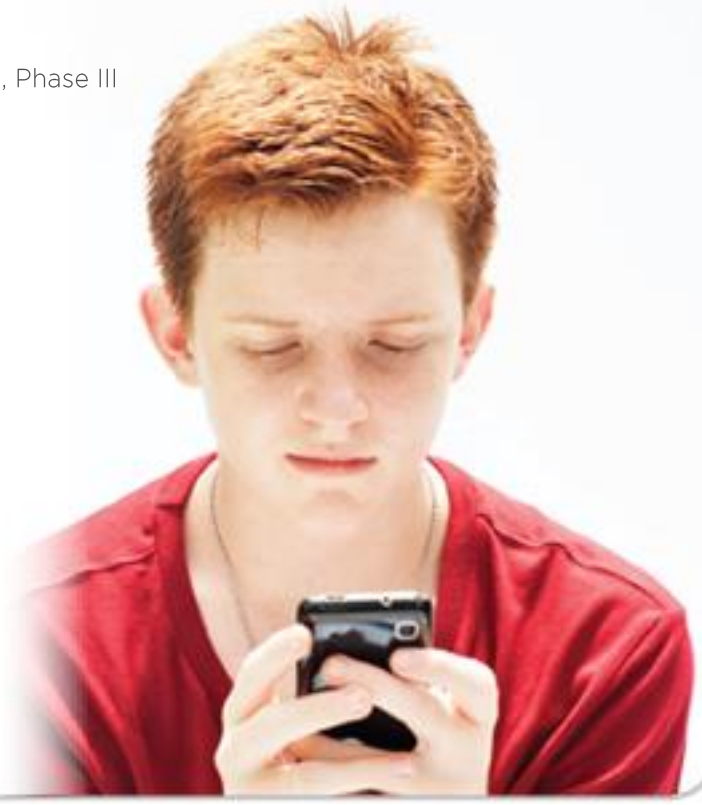
MediaSmarts

YOUNG CANADIANS IN A WIRED WORLD

Encountering Racist and Sexist Content Online

Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III



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Cite as: Steeves, Valerie. (2014) Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Encountering Racist and Sexist Content Online. Ottawa: MediaSmarts.

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Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Encountering Racist and Sexist Content Online was made possible by financial contributions from the Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA), the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada and the Alberta Teachers' Association.

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Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III:

ENCOUNTERING RACIST AND SEXIST CONTENT ONLINE

Introduction

After Montreal Canadiens P.K. Subban scored the winning goal in a double-overtime playoff game against the Boston Bruins on May 1, 2014, a number of Boston fans posted racial slurs against him on Twitter. Although both the Canadiens and the Bruins management condemned the attacks, the posts remind us that discrimination continues to dog our online interactions and that networked technologies provide a potentially global platform for all sorts of communications, including hateful ones.

Canadian policymakers have been concerned about the possibility that the Internet might expose Canadian youth to websites created by hate mongers since it wired Canada's schools in 1999. However, the Bruins incident reminds us that, with the advent of social media, offensive content has grown to encompass exposure to – and possibly participation in – discriminatory communications across a broad range of platforms.

In 2013, MediaSmarts conducted a national survey – *Young Canadians in a Wired World* – of 5,436 Canadian students, grades 4 through 11, in every province and territory, in order to gain a better understanding of young people's experiences and perceptions of networked media. In it, we asked students in grades 7 through 11 how often they come across racist or sexist content online and how they think people should respond to such content. This report summarizes our findings. It is part of a series of reports drawing on the rich data we collected in response to our survey.

Exposure

Over three quarters (78%) of students in grades 7-11 report that they have come across racist or sexist content online at some point (Table 1).

Older students are more likely than younger students to encounter racist or sexist content: the percentage rises from 63 percent in Grade 7 to 88 percent in grades 10 and 11 (Figure 1).

Moreover, for many students, seeing racist or sexist content is a frequent online occurrence.

Over one third (37%) of all students in grades 7-11 see racist or sexist content online at least once a day or once a week (Table 1). Frequent exposure is even more prevalent among older students. By Grade 11, more than half of students (56%) report seeing racist or sexist content on a weekly or daily basis (Table 2).

Although patterns of exposure are similar for boys and girls, overall girls are more likely than boys to report encountering racist and sexist content once a month or less, while boys are more likely to report encountering this daily or weekly (Figure 2). However, French language students in Quebec are significantly more likely to report that they have never seen racist or sexist content online (54% compared to 18% of English language students in the rest of Canada).

Table 1: Racism and sexism online

Have you seen racist or sexist things online? Grade	Percentage
At least once a day	16%
At least once a week	21%
At least once a month	21%
At least once a year	11%
Less than once a year	8%
Never	22%

