



Sense of Belonging Among English-Speaking Youth in Québec: Confronting Isolation through Digital Community-Building





Author

Alexandre Pettem

Date published

11 May 2022

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INTRODUCTION

Since the onset of Covid-19, community has come to inhabit a digital medium for many of Québec's English-speaking youth. But what does this mean in concrete terms? How is this linguistic minority using social media, and in what manner are they experiencing this digital shift? Will they want to keep having online events going forward? Our paper observes the digital behavior of young (aged 16-30) English-speaking Québécois from March 2020 until the current moment in the pandemic's development.

1.1 Research Question

Little yet has been written on this particular linguistic minority in the context of Covid-19. Our paper is interested in answering two questions: What digital approaches has Y4Y observed young (aged 16-30) English-speakers employ to combat physical isolation? Is this demographic in favor of future events being virtual?

1.2 Outline

We first summarize the survey responses completed by English-speaking youth spanning the province. We then discuss these survey responses in an attempt to address our two research questions. To preview our conclusion, we find that, first, the most popular platforms to satisfy restlessness during Covid were Instagram, Facebook messenger, and TikTok. Second, respondents agree, especially rural youth, to some form of hybrid events being the norm going forward.

We make two recommendations. First, English-speaking organizations should continue to offer hybrid events once the pandemic is over. Second, to confront the negative aspects of prolonged use of social media on youths' mental health, the provincial government subsidize sports facilities, the cultural sector, and provincial parks, so as to encourage youth to reduce prolonged screen time.

1.3 Methodology

Data to better understand Québec's English-speaking youth (aged 16-30) between March 2020 to today was primarily gathered through a nine question survey. This was distributed in April 2022 and responded to by 15 English-speaking youth, spread over 9 Québec regions. These regions include Montréal, Nunavik, Québec City, Chaudière-Appalache, the North Shore, the Outaouais, Gaspé-les-Îles, Sherbrooke, and Abitibi-Témiscamingue. Each of these youth have previously attended Y4Y's COVID-era projects and initiatives.

The survey seeks to first create a qualitative portrait of the demographic, including in what region they reside; their age; whether they are urban, rural, or "other;" if they were students, or employed, between March 2020 and today. The nine questions are indicated in the following section.

Taken together, this primary source commentary is meant to respond to our two main questions: What digital approaches has Y4Y observed young English-speakers employ to combat physical isolation? Is this demographic in favor of future events being virtual?

ANALYSIS

We now turn to the analysis of the questionnaire data we collected as outlined in the methodology section. This analysis will allow us to compare each response with one another and answer our two research questions.

1. a) How has your social media use changed since the start of COVID in March 2020? And what social media did you use? Do you still use the same ones today?

Of our survey respondents, all these youths saw their use of social media increase at the beginning of Covid, whether in urban or rural settings, student or worker. Nearly all, minus two, are still using the same social media platforms today. The most popular platforms were Instagram and Facebook messenger.

Rural respondents were more likely to not only keep engaging with their preferred social media platforms, but to add new ones to their repertoire. Their most frequently cited new platform adopted was TikTok.

b) Do you use social media for the same reasons today you used to at the beginning of COVID?

The most recurring stated use of social media, regardless of region, schooling, or employment, has been as a distraction to satisfy these youths' restlessness during Québec's lockdowns ("passive scrolling," a "mental escape," "addictive," "mindless scrolling," "brain break," etc). Second was to stay in touch with friends and family, and third was to keep up with the news.

Today, a slim majority of these youth still use social media for these same reasons. Those that do not are primarily youth who are in the job market, orienting their screen time towards greater networking and work-related activities.

c) Did social media feel like a way to fight isolation at the beginning of Covid, and does it still feel like that today? Why or why not?

All respondents claim that social media felt like a way to fight their isolation when Covid began, with major caveats. One defined social media as the "best fake way to fight isolation," another as something "used to keep [them] sane," and we believe this begrudging attitude finds general agreement amongst our audience.

