# Break the Hate: A Survey of Youth Experiences
# with Hate and Violent Extremism Online

Henry Kerr, Michèle St-Amant and John McCoy

## *Abstract*

As the most prolific users of the Internet, youth are exposed to a diverse array of harmful content and experiences, including cyberbullying and sexual exploitation. What is less well understood is the impact of hate and violent extremism on youth in these online spaces. This study surveyed over 800 youth from Alberta, Canada, to identify where they most frequently encountered hateful and extremist content online, how they react to it, and what they believed were the most appropriate responses to these problems. This study adds to a growing literature which takes youth perspectives seriously in the study of this problem. Our study found that more than three-quarters of youth surveyed reported encountering hateful content, while more than two-thirds reported encountering extremist content. Our findings add to a growing debate on the relationship between identity factors and exposure. While our results indicate respondents who identify as female are more likely to report encountering extremist and hateful content than males, intersectionality factors shed new light on the patterns of online exposure among youth. Specifically, we found that the effect of gender is mediated by other identity factors, like being a visible minority or identifying as 2SLGBTQ+.

Keywords: youth, social media, hate, extremism

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## *Introduction*

Youth are exposed to a diverse, ever changing, and largely unregulated world of online entertainment, information, disinformation, and social networks. In 2022, Common Sense Media published the results of a survey which found a 17% increase in screen usage amongst teens between 2019 and 2021, a larger increase than the previous four years (Rideout, Peebles, Mann, & Robb, 2022). In another report by McClain et al. (2021) at the Pew Research Center, when asked if their school-aged children were spending more or less time online during the Covid-19 pandemic, 72% of parents indicated increased usage.

While social media has its benefits, it can also come with significant drawbacks and hazards, including exposure to and proliferation of hateful or violent extremist (VE) content. This report discusses the results of a survey of youth exposure to hateful and VE content on online social media platforms. The research is based on a survey of 859 youth between the ages of 12 and 23 in Alberta, Canada conducted between December 2020 and June 2021. It sought to identify where youth encountered hateful and VE content online, how they reacted to it and what they believe are solutions to this problem. This approach sought to identify not only rates and negative impacts associated with exposure, but also prevention and intervention measures identified by youth.

Our study finds that 86% of youth surveyed reported encountering hateful content online, and 72% reported encountering VE content. Moreover, 46% of youth surveyed reported they had personally experienced hate online. These statistics are worrying, but our findings also suggest that intersectionality matters for identifying which youth will encounter this content most frequently. Despite encountering this content at high levels, respondents in our survey are optimistic about what can be done to combat these online problems. Among the most identified solutions suggested by respondents were targeted education and awareness for young people and encouraging social media platforms to remove harmful content more actively.

## *Background*

Youth are at the forefront of a global revolution in how we access information, interact with others, and subsequently shape how they situate themselves in the world. There are, of course, unknown hazards and outcomes in this revolution, one of which is interacting with disinformation, hatred, bigotry, and extremist content generated by a growing and diffuse host of bad actors on the Internet. As noted above, the Covid-19 pandemic has increased youth reliance on social media, indicating a need to understand the broad impacts online content has on youth. For example, in one study conducted by L1ght (2020), a technology company using Artificial Intelligence to detect online content, they found a 70% increase in hate "between children and teens" in online chats and a 40% increase in "toxicity" among young people in video game chats during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Hateful and VE content online have been extensively studied from a broad perspective. There has been considerable work done to understand how terrorists use the Internet to radicalize others (Archetti, 2015); or how specific ideologies, such as right-wing extremism or violent jihad-

ism, are spread online (Klausen, 2015; Youngblood, 2020). There is also a small but growing body of literature on the intersection of youth exposure to hateful or VE content. Given the disproportionate amount of time youth spend online, the potential to encounter, be targeted or be a victim of social media propaganda tools designed to propagate this content may be growing. As a result, research has sought to understand these tactics and outcomes. These studies were driven in part by the success of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in weaponizing social media to recruit young people from the West (Gates & Podder, 2015). ISIL took advantage of using tailored, high quality video content to pique the interest of youth online. ISIL even recruited qualified Western youth to run their social media platforms and appeal to specific audiences (Gates & Podder, 2015).

Some studies have explored how online exposure impacts real-world acts of violence among youth. For example, Pauwels and Schils (2016) investigate how differential youth exposure to extremist content on social media sites affects the likelihood of committing political violence offline. They find that youth who participate in online discussions related to VE are more likely to self-report committing political violence offline, compared to those who are simply exposed to this type of content. Conversely, in a qualitative study of youth who joined radical or violent extremist groups, Schils and Verhage (2017) found that social media only played a minor role, while offline factors such as in-person recruitment, play a much larger role.

Other studies seek to understand how individual traits or demographics make some youth more likely to seek out violent, hateful, or extremist content. This follows a strain of research examining the relationship between risky behavior and this period of development (Casey, 2015). For example, Ybarra, Mitchell, and Korchmaros (2011) found that older adolescents and young males are more likely to access online hate sites. Additionally, Slater (2003) found youth who exhibit high levels of sensation or risk-seeking behavior are more likely to seek out violence-oriented websites and content.

