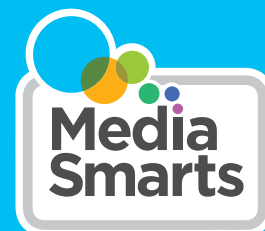YOUNG CANADIANS IN A WIRELESS WORLD, PHASE IV

DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY AND DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

Media Smarts

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 sixth 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 sixth report presents findings related to digital media literacy and digital citizenship. We share findings related to verifying information online, learning digital media literacy skills, and ethical digital citizenship. Data collected in Phase IV of YCWW 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. We speak to 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.

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.
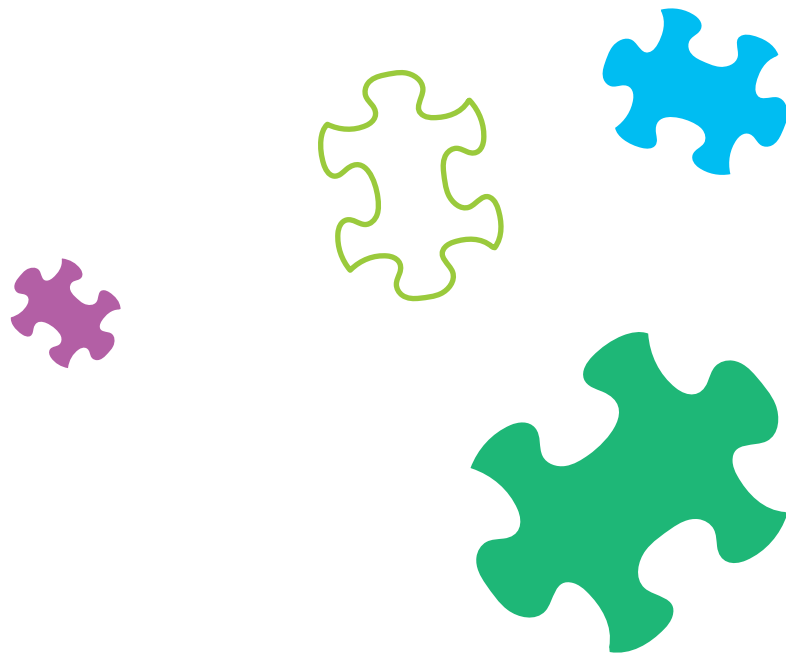
INTRODUCTION

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.
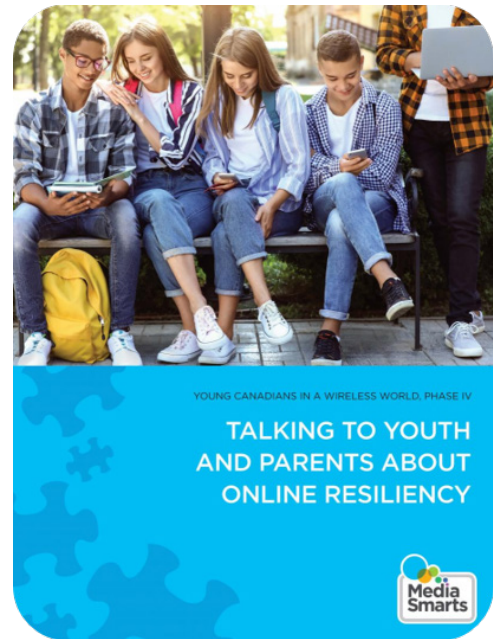
METHODS

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.

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[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.

DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY

Our work at MediaSmarts is in response to the fact that media are all around us—from the television we watch to the advertisements we see to the social media apps we use, and the news we read in print and online. Media in all forms impacts how we learn and interact with each other and our environments, and we are increasingly being influenced by digital media that travels through an infinite web of interconnected information ecosystems. The challenge is that while most people do not need coaxing to *use* digital technology, users can become deeply immersed in online life without the necessary digital media literacy skills and support. This is why our research, public awareness, and educational resource development at MediaSmarts are grounded in our evidence- and practice-based understandings of **digital media literacy**. For youth to survive and thrive in a digital age, they need to not only have *access* to digital technology and media, but they also need to know how to *use, understand*, and *engage* with it.

Access means being able to access devices in order to use and consume media and to find content with tools such as search engines, databases, wikis, and streaming services.

Understand means **thinking critically** about how and why media are made; examining the impact that media have on us and on society; and reflecting on how we use digital and media tools.

Use is the technical skills needed to use digital and media tools like cameras, computers, mobile devices, software, and online platforms.

Engage means using media **effectively** and **responsibly** to participate in our online and offline communities as engaged and responsible citizens.

ACCESS

USE

UNDERSTAND

DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY

ENGAGE

To learn more about digital media literacy, you can visit our website which includes a comprehensive definition along with fundamentals, key concepts, core competencies, best practices, and our digital media literacy framework. The framework draws on our research to identify nine essential skill topics that students need to know as they learn to navigate and participate in the digital media literacy landscape:

1. **Reading media**
2. **Media representation**
3. **Finding and verifying**
4. **Ethics and empathy**
5. **Privacy and security**

6. **Media health**
7. **Consumer awareness**
8. **Community engagement**
9. **Making and remixing**

Given the questions asked in the Phase IV YCWW survey, this report focuses specifically on two elements of the digital media literacy framework: (1) finding and verifying and (2) community engagement. Additionally, we speak to digital citizenship as it relates to these skills and digital media literacy more broadly.

Before moving on to findings from the Phase IV YCWW survey that focus specifically on digital media literacy, we want to return to some data from the Life Online report as a reminder of where young Canadians are online and what they are doing. First, a reminder that the top platforms identified by participants (see **Figure 1**) are nearly all devoted to socialization, entertainment, or both. Additionally, the top twenty responses are composed entirely of platforms operated for commercial purposes.

Figure 1

TOP 5 PLATFORMS

YouTube 50% TikTok 42% Instagram 38%

Facebook 37% Snapchat 28%
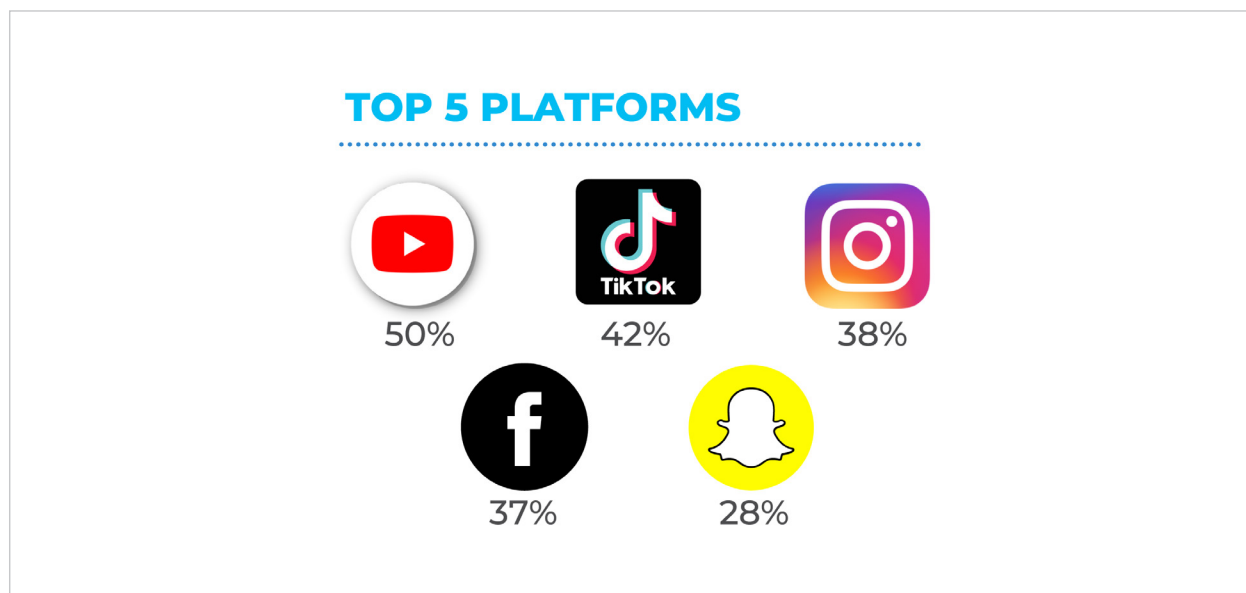
Next, responses to the Phase IV YCWW survey tell us that young people primarily use digital technology and engage in online spaces to connect with family and friends, play online games, watch videos, and listen to music. Besides engaging in social connection online, 74% of participants said they also post comments, pictures, videos, or memes on a social network—demonstrating a high level of *active* and *creative* online engagement.

Finally, of relevance from the Life Online report are findings that tell us that when young people are allowed access to digital devices in the classroom, they mostly use them to research for a school assignment or project (46%), read class materials (29%), or use/play educational programs/games (25%). Another 23% use their devices in the classroom to watch videos, listen to podcasts, or read websites directly related to their schoolwork (see **Figure 2**).

Figure 2: Digital device activities permitted in the classroom

Activity	Percentage
To do research for a school assignment/project	46%
Read class materials	29%
Use educational programs/play educational games	25%
Watch videos/listen to podcasts/read websites for school work	23%
Communicate with other students in your class about school work	16%
Help you concentrate on school work	16%
As a reward when you finish your school work early	14%
Communicate with people outside of the classroom for school work	11%
Contribute to a class blog/Wiki	8%
I am not allowed to use a digital device in the classroom	3%
None of the above	39%

Considering the rise of misinformation and disinformation online, understanding how students use technology and the internet in the classroom is important. While we did not ask how frequently young Canadians encounter false or misleading information online or how this might impact their ability to complete school assignments in this study, our recent qualitative research in this area provides some insights. Through interactive focus groups with youth ages 16 to 29, we learned that there is a growing concern among young Canadians about the amount of misinformation and disinformation posted and shared on various platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube). While young people do their best to report or verify this information, they want platforms to play a more decisive role in countering misinformation and disinformation online. Furthermore, given that young people turn to social platforms as their primary news source and use apps like TikTok as a search engine, we must continue to learn more about how youth encounter, identify, and navigate misinformation and disinformation so we can develop and deliver more effective digital media literacy resources in classrooms and communities across Canada.

Finding and Verifying Information

Young Canadians mostly use the internet to learn more about their hobbies and interests, get updates on entertainment news and celebrities, and keep up with sports and news, current events, or politics.

8 in 10 youth are concerned with accessing information from sites they believe are reliable. Many rely on their teachers to help them determine reliability.

Most youth try to ensure the reliability of the content they find online, especially for schoolwork or personal interest. However, they appear to be less cautious regarding social media posts—whether it is content they see on social media or content they plan to share.

One of the first questions we asked young Canadians in the Phase IV YCWW survey was whether they use the internet to learn about various topics and activities (see **Figure 3**). Responses to this question tell us that youth mostly use the internet to learn more information related to their own hobbies and personal interests (68%), to get updates on entertainment news and celebrities (50%), and to keep up with sports (42%) and news, current events, or politics (35%).