Figure 1: Racism and sexism online: Grade

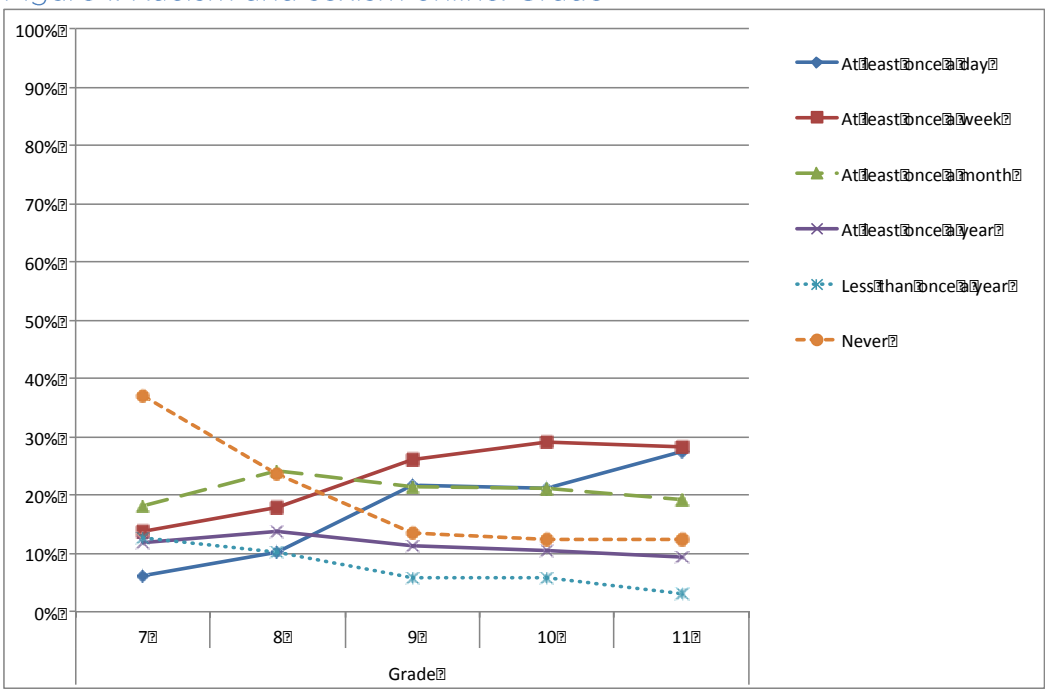
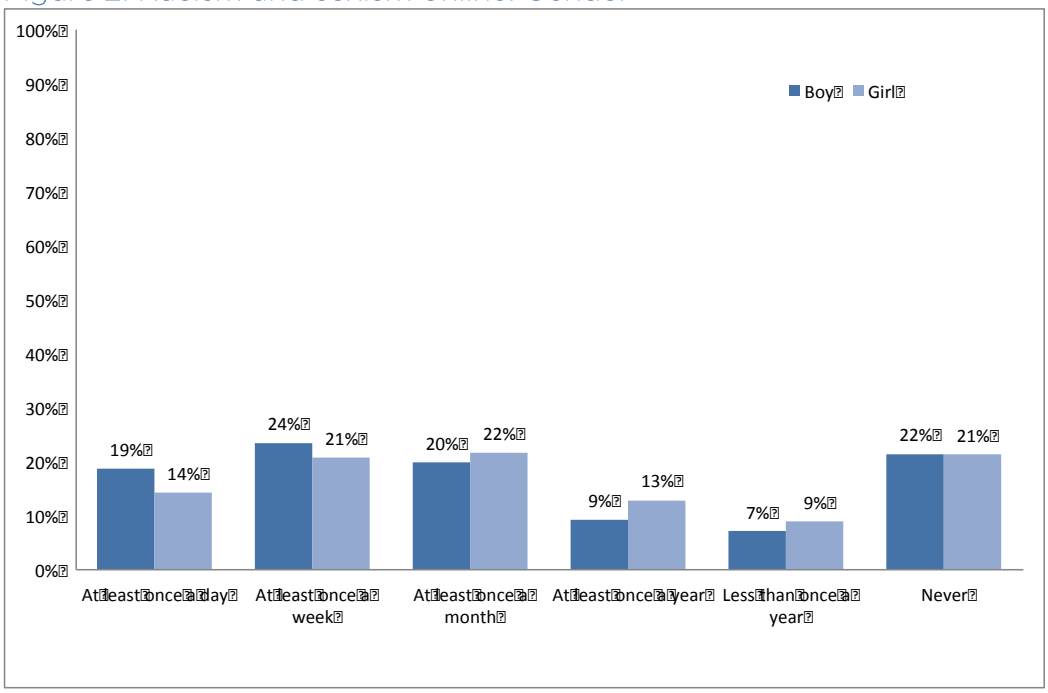


Table 2: Racism and sexism online: Frequent exposure

Grade	Have seen racist or sexist content online at least once a day or once a week
7	20%
8	28%
9	48%
10	50%
11	56%

Figure 2: Racism and sexism online: Gender



Students' Attitudes

A majority of students in grades 7-11 agree that people say racist and sexist things online to pick on other people (69%) and that it is important to say something so people know that it is wrong (78%) (Table 3).

These attitudes are consistent across all grades, suggesting that there is significant agreement about the social harms associated with discriminatory talk and the need to talk back when it does occur.

The exception may be in French language schools in Quebec, where a smaller percent of students – 46 percent compared to 71 percent of English language students in the rest of Canada – agreed that racist or sexist comments are a way of picking on someone. However, French language students in Quebec are also less likely to say nothing when they encounter such talk on the assumption that people are usually joking around (29% compared to 57% of English language students in the rest of Canada). Accordingly, there is no clear pattern distinguishing the attitudes of French language students in Quebec from English language students in the rest of Canada.

Although a large majority of students agree that it is important to say something so people know racist and sexist talk is wrong (78%), just under half of students (45%) report that they feel that it is not their place to say something when it does occur. In addition, less than half (47%) think that it is important to tell an adult when they see something racist or sexist online (Table 3). Although girls are more likely to reach out for adult assistance (52% versus 42% of boys) (Figure 3), the tendency to tell an adult decreases in the later grades for both boys and girls (Figure 4). Moreover, older students are less likely to feel that it is their place to say something to challenge the comments (Figure 4). This suggests that educational interventions to help students respond productively to offensive comments may be useful, especially for older students who are less inclined to speak out.

At the same time that students largely see racist and sexist talk as wrong, many students also dismiss it in a variety of contexts.

For example, roughly half of students report that they don't say anything because people are just joking around most of the time (57%), the person who makes the comment, although insensitive, doesn't mean to hurt anyone (52%), and friends who say racist and sexist things to each other don't mean anything by it (44%) (Table 3).

However, gender plays an important role in this regard.

Girls are more likely to be concerned about racist or sexist comments, while boys are more likely to see them as innocuous.

For example, girls are much more likely than boys to feel hurt when a racist or sexist joke is made at their expense (23% difference) and that it is important to tell an adult when they come across offensive content (10% difference). Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to say that when they say racist or sexist things with their friends, they don't mean anything by it (16% difference) or that racist or sexist comments don't require a response because the people who say them are joking around most of the time (10% difference) (Figure 3).

Boys are also three times more likely than girls to be mean or cruel to someone online by making fun of their race, religion or ethnicity or sexual orientation, or harassing them sexually[1] (Figure 5). This suggests that successful educational interventions will have to take gender differences into account.

