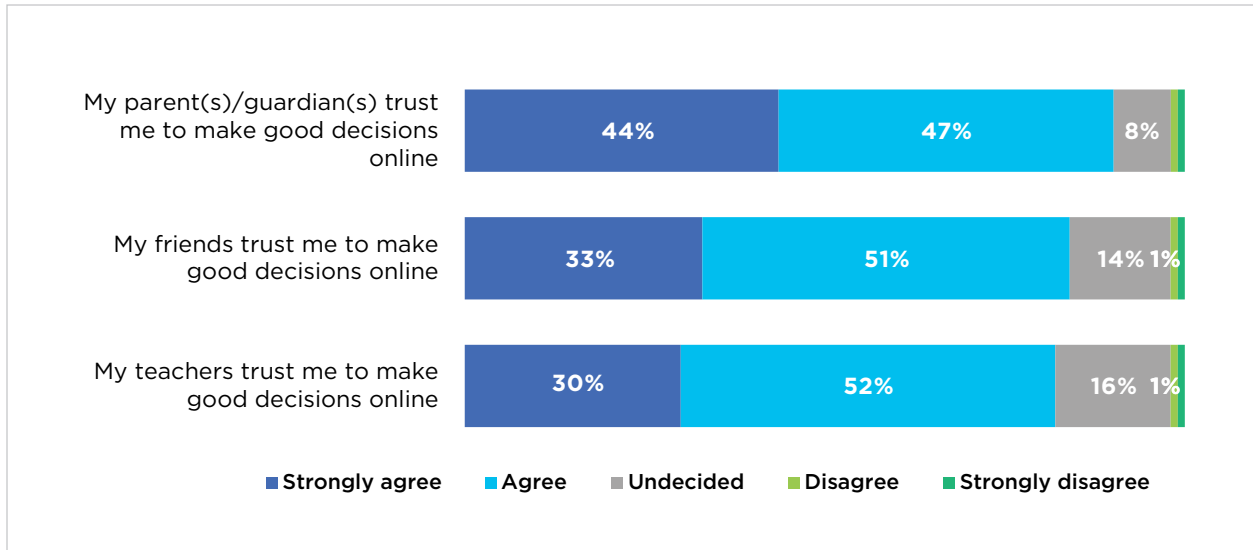
We want to end this report by focusing on factors like trust and support alongside how young people respond when they receive or come across harmful or discomfoting content online. In our [qualitative report](#), we highlighted the importance of building **collective resilience** and encouraging open and honest communication between parents/guardians (or other trusted adults) and children grounded in trust, respect, and empowerment. This collective or communal form of resilience – as opposed to the individual resilience that is typically mobilized in the literature on child and youth development – is more conducive to building and retaining the skills, knowledge, competence, and confidence required to respond to ever-changing, and sometimes stressful, digital environments.

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.

By asking about trust in the Phase IV YCWW survey, we have a sense of how prepared and supported young people feel when they encounter harmful or discomfoting content online. For example, participants generally feel that their families, friends, and teachers trust them to make good decisions when they are online (see **Figure 12** on the next page).

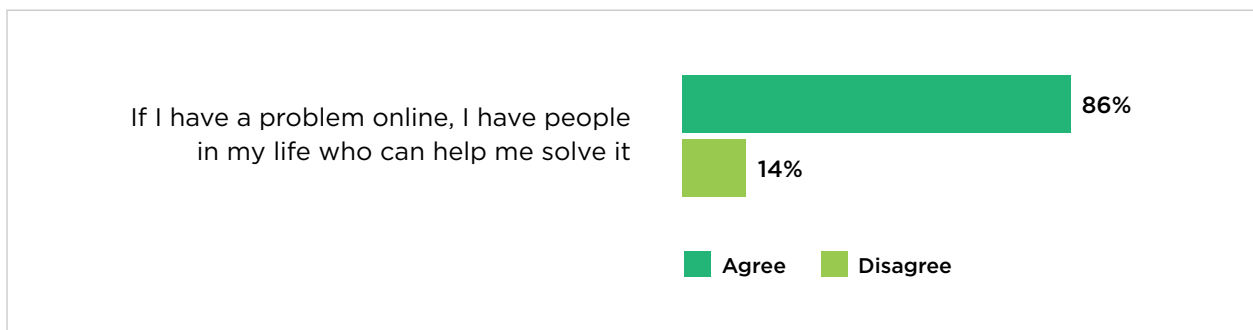
- 90% of participants agree that their parents or guardians trust them to make good decisions online.
- 84% of participants agree that their friends trust them to make good decisions online.
- 82% of participants agree that their teachers trust them to make good decisions online.

