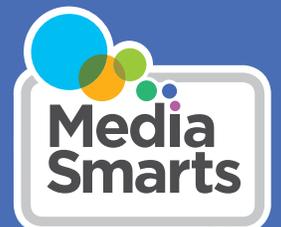# RESEARCHING YOUNG CANADIANS IN A WIRELESS WORLD

PHASE IV RESEARCH METHODS REPORT

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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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 in 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, 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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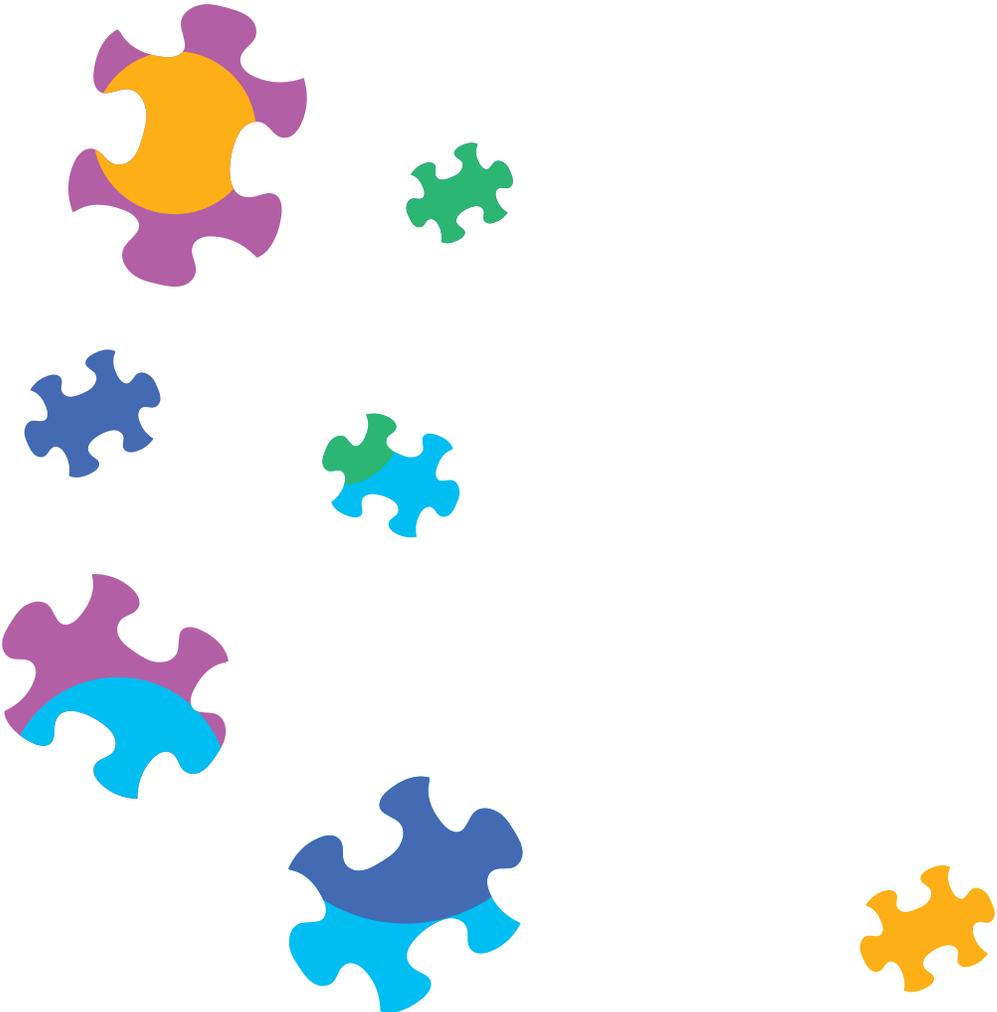
Introduction

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 within our vast and growing network, including academic institutions.

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. Focus groups with parents helped to round out discussions about what is needed to foster (collective) online resiliency. This qualitative work helped us prepare for a quantitative survey that began in 2021.

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

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

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

While each report in the series will contain a brief section on the research method, this 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 along with 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 original classrooms from Phase I were revisited for the quantitative surveys.