There are also important differences between students across the grades. Older students are more likely to say that racist or sexist talk is a joke, not intentionally hurtful or inconsequential. They are also less likely to report that they feel hurt when someone says something racist or sexist about them as a joke (Table 4a, 4b). At the same time, a large number of older students continue to feel that it is important to respond to racist or sexist talk so people know it is wrong (74%-76%) and agree that people say these things to pick on others (71%-69%) (Table 4a, 4b). This suggests that context is important and that while some behaviours are seen to be innocuous, others are seen to be more disturbing and worth speaking out against.

There are also interesting contradictions in what students say, what they do and how they feel about racist and sexist content. The fact that many see this as "just joking", even though they admit that the behaviour is hurtful, resonates with similar contradictions in their responses to cyberbullying as reported in *Cyberbullying: Dealing with Online Meanness, Cruelty and Threats*.[2] Further research is required to tease out the subtleties in these areas.

[1] The questions about being more mean or cruel by making fun of someone were asked of students in grades 4-11. The question about being mean or cruel by harassing someone sexually was only asked of students in grades 7-11. See also Figure 3 and Table 1 in the *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Cyberbullying: Dealing with Online Meanness, Cruelty and Threats* report.

[2] Steeves, V. (2014). *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Cyberbullying: Dealing with Online Meanness, Cruelty and Threats*. Ottawa: MediaSmarts, p. 3. <http://mediasmarts.ca/ycww/cyberbullying-dealing-online-meanness-cruelty-threats>

Table 3: Attitudes to racism or sexism online

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about racist or sexist online content?	Agree Percentage
It is important to say something so people know it's wrong.	78%
People say racist and sexist things to pick on other people.	69%
I don't say anything because, most of the time, people are just joking around. ♂♀, Grade	57%
People say racist and sexist things because they are insensitive, but not because they mean to hurt anyone. Grade	52%
When you see something racist or sexist online, it's important to tell an adult. ♂♀, Grade	47%
When people say something racist or sexist about me as a joke, it hurts my feelings. ♂♀, Grade	46%
It is wrong, but it's not my place to say anything. Grade	45%
My friends and I say racist and sexist things to each other online, but we don't mean anything by it. ♂♀, Grade	44%