Figure 12: Feeling Trusted to Make Good Decisions Online



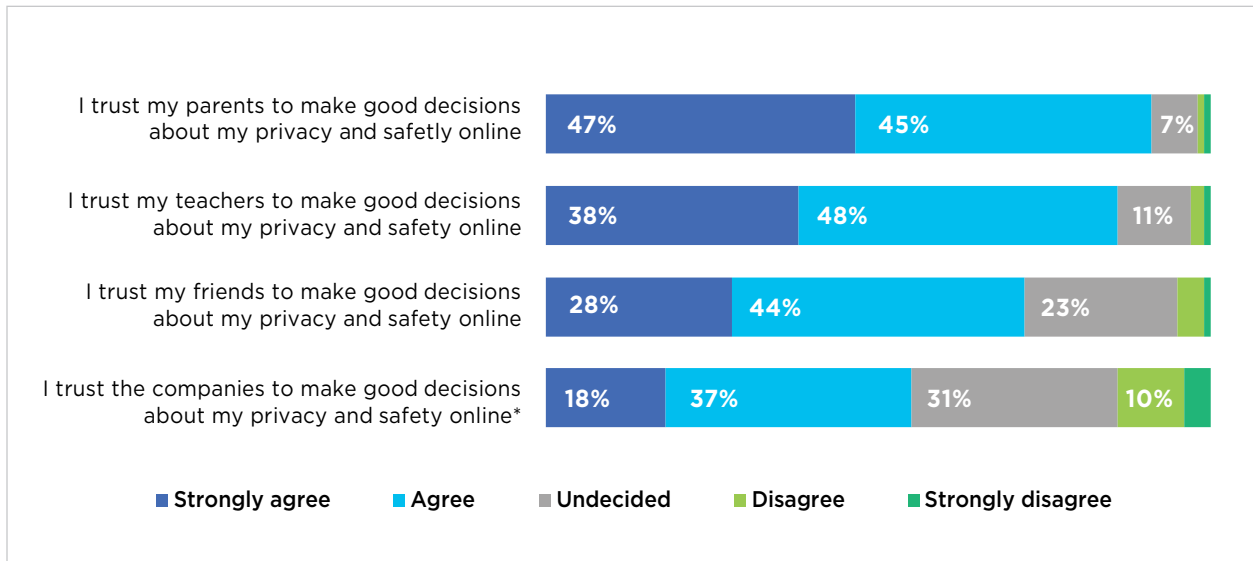
Participants also feel confident that there are people in their lives who will or who could help solve any online problems they experience – 86% agreed with this statement (see **Figure 13** below). Younger youth (88%) and LGBTQ+ youth (83%) are more likely to agree with this statement than other participants. Overall, this sense of support increased from 72% in Phase III of YCWW in 2013 to 86% in Phase IV in 2021.

Figure 13: People Who Can Help Solve Problems



Next, although participants generally seem to trust their parents (92%), teachers (96%), and friends (72%) to make good decisions about their privacy and safety online (we will come back to privacy in more detail in a forthcoming report), they do not have the same amount of trust in online companies (see **Figure 14** on the next page). Only 55% of youth trust companies to make good decisions about their privacy and safety online.

