

Trolls and tribulations: One-in-four Canadians say they're being harassed on social media

Most say companies don't do enough to combat abuse on social media platforms

October 21, 2016 – It's not something most people would feel comfortable seeing while walking down the street: One out of every four people being subjected to unwelcome comments, vicious insults, threats of violence, or worse. On Facebook or Twitter, however, this is exactly the environment that develops below even the most run-of-the-mill political stories.

The growth of social media over the last decade or so has revolutionized the way people build relationships, but it has also revolutionized the way they tear each other down.

A comprehensive new public opinion poll from the Angus Reid Institute finds one-quarter of all Canadians have experienced some type of harassment or abuse while using social media, and that total rises among younger people and frequent users of such sites.

The survey finds that the effects of uncivil social media discourse extend well beyond hurt feelings and online embarrassment. One-in-four who have been harassed on social media say their experiences have had real-world consequences, and more than six-in-ten Canadians say they have self-censored online in hopes of avoiding such abuse.

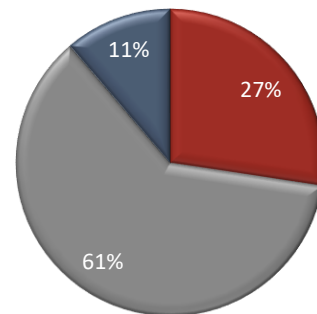
Given these wide-ranging effects, it's perhaps little wonder that most Canadians who have been following this issue are less than satisfied with the way social media companies have been handling offensive content on their platforms.

Key Findings:

- More than half of Canadians familiar with the issue (53%) say social media companies are "not doing enough" to address harassment on their platforms. Just 19 per cent say they're "responding appropriately"

Percentage of Canadians who:

- Have been harassed on social media
- Use social media, but haven't been harassed
- Don't use social media



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from Aug 29 – Sept 2 among a representative randomized sample of 1,530 Canadian adults who are members of the [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

- Most would like to see social media companies take an active approach to harassment, either responding to complaints (42%) or proactively finding and removing offensive content (49%)
- Canadians find five specific examples of social media abuse presented in this survey to be unacceptable, but there are significant age and gender gaps in their responses

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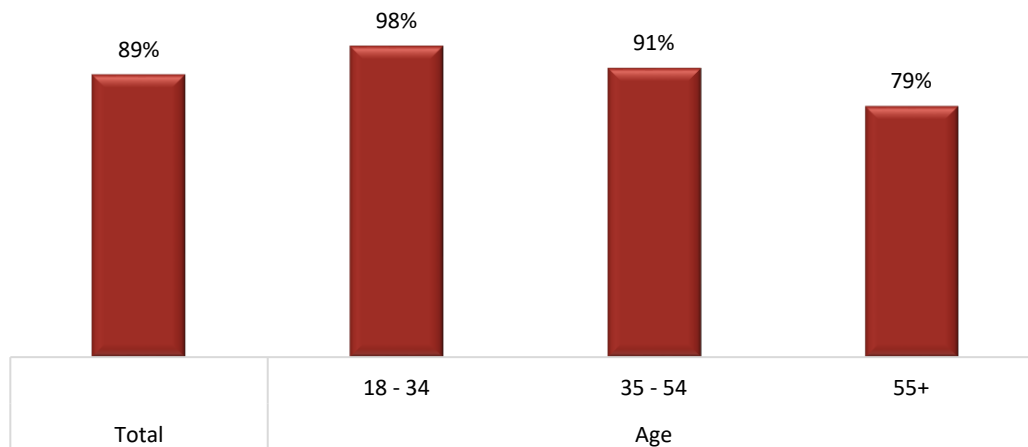
- **Part 1: How many have been harassed?**
- **Part 2: What does harassment look like?**
- **Part 3: Specific examples – what's okay and what's not?**
- **Part 4: What should be done?**

PART 1: How many have been harassed?

Who uses social media?

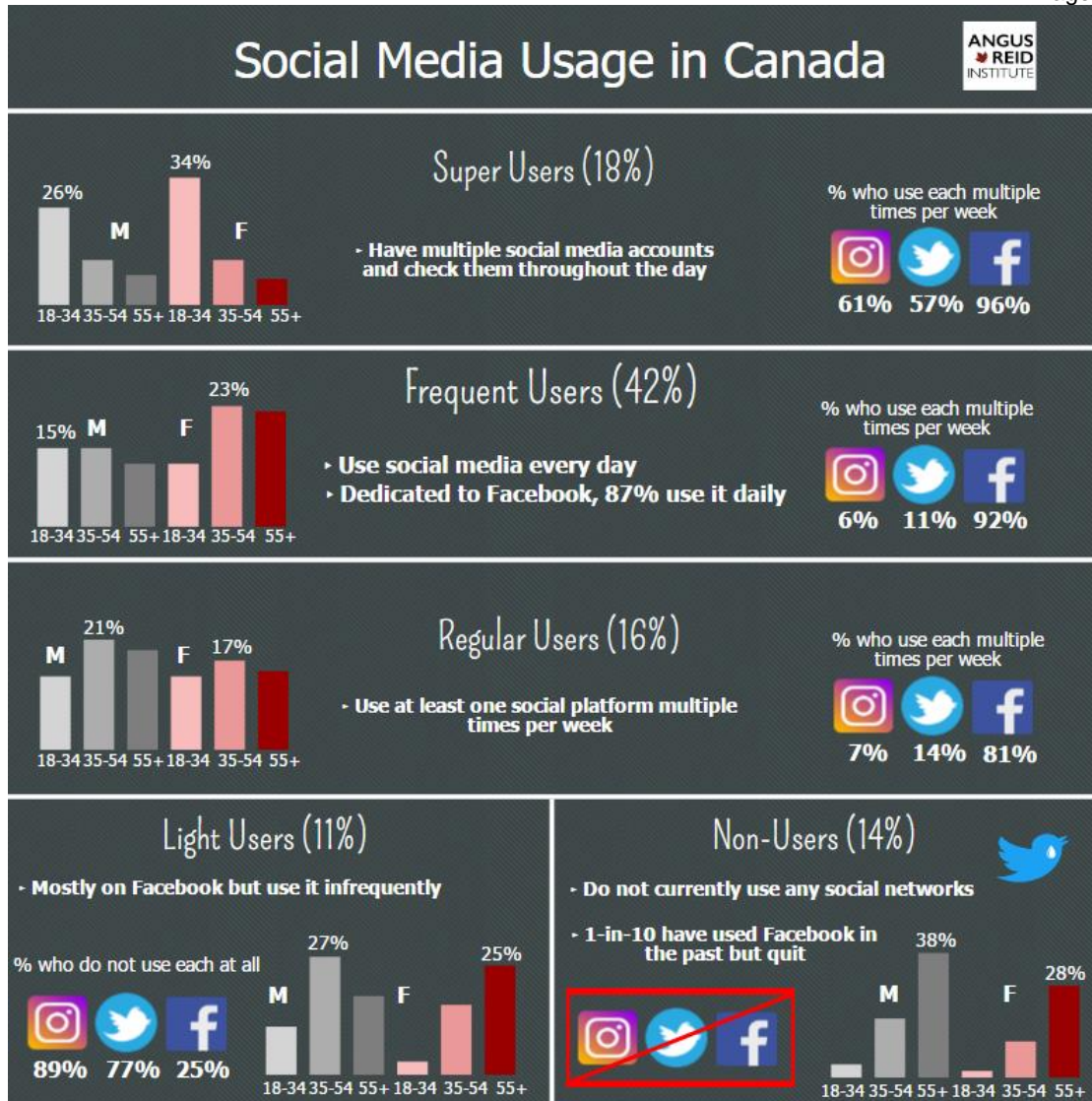
The vast majority of Canadians, approximately nine-in-ten (89%), say they use social media at least occasionally. This number grows to almost 100 per cent among the youngest Canadian adults, and also includes four-in-five (79%) of those ages 55 and older:

Percentage of Canadians who use social media at least occasionally:



Facebook is by far the most-used social network for Canadians. Most (52%) use it every day or more, and almost seven-in-ten (69%) use it multiple times a week. No other platform is used this heavily by more than 17 per cent of Canadians ([see comprehensive tables for greater detail](#)).

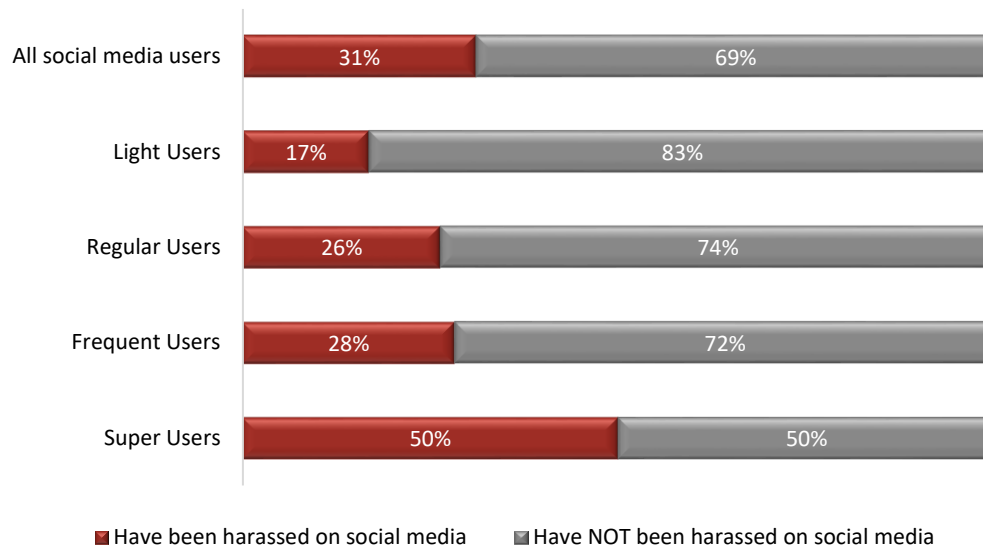
Based on their social media usage, Canadians can be divided into five groups. The following infographic summarizes their age, gender and social media engagement.



Who is being harassed?

Perhaps because of their higher rate of use, Super Users are more likely than other groups to report having been harassed on social media:

Experience with harassment, by social media usage:

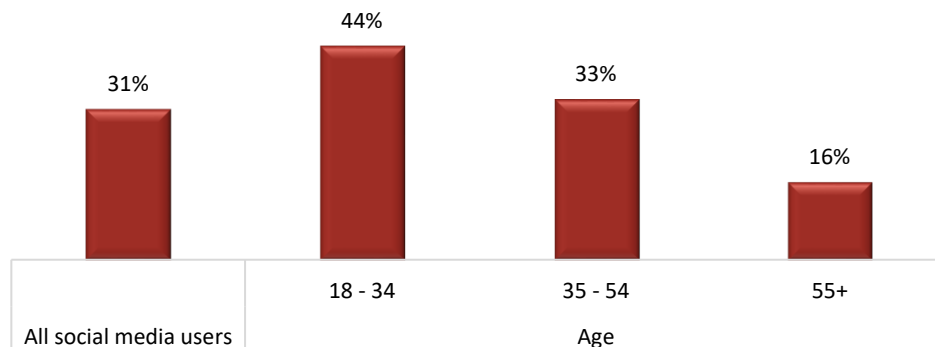


Though much of the discussion about online harassment focuses on the experiences of women – and for good reason given the severity of some of the attacks women have faced on social media – this survey finds that men and women who use social media report experiencing harassment at roughly equal rates.

Women are more likely to report certain types of harassment, however, as will be discussed later in this report.

In terms of the overall likelihood of being harassed, age is much more of a driving factor than gender, a finding that correlates to the heavier usage seen among younger respondents.

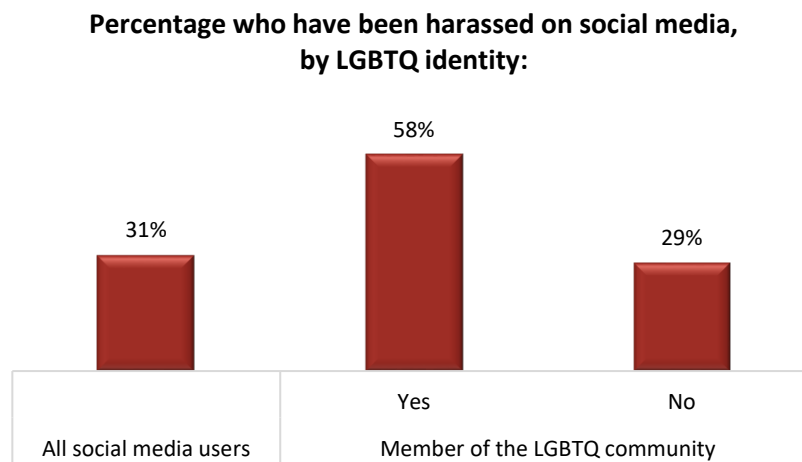
Total who have been harassed on social media, by age:



Also more likely to experience social media harassment? Self-identified members of a visible minority or the LGBTQ community.

Among visible minorities, almost four-in-ten (38%) social media users have experienced harassment, while among those who are not visible minorities, the total falls to three-in-ten (29%, see summary tables at the end of this report).

The difference between the experiences of LGBTQ social media users and those of everyone else is even more stark, as seen in the following graph:



These findings correlate to [other research](#) that has been done on the topic of online harassment of this community.

PART 2: What does harassment look like?

How are they being harassed?