While the links between youth engagement online and their offline activities are important, several questions remain around the impacts of the phenomena on youth exposed to harmful content, rather than those who purposefully seek it out. Namely, there is a growing need to understand the short, immediate, and long-term outcomes of exposure to harmful content online on mental health, social networks, identities, and beliefs. In one study, Livingstone and Haddon (2009) found that encountering violent or hateful content is the third highest ranked online risk for youth across Europe. A later survey of European youth found that 20% had been exposed to or encountered hateful messages and content online (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014). Similarly, surveys of French youth (Blaya, 2019) and German youth (Nienierza, Reinemann, Fawzi, Riesmeyer & Neumann, 2021) found that roughly one-third of respondents encountered hateful or extremist content online. Savoia, Harriman, Su, Cote, and Shortland (2021) found the most frequent risky online situation youth reported was encountering images of violence. This type of risk, known as "content risk," has received growing attention by scholars.

Much of this research draws from a body of work on online criminal behaviors, particularly cyber-bullying. The key difference between cyberbullying and hateful or extremist material is that the former targets a single individual, while the latter targets a collective identity (Hawdon, Oksanen & Räsänen, 2015). Early studies approached this issue using routine activity theory (RAT), which argues youth are more likely to be victimized in spaces that combine a motivated

offender with a lack of capable guardianship (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Indeed, the Internet provides such an opportunistic space. For example, Tynes, Reynolds, and Greenfield (2004) found support for this when comparing the use of negative racial or ethnic-based language between moderated and unmoderated online teen chatrooms. In unmoderated chatrooms, negative racial or ethnic language permeates most.

However, unlike offline interactions, the Internet provides a unique environment where youth need not come in direct contact with a motivated offender. Instead, targets need only read or passively consume materials posted at some time prior to their exposure (Hawdon, Oksanen & Räsänen, 2014). One risk factor for this may be the amount of time spent online. For example, Ybarra et al. (2011) and Harriman et al. (2020) found the rate of exposure to extremist or hate-related content increases the more time youth spend online. This is especially true as individuals enter online spaces with a higher proportion of extremist or hate-related actors, groups, and content (Hawdon et al., 2014). However, as noted, youth do not necessarily need to seek out harmful content to be exposed to it. For example, Hawdon et al. (2014) found that most respondents who encountered hate speech online found it accidentally and, subsequently, were also more likely to indicate they were disturbed by it.

The frequency of exposure also varies by individual traits and demographics, though research so far has produced conflicting results. Hawdon et al. (2014) found that youth who identified as White were less likely to encounter online hate materials; whereas Hispanic respondents were nearly 1.7 times as likely to encounter it. They also found that younger male respondents were more likely to encounter hate material. This supports earlier studies of European youth which found that younger males were more likely to encounter violent or hateful content than young females (Livingston & Haddon, 2009).

On the other hand, Costello, Hawdon, Ratliff and Grantham (2016) found no relationship between gender and exposure. Instead, in a survey of American youth, they found that Black Americans, foreign-born youth, and younger respondents were less likely to encounter this type of content. In a similar study, Costello, Barret-Fox, Bernatzky, Hawdon and Mendes (2020) found youth who identify as White were more likely to be exposed to online hate but found no relationship between gender and exposure. Conversely, Savoia et al. (2021) found young females had nearly twice the odds of coming across images of violence as their male counterparts. Similarly, youth who identified as White were 50% more likely to encounter this content compared to those who identified as non-White.

More generally, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest youth exposure to hate and extremism has negative impacts. Studies have found that exposure to hateful content can produce short-term emotional impacts like feelings of fear, loneliness, and unhappiness (Tynes, 2006; Keipi, Räsänen, Oksanen, Hawdon, & Näsi, 2018); as well as longer term impacts like normalizing and reinforcing hateful beliefs and discrimination against targeted groups (Foxmann & Wolf, 2013; Harel, Jameson & Moaz, 2020). Earlier studies also indicate that demographics matter for assessing the level of impact on an individual. Women and people of color are more likely to perceive hate speech and hate crimes as more serious and harmful than men and non-minorities (Cowan & Mettrick, 2002; Craig & Waldo, 1996; Inman & Baron, 1996). This is supported by later work on online encounters, such as Livingstone and Haddon (2009) who found that, while

males were more likely to encounter violent or hateful content, females were more likely to be negatively affected by it. For youth who may be the target of hate, studies also indicate this can lead to modified behaviors due to fear and emotional distress (Cowan & Mettrick, 2002; Garnets, Herek & Levy, 1992; Matsuda, 1989); and targeted individuals may develop defensive attitudes that can impede future social relationships (Leets, 2002).

While there is certainly a growing base of literature which explores youth encounters and interaction with online hateful and VE materials, there is little consensus about the risk of certain demographics encountering this type of content compared to others, as well as the short, intermediate, and long-term harms. There has also been little work which specifically asks youth about the scale of the problem, or how they responded to the content they encountered. Finally, there has been little meaningful engagement with youth in a manner that seeks to elicit their ideas for how best tackle these issues. This survey and its results represent a modest attempt to address some our gaps in knowledge and understanding.

### *Methodology*

To investigate youth online behavior as it relates to exposure to hate and VE, this study created an original survey consisting of 19 questions. Youth from Alberta, Canada were recruited for the survey based on a convenience sampling method. Prior to dissemination, the survey received approval from the Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB) and a link to the survey was posted on online school websites and in-person announcements. This included an online hub of information for students, individual school announcement boards, announcements in classrooms, and on school social media pages.