Today, however, the majority believes that social media has the opposite effect on perceptions of isolation. To quote one of our urban respondents, they stated that "now it feels more like isolation is better fought offline." Another went even further, claiming that "social media is serving to run away from the difficulties of life rather than teach or encourage how to handle them properly".

But each *rural* participant, for their part, still believes that their increased use of social media remains a tool to fight isolation and to maintain the social relations they adopted throughout the pandemic.

2. a) What effects do you think this big shift to digital interactions has on you? Do you like it or not?

Opinions were mixed on the effects this massive shift to digital interactions has had, and whether it is appreciated, on the whole, or not. Those who were more in favor of the shift, particularly youth in rural locations, mentioned how it felt inevitable; it regularized and strengthened contact with friends and family who may live far away; and helped develop an online community.

Those more opposed claim that the shift has been both unpleasant and taxing on their mental health. Reasons include social media's ability to strengthen online interaction skills while harming them in the real world; increasing our addiction to screens; deepening loneliness by constantly seeing the pictures that others post (from regions possibly with fewer Covid restrictions); and forcing us to cultivate our online personas more than our true selves.

While this did not factor much in their responses, all of those opposed to the digital shift were students for much of Covid. This leads us to speculate that the added stress and screen time of course work and online classes likely cast a negative lens on the shift.

b) Do you feel more or less connected to your friends/peers/family? Why or why not?

A plurality of respondents now feel more connected to friends, family, and their peers, particularly those in rural areas. This is primarily because it has allowed people to check in on one another almost at all times. One rural respondent stated that this shift has had an "equalizing" effect on those living inside and outside of urban centers.

The second largest response set stated that they felt *more* connected in some ways to friends, family, and peers, and *less* in others. Some found themselves facetimeing plenty with their family, while allowing many of their friendships to slide. Another, while feeling closer with family, felt more distant from her work peers, since she was based in a rural area with stricter Covid regulations.

The minority of those who now feel less connected to friends, family, and their peers also have their reasons. One stated that bringing in texting and messenger introduces the fact that some are slower at responding than others, and thereby leads to people overthinking whether the slowness means something.

3. What has your screen time gone up to per day? From memory, is this a higher, lower, or similar number to the beginning of Covid?

All but one youth respondent admitted to their screen time skyrocketing at the beginning of the pandemic. While admitting to fluctuations, some mentioned it went to over 7 hours a day, others in the 10-hour range.

4. a) To the best of your knowledge, how many times in the past 3 months have you attended an event because you heard about it online/through social media?

In the past three months (February-March-April 2022), the vast majority of respondents stated they attended an event because they had heard of it online and/or through social media. By and large, it was the urban youth who were overrepresented in the minority of those who did not.

b) Were these events mostly in person, digital, or hybrid?

Of the aforementioned events, a majority were held virtually. The minority who attended more in-person events were in urban settings, as well as in Kangirsuk, Nunavik. This urban minority fact may simply point to the reality that rural youth have fewer local events being offered, especially during Covid. Our respondent from Nunavik who attended events “[mostly] in person” could be explained by the fact that internet connection is very poor in the region, forcing events, if they are to take place at all, to occur in person.

5. If/when Covid is over, would you like it that future events keep the option to be virtual?

All but one respondent would agree to some form of hybrid events being the norm going forward, albeit uncomfortably. Arguments in favor all involve the recognition that the virtual element would allow for greater social participation, especially for those who otherwise could not attend in person.

Many of these same respondents, while in favor, have certain hesitations. “[The hybrid option is] much more accessible for everyone [however] ... [we], as humans, are meant to be in close contact with one another to build connections and networks,” wrote one. “Although we miss in-person events,” said another, “virtual events allow for a larger reach of audiences who may not be able to attend the event.” A third; “I think that hybrid events might be a challenge for heavily active discussions, but if there is a good virtual moderator then I think it would work well.”