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.
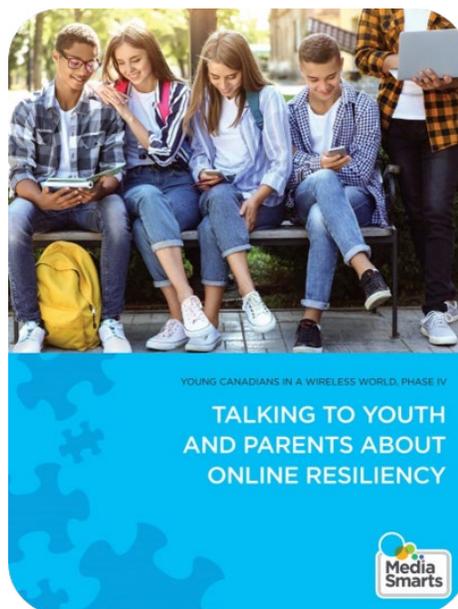
Phase IV of YCWW also began with a name change to the project: from *Young Canadians in a **Wired** World* to *Young Canadians in a **Wireless** World*. This change in language speaks to shifts in digital technology and the online world since 1999 from a 'wired' to 'wireless' technological landscape 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 rest of this report will outline in detail 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 the forthcoming Phase IV reports.

Survey Design

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 1[1]. We organized questions into various categories:

- Online activities
- 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.

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. Each school board also reviewed all documents to assess our applications for approval.

In previous phases of YCWW, all surveys were paper-based, but in Phase IV, we worked with our research-firm partner (Environics) to design an online portal to deliver information letters, consent forms and surveys to teachers, parents, and students. While teachers were still given the option to administer paper-based surveys, all participating teachers opted for the online portal.

Finally, all project materials were made available in English, French and Inuktitut, and the research portal designed by Environics allowed participants to select their preferred language.

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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.

Survey Administration

Original Research Plan

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 grades 4 to 11 in the fall of 2020. We began outreach to school boards in the summer of 2020 and submitted a total of 63 research applications. This tremendous effort included applications to boards that participated in Phase III and some new districts to expand the reach of the study. These applications gave us the potential to survey approximately 1,240 classrooms in over 120 schools across all provinces and territories.

Despite strong support for YCWW and MediaSmarts from school board representatives, fewer than half (n=25) confirmed their participation in Phase IV. Most cited hesitations and complications related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Administrators, teachers, and students across the country were busy adapting to online learning, figuring out hybrid teaching models or planning for a safe return to the classroom. All of this understandably left little time, energy, and resources for participating in external research studies.

Due to this low uptake, we decided to shift the project timeline while also adjusting our recruitment strategy and survey administration options.

Pandemic Pivots

The first of our pandemic pivots involved **piloting the new online survey portal**. We completed this pilot phase with a small group of teachers who agreed to participate in Phase IV after being approached by their principals in the fall of 2021. This piloting period ran from January to April 2021 and allowed us to see how the portal worked in real-time and helped us identify and fix any issues with access, design, and user experience before moving forward in the project.

After this pilot phase, **we started recruitment again in the summer of 2021**. We reconfirmed participation from the 25 districts that had previously approved our application and began reaching out to principals – letting them know that we would be administering the survey in the fall of 2021. Twenty-two (n=22) principals confirmed participation and helped us reach out to teachers from their schools. Twenty-five (n=25) teachers expressed interest in having their classrooms participate in the study. A final total of ten (n= 10) classrooms participated during the survey administration period – October to December 2021. In terms of participants, this meant that 28 students in grades 4 to 6 and 51 students in grades 7 to 11 (n=79) participated in the classroom-based survey for Phase IV of YCWW.

Our next pandemic pivot involved **administering a GenPop survey** to address the recruitment challenges we were facing. In other words, we worked with Environics Research Group to distribute the YCWW survey to their general population database with the goal of reaching a total of at least 1,000 participants (youth ages 11 to 17). We submitted an update to our ethics protocol to the Carleton University Research Ethics Board to reflect this additional mode of data collection, and it was approved.

Participants recruited through the general population were incentivized since they did not complete the survey during class time – as was the case with the school and classroom recruitment process. Incentivization followed Environics standard procedures for all general population recruitment. All participants were offered Environics Points which can be redeemed for gift cards.

Participant and parental consent forms were obtained electronically for all participants using the same forms already approved for our school recruitment process. Once consent was obtained, participants were granted access to the same online survey instrument administered to students in the classroom.

A total of 979 youth completed the GenPop survey during the survey administration period from October to December 2021: 371 students in grades 4 to 6 and 608 students in grades 7 to 11. Combining both the classroom-based and Gen Pop surveys, our total number of participants in the quantitative portion of Phase IV is 1,058.

| 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**
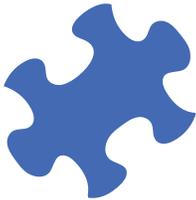
Data Analysis

Under the direction of the MediaSmarts research team, our research partner, [Environics Research Group](), conducted the first round of analysis and provided MediaSmarts with all the raw and analyzed data to supplement the reports with our own review of the survey responses. All reports in the YCWW Phase IV series are based on the 1,058 surveys conducted online with youth in grades 4 to 11 from across Canada.