Respondents were provided with a definition of hate and violent extremism (VE) before beginning the survey. The definition of hate used for the survey was *"the use of hostile language or violence towards individuals based on their culture, race, religion, disability, sex, gender or sexual orientation."* Violent extremism was defined in the survey as *"the beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence in the name of a cause."* These definitions employed simple and accessible language and were also provided to the respondents during the survey.

The survey was live between December 2020 until June 2021. For respondents under the age of 18, the survey required prior parental approval. Parents were required to first read the questions in the survey and type their names to indicate consent. This would then allow the youth to begin answering questions. Prior to beginning, participants were informed that all questions in the survey were optional, answers are anonymous, and all participants were given a list of community resources if they needed support.

The 19 questions surveyed a range of responses from youth:

- basic demographic information (age, gender, identification as a visible minority or member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community);
- social media and online platforms used on a regular basis;
  which social media and online platforms they have encountered hateful or VE content;
- whether they personally experienced hate on- or offline;
- how they responded to hate or VE content online in the past;

- and a range of questions which ask what they believe youth can do to combat hate and VE online.

## *Results*

A total of 859 youth completed the survey. The average age of the respondents was 16. The youngest respondent was 12 and the oldest was 23, with 91% of respondents between the ages of 15 and 17. 53% of respondents identified as female, 44% identified as male, and 3% identified as something other than female or male (this includes but is not limited to non-binary, transgender, gender-fluid, and agender). Of 859 respondents, 801 reported whether they identified as a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, and 760 reported whether they identified as a visible minority. Accordingly, 74% of respondents reported that they do not identify as 2SLGBTQ+, 19% reported they do, and 7% declined to answer. Alternatively, a near even split of 43% of respondents reported identifying as a visible minority, and 45% reported identifying as a non-minority. 12% declined to answer.

Given previous research in this field, it is important to pay attention to intersectional patterns. Of all self-identified female respondents who answered the visible minority question, 49% reported identifying as a visible minority; similarly, 48% of all male respondents reported identifying as a visible minority. Conversely, nearly 60% of respondents who reported identifying as something other than male or female report also identifying as a visible minority. Of all female respondents who answered the 2SLGBTQ+ question, 25% report identifying as a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, whereas only 9% of all male respondents report identifying as such. Conversely, 100% of respondents who identified as something other than male or female report also identifying as a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

### *Social Media and Online Platform Use*

Respondents were asked which social media or online platforms they used daily. Because this survey was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, these results provide updated insights into the social media usage trends of youth in the context of VE and hate. *Figure 1* below shows platform usage by gender. Instagram is the most frequently used online social media platform, followed by YouTube and TikTok. The latter is of particular interest as it is one of the newer social media platforms which gained traction amongst youth during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although TikTok only launched for Apple and Android devices in 2017 outside of mainland China, by 2021, Cloudflare ranked it as the most popular website, surpassing even Google (Rosenblatt 2021).

Although Instagram is the most widely used social media platform overall, this varies by gender. Instagram is the most widely used amongst female respondents; whereas male respondents amongst report using YouTube most frequently. For those who identify as something other than male or female, TikTok is the most widely used. Additionally, those who identify as male use Discord, Reddit, and Steam or other online gaming platforms more than those who identify as female; whereas those who identify as female are more likely to use TikTok and Snapchat daily.

Finally, of 862 respondents who reported using at least one social media or online platform daily, 81% reported using between 2 and 5 simultaneously.
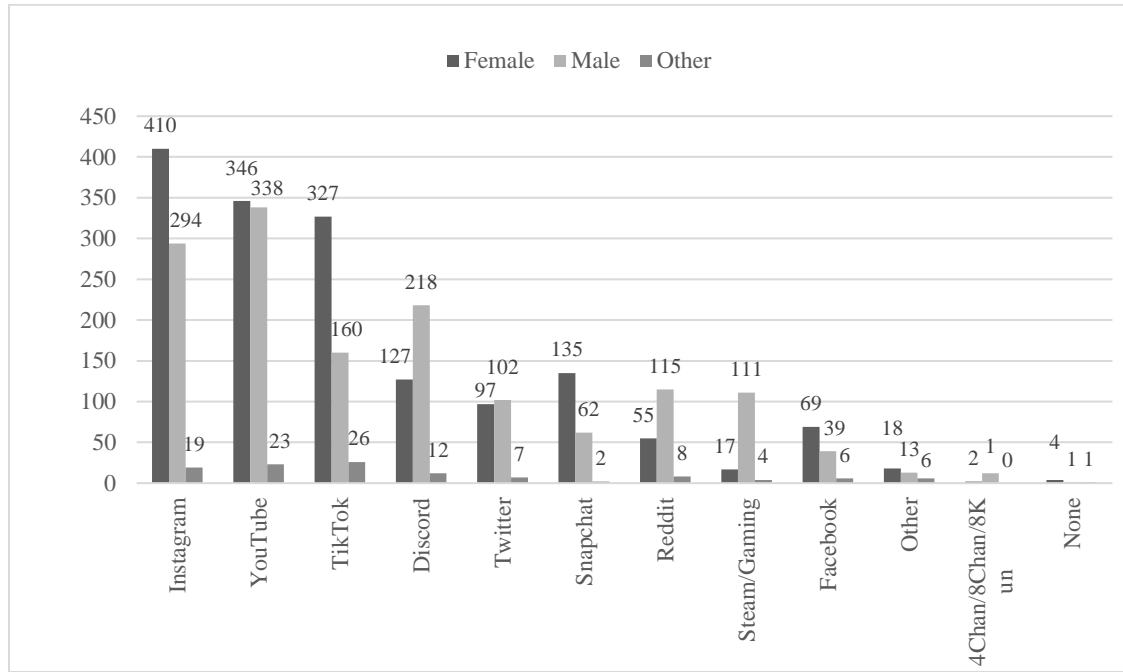