DISCUSSION

Our research suggests that the most popular platforms between March 2020 and today were Instagram and Facebook Messenger, and the most frequently newly-downloaded platform was TikTok. Their most recurring use, regardless of region, schooling, or employment, was as a distraction to satisfy restlessness during Québec’s lockdowns; next was to stay in touch with friends and family, and third was to keep up with the news.

As for our second research question, respondents overwhelmingly agree, albeit with certain hesitations, to some form of hybrid events being the norm going forward.

While going through our survey results, we were surprised to remark that there were greater differences in responses between urban and rural individuals than between students and non-students. Intuitively, we would have thought that students who were forced to engage in online courses would have been more fed up with the digital shift; however, youths’ geographic situations appeared to play a larger role in whether they wanted virtual events to continue occurring or not. While the Mental Health Commission of Canada makes one reference to “youth living in rural areas” (3) in their report as an example of groups at particular risk of “COVID-10 and its impacts,” no further analysis is completed. We believe our findings provide insight on this underdeveloped intersection.

We did not expect that our respondent from Nunavik attended events “[mostly] in person.” A possible explanation, apart from that offered in the previous section, is that Inuit and First Nations communities in Québec, Y4Y has learned, overwhelmingly prefer meeting with people in person, rather than digitally.

It is possible that our overall findings would vary if we had surveyed English-speaking youth from some of the other regions not covered, such as the Montérégie and Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean. That being said, it had been our intention to focus on regions wherein English-speakers were slightly more represented.

We admit that featuring only 1 or 2 youth per region may not result in the most representative data set. This resulted from the difficulty in finding English-speaking youth outside of the Montréal core. However, research like that of Sitounis and Chiara, which includes gender and race in the analysis of their material (4), might have allowed for more insight to have emerged from our data set.

Our future research ought therefore to seek a larger audience across the province. With Covid restrictions largely removed, Y4Y can now consider visiting English-speaking schools across the province, thereby allowing for more data.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Through examination of our respondents' feedback, we recommend that Québec's English-speaking organizations continue to offer hybrid events even once the pandemic is over, in particular to reach youth in rural settings that otherwise would be unlikely or unable to participate. Our rural participants maintain that their increased use of social media remains a tool to fight isolation and to maintain the social relations they adopted throughout the pandemic.

While social media was at first an acceptable method for these youth to fight their social isolation, it has now degenerated, for many of our urban respondents, into an addictive habit that weighs on their mental health. As such, we recommend the provincial government allocate additional financial resources to subsidize sports facilities, the cultural sector, and provincial park infrastructure with the intention of reducing fees to near zero so as to encourage youth to step away from their screens. Such a program could be based on Canada's 2017 Discovery Pass which offered free admission to federal parks (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2017), or on the Accès Montréal card (Montréal, 2020), which provides discounts on various arts, sports and recreational activities.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to answer what digital approaches Y4Y has observed young English-speakers (aged 16-30) employ to combat physical isolation, and whether this demographic is in favor of future events keeping the option to be virtual.

As for our first research question, our findings imply that Instagram, Facebook Messenger, and TikTok were the most widely and frequently used social media platforms to assuage restlessness during Québec's lockdowns; next was to stay in contact with friends and family, and third, to keep up with the news.

As for our second research question, respondents overwhelmingly agree, albeit with certain hesitations, to some form of hybrid events being the norm going forward.

This paper itself adds value insofar as it provides new data on an often-overlooked linguistic minority in the context of Covid-19. In order to gather a more representative sample, however, future research ought to consider surveying a larger pool of English-speaking youth. We are content with helping to have started the conversation. More efforts towards integrating gender and race into the selection of survey respondents should be considered.

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5165 Sherbrooke Street West,
Suite 107
Montréal, QC H4A 1T6



info@y4yquebec.org



514-612-2895



www.y4yquebec.org