The survey data are not weighted, and, in accordance with industry standards, the margin of sampling error is not reported for online panel surveys. In all forthcoming reports, results are expressed as percentages unless otherwise noted, and results may not always add up to 100% due to rounding or multiple responses.

In an effort to reduce bias in reporting the survey data, MediaSmarts' research team engaged in a collaborative analysis process for each report. 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 the area of digital media literacy.

For each report, we identified a lead analyst who presented a comprehensive summary of the data related to their assigned topic. In preparation for each presentation, all research team members reviewed the data and prepared their own analysis notes to bring to each collaborative analysis session. During each presentation, the lead analyst offered their initial thoughts on the outline of the report, including the themes and critical data points to be included. Discussion during these presentations helped to confirm (or triangulate) the themes for each report and served to expand on the story we wanted to share based on the survey responses. The research team then began writing the themed reports based on the outcomes of each presentation and collaborative analysis session.

As mentioned above, this collaborative and iterative data analysis process helped reduce bias by drawing on multiple perspectives, positions, and areas of expertise. Furthermore, discussing the data at various points throughout the analysis and writing process helped us build a strong narrative that connects the complete series of reports in Phase IV of YCWW.
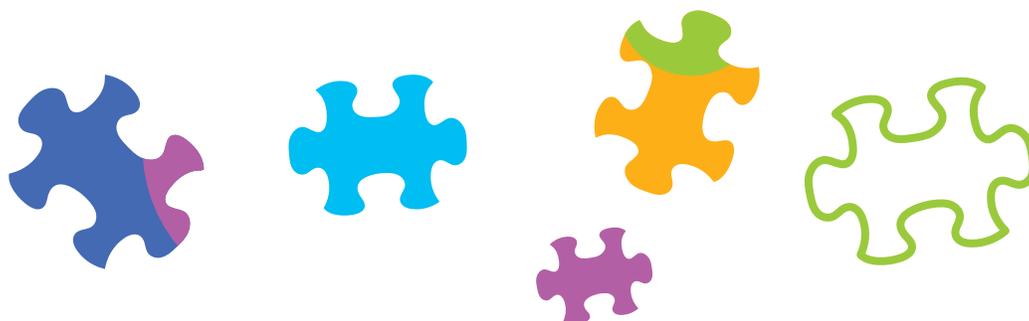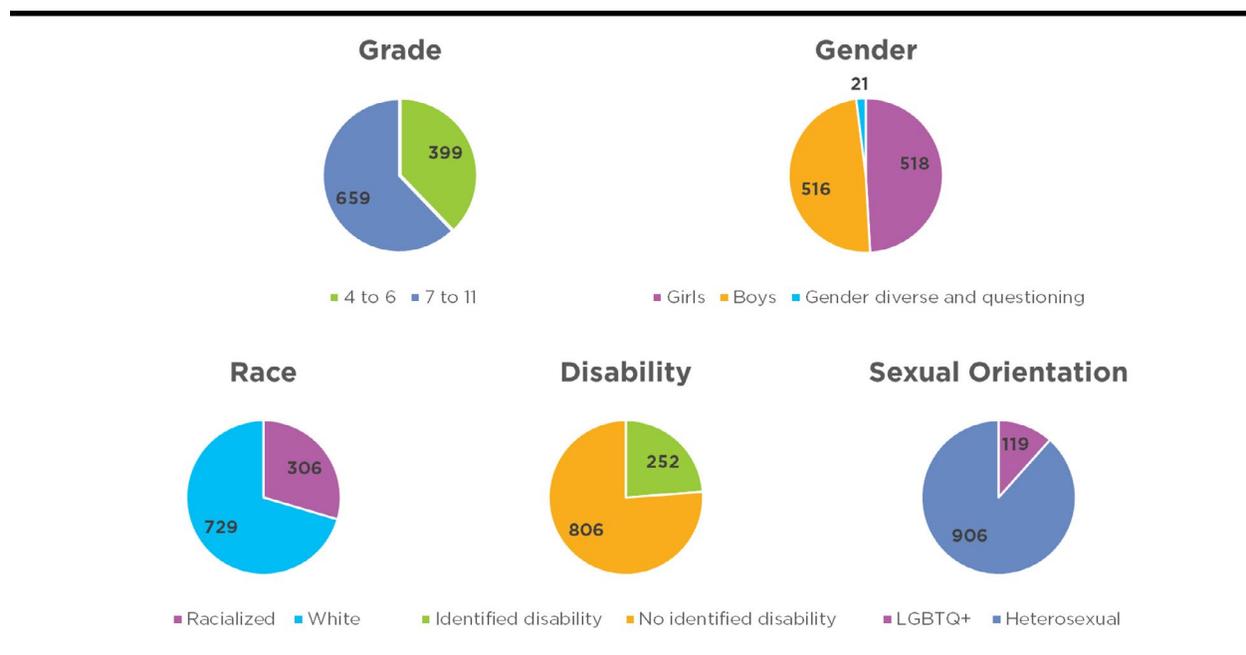
Limitations and Considerations