Figure 3: Looking for Information Online - Topics
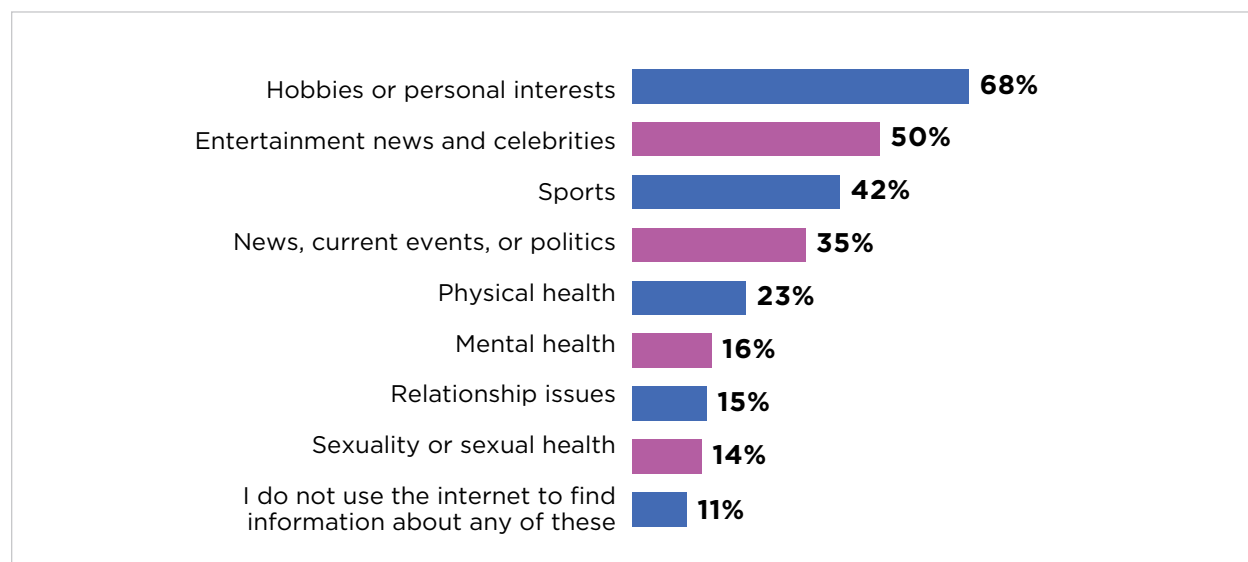
Girls are somewhat more likely to use the internet to seek information about entertainment and celebrities (53%, compared to 46% of boys), mental health (18, compared to 13% of boys), and relationship issues (14%, compared to 9% of boys). Boys are considerably more likely to use the internet to look up information about sports (55%, compared to 29% of girls), as are heterosexual youth (44%, compared to 26% of **LGBTQ+** youth). LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to seek information about mental health (26%, compared to 15% of heterosexual youth) and sexuality or sexual health (24%, compared to 13% of heterosexual youth). Gender-diverse youth (n=6) are more likely to use the internet to learn about entertainment news and celebrities (83%), physical health (83%), and mental health (83%). Transgender youth (n=7) are more likely to use the internet to learn about hobbies or personal interests (86%), entertainment news and celebrities (57%), and relationship issues (57%).

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

Youth with a disability are more likely to search the internet for information on physical health (31%, compared to 20% of youth without a disability), mental health (28%, compared to 12% of youth without a disability), and relationship issues (20%, compared to 13% of youth without a disability). Older youth (in grades 7-11) are more likely to use the internet to find information for most categories we listed in the question compared to younger youth (in grades 4-6).

> **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.**

Using the internet to find information about news, current events, or politics has decreased slightly from the last phase of YCWW, with 49% of youth reporting using the internet to look up news, current event or politics in Phase III and 35% of youth reporting using the internet for the same information in 2021. Of note, however, is the difference in sample size between the two phases: in Phase III, the sample size was 5,436, and in Phase IV, the sample size was 1,058.

For the 11% (n=120) of participants who said they do not use the internet to learn about any of the items listed, we asked about where they tend to learn this information (see **Figure 4**). Most (86%) turn to family members as sources of information, followed by friends (58%) and teachers (55%).

Figure 4: Personal Information Sources

Family 86%
Friends 58%
Teachers 55%
Other 4%

n=120
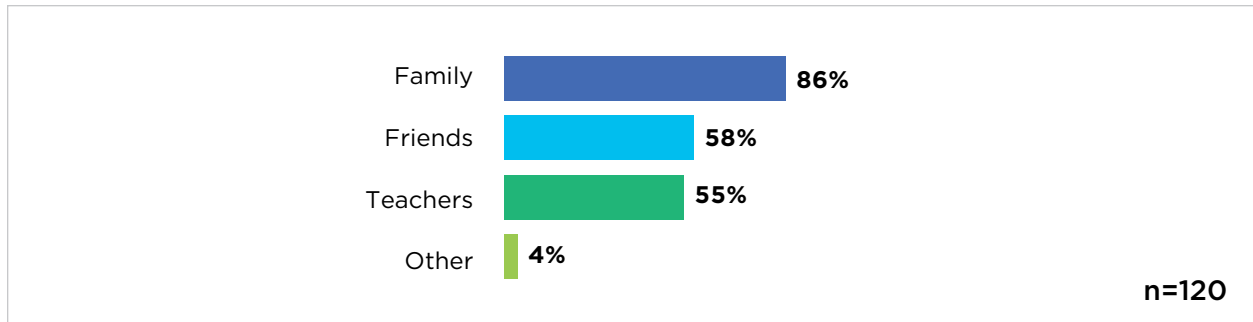
Younger participants indicated they are more likely to rely on their teachers to learn about various topics, while older participants are more likely to seek advice and guidance from friends (**see Figure 5**).

Figure 5: Personal Information Sources by Grade

Family 87% / 84%
Friends 52% / 64%
Teachers 65% / 45%
Other 3% / 5%

■ Grades 4-6   ■ Grades 7-11

n=120
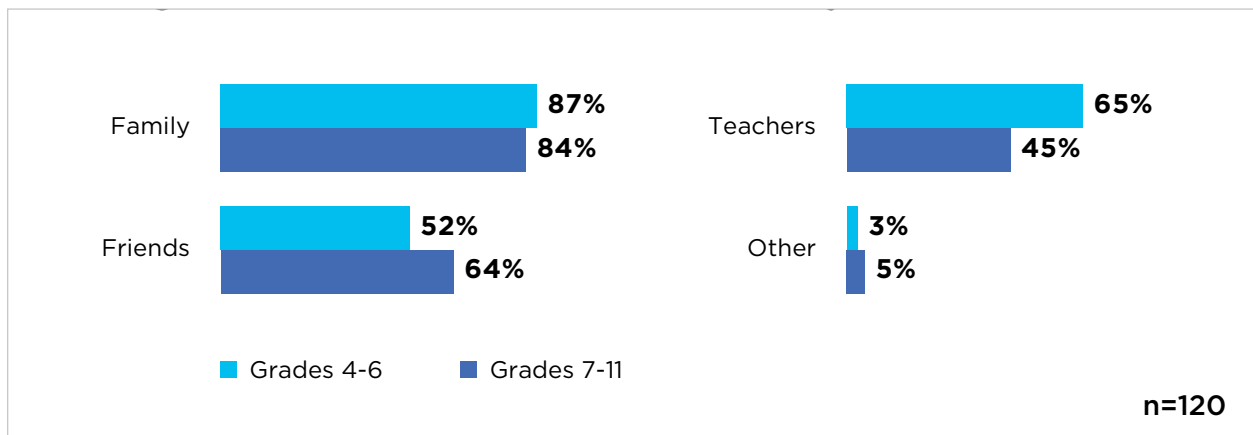
When it comes to looking for information online, young Canadians employ relatively savvy searching practices (**see Figure 6**). Most want to ensure they access information from sites they believe are reliable (82%), and many understand that using different search terms can generate different results (71%). Young people also rely heavily on teachers to support them in looking for information online (67%) and are generally aware of specialized search tools (66%) and the benefit of scanning several sources from different search engines and websites.

Figure 6: Looking for Information Online - Practices
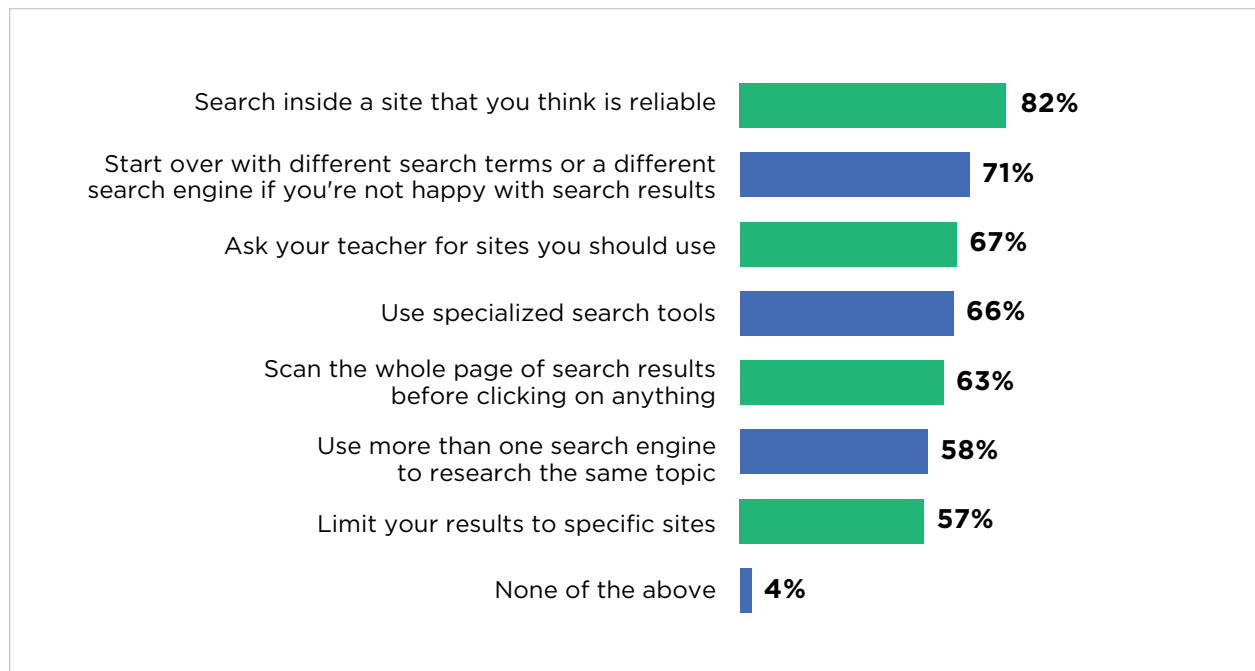
Girls are slightly more likely to search sites they believe are reliable (85%, compared to 79% of boys). Gender-diverse and transgender youth (n=13) are more likely to scan the whole page of search results before clicking anything (100% of gender-diverse youth and 86% of transgender youth), as are older youth (67%, compared to 58% of younger youth). Younger participants are considerably more likely to seek support from a teacher (78%, compared to 61% of older youth). Across all the other demographic groups (race, sexual orientation, disability), the top two statements remain consistent. In other words, most youth are concerned about the reliability of websites and are aware of the impact of using different search terms and search engines on the results that appear while researching online.