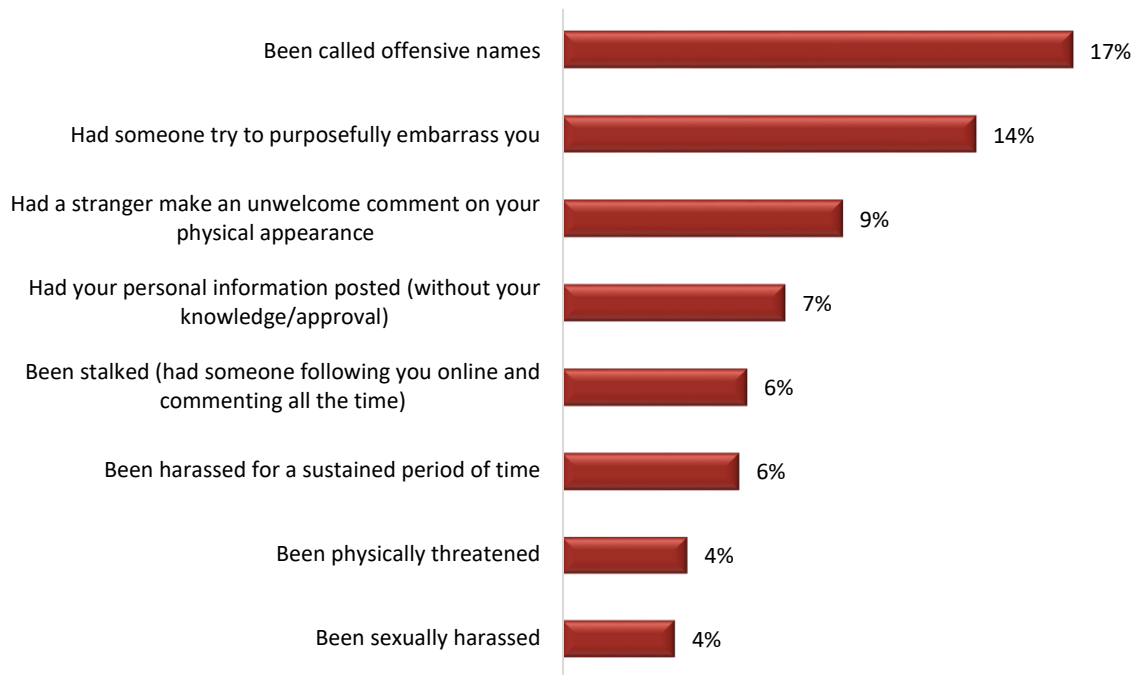
Not all social media harassment is created equal. There's a big difference between an isolated insult and the flood of targeted abuse to which *Ghostbusters* actress [Leslie Jones was subjected](#) after the film's premiere.

And then there are cases in which online harassment spills over into the real world, often in the form of cyberbullying or "revenge porn." In these more extreme situations, [the victims tend to be women](#).

Among the nearly one-in-three Canadian social media users who have been harassed, roughly half say they've been subjected to multiple types of harassment ([see comprehensive tables](#)).

The specific types of harassment reported are shown in the following graph (bars add up to more than the 31 per cent of Canadians who have been harassed because many have been harassed in multiple ways):

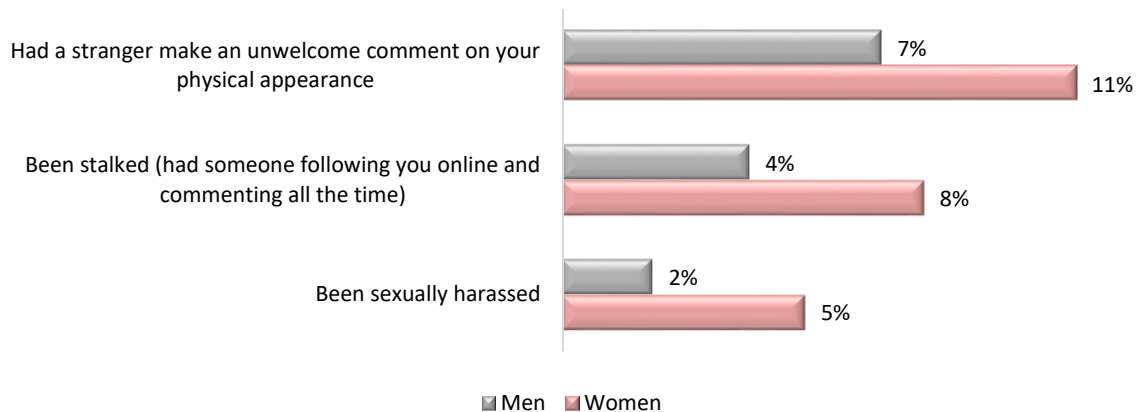
Which, if any, of the following have happened to you, personally, using social media?



As previously mentioned, this survey finds no difference between social media users of different genders in terms of the overall prevalence of harassment. Women and men are roughly equally likely to report being subjected to at least one of the behaviours on the list.

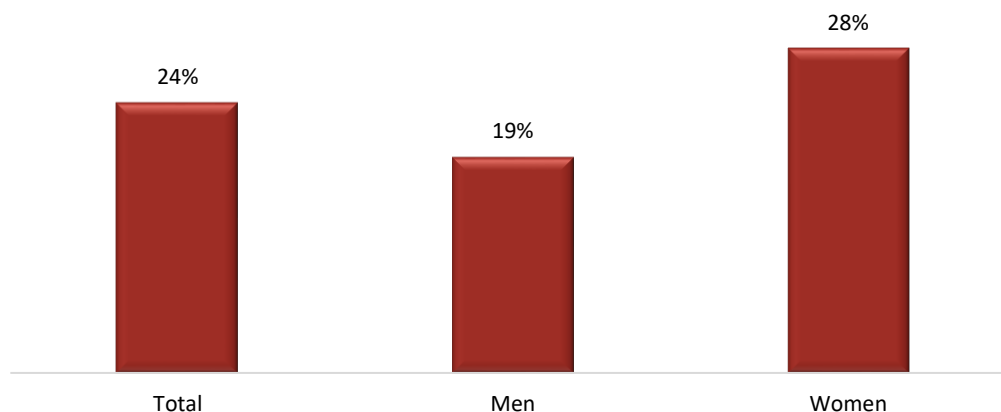
That said, there are certain types of harassment that are more likely to be directed at women on social media. As the following graph indicates, women are twice as likely as men to say they've been stalked or sexually harassed, and one-and-a-half times more likely to say they've been subjected to unwelcome comments about their appearance:

Which, if any, of the following have happened to you, personally, using social media?