Although we did not hit our initial target of 6,000 to 8,000 participants – primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic – we still reached over 1,000 survey respondents, thanks to principals and teachers from across the country and our research-firm, Environics.
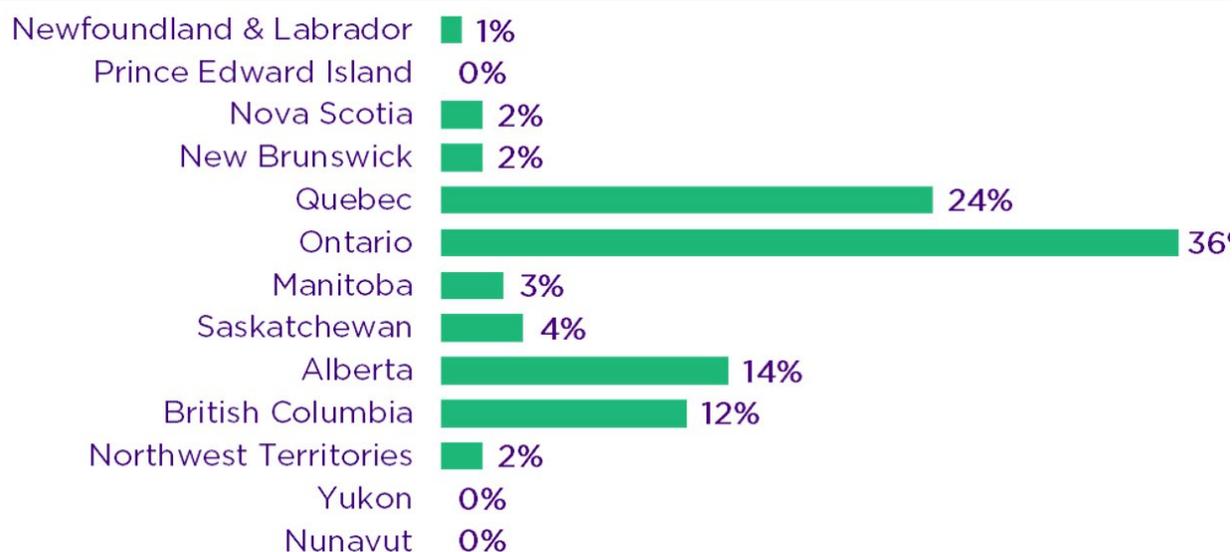
Of the 1,058 youth who participated in the survey:

- 659 were in grades 7-11, and 399 were in grades 4-6
- 518 identified as girls, 516 as boys, and 21 as gender diverse and questioning
- 729 identified as white and 306 as racialized
- 252 identified as having a disability or mental illness, and 806 had no identified disability or mental illness
- 906 identified as heterosexual and 119 as LGBTQ+

Grade

399
659

■ 4 to 6 ■ 7 to 11

Gender

21
518
516

■ Girls ■ Boys ■ Gender diverse and questioning

Race

306
729

■ Racialized ■ White

Disability

252
806

■ Identified disability ■ No identified disability

Sexual Orientation

119
906

■ LGBTQ+ ■ Heterosexual

Of note in this latest phase of YCWW is the additional demographic data we collected to help us understand how gender, race, (dis)ability, and sexual orientation might influence what young Canadians are experiencing online and with using digital technology at home and in the classroom. 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 quantitative studies.

We also collected geographic data to get a sense of the reach of our survey:

Province/Territory	Percentage
Newfoundland & Labrador	1%
Prince Edward Island	0%
Nova Scotia	2%
New Brunswick	2%
Quebec	24%
Ontario	36%
Manitoba	3%
Saskatchewan	4%
Alberta	14%
British Columbia	12%
Northwest Territories	2%
Yukon	0%
Nunavut	0%

Once again, we are aware of the gaps – 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.