When it comes to searching practices, we observed increased use of almost all the practices we asked about in Phase IV (2021) compared to Phase III (2013).[3] We note the significant use of:

- specialized search tools (35% of participants in Phase III, compared to 66% of participants in Phase IV);
- scanning the whole page of search results (50% of participants in Phase III compared to 63% of participants in Phase IV); and
- asking a teacher about sites to use (54% of participants in Phase III compared to 67% of participants in Phase IV).

Next, we wanted to know more about what youth do to determine the reliability of the information they find online (**see Figure 7**). Top responses include asking teachers for advice on whether a source is reliable (74%), checking sources already known to be reliable (73%), and looking at other websites to see if they say the same thing (73%). It is also worth noting that while Wikipedia is no longer a top site among young Canadians (see the Life Online report), they continue to rely on it as a source when verifying information.

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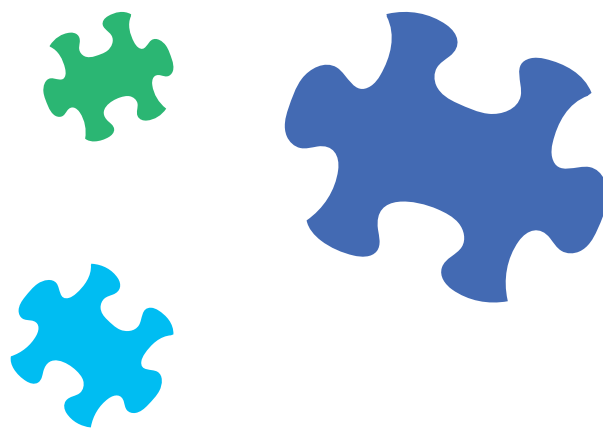
[3] Again, we note the difference in sample size between the two phases: in Phase III (2013), the sample size was 5,436, and in Phase IV (2021), the sample size was 1,058.

Figure 7 : Determining Reliability of Information

I ask my teacher for advice on whether a source is reliable	74%
I check a source I know is reliable	73%
I look at other websites to see if they say the same thing	73%
I check an online encyclopedia like Wikipedia	68%
I look at whether the site seems polished and professional	67%
I make sure that facts are from experts on the topic	66%
I research to see if source of the website is considered reliable by others	64%
I check the web address of the site	63%
I look at whether any opinions on the site are backed up with facts I can check out	62%
I look to see when the site was published or last updated	62%
I look at whether the source only shows one side of an issue	58%
I find out where the information originally came from	58%
I look to see if there is contact information for the source	56%
I use tools like fact-checking sites or reverse image search	54%
None of the above	4%

Older youth are more likely than younger ones to do almost all of these things, although younger participants are more likely to rely on their teachers for support when determining the reliability of information found online (this was the top response for participants in grades 4 to 6, while participants in grades 7 to 11 prefer to cross-reference the information they find with other websites and sources).

When determining the reliability of information found online, we observed an increased use in Phase IV (2021) of all the strategies we asked about in Phase III (2013) of this study.[4] In particular, we note increases in the following:

- asking a teacher for advice on reliable sources (54% of participants in Phase III, compared to 74% of participants in Phase IV);

- looking at whether opinions are backed up with facts to be further examined (51% of participants in Phase III, compared to 65% of participants in Phase IV);

- looking at whether the source only shows one side of an issue (44% of participants in Phase III, compared to 58% of participants in Phase IV); and

- looking to see if there is any contact information for the source (27% of participants in Phase III, compared to 56% of participants in Phase IV).

In addition to knowing *whether* youth are concerned about verifying the reliability of the information they find online, we also wanted to know *when* they are more likely to engage in fact-checking activities (see **Figure 8**). Responses indicate that most youth try to ensure the reliability of the content they find online, especially for schoolwork (89%) or personal interest (84%). However, they appear to be less cautious regarding social media posts— whether it is content they see on social media (72%) or content they plan to share (69%).

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[4] Of note is the difference in sample size between the two phases: in Phase III (2013), the sample size was 5,436, and in Phase IV (2021), the sample size was 1,058.

Figure 8: Verifying Reliability of Online Sources

You are looking for information for school work	89%
You are looking for information for your own personal interest	84%
You are looking for information for a friend or family member	78%
A friend/family member shares information with you	76%
You read an online news story	74%
You learn something through social media	72%
You are going to share it on social media	69%
None of the above	4%

Older youth are slightly more likely than younger youth to verify sources for all the reasons listed except when looking for information for schoolwork. Youth who make online purchases and youth who say they know how to protect themselves online are also more likely to verify the reliability of sources for all the reasons listed. Across all demographic groups (gender, age, race, sexual orientation, disability), the top two statements remain consistent. In other words, all youth are most concerned with verifying the reliability of sources when it comes to completing schoolwork or searching for information for their personal interests.

Verifying the reliability of sources has increased from Phase III (in 2013) to Phase IV (in 2021) for all the reasons listed except for looking for information for schoolwork, which remained consistent across the two phases (89% of participants in both phases indicated verifying information in this instance).[5] Here we note significant increases in verifying the reliability of sources in the following instances:

- looking for information for personal interest (66% of participants in Phase III compared to 84% of participants in Phase IV);

- reading an online news story (60% of participants in Phase III compared to 74% of participants in Phase IV); and

- learning something through social media (56% in Phase III compared to 72% of participants in Phase IV) - despite this being an area where youth exercise less caution in Phase IV compared to other instances of information seeking.

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[5] Once again, we note the difference in sample size between the two phases: in Phase III (2013), the sample size was 5,436, and in Phase IV (2021), the sample size was 1,058.

Case study: Perceptions of Search Engines

As one marker of information-seeking and digital media literacy skills (see the learning digital media literacy skills section for more information on what youth are learning and from whom), we asked participants to indicate whether they believed a series of statements about how Google operates to be true or false (see **Figure 9**).[6] These statements, some of which are accurate and some inaccurate, were chosen to identify how well youth understand Google's business model and how the search engine operates. Although participants could agree with any statements they believed true, most received only fifteen to thirty percent support. This suggests that, in general, young people do not feel confident in their knowledge or understanding of how Google operates or makes money.
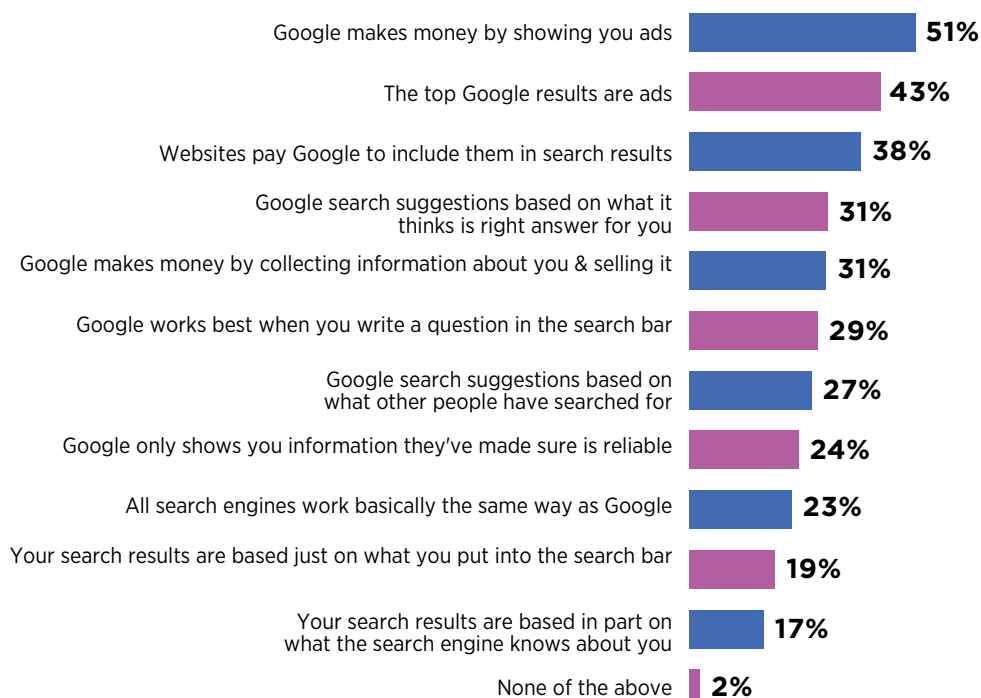
For example, despite the prominence of advertising in search results, just over half of participants correctly stated that Google makes money by showing people ads,

and over a third mistakenly believe that websites must pay to be included in search results. While just a quarter mistakenly believe that the information Google provides has all been verified, only a slightly larger number (31%) understand that relevance is a more significant factor, and an even smaller number (17%) realize the role that their data profile plays in determining search results.

This last point about data use contrasts with the much larger number (31%) who mistakenly believe that Google collects data and sells it to third parties, a practice Google has said it does not engage in. While many youth are aware that Google engages in data collection, they are generally mistaken about its purpose and the impact that data has on their online interactions.

Young Canadians' attitudes towards Google can, therefore, be best described as naïve skepticism, expressed as a general suspicion of a corporate business model but a poor level of understanding about how it works.

Figure 9: Perceptions of Search Engines

Statement	Percentage
Google makes money by showing you ads	51%
The top Google results are ads	43%
Websites pay Google to include them in search results	38%
Google search suggestions based on what it thinks is right answer for you	31%
Google makes money by collecting information about you & selling it	31%
Google works best when you write a question in the search bar	29%
Google search suggestions based on what other people have searched for	27%
Google only shows you information they've made sure is reliable	24%
All search engines work basically the same way as Google	23%
Your search results are based just on what you put into the search bar	19%
Your search results are based in part on what the search engine knows about you	17%
None of the above	2%

[6] We chose Google as an example of a search engine for this case study because at the time of survey design it was one of the most used search engines among youth.

After the initial analysis of survey responses related to finding and verifying information, we examined the relationship between specific verification methods and other experiences and behaviours. The four verification methods we focus on here include:

1. I look at whether the site seems polished and professional.
2. I check the web address of a site.
3. I use tools like fact-checking sites and reverse image searches.
4. I research to see if the source is considered reliable.