Figure 3: Attitudes to racism or sexism online: Gender

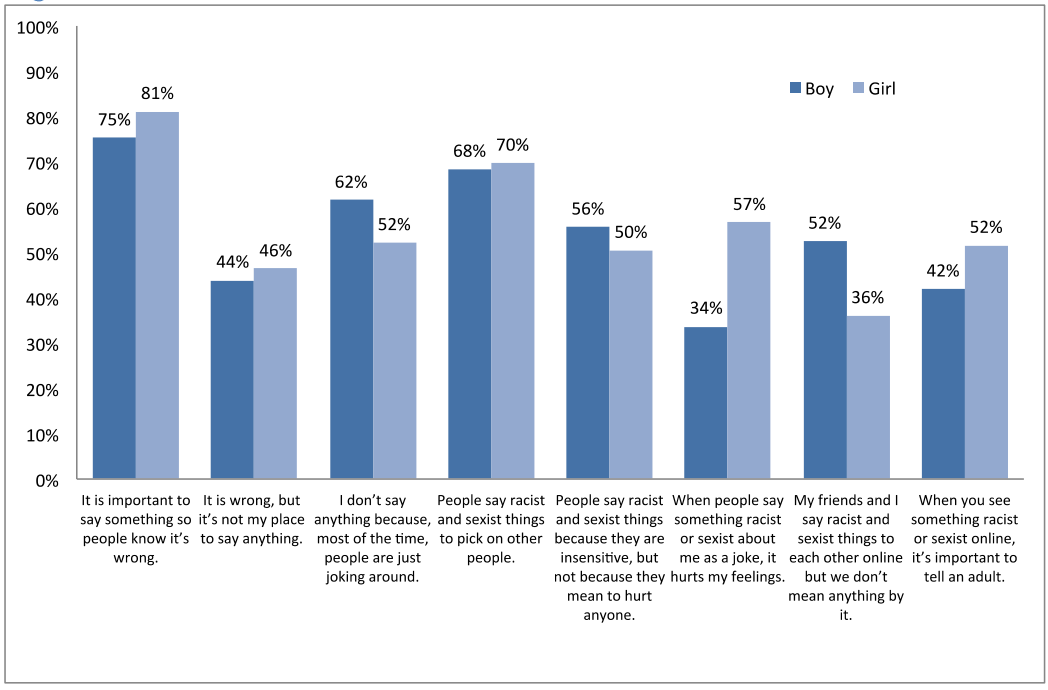


Figure 4: Attitudes to racism or sexism online: Grade

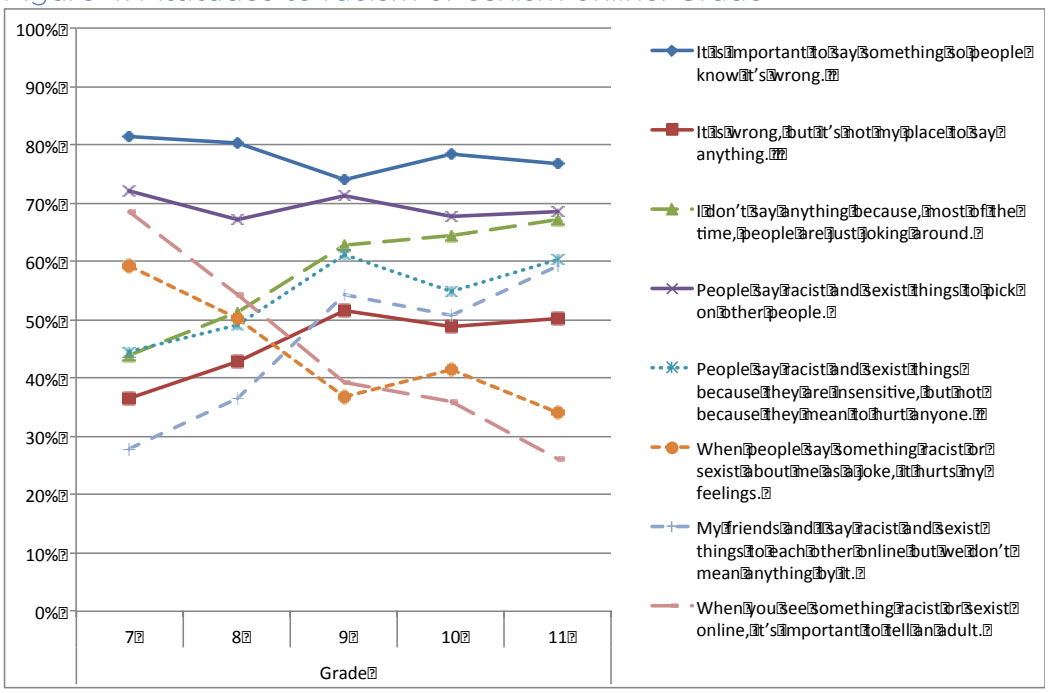


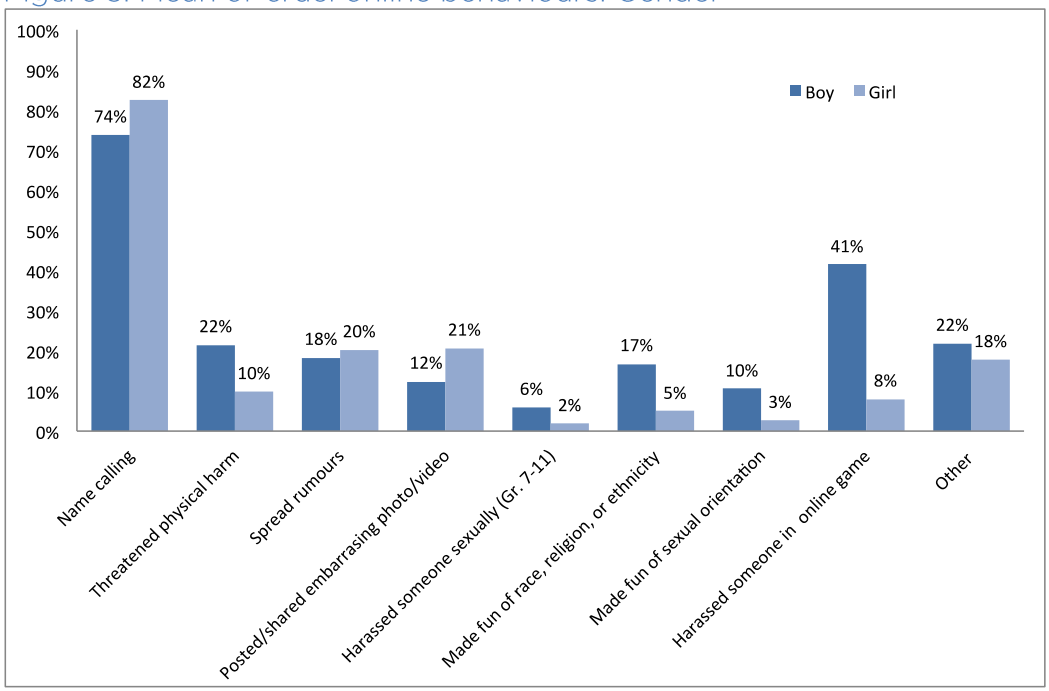
Table 4a: Attitudes to racism or sexism online: Grade

Grade	It is important to say something so people know it's wrong.	It is wrong, but it's not my place to say anything.	I don't say anything because, most of the time, people are just joking around.	People say racist and sexist things to pick on other people.
7	82%	37%	44%	72%
8	80%	43%	51%	67%
9	74%	52%	63%	71%
10	78%	49%	64%	68%
11	77%	50%	67%	69%

Table 4b: Attitudes to racism or sexism online: Grade

Grade	People say racist and sexist things because they are insensitive, but not because they mean to hurt anyone.	When people say something racist or sexist about me as a joke, it hurts my feelings.	My friends and I say racist and sexist things to each other online, but we don't mean anything by it.	When you see something racist or sexist online, it's important to tell an adult.
7	45%	59%	28%	68%
8	49%	50%	37%	54%
9	61%	37%	54%	39%
10	55%	41%	51%	36%
11	60%	34%	59%	26%

Figure 5: Mean or cruel online behaviours: Gender



Helping Students Respond

Close to one-third of students in grades 7-11 (31%) report wanting to learn how to deal with racist or sexist online information (Table 5). Girls (at 36%) and younger students in grades 7 and 8 (at 37% for each grade) are more likely than boys and older students to express an interest in learning how to do this (Figures 6 and 7). When it comes to actual learning, three quarters (76%) of students in grades 7-11 report that they have learned about how to deal with hateful, racist or sexist online information, mostly from parents (39%) and teachers (39%) (Table 6). Other sources of help in this regard are friends (21%) and online sources (17%).

Gender, however, again plays a role. Girls are more likely than boys to turn to parents and teachers to learn about how to respond to racist or sexist content and, although they are a less common source for both genders, online resources are more likely to be sought out by boys than by girls (Figure 8).

However, adult assistance in this regard is particularly important, especially for younger students who are more likely to learn about it from parents and teachers (Figure 9). The presence of a household rule about which sites not to visit may also be a protective factor. Although the presence of such a rule has declined since 2005 and 2001 – 48 percent of students in grades 4-11 report having a site rule in 2013,3 compared to 70 percent of students in grades 4-11 in 2005 and 61 percent of students in grades 4-11 in 20014 – those students reporting a site rule are more likely to report never having encountered racist or sexist material online. Although there appears to be no effect on less frequent exposure, a rule correlates with less exposure on a daily basis (Figure 10).