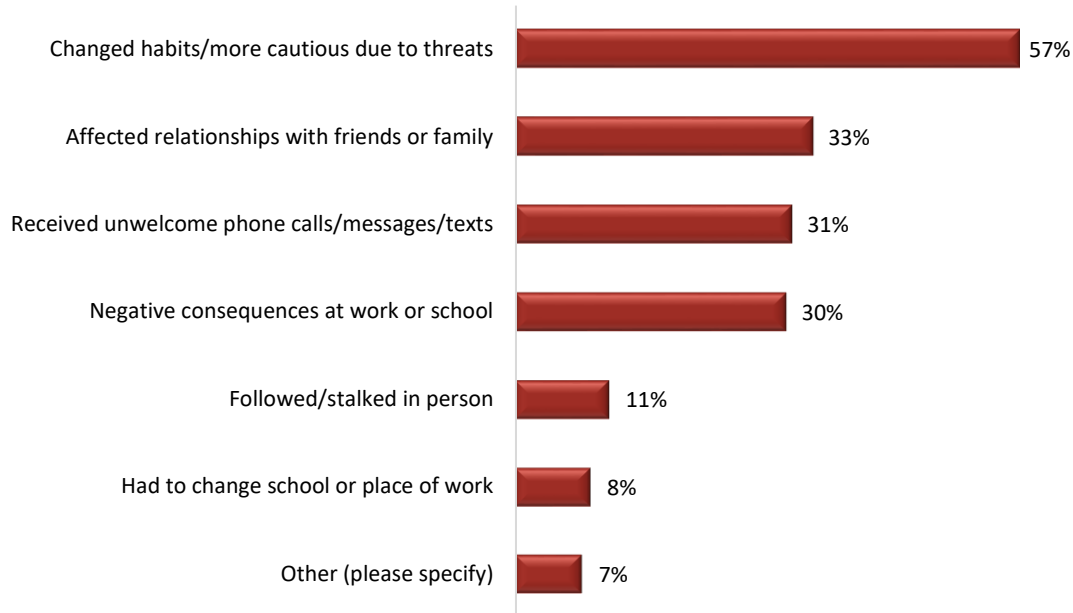
Women are also more likely than men to say their experiences with social media harassment have followed them into the real world. Overall, one-in-four Canadians who have been harassed on social media (24%) say their experiences have had an impact on them in their real lives. This rises to 28 per cent among women, and falls to 19 per cent among men:

**Percentage saying their experiences with harassment on social media have had an impact on their real lives
(asked of those who have been harassed, n=419)**



These real-world effects of digital-world harassment manifest themselves in a variety of ways, as seen in the graph that follows:

**Real-world impacts of social media harassment:
(asked of those who said they were harassed on social media and
experienced consequences in their real lives, n=99)**



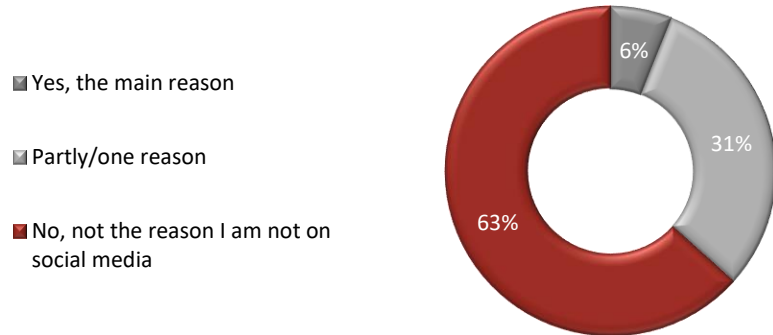
Self-censorship and opting out:

Given the relatively large number of Canadians who have been harassed on social media, and the serious consequences that can result from such harassment, it's perhaps not surprising that the threat of such an experience keeps some people from participating in online communities.

One-in-four Canadians surveyed (25%) indicated they had used at least one social network in the past that they no longer use today. Asked whether they quit the site in question because of offensive content on it, one-quarter of this group says that's at least partly the case – 6 per cent say it's the main reason they quit, while 20 per cent say it was one of the reasons.

Likewise, among the one-in-ten Canadians (11%) who don't use any social networks, more than one-third say offensive content is at least partly to blame for their non-participation:

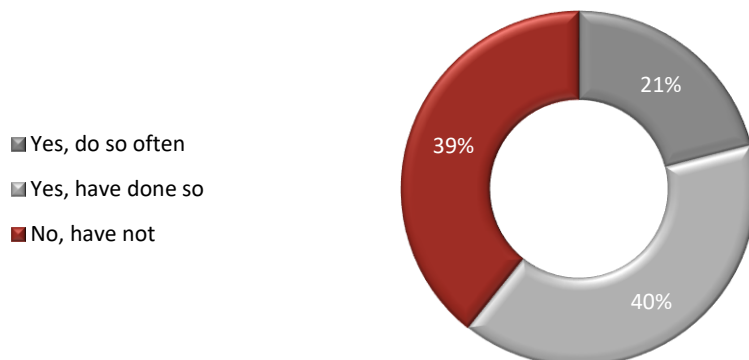
You don't use any of the main social media sites we asked about at the beginning of the survey. Is this issue of offensive content your reason for not being on social media?



This chilling effect of the tone of online discourse can also be seen among those who *do* use one or more social media platforms.

Asked whether they've ever self-censored on social media because of fear of the negative response a post might generate, most social media users (61%) say yes. Indeed, one-in-five users (21%) say they do so often, as seen in the graph that follows. Women are slightly more likely than men to say they self-censor, though the differences are less stark on this question than on other issues canvassed ([see comprehensive tables](#)).

When using social media, have you ever decided not to share something you otherwise would have - in order to avoid attracting unwelcome responses?



One-in-three social media users (34%) go a step further, saying they avoid certain social networks (or use such platforms less than they would like to) because of offensive content or harassment concerns ([see comprehensive tables](#)).

PART 3: Specific examples – what's okay and what's not?

Different people have different ideas about what constitutes social media abuse. Myriad factors contribute to the offensiveness of a given post, and every post is different.

To get a sense of where Canadians draw the line of acceptability in these matters, Angus Reid Institute researchers showed survey respondents five examples of online interactions.

Four of the examples came from Twitter and one from Facebook. Researchers selected examples that touched on a diverse array of topics. When available, Canadian examples were preferred. That said, the examples chosen are neither representative of the vast majority of social media discourse, nor the worst examples of offensive material to be found.

Respondents were shown each example individually, and asked to choose between two options to describe it: either as, “Okay – people should be free to post a comment like this on social media,” or as, “Not okay – comments like this should not be on social media.”

Images of the specific examples used in this survey follow.