The first two methods are based on *close reading*[7] of the source - and while both are widely practiced and (especially regarding the second method) still widely taught, they have been found to be ineffective or worse (in part because they require too much time and attention to become habitual in a networked media environment, and partly because they rely on incorrect advice such as giving more weight to sites with dot-org addresses). Due to their general ineffectiveness, these methods are no longer included in MediaSmarts' materials on verifying information online. The other two methods are *lateral reading*[8] strategies. These strategies are found to be more effective and are now central to MediaSmarts' approach.

In completing this additional analysis, we aimed to identify differences between students who had learned either the *close reading* or *lateral reading* strategies. However, we found that all four of these verification methods are strongly associated with one another and with all the other search and verification methods we asked about. Essentially, youth who report using *any* of these methods are more likely to say they use *all* of them. This may be due to social desirability bias, as youth who feel that verifying information is important might be reluctant to admit to not using any suggested strategy. While (with a few exceptions) we cannot draw distinctions between using the different verification methods, there are clear distinctions between youth who say they verify information found online and those who do not.

Which young people use verification strategies? There are very few demographic differences: boys and girls are about equally likely to use most tactics, and younger participants (9-11) are less likely to use these tactics compared to older youth (12-17).

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[7] Close, or vertical, reading is an approach to authenticating sources that is based on focusing closely on the sources themselves, most often using a checklist such as the CRAAP test. Examples of close reading strategies include: evaluating a site's web address, looking for contact and "About Me" information, and looking at the completeness and objectivity of the content.

[8] Lateral reading involves evaluating sites by moving away from the site itself and using digital tools to identify whether a consensus of other sources consider it to be reliable. The lateral reading strategies covered in MediaSmarts' Break the Fake program include: using fact-checking tools like Snopes; using tools such as links, search engine searches, or reverse image searches to find the original source; evaluating whether the source is generally seen as reliable; and consulting sources known to be reliable to get accurate information on the topic.

Racialized youth were, in most cases, somewhat more likely to use these strategies, while youth with disabilities were considerably more likely to do so than those without.

Devices available at school are not connected to using these verification strategies, though youth who practice these strategies are more likely to say their schools allow them to use their *own* devices for various purposes. School filters (when school administrators apply various blocks or restrictions on the websites available to students in the classroom) are one of the only areas where there is a meaningful difference between the use of *close reading* and *lateral reading* strategies. Youth who practice *any* of the strategies are all slightly more likely to have had trouble finding things due to school filters. However, only those who reported using the *lateral reading* strategies - those that require the use of multiple sites to identify whether a consensus of other sources confirms reliability - were more likely to say they could get around those filters. More information about technology in the classroom is available in the Life Online report.

> 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.

In general, youth who used any of the four verification methods are considerably more likely to use the internet to learn about hobbies or personal interests, news, and physical, mental or sexual health and slightly more likely to use the internet to learn about sports and entertainment news or celebrities. The use of these methods is also tied to civic engagement (see the section on digital citizenship in this report for further analysis of questions related to online advocacy and activism). For instance, youth who use any verification methods are more likely to post content about a cause or event they care about and to join or support an activist group online (both are particularly true of youth who use fact-checking tools). We also note a relationship between using any of the four verification methods and trust. For example, youth who use any of the verification methods are more likely to say they trust the adults in their lives, their friends, their teachers, and the corporations that own online platforms. They are also more likely to turn to others—both adults and other youth—for help with a personal problem.

Overall, using verification methods is strongly associated with using all the search strategies we asked about and with verifying information in all contexts. This relationship is especially strong when youth are looking for information for a friend or family member (perhaps indicating youth who use these methods are seen as trusted resources by others), when they encounter information on social media, when they read news online, and when they are going to share it with others. This suggests that knowledge of verification methods does translate into meaningful action.
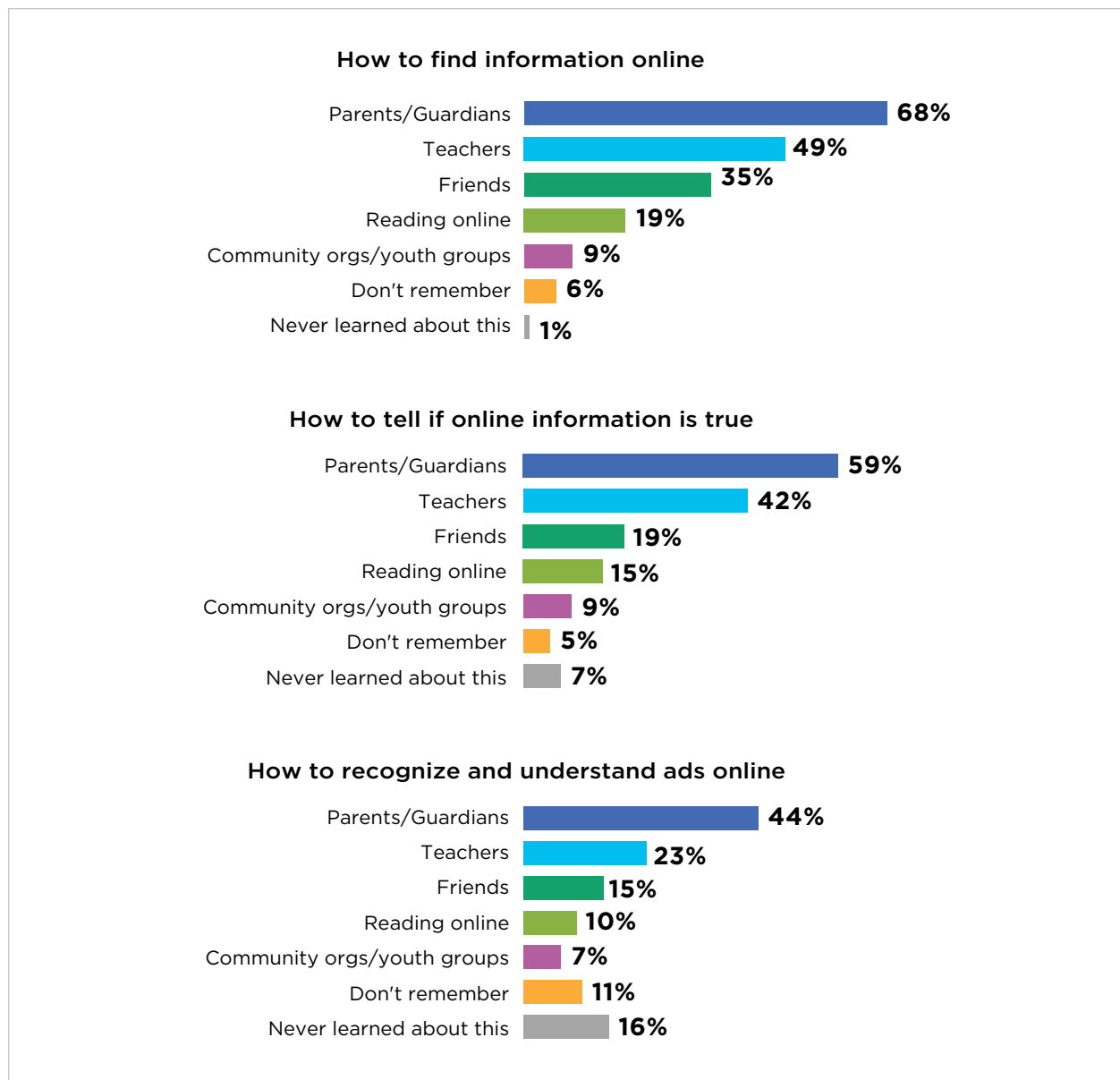
Learning Digital Media Literacy Skills

Young Canadians report learning how to find and verify information online primarily from their parents or guardians and teachers. 4 in 10 report wanting to learn more about both of these activities.

3 in 10 youth said they have never learned what an algorithm is or how it works.

About two-thirds of youth believe their parents or guardians and teachers know more about digital technology than they do.

When it comes to learning about how to find information online, how to verify that information, and how to recognize and understand online advertising, it seems that many youth do so via their parents and guardians (see **Figure 10**). Teachers are noted as a good source for learning about finding and verifying information online but less so for learning about recognizing and understanding ads. About one-third (35%) of youth report that their friends teach them how to find information online, but they do not rely on these relationships as much to tell if that information is true (19%). Overall, it seems that young Canadians are learning about these specific digital media literacy skills from various sources—with parents and guardians being a primary guide.

Figure 10: Learned Activities—Information Seeking

How to find information online

Parents/Guardians	68%
Teachers	49%
Friends	35%
Reading online	19%
Community orgs/youth groups	9%
Don't remember	6%
Never learned about this	1%

How to tell if online information is true

Parents/Guardians	59%
Teachers	42%
Friends	19%
Reading online	15%
Community orgs/youth groups	9%
Don't remember	5%
Never learned about this	7%

How to recognize and understand ads online

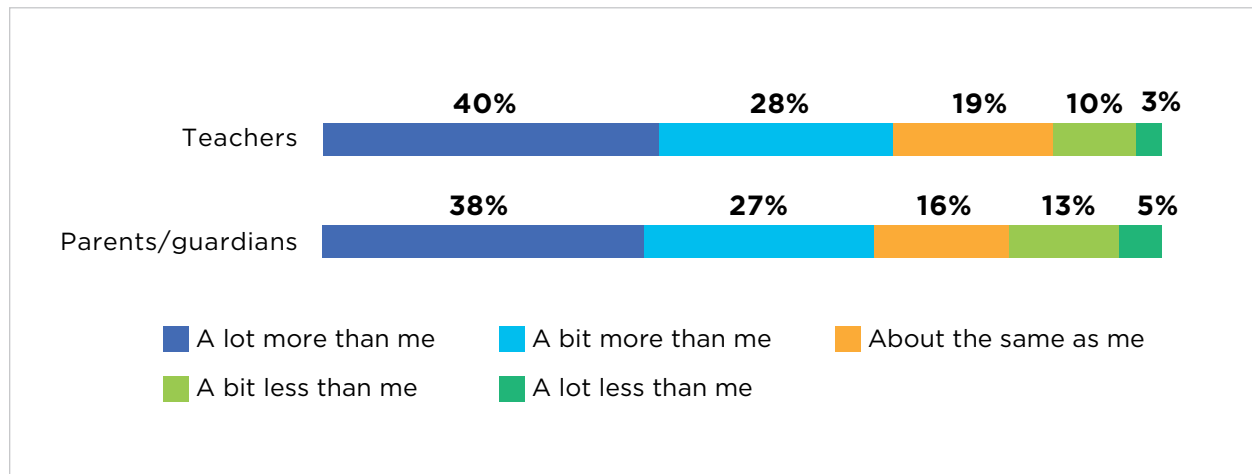|	
Parents/Guardians	44%
Teachers	23%
Friends	15%
Reading online	10%
Community orgs/youth groups	7%
Don't remember	11%
Never learned about this	16%

Regarding more technical skills—learning about algorithms, coding, and making media—the sources and levels of learning are a bit more varied (see **Figure 11**). For example, about one-third (31%) of youth say they learned about what an algorithm is and how it works from their parents or guardians, and nearly the same amount (30%) said they have never learned about this. When it comes to coding, 30% of participants said they have learned about this from their teachers, and 33% said they have never learned how to code. Finally, when young Canadians want to learn about how to make and publish media with their digital devices, about one-third (33%) turn to their friends, followed by parents and guardians (29%) and teachers (23%). Only 16% said they have never learned about media making and sharing.