Table 5: Desire to learn more about this in school

Would you like to learn more about this in school?	Percentage Yes
How to deal with hateful, racist or sexist online information (grades 7-11 only)	31%

[3] Steeves, V. (2014). *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Life Online*. Ottawa: MediaSmarts, p. 32. <http://mediasmarts.ca/ycww/life-online>
[4] MediaSmarts. (2005). *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase II: Student Survey.* Ottawa, p. 66. <http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/publication-report/full/YCWWII-student-survey.pdf>

Figure 6: Do you want to learn more about this in school: Gender

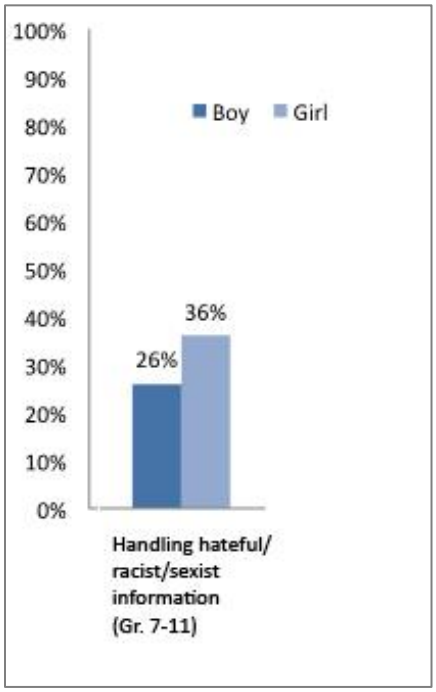


Figure 7: Do you want to learn more about this in school: Grade

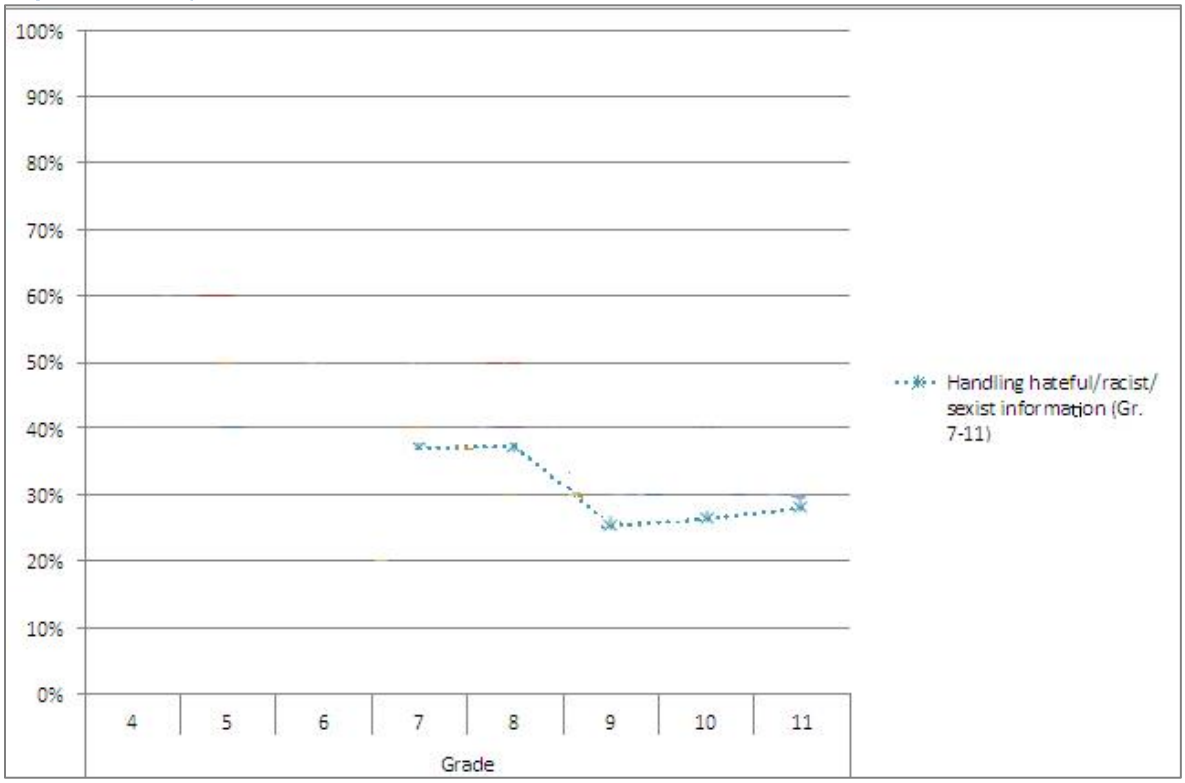


Table 6: Learning about online activities

I have learned about the following activities	From my parent(s)	From teachers	From friends	From reading about it online	I have never learned about this
How to deal with hateful, racist or sexist online information (grades 7-11 only)	♂♀, Grade 39%	♂♀ 39%	21%	♂♀, Grade 17%	24%

Figure 8: Learning about how to deal with hateful, racist, or sexist online information: Gender

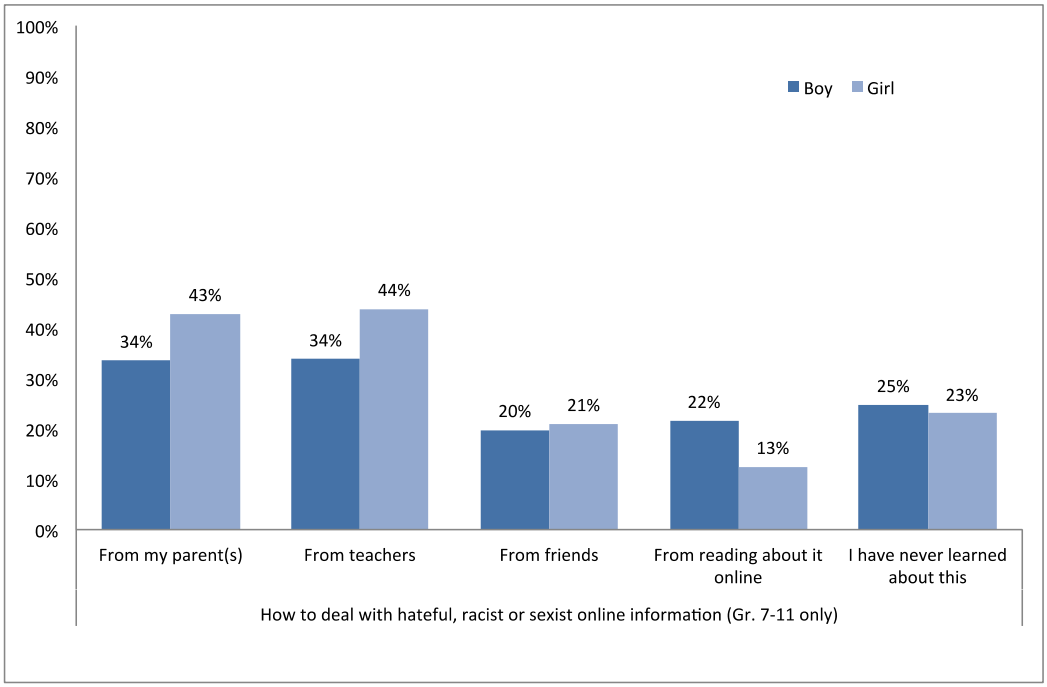


Figure 9: Learning about how to deal with hateful, racist, or sexist online information: Grade