Figure 14: Trust in Others to Make Good Online Decisions



Some other interesting findings related to trust in online corporations include:

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

These findings should be of interest to online corporations who are seeking to repair or increase trust and safety among users and consumers.

Lastly, when it comes to the support that youth are looking for in addressing the harmful or discomfoting content they see or encounter online, we note the following:

- 36% of participants say they want to learn more about how to be safe online.
- 17% of participants say they want to learn more about how to report inappropriate behaviour or content online.
- 14% of participants in grades 7 to 11 want to learn more about how to deal with hateful, racist, or sexist online information.

Some good news in this regard is that young people seem to be getting more support from their parents or guardians than we reported in Phase III of YCWW. For example, only 39% of participants in Phase III said they learned how to deal with hateful, racist, or sexist content online from their parents – this jumped to 52% in 2021. Additionally, while 24% of participants said they *never* learned how to respond to or navigate harmful content in Phase III only 9% of participants reported the same in this most recent phase.

NEXT STEPS

Research shows that even small efforts to push back against online hate can profoundly motivate others to intervene.⁸ However, consistent with our previous research on [online hate](#), 58% of participants in this study indicated that they want to say something when they see something racist or sexist online, but they do not know *what* to say. This phase of YCWW demonstrates that while there is an increased desire to speak out and learn more about how to recognize and respond to harmful and hateful content online (including racist and sexist content), there is a continued lack of knowledge and confidence to do so in ways that are safe and effective.

As we emphasized in our study on [online hate](#):

- Youth need support in developing the skills and knowledge required to recognize when something is hateful or prejudicial online.
- Parents and guardians also need to help their children recognize online hate and support their children to intervene in safe and respectful ways.
- Platforms and technology companies are responsible for creating clear rules for what is considered acceptable behaviour on platforms and easy-to-use reporting mechanisms for flagging unacceptable behaviours and countering hate online.
- More research is needed to understand the experiences of young Canadians, especially gender-diverse youth, racialized youth, 2SLGBTQ+ youth, and youth with disabilities.

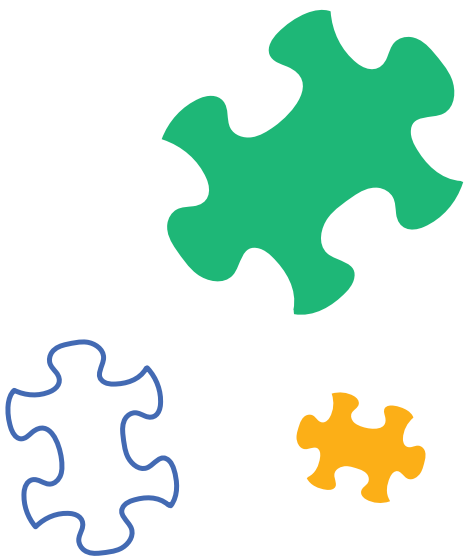
my voice
IS **LOUDER**
than hate

From this study on online hate, MediaSmarts developed [My Voice is Louder Than Hate](#) – a multimedia resource designed to empower young people to push back against hate and prejudice in their online communities. The program incorporates various learning tools, practice scenarios, and media-making exercises alongside two lesson plans and

teacher guides that provide educators with the information required to implement *My Voice* in the classroom or the community. All the information about this resource is on [our website](#) and is free to access. This is one of many resources that exist to support young people as they navigate the digital information ecosystem and various online spaces and places, and we continue to work with our partners and funders to create and update resources in response to an always-already changing wireless world.