Figure 11: Learned Activities—Technical Skills

What an algorithm is & how it works

Parents/Guardians	31%
Teachers	22%
Friends	13%
Reading online	13%
Community orgs/youth groups	9%
Don't remember	7%
Never learned about this	30%

Coding

Parents/Guardians	20%
Teachers	30%
Friends	15%
Reading online	10%
Community orgs/youth groups	7%
Don't remember	4%
Never learned about this	33%

How to make/publish media with digital devices

Parents/Guardians	29%
Teachers	23%
Friends	33%
Reading online	17%
Community orgs/youth groups	9%
Don't remember	8%
Never learned about this	16%

That young Canadians report relying on parents and teachers most often for learning about these topics is not surprising, given that they also believe that the adults in their lives know *more* about digital technology than they do (see **Figure 12**). About two-thirds of youth believe their parents or guardians and teachers know more about digital technology than they do. Younger youth are more likely to say that their parents or guardians (85%, compared to 53% of older youth) and teachers (55%, compared to 31% of older youth) know more than they do. Older youth are more likely to say that teachers and parents or guardians know either the same or less than they do.

Figure 12: Knowledge of Digital Technology

	A lot more than me	A bit more than me	About the same as me	A bit less than me	A lot less than me
Teachers	40%	28%	19%	10%	3%
Parents/guardians	38%	27%	16%	13%	5%

Overall, these findings suggest that contrary to the stereotype that youth effortlessly acquire technical skills by virtue of 'growing up with technology,' young people in this study believe the adults in their lives know more about technology than they do, and they turn to these adults as trusted sources of information and support. For example, youth who are usually online with adult supervision and support are more likely to engage in all the search practices and strategies for determining reliable information we asked about in this study.

After asking how or from whom youth learn about various digital media literacy skills, we also wanted to know whether they are interested in learning more about information-seeking or technical skills (see **Figures 13 and 14**). Young Canadians seem most interested in learning about information seeking (46%) and verification (44%). There is less interest in learning about technical aspects of the online world; however, there is at least some interest in learning about algorithms (27%) and coding (23%).

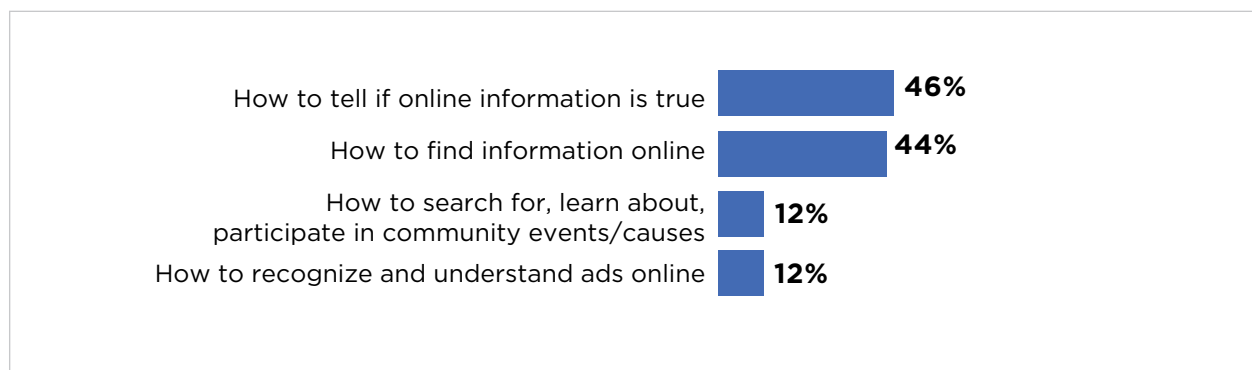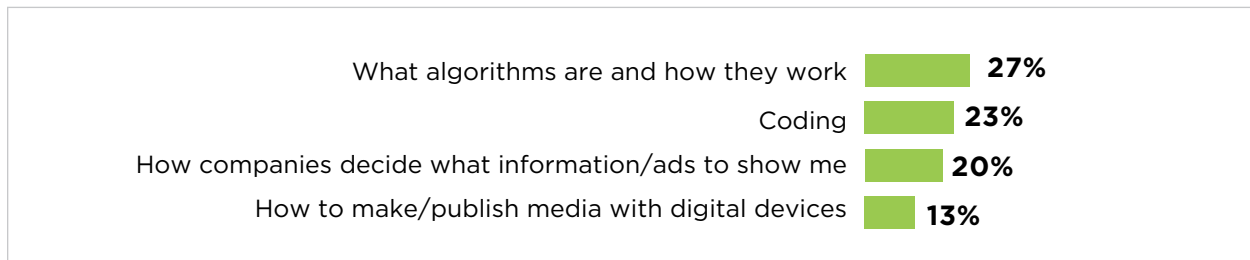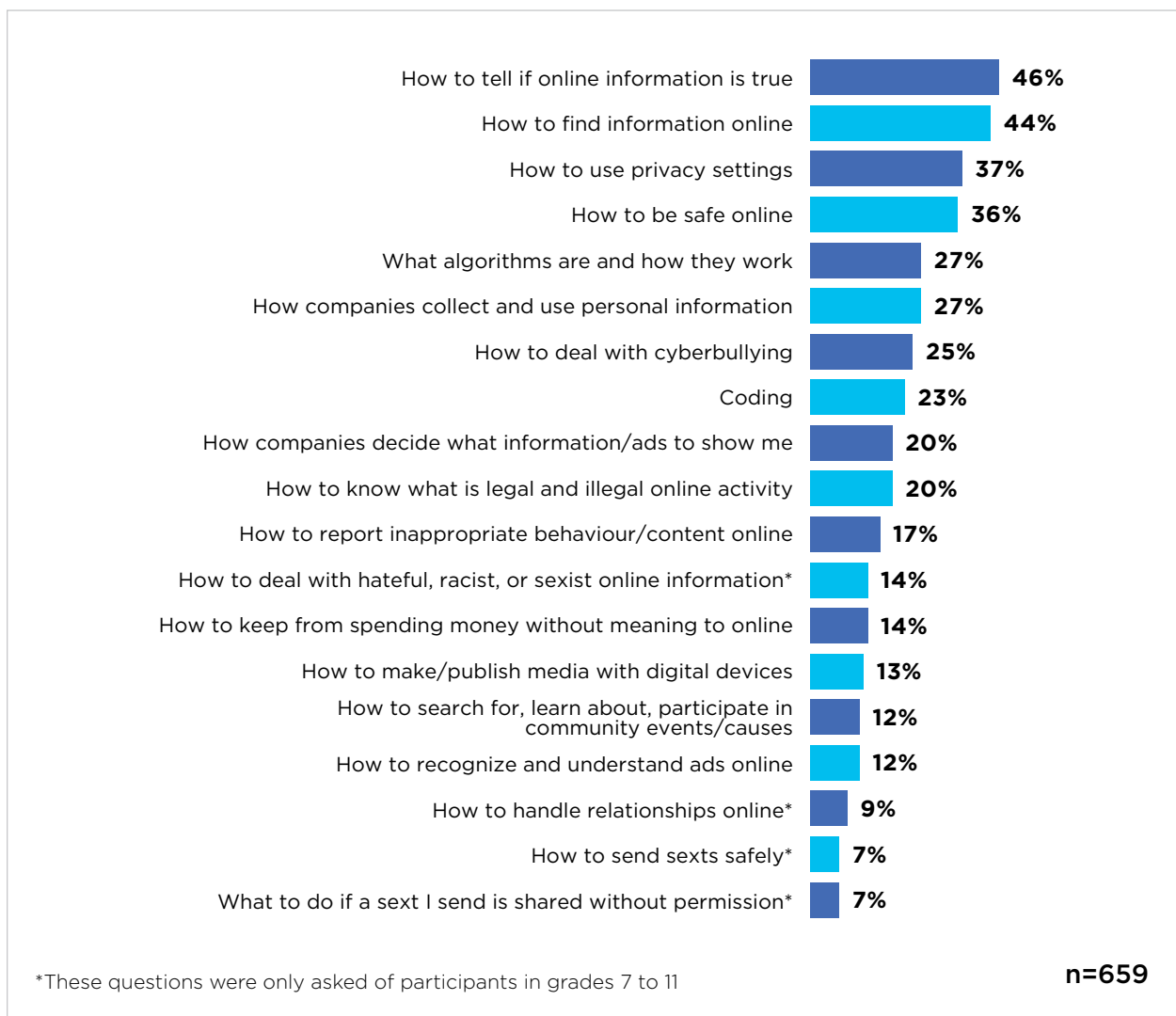**Figure 13: Further Learning—Information Seeking**

How to tell if online information is true	46%
How to find information online	44%
How to search for, learn about, participate in community events/causes	12%
How to recognize and understand ads online	12%

Figure 14: Further Learning - Technical Skills

What algorithms are and how they work	27%
Coding	23%
How companies decide what information/ads to show me	20%
How to make/publish media with digital devices	13%

Throughout the other reports in the YCWW Phase IV series, we have highlighted areas where youth desire more opportunities for learning across various topics, including finding and verifying information, privacy and safety, technical skills, online meanness and cruelty, harmful and discomfiting content, and sexting (see **Figure 15**).

Figure 15: Further Learning—All Topics

How to tell if online information is true	46%
How to find information online	44%
How to use privacy settings	37%
How to be safe online	36%
What algorithms are and how they work	27%
How companies collect and use personal information	27%
How to deal with cyberbullying	25%
Coding	23%
How companies decide what information/ads to show me	20%
How to know what is legal and illegal online activity	20%
How to report inappropriate behaviour/content online	17%
How to deal with hateful, racist, or sexist online information*	14%
How to keep from spending money without meaning to online	14%
How to make/publish media with digital devices	13%
How to search for, learn about, participate in community events/causes	12%
How to recognize and understand ads online	12%
How to handle relationships online*	9%
How to send sexts safely*	7%
What to do if a sext I send is shared without permission*	7%

*These questions were only asked of participants in grades 7 to 11

n=659

Here we note the following demographic differences:

- Younger youth want to learn more about how to be safe online.

- Older youth want to learn more about how companies collect and use personal information and what algorithms are, and how they work.

- Girls want to learn more about how to be safe online and what to do if a sext is shared without their permission.

- Boys want to learn more about what algorithms are and how they work, and coding.

- Gender-diverse and transgender youth (n=13) want to learn more about how to use privacy settings, how to be safe online, and how to make and publish media.

- LGBTQ+ youth want to learn more about making and publishing media with digital devices.

