Preliminary findings about online harms among youth

DIY DIGITALLY INFORMED YOUTH

In 2023–2024, our DIY: Digital Safety team conducted 26 focus groups with 149 youth aged 13-18 across Canada. Here are some preliminary findings from our early analysis of the data.

Experiences are shaped by identity and personal interests.

Youth reported experiencing harms related to their social position. For example, LGBTQ+ youth and BIPOC youth encountered homophobic, transphobic, and racist slurs in online games and on social media. Algorithms curate content based on a user's identities and personal interests, which means that different populations (e.g., boys, girls, LGBTQ+ youth, BIPOC youth) see different content that might be more or less troubling to them.

Algorithms are fuelling harm.

Algorithms suggest content that encourages user engagement. Unfortunately, negative or harmful content is sometimes prioritized because it evokes a strong emotional response. For instance, boys are usually more exposed to violent and graphic content that they do not want to see, while girls are more exposed to content that promotes comparisons and social pressures, fueling a "fear of missing out" and low levels of anxiety. Therefore, the "sticky" content can be shocking and provocative or might also tap into subtler insecurities, amplifying feelings of discomfort and exclusion.

There is no "one size fits all" approach.

Since different populations see different content—and experience different harms—a "one size fits all" approach to addressing harms will not work. Interventions need to consider how identity and social position factor into youth's experiences, and the different harms they encounter online.

Youth want anonymous, non-judgmental, confidential supports.

Youth stressed the importance of having supports that are anonymous, non-judgmental, and confidential. This is because they were worried about over-escalation from parents or other adults in their lives when reporting something to an adult because they did not want things to be blown out of proportion. Youth also wanted adults to be less judgmental and less reactive so that they feel safe when reaching out to them.

Fear-based approaches don't work. Instead, we need to teach young people their rights and responsibilities.

Youth want more information and tools so that they can better control their online experiences and respond to harms, without having to rely on parents or adults in every circumstance. Technology is an important part of youths' lives, and taking an abstinence-based approach or a fear-based approach fails to recognize how integral technology is to them. When adults do need to make rules and restrictions, youth wish the adults in their lives would work to understand the technology in a nuanced way first and hear young people's perspectives on the positives and negatives of a digital space/app/tool before deciding how to regulate it.