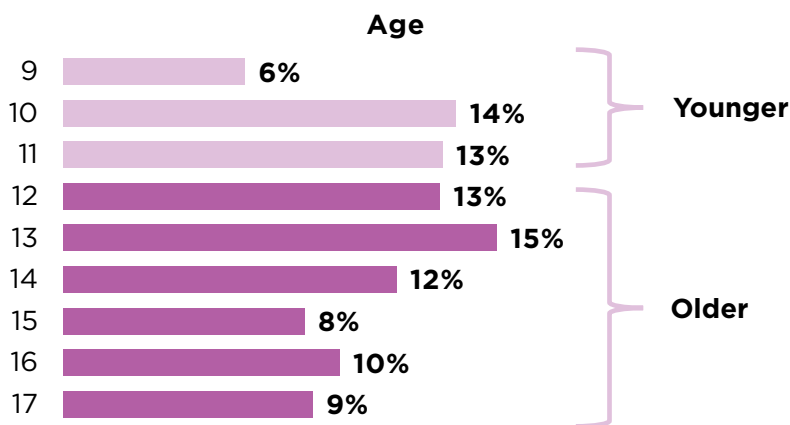
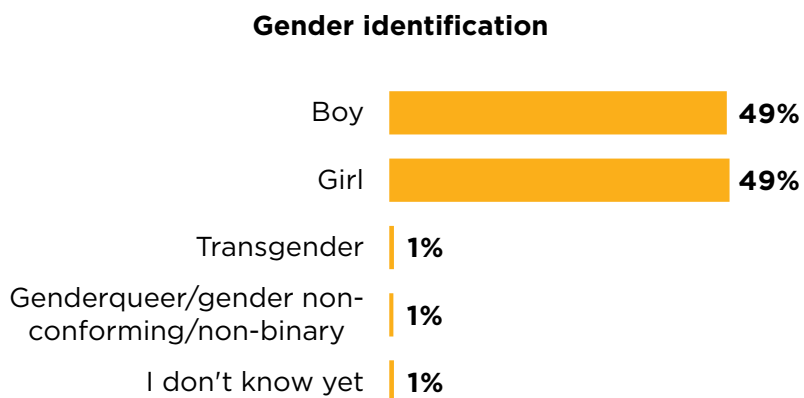
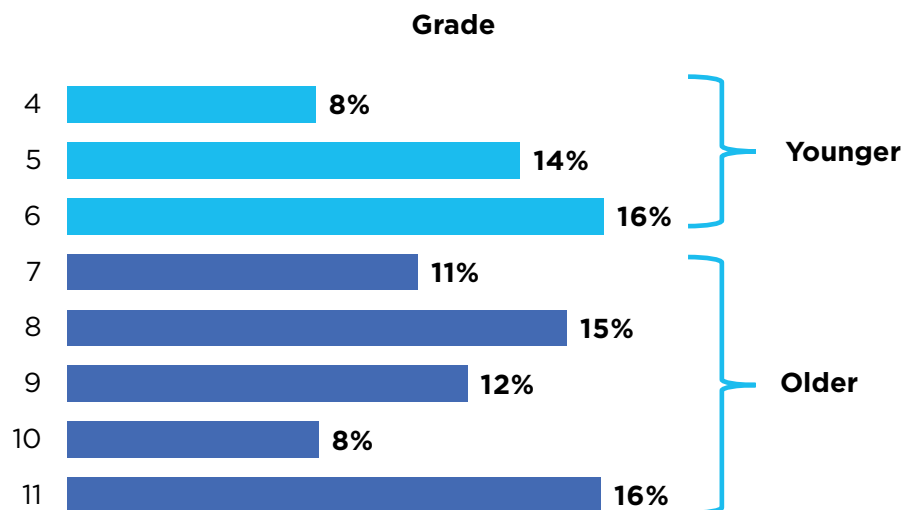
⁸ See: Rasinski, H.M. & Czopp, A.M. (2010). The effect of target status on witnesses' reactions to confrontations of bias. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 39(7), 856-869;
Zou, L.X. & Dickter, C.L. (2013). Perceptions of racial confrontation: The role of colour blindness and comment ambiguity. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 19(1), 92-96.