- Racialized youth want to learn more about how companies decide what information and ads to show them and how to deal with hateful, racist, or sexist content.

- Youth with a disability want to learn more about how to use privacy settings, how to handle online relationships, and how to deal with hateful, racist, or sexist content.

When we look at all the topics (seeking and verifying information, privacy and safety, technical skills, online meanness and cruelty, harmful and discomfiting content, and sexting), we see that the top response across all demographics is for further learning about how to tell if the information found online is true. Young people's desire to learn more about how to tell if information online is true is consistent with our (2018) parenting research, which found that the top concern of parents regarding children's use of digital technology was misinformation and the need to prove online information is true.

It is not surprising that generally, youth who have learned digital media literacy skills in one area (for example, finding and verifying, privacy and safety, technical skills, online relationships, and online harms) are also more likely to have learned the other digital media literacy skills we asked about. However, *how* they learned them and *from whom*— parents, teachers, friends, or through reading online on their own—is not consistent. This suggests that what learning does take place continues to be generally isolated and *ad hoc* rather than as part of a comprehensive digital media literacy program.

These findings align with what we know about digital media literacy education across the country: that it is often the result of educators who are *champions* for it and not because it is included in formal curricula with appropriate support. For more than twenty-five years, MediaSmarts' education team has developed and maintained a hub of [hundreds of resources](#) for educators that connects digital media literacy to curricular outcomes for all the provinces and territories in Canada. MediaSmarts has also been advocating for over 15 years for a [national digital media literacy strategy](#) for Canada, recognizing that digital media literacy is a lifelong learning process, requiring universal access to training and education, and long-term sustained investment in community-driven supports (see the [next steps](#) section for more information on MediaSmarts' work on a national digital media literacy strategy).
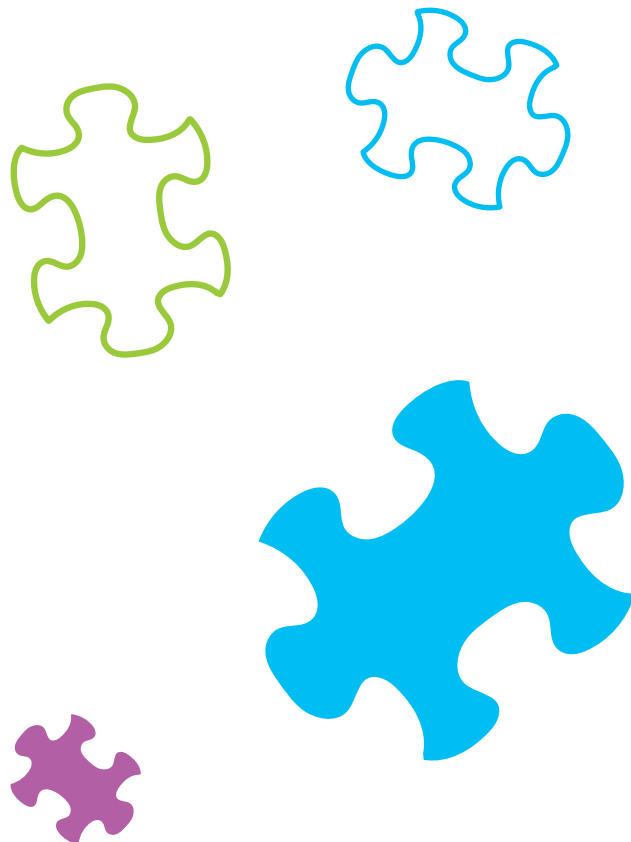
Digital citizenship

Three-quarters of young Canadians feel like they contribute positive things online.

About one-third of youth say that they only post things online that they are sure will not offend or upset other people, and around the same number agree that they are expected to only post positive things online.

More than half of participants said they post content online about a cause or event they care about, and just over one-third have joined or supported an activist group online.

8 in 10 youth think that online platforms should supervise what people post and comment in online spaces and take down bad content.

In this section of the report, we focus on findings that speak to digital citizenship: the ability to navigate and actively participate in digital environments in ways that are safe, responsible, and respectful. At MediaSmarts, we recognize that although we live and interact in the digital world, similarly to how we interact in the offline world, we are not always as mindful of our behaviours or aware of the potential impacts of our actions (and inactions) when we are online. Digital media provides unique opportunities for everyone to actively participate in various conversations and movements, and we must approach these opportunities as responsible digital citizens who work towards building a better world—online and offline.

Examples of responsible digital citizenship include:

Empathy and community-building

- I reach out to help if I see someone being cyberbullied.

- If I get in a conflict with someone I know online, I talk it out in person.

- I speak out to shape the values of my online communities.

Positive Technology Use

- I use digital tools to connect with my friends and family.

- I use digital tools to be an active citizen in my community.

- I'm mindful of my digital media use.
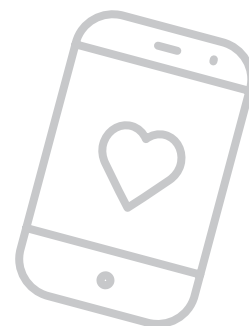
Sharing information

- I check reputable sources before sharing information online.

- I share information that I know is useful and reliable.

- I challenge misinformation without giving it extra attention.

**Rights, privacy, and ethics**

- I use tools, settings, and preferences to manage my privacy online.

- I respect other people's privacy when I share things online.

- I know how to ethically access content like music, games, and videos.

- I know my rights as a citizen, a consumer, and a human being and how to assert them online.

Findings from the other reports in the YCWW Phase IV series indicate that young Canadians are already engaged in many of these aspects of responsible digital citizenship. For example, youth reach out to others, privately or in person, in instances of online meanness and cruelty. Canadian youth also use digital technology for social connection with friends and family, they are aware of the time and energy they spend online, and they use a variety of verification skills and privacy practices. In this report, we take a closer look at findings related to whether and how young Canadians engage online as active and ethical digital citizens.

In the Phase IV YCWW survey, we asked various questions related to digital citizenship - including questions about contributing positive things online, engaging in advocacy or activism online, and the role that platforms should play in fostering safer and healthier spaces online. First, when it comes to the content they share online, 74% of young Canadians feel like they contribute positive things in spaces like social networking sites (see **Figure 16**).

Figure 16: Contributing Online

I feel like I contribute positive things to online spaces like social networking sites

Agree	74%
Disagree	26%
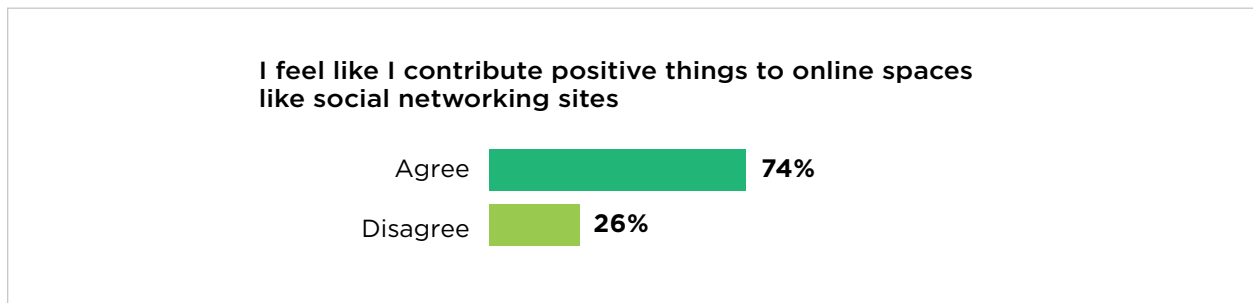
Boys, older youth, heterosexual youth, racialized youth, and youth with a disability are all slightly more likely to agree that they contribute positive things to online spaces, and all participants who identified as gender-diverse or transgender (n=13) agreed with this statement.

We also asked separate questions about posting content to see what youth understand as the expectations for contributing positively to online spaces (see **Figure 17**). About one-third of youth say that they only post things online that they are sure will not offend or upset other people, and around the same number of participants agree that they are expected to only post positive things online.

Figure 17: Posting Content Online

|	
I only post things that I'm sure won't offend or upset other people	34%
People expect me to only post positive things online	31%
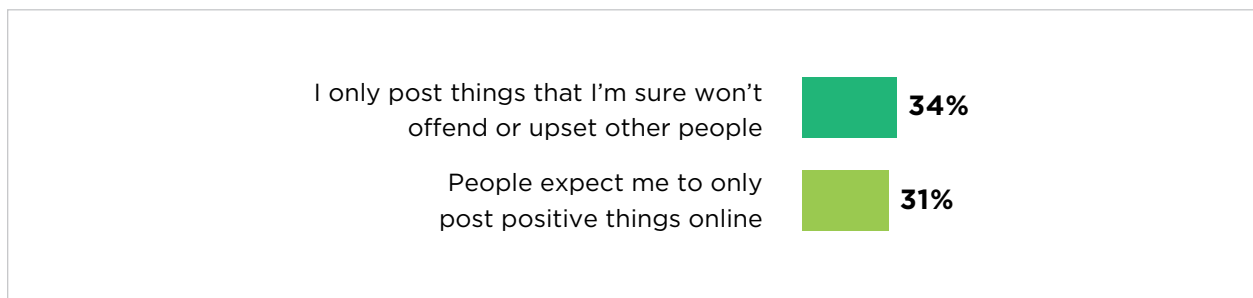
Girls are more likely to say that they only post things online that they are sure will not offend people (38%, compared to 29% of boys), and 43% of transgender youth (n=7) report the same. Older youth are also more likely to agree with this statement about posting content they are sure will not offend others (39%, compared to 25% of younger youth), as are racialized youth (38%, compared to 32% of white youth).

When it comes to the expectation of only posting positive things online, gender-diverse youth (n=6), heterosexual youth, and youth with a disability are more likely to agree with this statement.

Next, we asked about online advocacy and whether youth ever post content online about a cause or event they care about (see **Figure 18**). More than half (55%) of participants said that they do this, with 45% reporting that they post about causes or events at least once a month.

Figure 18: Online Advocacy
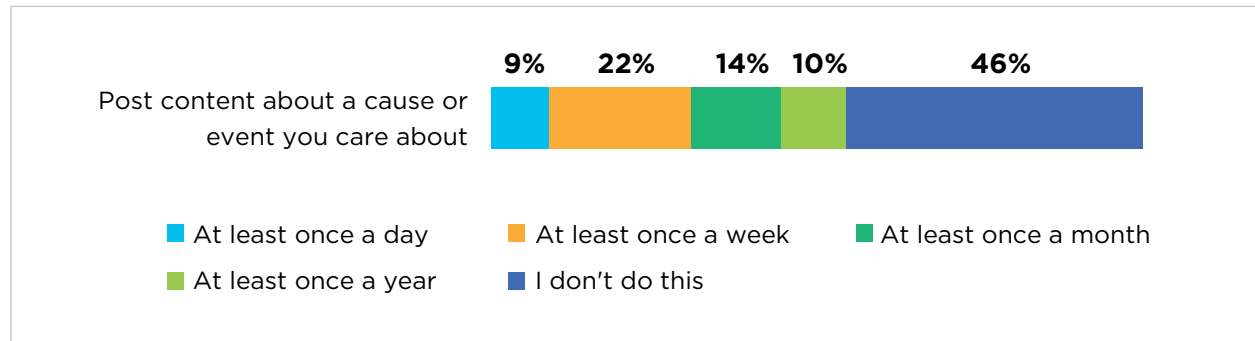
Older youth, heterosexual youth, transgender youth (n=7), white youth, and youth with a disability are all slightly more likely to say they post content about causes or events that they care about online.