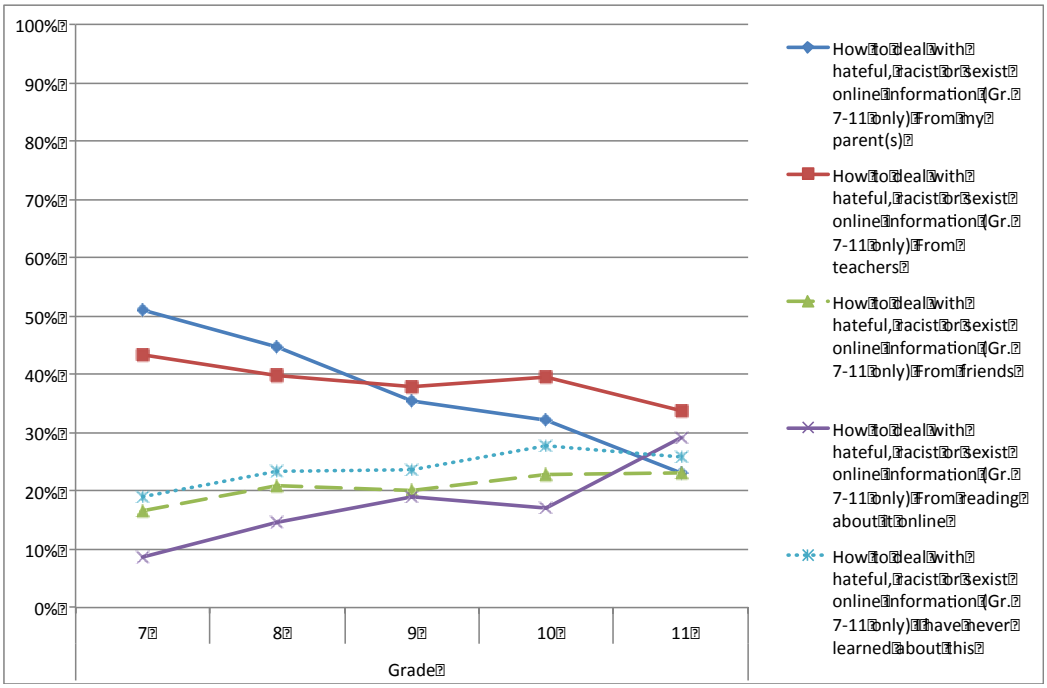
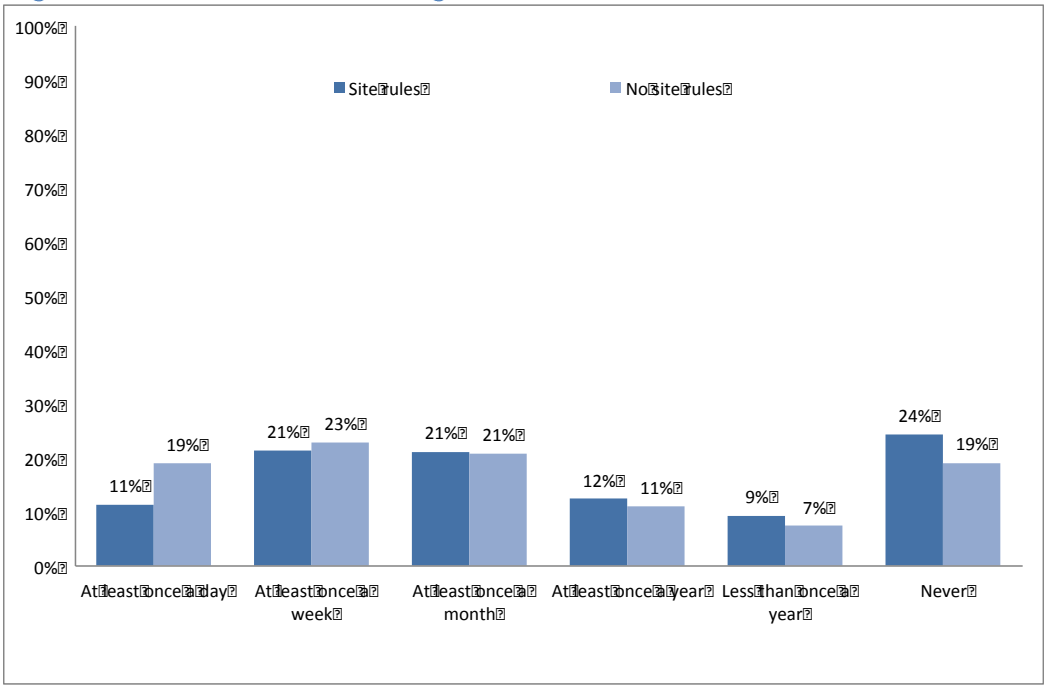


Figure 10: Site rules and seeing racist or sexist content online



Methodology

This report is based on the findings of a survey that was administered in 2013 to 5,436 Canadian students in grades 4 through 11. The purpose of the survey was to explore the benefits and challenges children experience when they use networked devices such as computers, tablets, cell phones and iPods. The survey explored the social codes young people develop with respect to their online social interactions and their attitudes about online issues such as privacy, cyberbullying, sexting and offensive and hateful content. It also explored the ways young people use online media to support their learning (both in and out of school) and to create new content.

The survey instrument, consent documents, recruitment text, instructions and method of analysis were approved by the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board.

Recruitment

Students were recruited through school boards and schools in all 10 provinces and three territories.