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

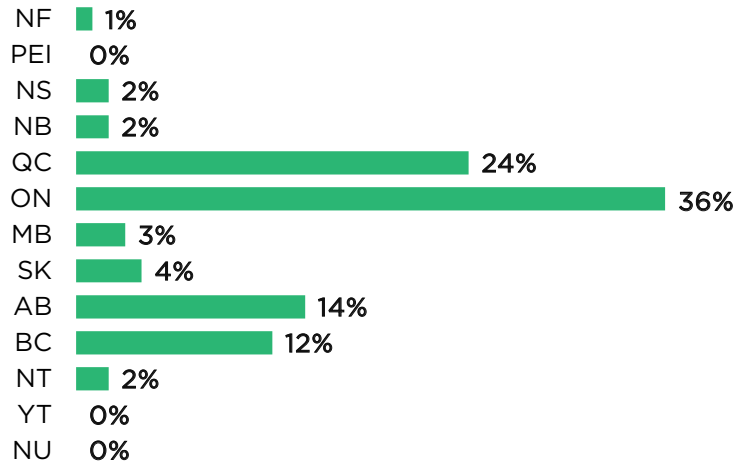


APPENDICES

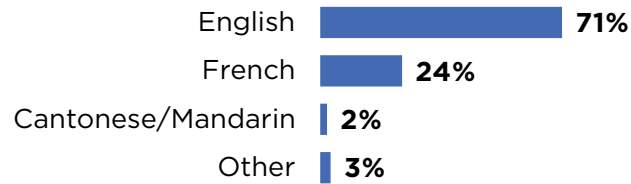
Appendix A: Demographics



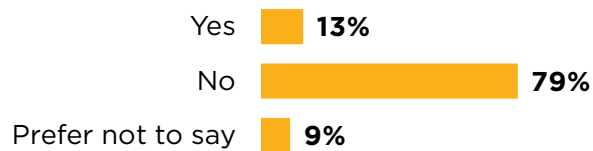
Province of residence



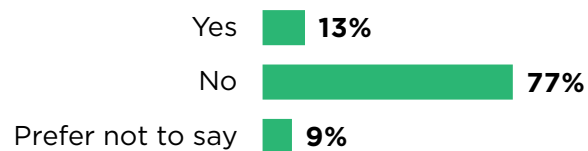
First language



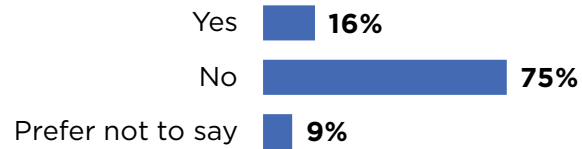
Identifies as having a physical disability



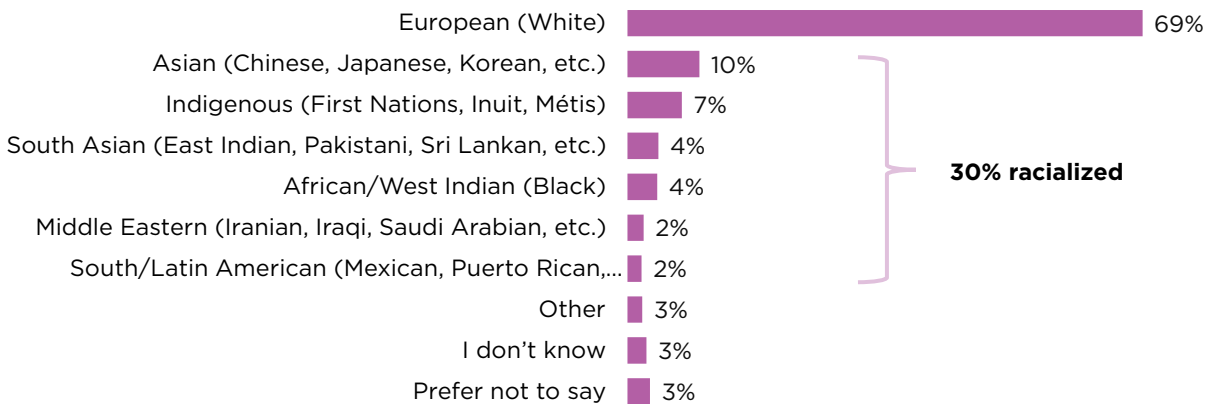
Identifies as having intellectual/cognitive/learning disability