We also asked older youth whether they have joined or supported a specific activist group online, and 35% indicated they have (see **Figure 19**).

Figure 19: Online Activism
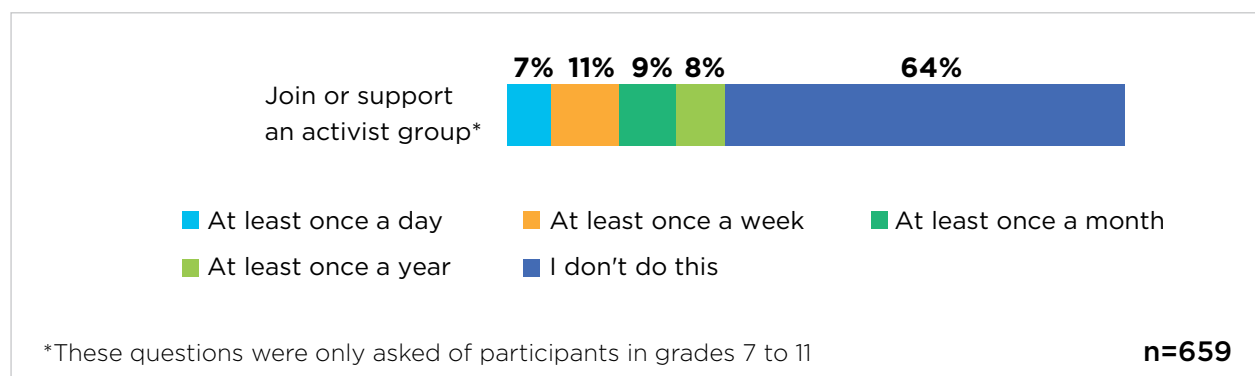
Boys and girls report joining or supporting activist groups online at a similar rate. LGBTQ+ youth, racialized youth, and youth with a disability are all slightly more likely to engage in activism online.

Overall, we have observed an increase in joining or supporting activist groups online—from 24% of participants in Phase III (in 2013) to 35% of participants in Phase IV (in 2021)[9].

Finally, as it relates to digital citizenship, we asked young Canadians whether they think online platforms should supervise what people post and comment in online spaces and take down bad content (see **Figure 20**). 83% of participants agreed with this statement.

Figure 20: Role of Platforms

Online platforms should supervise what people post and comment, and take down bad content

Agree	83%
Disagree	17%
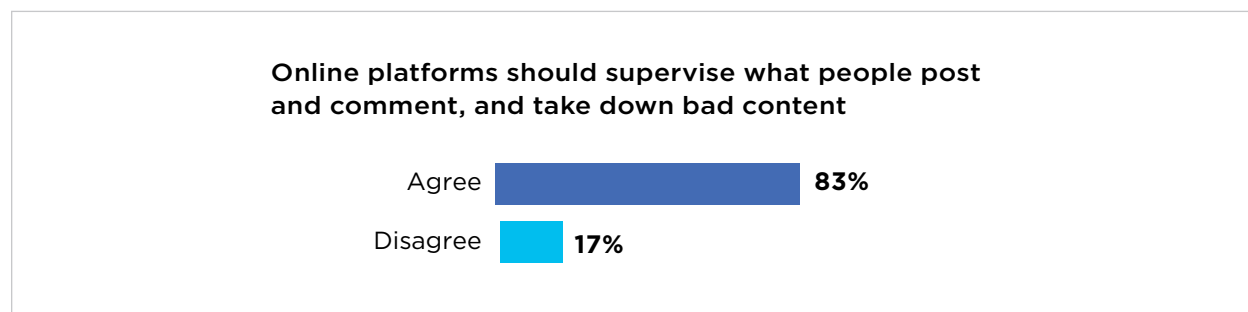
Furthermore, this statement has strong support across all demographic groups (gender, age, race, sexual orientation, and disability).

This near-consensus echoes the calls to action from young Canadians in our recent qualitative project on misinformation and disinformation. While young people are eager to actively participate and share information in online spaces, they are also well aware of the risks associated with being in the digital world. They are increasingly more aware of their responsibilities in these online meeting places and often engage in relational practices to address harm when it occurs (for example, when someone shares false information)— but they want platforms and online corporations to do *more* to ensure safe and inclusive online communities.

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[9] Of note is the difference in sample size between the two phases: in Phase III (2013), the sample size was 5,436, and in Phase IV (2021), the sample size was 1,058.

Towards Inclusive and Ethical Digital Citizenship

Digital media literacy is about more than technical skills; it includes a variety of ethical, social, and reflective practices grounded in the principle that digital media are fully networked, placing each user and consumer at the centre of an infinite web of interactions and connections. In other words, everything and everyone is connected online, and this connection comes with responsibility: to pause before we share something, check the sources of our information, intervene (and report) in situations of online abuse, racism, and sexism, and use our collective power to hold platforms and governments accountable for addressing our online safety, privacy, and equity concerns.

Digital media literacy is also not an outcome in and of itself but rather a tool necessary for education, employment and economic participation, civic engagement, social inclusion, safety, empowerment, and health and wellness. Not only young Canadians but all people living in Canada must be supported in the work of embedding practices of responsible and ethical digital citizenship (empathy and community building, positive technology use, sharing information, and rights, privacy, and ethics) in our work, learning, and daily life.

Increasingly, businesses, social services, and even democratic processes have migrated online and those who lack digital media literacy skills risk being disadvantaged when it comes to accessing healthcare, government services, and opportunities for employment, education, and civic participation. In other words, digital literacy is a social justice issue through which economic, social, cultural, and civic gaps can be reduced.

As the results of this study have shown, young Canadians want to learn the digital media literacy skills and critical competencies required to use new technologies, navigate various online environments and information ecosystems, think critically, and become discerning consumers and creators of all kinds of media. While we ought to cultivate digital media literacy at the earliest age possible, it is something that we also need to actively exercise and constantly develop through lifelong learning.

Similarly, digital citizenship cannot be reduced to 'being on our best behaviour' when we are online. Being online can afford us many opportunities and privileges, but it also requires that we are accountable and responsible for our actions and inactions. While our online experiences or encounters are felt in *all* spaces (both online and offline) how we behave and interact online is not necessarily the same as how we behave and interact offline. In particular, our online experiences and environments can impact our capacity to develop empathy and act ethically.

Aspects of networked digital communication can lead to 'empathy traps,' which can prevent us from feeling empathy in situations where we normally would. For example, when we are using the same screen to talk to our friends that we use to watch movies and television shows, or when we cannot see the people we are hurting or copying content from, it is easy to forget that what we do online *matters.* Further, the design of many online platforms (like video sites and social networks) can result in a lack of sensory feedback for users, making us less likely to recognize our own emotions and how other people are feeling. Some things that generally trigger empathy in us—a person's tone of voice, body language, and facial expression—can be absent when we interact with them online. This lack of sensory feedback can lead users to say or do things online that they would not usually say or do offline*.*

Similarly, new and ever-evolving technologies, including algorithms and artificial intelligence, impact our ability to recognize and respond to harmful things like bias and prejudice. In fact, there is significant research on how online platforms amplify inequities and online harms for more views, engagements, and ultimately more profits.

This work recognizes and understands the systemic inequalities inherent in technology is a central part of digital media literacy and advocating for equity by design is an example of responsible and ethical digital citizenship.[10]

At MediaSmarts, we are working in partnership with a network of key stakeholders and community partners to bolster digital citizenship, building and supporting **collective online resilience**, and empowering technology users (especially youth) to use, understand, create, and engage with digital media in safe, fun, and responsible ways.

> **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.**

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[10] Equality by design intentionally considers the lived experiences of communities potentially impacted by technology use and its design. It seeks to limit assumptions about groups of people by increasing representation across the design process and foregrounding systems of oppression that have caused many communities to be historically overlooked. This collaborative design process invites community members to the table to actively participate in technology development from the start. (See: The Power of Equity-Centred Design for more information).

NEXT STEPS

In this report, we highlighted findings related to young Canadians' knowledge and development of digital media literacy and digital citizenship. Specifically, we found that while Canadian youth are relatively savvy at searching for information online, they are less aware of how search engines work and the impacts of corporate business models on their online experiences. We also found that teachers and parents or guardians are top sources of digital media literacy support and learning for young people, especially regarding information-seeking and technical skills (like coding and knowing what an algorithm is and how it works). This was not surprising given that, contrary to popular stereotypes about youth tech use, young people in this study believe the adults in their lives know *more* about technology than they do. While findings from all the reports in the YCWW Phase IV series indicate that Canadian youth want to learn more about a variety of topics (including meaningful device use, online privacy and safety, technical skills, harmful and discomforting content, and online relationships), young Canadians are most eager to learn more about how to tell if the information they find online is true.

Questions related to responsible digital citizenship tell us that Canadian youth are actively contributing to online communities in positive ways. For example, most youth (74%) in this study said they contribute positive things in spaces like social networks. However, when asked specific questions about posting content, fewer participants (31%) agreed that there is an expectation to only post positive things online. Concerning online advocacy and activism, we found that more than half (55%) of youth in this study post content online about a cause or event they care about, and one-third of older youth (grades 7-11) have joined or supported an activist group online. Finally, in relation to the responsibility of online platforms in ensuring safe and inclusive online communities, 83% of participants agreed that platforms should supervise what people post or comment online and take down bad content.

The findings from YCWW Phase IV confirm our [research](on) and continued [advocacy](for) for a national digital media literacy strategy for Canada.[11] In 2022, MediaSmarts conducted an environmental scan of national and international digital media literacy frameworks and completed key informant interviews with experts responsible for designing and implementing these strategies. We also facilitated a symposium that brought together key stakeholders and community partners from across the country who share an interest in developing and implementing a digital media literacy strategy in Canada (see our [foundational commitments and principles](#) document for the ten identified goals or objectives for developing a national digital media literacy strategy for Canada).

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[11] See also: [Testimony given to the standing committee on public safety and national security.](#)

Organizations and leaders in the field are eager to move forward with developing, implementing, and evaluating a national digital media literacy strategy in Canada. This project confirmed the need for long-term federal government support and a meaningful commitment to digital media literacy in Canada centered on a collaborative, relational, and community-driven approach to strengthening digital citizenship and addressing digital inequities in our country. A [national digital media literacy strategy for Canada](#) would provide experts, advocates, and service providers with a unified but flexible approach for preventing and responding to online harm through education and critical skills development. At the same time, people living in Canada will be empowered to use, understand, create, and engage with digital technology and digital media, which is at the heart of active digital citizenship and innovation.