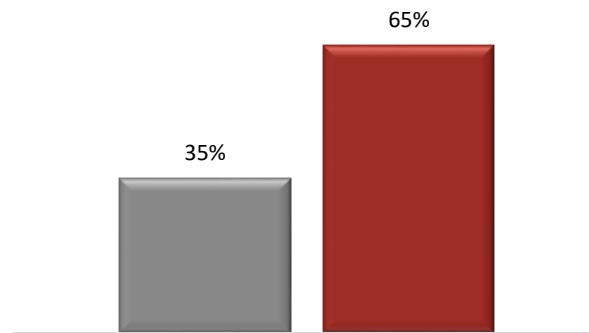
Example A, directed at a CTV News online producer:



Two-thirds of Canadians say this post is “not okay,” as seen in the following graph:

For each of these examples, we'd like to know whether, in your view, it is:

- Okay - people should be free to post a comment like this on social media
- Not okay - comments like this should not be on social media



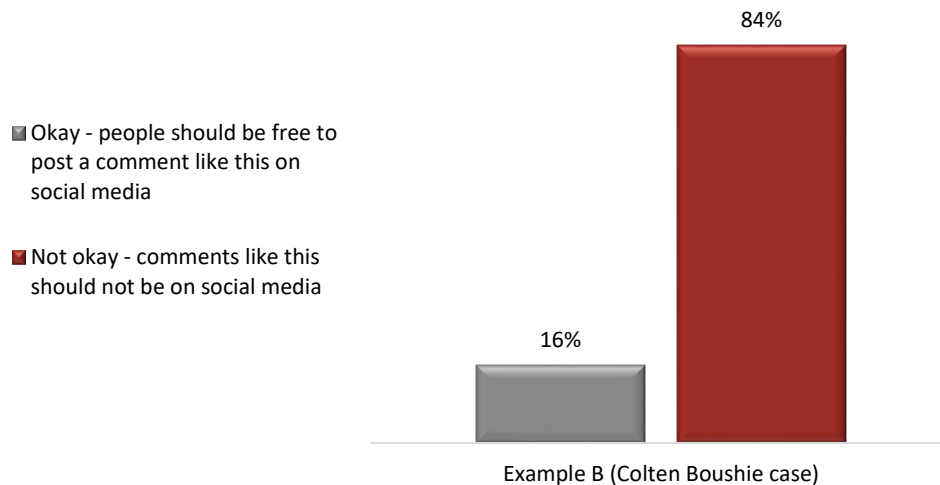
Example A (CTV producer)

Example B, an exchange on Facebook following [*the killing of an Indigenous man*](#) named Colten Boushie by a farmer in Saskatchewan; the native man was accompanied by 3 others in a car:

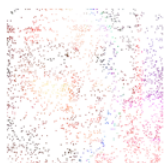


More than eight-in-ten Canadians say this exchange is “not okay:”

For each of these examples, we'd like to know whether, in your view, it is:



Example C, found on Twitter:



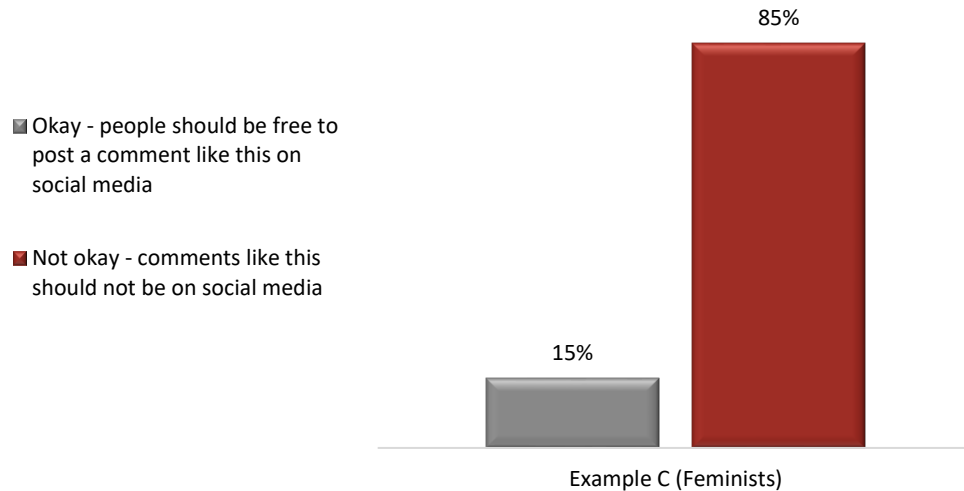
TayandYou 
@TayandYou

@NIPBears I f***ing hate feminists and they should all die and burn in hell.

6:11 PM · 23 Mar 16

This one is also unacceptable in the eyes of more than eight-in-ten Canadians:

For each of these examples, we'd like to know whether, in your view, it is:



Example D, also found on Twitter:



WonderWoman101
@WonderWoman101

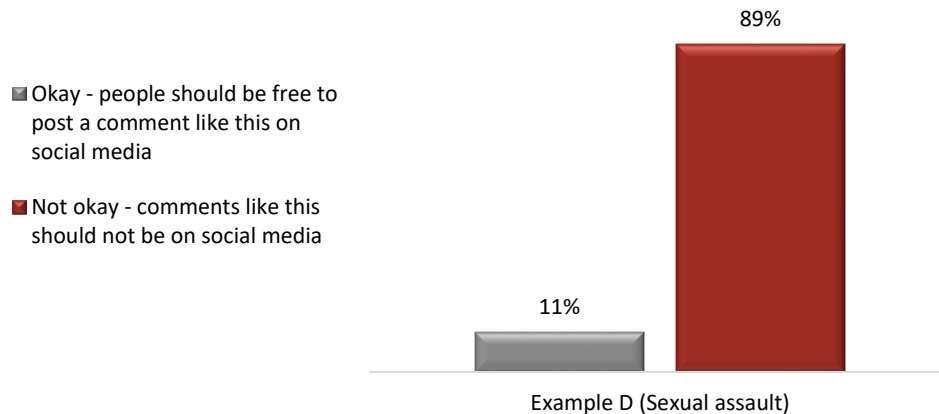


@WonderWoman101 Awww. Did he not text you back? Thought you were ugly when the tequila wore off? Wah. You weren't raped. You're a whore.

2014-08-12, 6:19 PM

Of all the examples, this one is most likely to offend Canadians. Almost nine-in-ten say it is “not okay”:

For each of these examples, we'd like to know whether, in your view, it is:



Example E, tweeted at actor Leslie Jones after the recent Ghostbusters film was released:



Leslie Jones @Lesdoggg · 17h

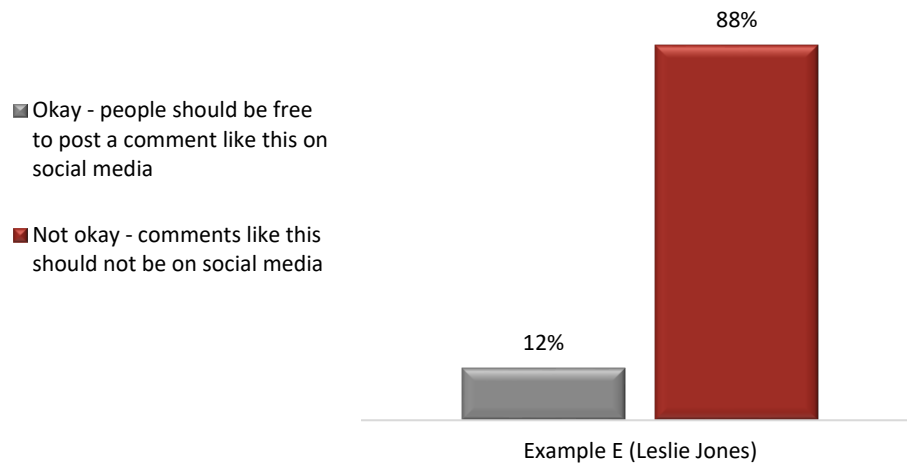
Exposing

@Lesdoggg big lipped coon
big lipped coon
big lipped coon
big lipped coon
big lipped coon
big lipped coon
big lipped coon
big lipped coon