*Figure 1:* **Daily Use of Social Media and Online Platforms by Gender**

*Encountering Hateful or Extremist Content*

Respondents were asked if they had ever come across VE or hateful content on any of the platforms they use. As noted, a definition of hate and VE was provided prior to answering these questions to avoid inconsistent interpretations of the terms (Nienierza et al., 2021). According to *Figure 2* below, of 859 respondents, 72% reported coming across VE content on one or more of the platforms they use; and 86% reported coming across hateful content. In total, 68% of respondents reported encountering both VE and hateful content, while only 10% report not encountering either violent extremist or hate content at all.
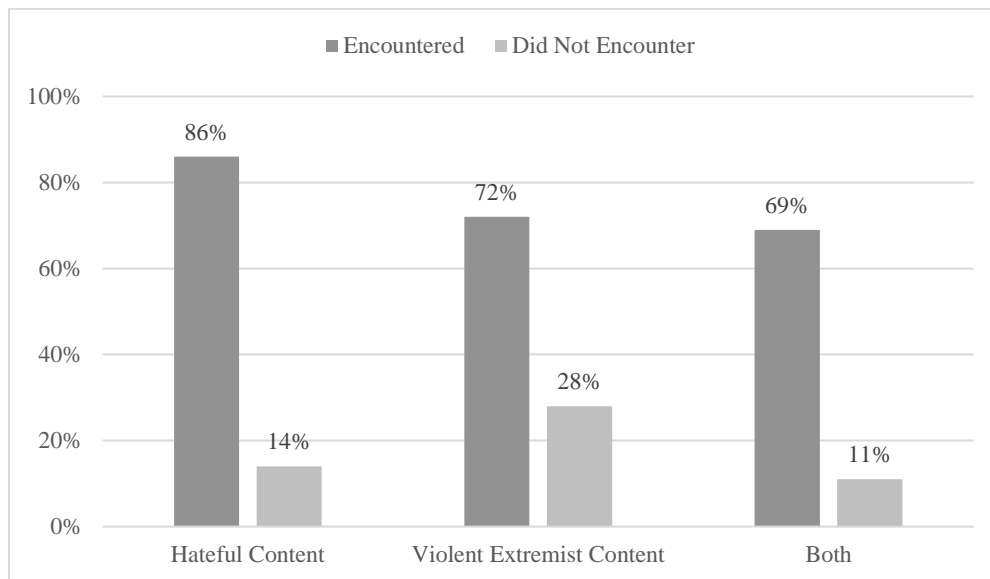
*Figure 2:* **Percentage of Respondents Who Report Encountering Violent Extremist Content, Hateful Content, or Both**

Respondents were also asked to indicate which platforms they encountered VE or hateful content. The results in *Figures* 3 and *4* below indicate wide variation across platforms. For some platforms like TikTok and Twitter, more daily users encounter VE or hateful content than those who do not. On others like YouTube, Discord, and Snapchat, most daily users do not encounter this content.
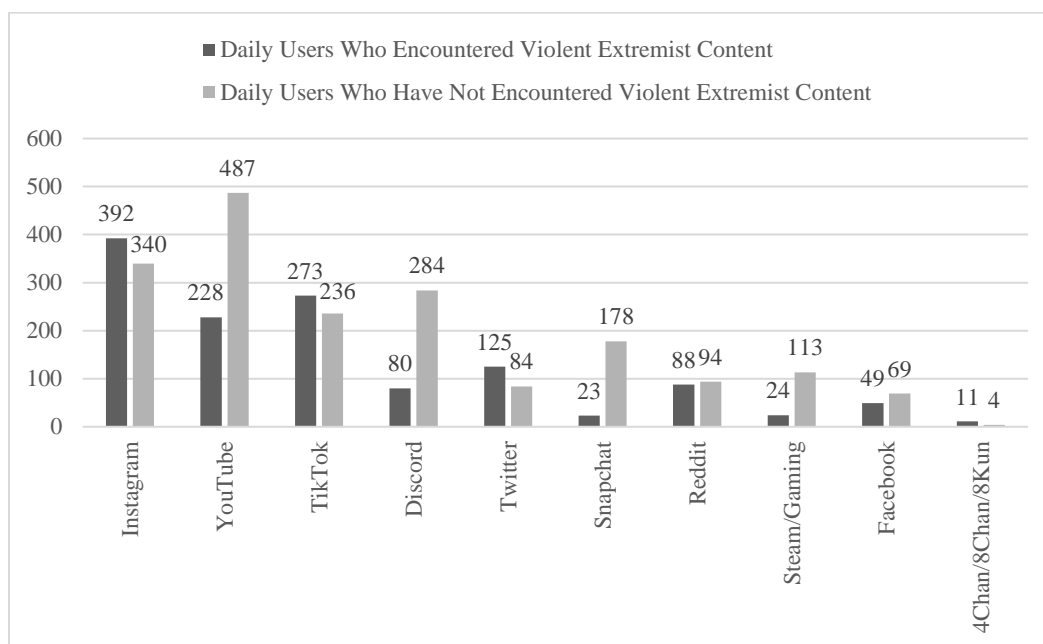