FROM ACCESS TO ENGAGEMENT:

BUILDING A DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY STRATEGY FOR CANADA

MediaSmarts

Specific to the findings in this report, and in our own efforts to enhance collective online resilience and empower young Canadians—and the families, educators, and communities who support them—to take steps to enhance their finding and verifying and digital citizenship skills, MediaSmarts has the following free resources available on our website:

- [Break the Fake.](#) A suite of fact-checking tips, workshops, and lesson plans for determining whether something is true online and sharing good information.

- [Reality Check: The Game.](#) Fast, fun, and engaging activities that provide teens and adults with the opportunity to test their skills and learn new authentication techniques.

- [Authentication 101.](#) Essential information on how to search and authenticate information.

- [Finding and Evaluating Science and Health Information.](#) Information about health and science topics, types of misinformation that are particularly common in those subjects, and steps we can take to determine how reliable a source or claim is.

- [Impact of Misinformation on the Democratic Process.](#) Information about how to read election and political news critically, recognize misinformation and disinformation, and be a more active and engaged consumer of political news.

- [Verifying Online News.](#) Information about how Canadians get their news, how to recognize fact from fiction in news media, and how to identify reliable and unreliable news sources.
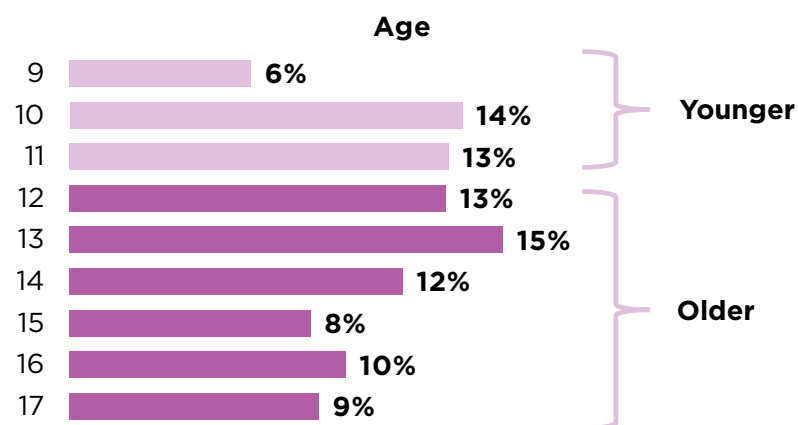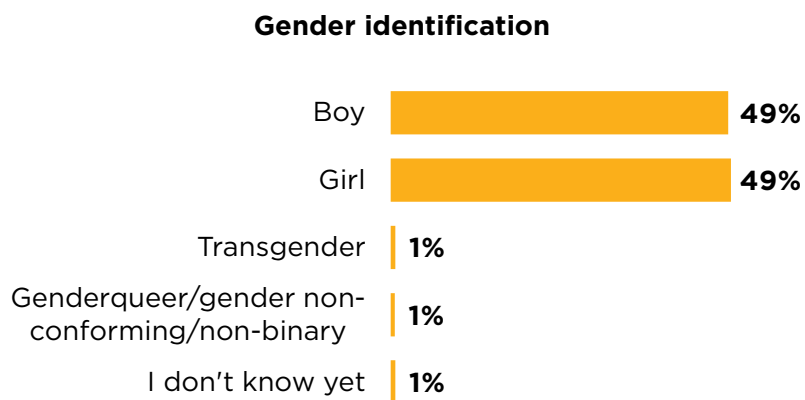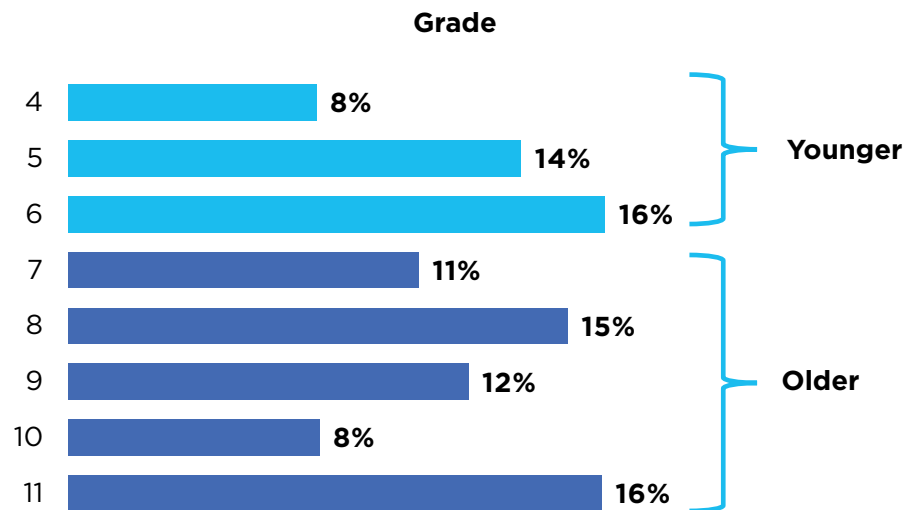
- **Talk Back! How to Take Action on Media Issues.** A guide that will introduce parents/guardians to the organizations that oversee Canadian media, the codes of conduct for advertising and television that cover children, and steps parents/guardians can take to voice their concerns—including using social media to speak out about these issues.

- **Speak Up! Your guide to changing the world, online and off.** An online advocacy and activism guide *for youth* who want to use social networks to make their voice heard and make a difference.

- **Defining Digital Citizenship.** Information about how to incorporate digital citizenship into educational programming, including helping youth to understand their rights as consumers, members of communities and digital citizens.

MediaSmarts is also the proud founder of Media Literacy Week (MLW), an annual event promoting digital media literacy across Canada, taking place each October. Schools, libraries, museums, and community groups organize events and activities throughout the week. In 2023, MediaSmarts is proud to host its 18th MLW from October 23rd to the 27th, including our second annual Digital Citizen Day on October 25th. Digital Citizen Day offers each of us an opportunity to pause and reflect on our online experiences and environments, our role in shaping our online communities and the power of 'being kind online.' Our Teacher's Hub features five days of lesson plans and activities curated around five digital media literacy themes—use, understand, engage (including activities for Digital Citizen Day), access and verify. The Teacher's Hub also includes pre-recorded plug-and-play lessons led by MediaSmarts experts, covering topics like body image, online hate, and identifying what's true online. For more information on how to become an MLW collaborator or to learn more about the events planned for 2023, please see the Media Literacy Week website or sign-up to receive our free newsletters.
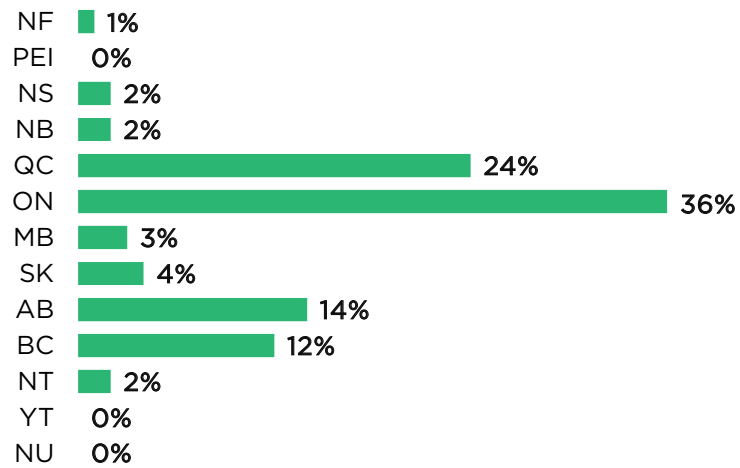
We hope the YCWW Phase IV reports, including the qualitative findings, will help us better understand what is working and what needs to be changed or improved so that young Canadians get the most out of their online experiences. This research will inspire future projects at MediaSmarts and within the broader research community. This report on digital media literacy and digital citizenship is the last of the six topics covered in the YCWW Phase IV series. In the coming months, MediaSmarts will publish a Trends and Recommendations report based on the key findings presented in all the topic-based reports. The final trends and recommendations report will support our ongoing efforts to establish, implement, and evaluate a national digital media literacy strategy for Canada and 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

Grade

Grade	Percentage	Group
4	8%	Younger
5	14%	Younger
6	16%	Younger
7	11%	Older
8	15%	Older
9	12%	Older
10	8%	Older
11	16%	Older

Gender identification

Boy	49%
Girl	49%
Transgender	1%
Genderqueer/gender non-conforming/non-binary	1%
I don't know yet	1%

Age

Age	Percentage	Group
9	6%	Younger
10	14%	Younger
11	13%	Younger
12	13%	Older
13	15%	Older
14	12%	Older
15	8%	Older
16	10%	Older
17	9%	Older

Province of residence

- NF — 1%
- PEI — 0%
- NS — 2%
- NB — 2%
- QC — 24%
- ON — 36%
- MB — 3%
- SK — 4%
- AB — 14%
- BC — 12%
- NT — 2%
- YT — 0%
- NU — 0%

First language

- English — 71%
- French — 24%
- Cantonese/Mandarin — 2%
- Other — 3%

Identifies as having a physical disability

- Yes — 13%
- No — 79%
- Prefer not to say — 9%
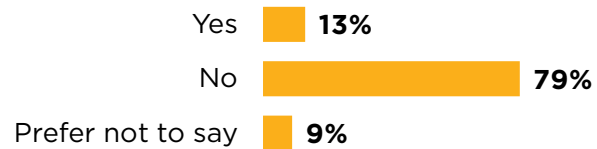
Identifies as having intellectual/cognitive/learning disability

- Yes — 13%
- No — 77%
- Prefer not to say — 9%
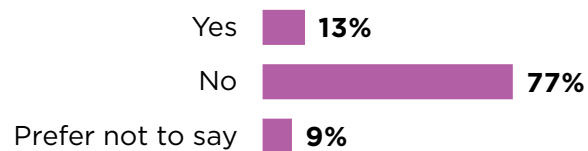
Identifies as having a mental illness

- Yes **16%**
- No **75%**
- Prefer not to say **9%**

Race identification

- European (White) **69%**
- Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc.) **10%**
- Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, Métis) **7%**
- South Asian (East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.) **4%**
- African/West Indian (Black) **4%**
- Middle Eastern (Iranian, Iraqi, Saudi Arabian, etc.) **2%**
- South/Latin American (Mexican, Puerto Rican,... **2%**
- Other **3%**
- I don't know **3%**
- Prefer not to say **3%**

30% racialized

Sexual orientation

- Heterosexual **86%**
- Bisexual **3%**
- Gay or lesbian **2%**
- I don't know yet **6%**
- Prefer not to say **2%**

14% LGBTQ+