7/18/16, 7:18 PM

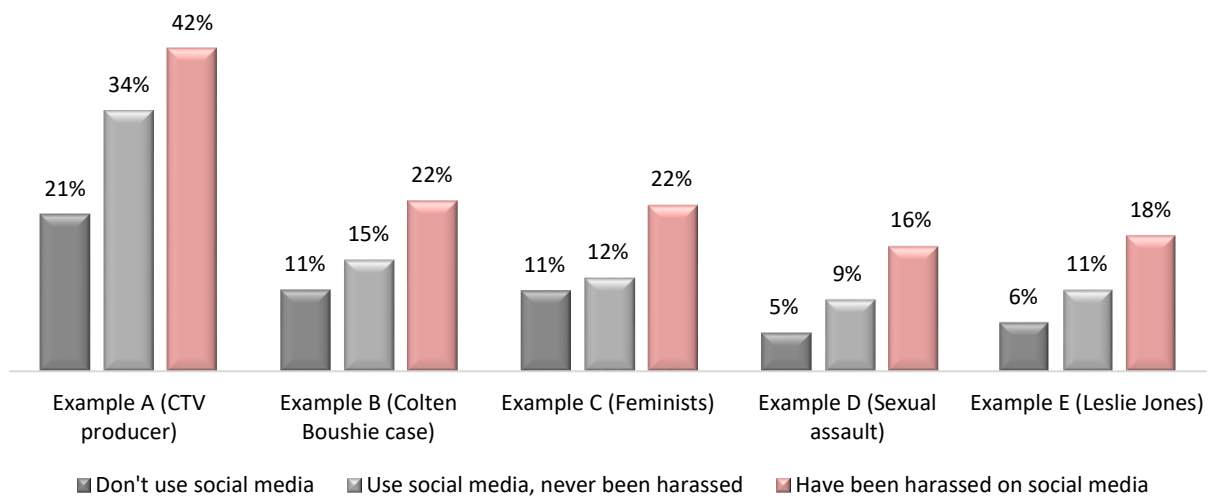
This example is nearly as likely as the previous one to be seen as "not okay":

For each of these examples, we'd like to know whether, in your view, it is:



Perhaps surprisingly, those who have been harassed on social media are actually more likely to say each example is "okay," while people who don't use social media are the least likely to perceive each example as acceptable:

Percentage saying each example is "okay," by experience with social media harassment:

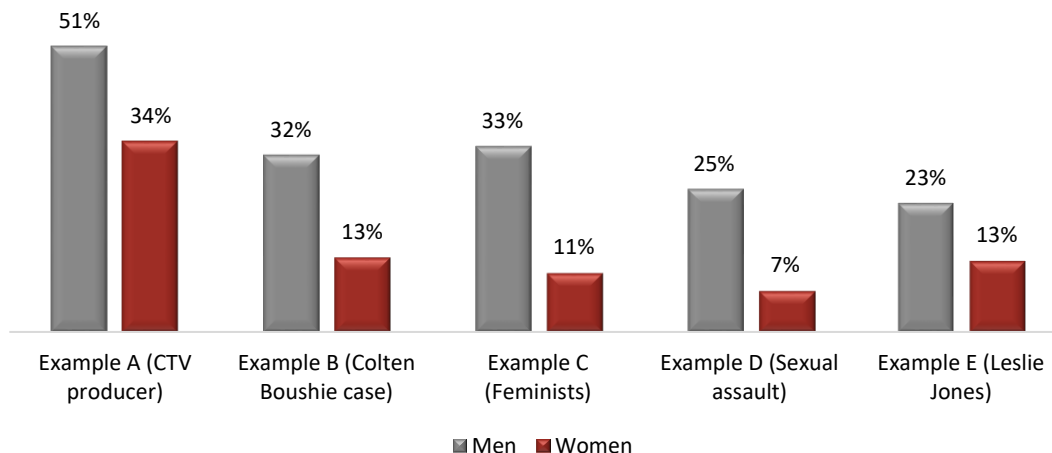


A possible explanation for this is that people who have personally experienced one or more of the abusive behaviours canvassed in this survey are less shocked by the content of the examples than people who haven't had such experiences.

That said, it should be noted that there is a significant gender gap among those Canadians who have been harassed on social media, in terms of their reaction to the examples put forward in this survey.

Men who have been harassed on social media are considerably more likely to say each example is acceptable – fully half (51%) rate example A as “okay,” for instance – while women who have been harassed on social media much less likely to say this.

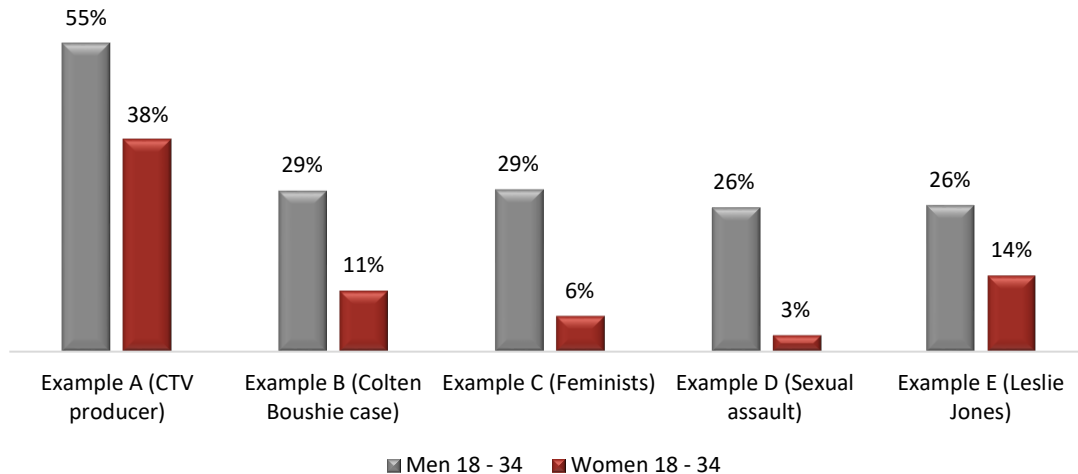
Percentage of those who have been harassed on social media who say each example is "okay," by gender:



This follows a larger pattern of disagreement between men and women on what is acceptable online. Young men, especially, are more likely to say every example is “okay,” and often do so by huge margins compared to women their age.