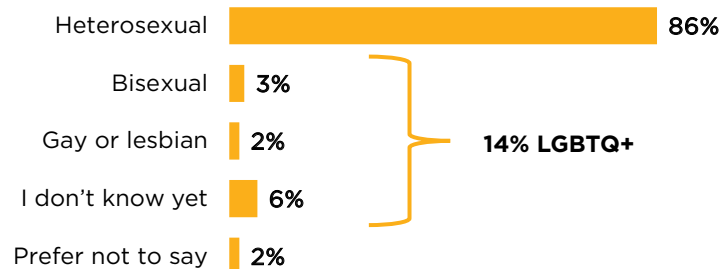
Identifies as having a mental illness



Race identification

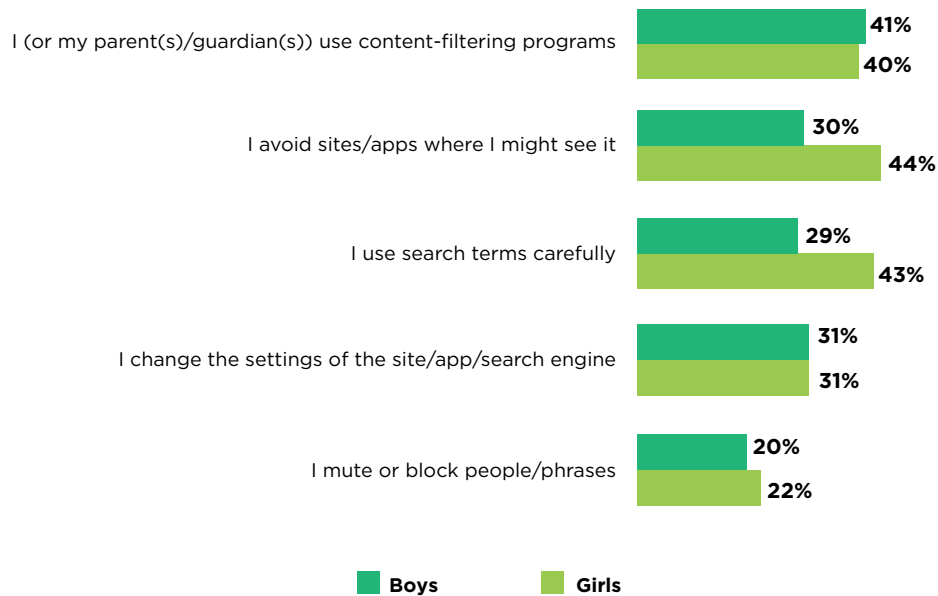


Sexual orientation

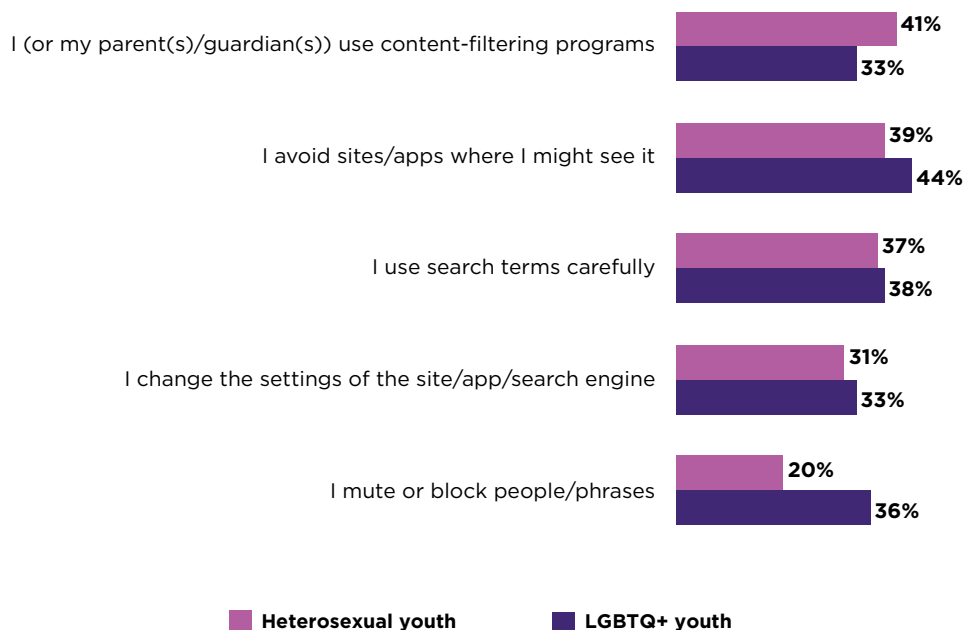


Appendix B: Steps Taken to Avoid Online Pornography – Demographic Differences