*Figure 3:* **Daily Users Who Encountered Violent Extremist Content**
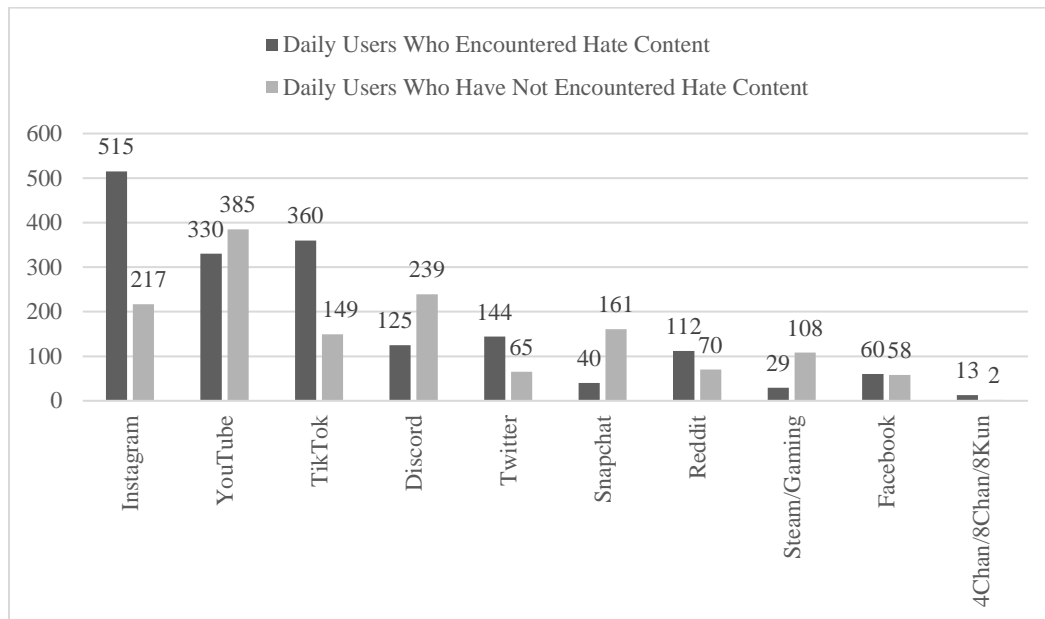
*Figure 4:* **Daily Users Who Encountered Hate Content**

Finally, respondents were asked to rate how much of a problem they thought VE or hateful content was on a scale from 1 (not a problem) to 5 (severe). *Figure 5* shows that most respondents rated online hateful content as being a "Severe," problem, whereas slightly more respondents rated online VE content as being a "Moderately Severe" rather than "Severe" problem.
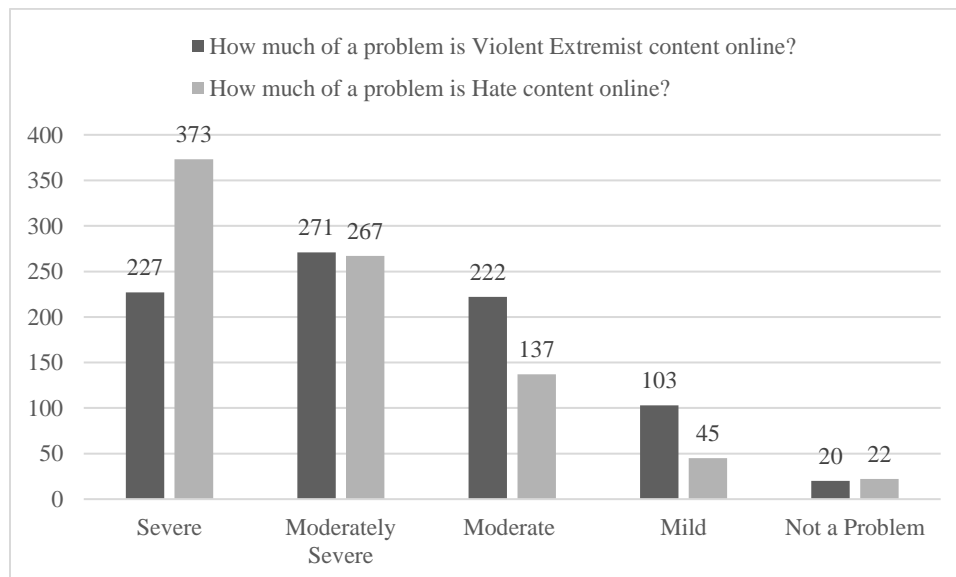


*Figure 5:* **How much of a problem is VE and hate online?**

To determine if some youth are more likely to encounter VE or hateful content than others, Phi and Pearson's correlation tests were conducted between reported rates of exposure and gender, age, minority status and identification as 2SLGBTQ+. For the binary variables of gender, minority status and identification as 2SLGBTQ+, Phi correlation coefficients are preferred. For the continuous variable of age, Pearson's correlation coefficients are favorable to Phi coefficients. The resulting coefficients and their level of statistical significance are presented in *Table 1* below.