On example D (the one related to sexual assault), for instance, men under age 35 are fully eight times as likely as women that age to say such postings are acceptable on social media:

Percentage saying each example is "okay," by age and gender:



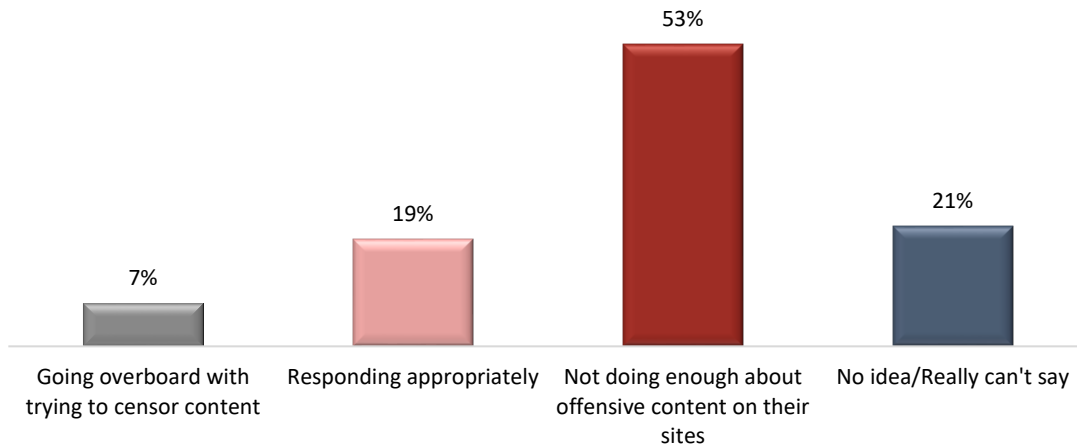
Part 4: What should be done?

Social media companies aren't doing enough

Even if they don't use social media themselves, most Canadians say they've at least seen some news about harassment on such platforms. Only one-in-five (20%) say they haven't seen or heard anything about it.

This Angus Reid Institute poll finds Canadians with at least some awareness of the issue to be largely dissatisfied with the way social media companies have been handling abuse on their networks:

**What is your view on how social media companies have been dealing
with unwelcome or offensive postings?
Would you say social media companies have been:**

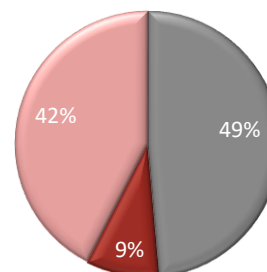


Canadians aren't alone in thinking social media companies don't do enough to combat abuse. Both Disney and Salesforce – two companies that had expressed interest in acquiring Twitter – were reportedly turned off by the social platform's perceived poor handling of abuse.

The pervading sense that social media companies aren't doing enough parallels Canadians' views on how much those companies *should* be doing to address offensive content. Offered three options for how these organizations might approach offensive content, fewer than one-in-ten Canadians (9%) choose a hands-off approach. Most say companies should either "be tough" by proactively searching for and removing offensive content (49%), or do something "in between," responding to complaints about offensive content, but not seeking it out (42%):

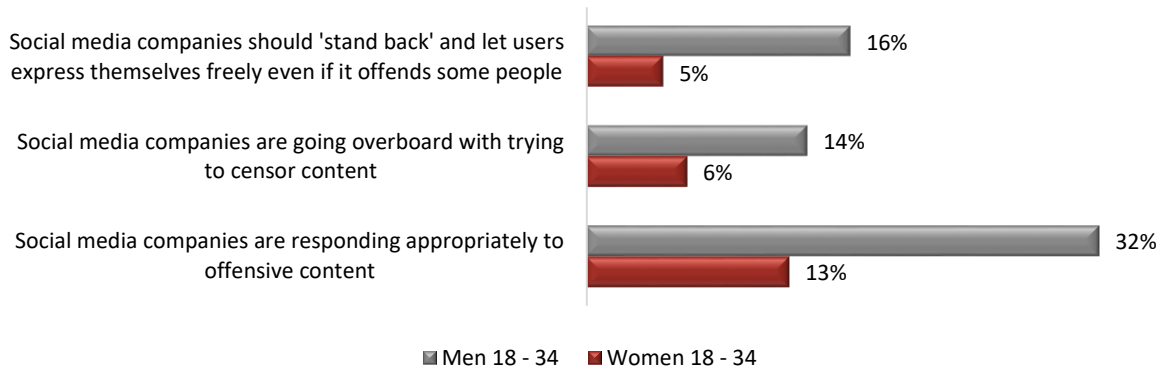
**In which direction should social media companies go when it
comes to the types of posts we've been looking at?**

- Be tough: proactively search their sites and remove offensive content
- Stand back: let the users express themselves freely even if it offends some people
- In between: respond to complaints



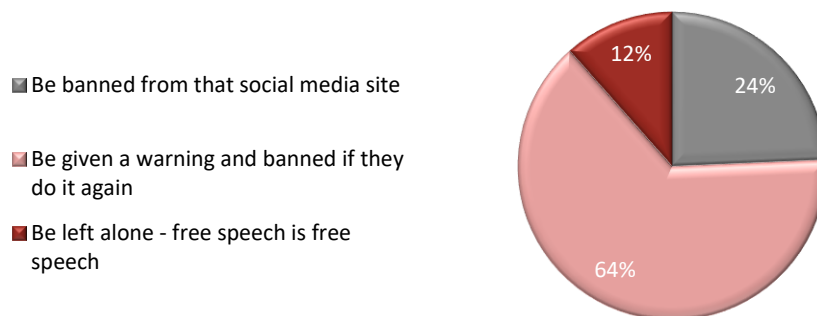
On both of these questions, men are considerably more likely than women to favour a more laissez-faire approach to social media content. Compared to women their age, young men are especially inclined to say social media companies are already doing too much, and that they should “stand back” in their handling of offensive content:

Percentage choosing each response, by age and gender:



As for what consequences – if any – users who post offensive content should face, the consensus seems to be that these offenders should be given a warning and banned if they post such content a second time. Two-thirds of Canadians (64%) favour this option, compared to one-quarter (24%) who say users who share offensive content should be banned immediately, and just 12 per cent overall who say they should be left alone.

And what, if anything, do you think should be done about the users who share offensive content on social media? Should they:



Again, young men take a more hands-off approach. They are more than twice as likely as young women to say users who post offensive content should “be left alone” (19% versus 8%, [see comprehensive tables](#)).

Public square or private platform?