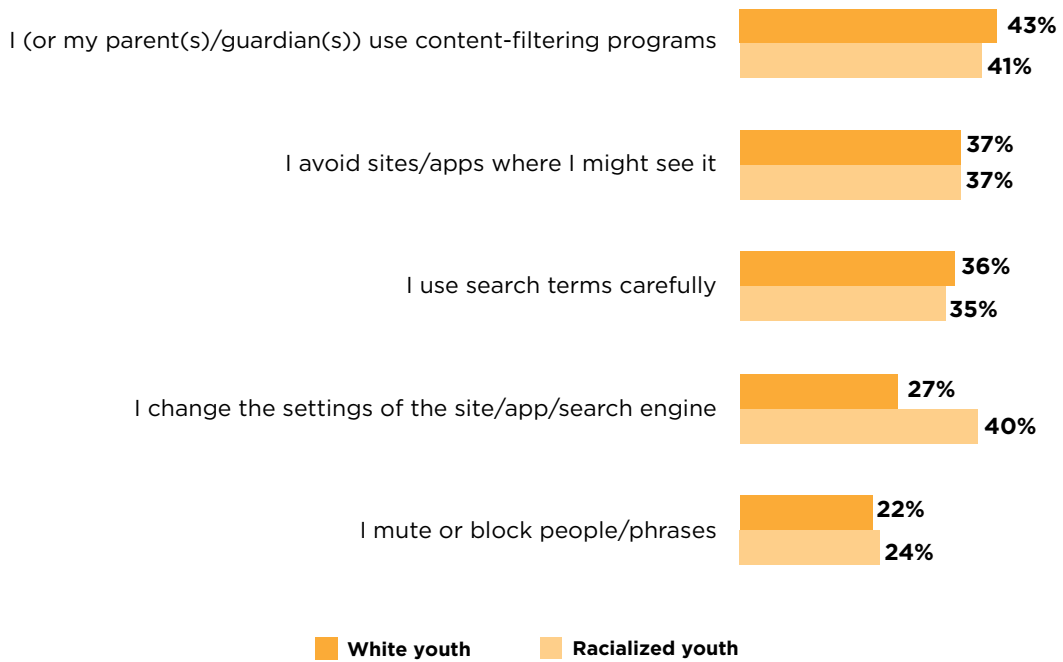
Steps Taken to Avoid Online Pornography – Gender



Steps Taken to Avoid Online Pornography – Sexual Orientation



Steps Taken to Avoid Online Pornography - Race



Steps Taken to Avoid Online Pornography - Disability