*Table 1:* **Phi and Pearson Correlation Coefficients**

| | **(1)** **Encounter VE Content** | **(2)** **Encounter Hate Content** | **(3)** **Encounter VE Content** | **(4)** **Encounter Hate Content** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Female | 0.0812** | 0.157*** | - | - |
| Male | -0.0938*** | -0.1562*** | - | - |
| Other | 0.0350 | -0.0063 | - | - |
| Age | 0.0518 | 0.0640* | - | - |
| 2SLGBTQ+ | 0.0666* | 0.0997*** | - | - |
| Visible Minority | 0.0956*** | 0.0941*** | - | - |
| Female Minority | - | - | 0.0887* | 0.0731 |
| Male Minority | - | - | 0.1590*** | 0.1615*** |
| Female 2SLGBTQ+ | - | - | 0.0289 | 0.0785* |
| Male 2SLGBTQ+ | - | - | 0.0566 | 0.0864* |

** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

In columns (1) and (2), there is a statistically significant and positive correlation between respondents who identify as female, 2SLGBTQ+, and visible minorities and encountering VE and hate content online. The correlation coefficients are larger in females and 2SLGBTQ+ for encountering hateful content than it is for VE content, whereas it is roughly the same in both categories in minority respondents. In other words, those who identify as female, 2SLGBTQ+, or as a visible minority are more likely to report encountering this content. On the other hand, there is a statistically significant and negative correlation between male respondents and encountering both VE and hateful content online. The correlation coefficient is larger in males for encountering hateful content than it is for VE content. In other words, those who identify as male are less likely to report encountering this content. Finally, in column (2), there is a statistically significant and positive correlation between age and encountering hate content.

Intersectionality in columns (3) and (4) appears to moderate the exposure to this type of content. Although being a female is positively correlated with encountering both VE and hate content in columns (1) and (2), there is only a weak significant relationship between being a minority female and encountering VE content, and no statistically significant

relationship between being a minority female and encountering hate content. On the other hand, despite a strong negative correlation between being male and encountering VE and hateful content in columns (1) and (2), there is a statistically significant and positive correlation between being a minority male and encountering both VE and hateful content. In fact, the correlation coefficients for minority males and encountering both VE and hateful content are the largest of all correlations tested. Finally, there is a statistically significant and positive correlation being a female and male who identify as 2SLGBTQ+ and encountering hateful content, but not VE content.

Respondents were also asked whether they had personally experienced hate online or offline. Of 859 respondents, 407 (47%) reported personally experiencing hate offline, and 395 (46%) reported personally experiencing hate online. 315 (37%) report personally experiencing hate both online and offline. These responses are broken down by gender, minority and 2SLGBTQ+ status in *figure 6* below. Those who report identifying as something other than male or female, and those identifying as 2SLGBTQ+ report personally experiencing hate the most.
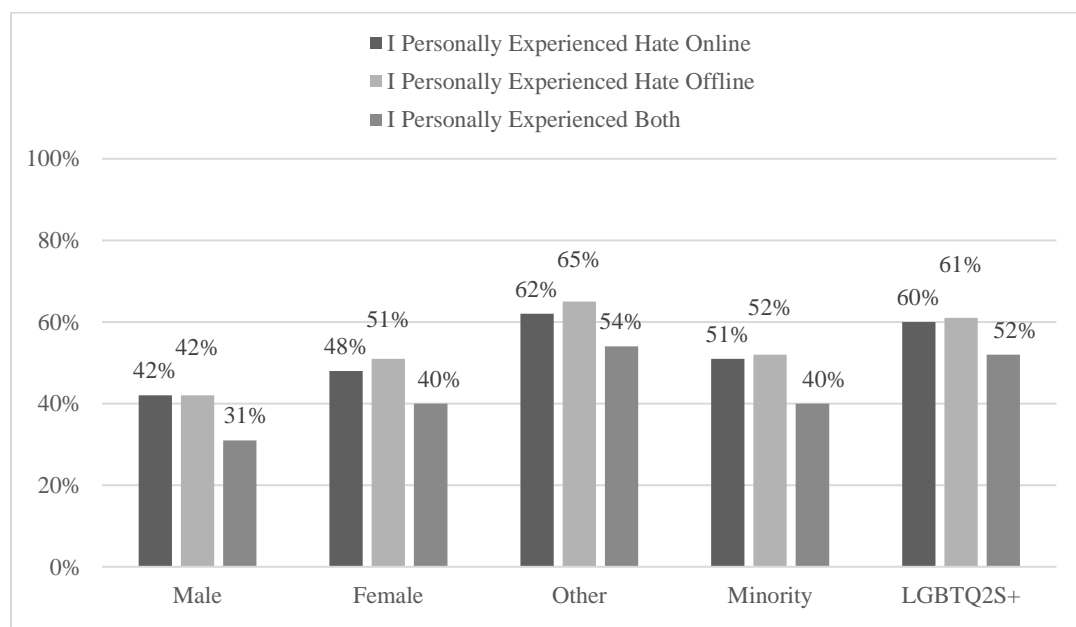
*Figure 6:* **Distribution of Personal Experiences of Hate (Online, Offline, or Both)**