MediaSmarts contacted school boards that had participated in its 2005 survey. Additional school boards were also contacted. In total, 51 school boards (44 English and 7 French) agreed to assist in recruitment and all requisite board approvals were then obtained. In Nunavut and the Northwest Territories approval was also obtained from territorial research institutes and the school boards' district education councils.

MediaSmarts then contacted principals of schools within participating school boards. The principals of schools that had participated in the 2005 survey were asked to provide access to the same number of classes and grade levels for the 2013 survey. Principals of new schools were asked to provide access to classes with teachers who were willing and able to assist with recruitment. In total, 140 schools (126 English and 14 French) agreed to assist with recruitment. The schools included a representative selection of urban and rural and public and Catholic schools.

Principals then approached teachers and asked them to assist with student recruitment. Teachers who agreed to do so received the survey documents from Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group (*Directions*). Survey documents included: student information letters; detailed parental consent forms; instructions for teachers; and (where applicable) paper copies of the survey. Teachers distributed the student information letters and parental consent forms to students in specific classes approved by the principal. Students interested in participating were asked to take the information home to their parents. Parental consent forms for all participating students were signed and returned to the teacher by the students.

Administration of the Survey

The survey instrument was developed by Valerie Steeves, with input from MediaSmarts and an advisory committee of experts in the field of children and technology, including Jacquelyn Burkell (Faculty of Information & Media Studies, University of Western Ontario), Wendy Craig (Department of Psychology, Queen's University), Bernard Froese-Germain (Researcher, Canadian Teachers' Federation), Sara Grimes (Faculty of Information, University of Toronto), Phillip McRae (Executive Staff Officer, Alberta Teachers' Association, University of Alberta, Faculty of Education) and Leslie Regan Shade (Faculty of Information, University of Toronto).

The survey was open from February to June of 2013. Students in grades 7 through 11 responded to 57 questions in total. However, since some of the questions dealt with age-sensitive content – including sexting, sexism, racism, romantic relationships, gambling, pornography, future employers and more complex digital tools (e.g. advanced search functions) — a shorter version of the survey without these questions was created for students in grades 4 through 6 . Accordingly, those students responded to 52 questions in total.

Students in schools where the language of instruction was English completed the survey in English. Students in schools where the language of instruction was French completed the survey in French.

The surveys were completed during class time and administered by the classroom teacher, teacher-librarian, vice-principal or the principal. Participating students either completed the survey electronically or filled out a paper version, depending on the availability of Internet access and the preference of the teacher. Students were advised that: neither the teacher nor the school would see their responses; their answers would be kept anonymous; they could skip any question they did not want to answer; and they could stop filling out the survey at any time. Surveys completed on paper were placed in an envelope and sealed in the students' presence. The envelope was then mailed to Directions by express post. Surveys completed electronically were administered by Directions using Fluidsurveys online survey software.

In total, 5,776 surveys were received in paper and electronic formats. Data cleaning left 5,436 surveys (1,721 paper and 3,715 electronic) for analysis. Some students skipped questions and/or did not complete the entire survey. Accordingly, to minimize the loss of data, the analysis was conducted on a question by question basis. The results reported are therefore based on the number of students who completed each question and not on the number of students who completed the survey as a whole.

Notes on Statistical Analysis[5]

Statistical analysis was conducted by Directions and the tables and graphs included in this report were prepared by Directions.

Chi-squared tests were used to identify statistically significant differences in responses by gender, grade, primary language of instruction (French, English) or affluence. To compensate for the possibility that errors may be correlated with one another in some way when making multiple comparisons from the same data set, it is often helpful to establish a more stringent significance level. Thus, instead of the commonly used significance/alpha level of .05, it is sometimes recommended that one perform a Bonferroni Correction by dividing the alpha level (.05) by the number of items being compared, therefore establishing a higher and more stringent threshold for significance. For the current analysis, for each factor of gender or grade, 400 tests were run, thus, the significance/alpha level was calculated as = .05/400 = 0.000125 and applied to all of the tests.

In the results presented in this report, statistically significant differences by gender are indicated next to the question by ♀♂ and statistically significant differences by grade are indicated next to the question by Grade.

Comparing French language Students in Quebec and English language Students in the Rest of Canada

Throughout the report, we compare the responses of French language and English language students in the sample. Because the number of students in English language schools in Quebec (124) and the number of French language students outside of Quebec (204) was very low, comparisons between students on the basis of language of instruction alone would have made statistical comparisons difficult. To explore any differences between French language students and English language students, we therefore compared the responses of students in Quebec whose primary language of instruction was French with the responses of students in the rest of Canada whose primary language of instruction was English.

There were statistically significant differences between the two groups regarding access to technologies, privacy-related behaviours, the role of adults in students' online lives, cyberbullying and racism/sexism. However, interpretative and inferential caution is warranted, because there were approximately eight times more English language students than French language students in the sample. Even though the analysis applied very stringent criteria (significance level of 0.000125), making strong inferences about the differences observed or generalizing the findings beyond the sample is not warranted.

[5] The paragraphs on Chi-squared tests and on interpretive and inferential caution were written by Directions and were included with the permission of the author.

Comparing High Affluence Students and Medium Affluence Students

A modified version of the Family Affluence Scale[6] was used to measure students' socioeconomic status. The scale is widely used in research with children because it enables researchers to solicit information about socioeconomic status directly from the children themselves and the scale shows some construct validity[7]. Although reports in regard to reliability are mixed, we opted to use the scale instead of relying on postal codes as a proxy for socioeconomic status because of the number of rural schools with large catchment areas in the recruitment pool and the variability of socioeconomic status within individual Canadian schools.

The scale is based on responses to the following four questions:

1. Does your family own a car, van or truck?
   (No, we don't own a car, van or truck = 0; Yes, one car, van or truck = 1; Yes, more than one car, van or truck =2)
2. During the past 12 months, how many times did you travel away with your family?
   (Not at all = 0; Once = 1; Twice = 2; More than twice = 3)
3. How many computers does your family have?
   (None = 0; One = 1; Two = 2; More than two = 3)
4. How well off do you think your family is?
   (Very well off = 4; Quite well off = 3; Average = 2; Not very well off = 1; Not at all well off = 0)

We created a composite score for each student who responded to all four questions. The composite scores were then divided into categories of low affluence (including composite scores of 0, 1, 2 and 3), medium affluence (including composite scores of 4, 5, 6 and 7) and high affluence (including composite scores of 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12).