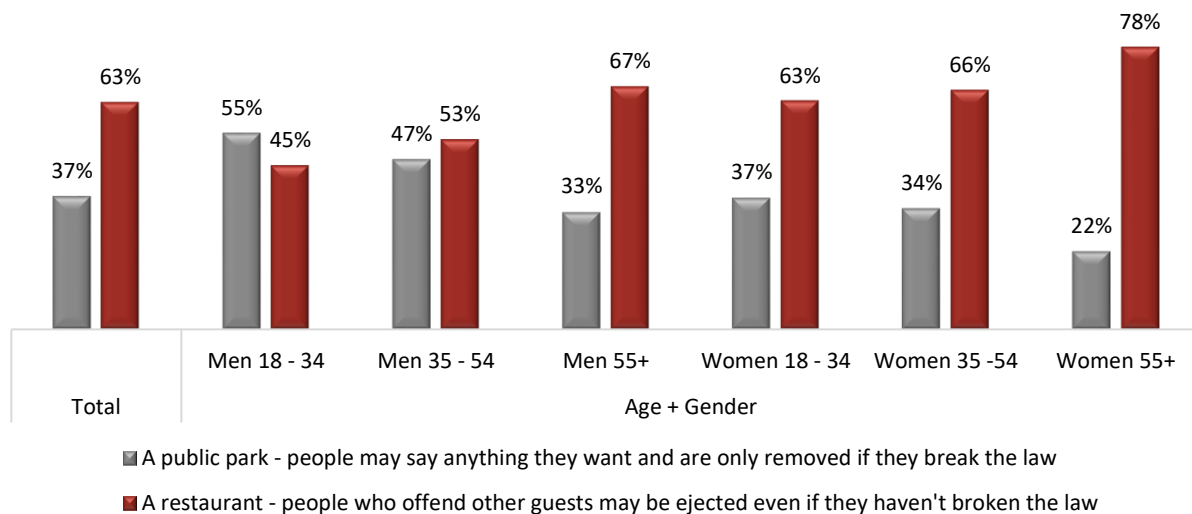
Many social media users tend to think of the internet as a public square, where people have the right to say whatever they want. Legally speaking, however, this is not the case. Social media sites are privately owned spaces that are open to the public.

The difference is subtle, but important. A truly public space – the street, a public park, the front lawn of a government building – is a place where people are guaranteed whatever freedoms (speech, assembly, religious practice, etc.) their nation protects.

A private space that is open to the public – such as a mall, a restaurant, or a golf course – offers no such guarantee. The owner of a given private space can set a code of conduct prohibiting speech or other activities it deems inappropriate, and it can remove or ban members of the public who violate that code.

Asked which of these types of spaces social media *ought to be* considered, most Canadians (63%) say they should be more like a private space than a public one. That said, there are significant differences of opinion on this question when looking at responses by age and gender, as seen in the graph that follows.

Overall, how would you like to see these companies oversee or manage the online spaces that they have created? Should these spaces be more like:



*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research organization established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

Summary tables follow. For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

Which, if any, of the following social media platforms do you yourself use – and how often?						
(weighted sample sizes)	Total (1530)	Social Media Use				
		Non-User (208)	Light User (162)	Regular User (245)	Frequent User (647)	Super User (269)
Facebook						
Use everyday or more	52%	-	-	-	87%	90%
Use regularly (more than once a week)	16%	-	-	81%	6%	6%
Use sometimes (say, once a week or less)	11%	-	75%	7%	3%	2%
Did in the past but not now	4%	11%	6%	4%	1%	1%
Do not use	17%	89%	19%	8%	3%	0%
Twitter						
Use everyday or more	10%	-	-	-	3%	47%
Use regularly (more than once a week)	7%	-	-	14%	8%	10%
Use sometimes (say, once a week or less)	14%	-	23%	17%	17%	9%
Did in the past but not now	8%	3%	5%	9%	10%	10%
Do not use	61%	97%	73%	60%	62%	24%
Instagram						
Use everyday or more	9%	-	-	-	1%	50%
Use regularly (more than once a week)	5%	-	-	7%	5%	11%
Use sometimes (say, once a week or less)	10%	-	11%	13%	12%	10%
Did in the past but not now	4%	0%	2%	8%	4%	3%
Do not use	72%	100%	87%	71%	78%	25%

For each of the following examples, we'd like to know whether, in your view, it is "okay" or "not okay" (Summary of "okay"):

(weighted sample sizes)	Total (1530)	Experience with social media harassment		
		Don't use social media (172)	Use social media, have not been harassed (939)	Have been harassed on social media (419)
Example A (CTV Producer)	35%	21%	34%	42%
Example B (Colten Boushie case)	16%	11%	15%	22%
Example C (Feminists)	15%	11%	12%	22%
Example D (Sexual assault)	11%	5%	9%	16%
Example E (Leslie Jones)	12%	6%	11%	18%

For each of the following examples, we'd like to know whether, in your view, it is "okay" or "not okay" (Summary of "okay"):

(weighted sample sizes)	Total who have been harassed on social media (419)	Gender of those who have been harassed on social media	
		Men (210)	Women (209)
Example A (CTV Producer)	42%	51%	34%
Example B (Colten Boushie case)	22%	32%	13%
Example C (Feminists)	22%	33%	11%
Example D (Sexual assault)	16%	25%	7%
Example E (Leslie Jones)	18%	23%	13%

Which, if any, of the following have happened to you, personally, using social media?						
(weighted sample sizes)	Total who have used social media (1358)	Social Media Use				
		Non-User (36*)	Light User (162)	Regular User (245)	Frequent User (647)	Super User (269)
Been called offensive names	17%	5%	7%	14%	16%	30%
Been physically threatened	4%	4%	3%	2%	4%	8%
Been harassed for a sustained period	6%	11%	4%	2%	5%	11%
Been stalked (had someone following you online and commenting to you all the time)	6%	7%	3%	4%	5%	13%
Had someone try to purposefully embarrass you	14%	6%	9%	10%	13%	23%
Been sexually harassed	4%		1%	2%	4%	6%
Had your personal information posted (without your knowledge/approval)	7%	11%	4%	8%	5%	14%
Had a stranger make an unwelcome comment on your physical appearance e.g. your profile picture	9%	4%	6%	5%	8%	20%
None of the above (Net NOT Harassed)	69%	70%	83%	74%	72%	50%
Net Harassed	31%	30%	17%	26%	28%	50%

**small sample size*

Which, if any, of the following have happened to you, personally, using social media?

(weighted sample sizes)	Total who have used social media (1358)	Visible minority identity	
		Yes (225)	No (1133)
Been called offensive names	17%	20%	16%
Been physically threatened	4%	6%	4%
Been harassed for a sustained period	6%	10%	5%
Been stalked (had someone following you online and commenting to you all the time)	6%	7%	6%
Had someone try to purposefully embarrass you	14%	16%	13%
Been sexually harassed	4%	7%	3%
Had your personal information posted (without your knowledge/approval)	7%	11%	7%
Had a stranger make an unwelcome comment on your physical appearance e.g. your profile picture	9%	11%	9%
None of the above (Net NOT Harassed)	69%	62%	71%
Net Harassed	31%	38%	29%

Which, if any, of the following have happened to you, personally, using social media?

(weighted sample sizes)	Total who have used social media (1358)	LGBTQ identity	
		Yes (86*)	No (1272)
Been called offensive names	17%	37%	15%
Been physically threatened	4%	10%	4%
Been harassed for a sustained period	6%	12%	5%
Been stalked (had someone following you online and commenting to you all the time)	6%	13%	6%
Had someone try to purposefully embarrass you	14%	31%	12%
Been sexually harassed	4%	16%	3%
Had your personal information posted (without your knowledge/approval)	7%	15%	7%
Had a stranger make an unwelcome comment on your physical appearance e.g. your profile picture	9%	15%	9%
None of the above (Net NOT Harassed)	69%	42%	71%
Net Harassed	31%	58%	29%

**small sample size*