*How Youth Responded to the Content They Encountered*

The survey also asked how youth responded to the content they encountered. A range of possible responses in two broad categories were provided. The first includes platform-specific responses – reporting the content to the platform, challenging the post via platform tools, and blocking the user. The second category includes turning to social support systems like talking to friends, parents, or teachers. Other possible responses include learning more about the content and

doing nothing. The distribution of responses is shown in *Figure 7* below. Amongst all youth surveyed, the most frequently selected response is turning to social support systems, followed by blocking the user. Among respondents who identify as male, the most frequently selected is to block the user, followed by reporting to the platform. In general, this response pattern is consistent with other research on actions Canadian youth take after encountering harmful content (Brisson-Boivin, 2019). Additionally, respondents who identify as male are the most likely to select doing nothing as a response to encountering VE and hateful content.
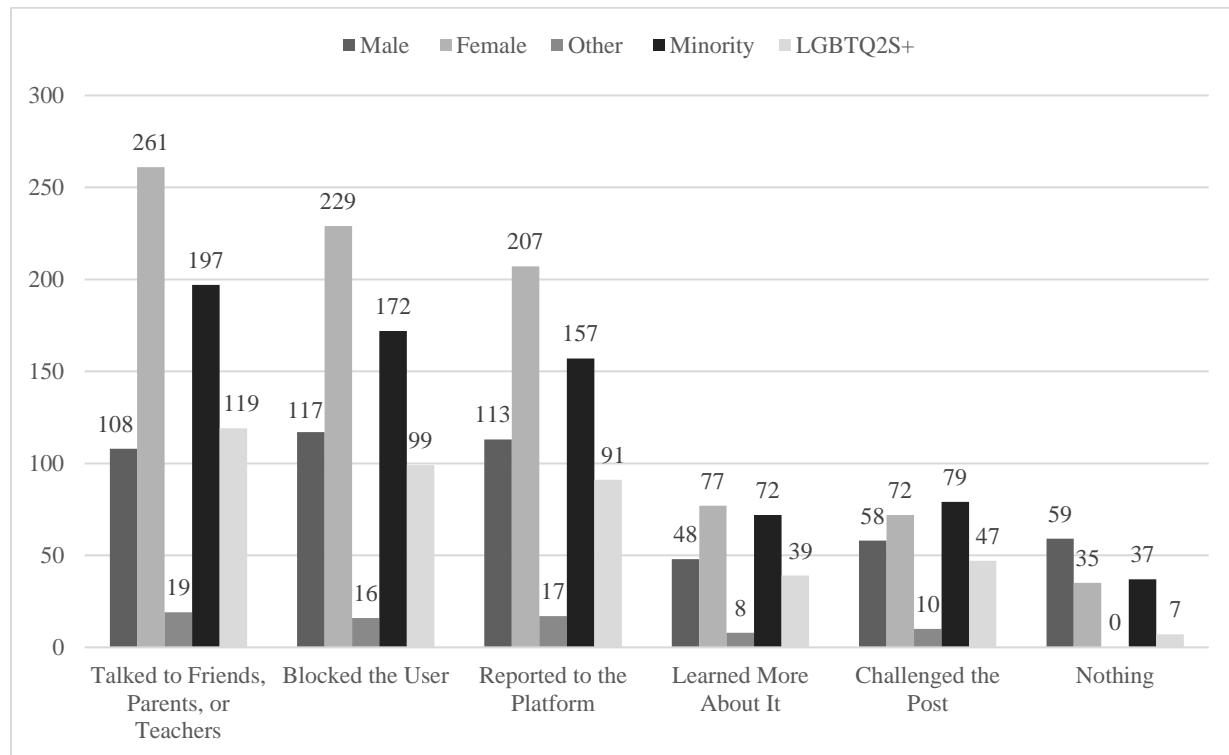


*Figure 7:* **How Youth Responded to the Content They Encountered**

*What Can Youth Do About Extremist and Hateful Content Online?*

The final set of survey questions asked respondents what can be done about VE and hateful content online. *Figure 8* below displays the distribution of results. The most widely selected solution across all youth surveyed was to "educate youth about the problem" of VE or hateful content, followed by "hav[ing] more conversations between people of different backgrounds" and "ask[ing] platforms to do more against this content online." A minority selected that "nothing" could be done. However, other research suggests that youth who report doing nothing often do so because they feel they will make things worse, or will not be able to make a difference (Brisson-Boivin, 2019).
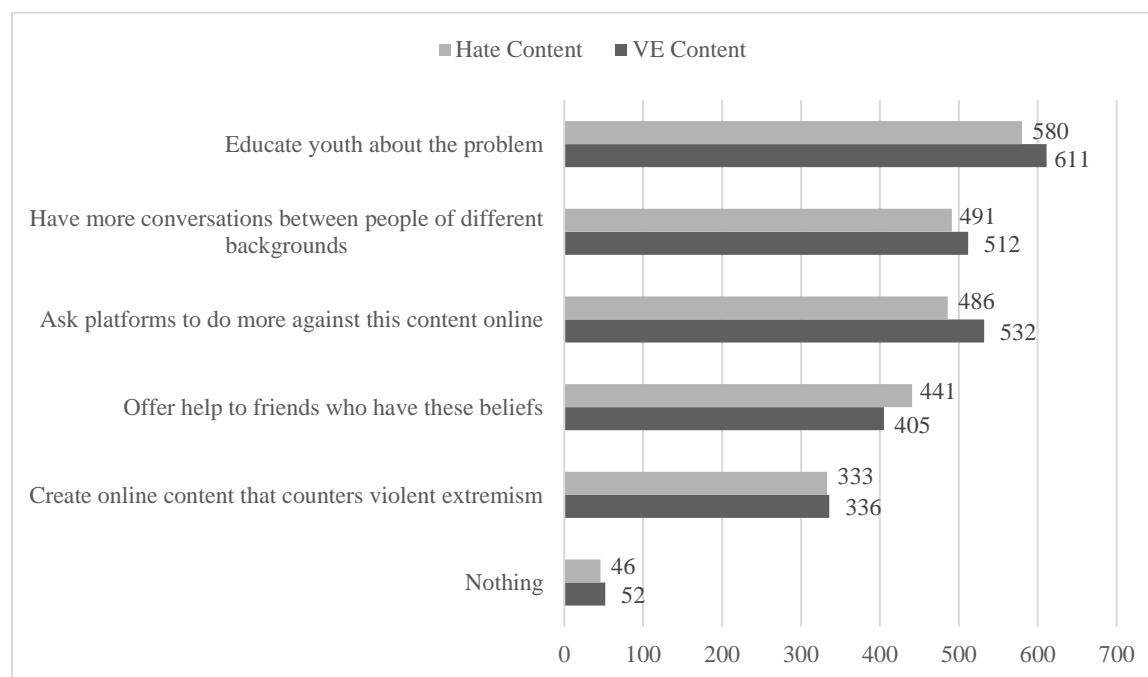
*Figure 8:* **What Can Youth Do About VE and Hate Content Online?**