Only two percent of the sample fell into the low affluence category. Because the numbers of students (65) in this category was so low, statistical comparison between the low affluence group and the medium and high affluence groups was not possible. Accordingly, students on the low affluence category were not included in the analysis of socioeconomic status, and the results reported in this report are based on a comparison of the medium and high affluence groups only.

Limitations: Interpretive and Inferential Caution is Recommended

As with all survey data, readers should be cautious about the interpretations or inferences they draw from these findings. Regardless of the age of the respondents, answers from self-reports are typically less reliable than direct observation of a behaviour. All respondents manage the impression that they convey with their answers. Answers may represent what the respondent wants us to know or think about their behaviour, rather than how they actually behaved. In

[6] Currie, Candace E., Rob A. Elton, Joanna Todd and Stephen Platt. (1997). Indicators of socioeconomic status for adolescents: The WHO health behavior in school-aged survey. *Health Education Research*. 12(3), 385.
[7] Kehoe, Susan and Liam O'Hare. (2010). The reliability and validity of the Family Affluence Scale. *Effective Education*. 2(2), 155-164

addition, differences in the percentage reporting behaviour between groups may reflect differences in how comfortable each group is in reporting the behaviour, rather than differences in how much each group actually engages in the behaviour.

When data are collected from different age groups in the same survey, it is tempting to want to interpret the differences in the percentages as increases or decreases from one age group to another. These data do not support such claims. The most that can be said is that a larger or smaller percentage of respondents in one or another age group said this or that. Moreover, when there are differences between age groups it is also tempting to infer that the differences are attributable to maturity when they might simply reflect differences in the frame of reference or experiences that younger and older students have about the object of the question.

One should be cautious about comparing the findings from this survey to the findings in previous surveys for several reasons. First, technology has changed dramatically; online accessibility and content in 2013 is very different from that of 2005 or 2001. Second, in addition to the technological changes that have occurred the rapid nature of social and cultural changes occurring in the eight years since the last survey may mean that the Grade 4 students today are different from the Grade 4 students surveyed eight or 12 years ago.

Demographics of Survey Participants

Forty-one percent of survey participants were boys and 46 percent were girls. An additional 13 percent did not report a gender. The number of students per grade ranged from 424 for Grade 11 to 745 for Grade 7.

Table 7: Demographics: Number of survey responses by gender and grade

	Grade									
Gender	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**Not provided / other[8]**	**Total**
Boy	226	213	271	356	322	249	304	194	96	2231 (41%)
Girl	272	296	288	368	376	252	347	229	73	2501 (46%)
Not Provided	13	12	24	21	14	17	8	1	594	704 (13%)
Total	**511 (9%)**	**521 (10%)**	**583 (11%)**	**745 (14%)**	**712 (13%)**	**518 (10%)**	**659 (12%)**	**424 (8%)**	**763 (14%)**	**5436**

Survey participants were drawn from all 10 provinces and three territories. Eighty-six percent of students were enrolled in schools in which English was the primary language of instruction. The remaining 14 percent of students were enrolled in schools where the primary language of instruction was French. Seventy-three percent of the students enrolled in French schools were from Quebec; the remaining students enrolled in French schools were from Manitoba (20%), Ontario (3%), Prince Edward Island (2%) and New Brunswick (2%).

[8] 16 students from Grade 3 participated and 44 students from Grade 12 participated. This is likely because some classes are split Grade 3/4 and 11/12 and these classes participated as a whole.

Table 8: Demographics: Number of responses by language of instruction and province

Primary Language of Instruction				
	English	**French**	**Total**	
British Columbia	513		513	(9%)
Alberta	560		560	(10%)
Saskatchewan	382		382	(7%)
Manitoba	171	152	323	(6%)
Ontario	1992	24	2016	(37%)
Québec	124[9]	557	681	(13%)
Newfoundland and Labrador	162		162	(3%)
Prince Edward Island	106	16	122	(2%)
New Brunswick	373	12	385	(7%)
Nova Scotia	180		180	(3%)
Yukon	32		32	(1%)
Northwest Territories	24		24	(<1%)
Nunavut	29		29	(1%)
Unknown	26	1	27	(<1%)
Total	**4674 (86%)**	**762 (14%)**	**5436**	

The survey asked students to indicate what languages they spoke at home. Ninety-one percent spoke English at home and 28 percent spoke French at home. Two percent to 6 percent also reported speaking a language at home other than French or English.

[9] Eight students in an English language school took the survey in French as the survey was administered in their French Second Language class.

Table 9: Demographics: Languages spoken at home

What languages do you speak at home? [10]	% Speaking
English	91%
French	28%
Arabic	3%
Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin, other dialect)	6%
German	3%
Greek	2%
Italian	5%
Korean	2%
Panjabi (Punjabi)	3%
Persian (Farsi)	1%
Polish	2%
Portuguese	2%
Russian	2%
Spanish	4%
Tagalog (Pilipino, Filipino)	3%
Tamil	2%
Urdu	2%
Vietnamese	2%
Other	**11%**

A large majority of the students who completed the survey in one of the official languages reported that they spoke that language at home (96% English and 92% French).

Table 10: Demographics: Languages spoken at home by students taking survey in English or French

What languages do you speak at home?	English survey	French survey
English	96%	57%
French	19%	92%

Students were asked a series of questions to determine their socioeconomic status based on the Family Affluence Scale[11]. Only two percent of the sample scored in the low affluence category. Approximately two-thirds self-reported as being high affluence.

[10] Twelve percent of respondents did not provide language information. In addition, some students reported an improbable number of languages spoken at home; however, these numbers were very low and these students' responses were included in the analysis.
[11] See Methodology for more information about the Family Affluence Scale.

Table 11: Demographics: Affluence

Affluence Level	Percent Respondents
Low	2%
Medium	32%
High	66%

Figure 11: Demographics: Frequency distribution of composite affluence scores