*Discussion*

Unlike previous research which indicates the rate of exposure to VE or hateful content is less than 50%, our work indicates this rate may be much higher. This is in line with more recent surveys in Canada which indicate 47% of Canadian youth in grade 7-11 report seeing racist or sexist content online at least once a week (MediaSmarts, 2022). Additionally, our results indicate nearly half of respondents had personally experienced hate online or offline. Meanwhile, our findings also indicate respondents who identify as visible minorities and members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community were most likely to report encountering this type of content. Similarly, our findings indicate that, in general, respondents who identify as female are more likely to report encountering VE and hate content, whereas those who identify as male are less likely, consistent with previous work which found the same.

By including intersectionality in our analyses, our findings shed new light on the patterns of youth online interaction with VE and hateful content. Specifically, we found the effect of gender is mediated by other identities such as being a visible minority or identifying as 2SLGBTQ+. In other words, minority males are most likely to encounter both VE and hateful content online. More work needs to be done to determine how intersectionality impacts these patterns, and what kind of short-term and long-term impacts this has on youth.

This survey is also part of a small but growing body of literature which asks youth about solutions to these problems. Encouragingly and in line with other research (MediaSmarts, 2022), most respondents indicate they believe there are solutions. Importantly, this demonstrates that regardless of one's relative exposure to harmful content, youth believe there are solutions. Moving forward, engaging with youth who make up a large share of social media and online platform users will be a crucial step for social media companies in addressing this problem. However, youth also overwhelmingly selected that offline community efforts like challenging hate, educating youth, and helping friends who may hold these beliefs are important solutions, indicating that online solutions to the problem are only part of the puzzle. As such, more work should be done to address how youth can be more meaningfully engaged not only with the online solutions to the problem, but community-level solutions as well.

### *Limitations*

One limitation of this study is that, unlike some previous studies (e.g., Nienierza et al., 2021), there were no questions related to the ability of respondents to accurately identity VE or hateful content. While definitions were provided within the survey itself, it cannot be determined if respondents read these definitions before completing the survey or interpreted them in a manner that allowed them to accurately identify content. This is important because, in previous studies, researchers found that only 59% of the respondents surveyed understood the researchers' definition of extremist content (Nienierza et al., 2021).

Additionally, the scope of encounters with harmful content were not specified to prevent limiting respondents in sharing their experiences. While this is important for allowing greater dialogue about what youth have encountered online, it also presents a limitation in that we cannot assess the severity of content encountered. It may also be a reason for the relatively high rate of respondents who report having encountered this type of content compared to other studies.

Finally, unlike some other work which takes a cross-cultural or cross-national perspective, this study is specific to Albertan youth experiences and may therefore be difficult to generalize. Additionally, our study utilized a convenience sampling method rather than representative sampling, which also limits its generalizability. We also did not disaggregate among minority groups, limiting the comparisons we can draw about the experiences of particular minority groups.

### Conclusion

This work represents a unique and timely example of research on hateful and violent extremism online. Given local trends related to the growth in hate crimes and incidents in countries like Canada, and the well-documented growth in ideologically motivated violent extremism in Western states, our findings are perhaps unsurprising. With nearly 9 in 10 respondents indicating they had encountered hateful content online and more than two-thirds indicating the same in relation to violent extremism, it is clear these experiences are part of life for youth online. Given the potential detrimental impacts of this exposure on youth, especially among those who identify as members

of visible minority or LGBTQ2S+ communities, it is vital that educators, parents, and policy makers – together with regulators and private Internet companies – take measures to safeguard youth.

Another takeaway from this research is that youth have opinions on how to tackle this problem. As the most prolific users of the Internet, their opinions should be given priority in helping guide efforts to create a safer and more equitable online environment. At the forefront of this youth-centered approach is the belief that digital literacy and education are effective means for youth to tackle hate and extremism online and that youth-led efforts are critical in this endeavor.

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