



The Students  
Commission  
Centre of Excellence for  
Youth Engagement



# YOUTH IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

FEBRUARY 2018

Youth Identity Development, or social identity formation, is quite different for today's young people than previous generations. Concepts such as belonging to a community and opportunities for social interaction are in an entirely different realm than before because of the internet and social media.

This report makes three recommendations to the youth policy related to how the government can support positive youth identity development.



The Youth Identity Development Theme Team

## SUMMARY

What is the true impact that social media has on youth identity development? There is no correct uniform answer, although social media can have both positive and negative consequences for the way young people feel and think about themselves. Spaces of belonging are created through social media platforms, but so are isolating spaces of exclusion. When young people feel isolated online, they are likely to extend this feeling in their everyday interaction. We make three recommendations to the federal government's youth policy:

The government should support and initiate online movements such as hashtags and challenges to support positivity and authenticity online.

All teachers should have social media safety and healthy habits training to teach to their students.

More youth spaces should be created in communities to provide an alternative to unhealthy activities that youth may engage in.



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## Acknowledgments

Thank you first to the courageous young people who traveled from coast to coast to coast to build the #CanadaWeWant so we can have the #CanadaWeNeed.

With representatives from First Nation, Métis and Inuit communities from across the country, we humbly gathered on the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee, the Ojibway/Chippewas, the Anishinabek, and currently the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation. We were also surrounded by Indigenous communities: to the North were the Chippewas of Georgina Island; to the East are the Mississaugas of Scugog Island; and to the West are the Chippewas of Kettle and Stoney Point. Through Indigenous-led ceremony, acknowledgement and respect, we recognized the enduring presence of Indigenous Peoples on this land, and were very grateful to have the opportunity to use it as a meeting place, and a space for knowledge sharing.

Thank you to the RCMP and the Canadian Safety and Security Program for supporting the participation of youth participants from across the country and for asking us to provide our voice on this topic. Thank you to YMCA Cedar Glen, The Students Commission of Canada, Sharing the Stories Research and Evaluation Platform, Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, RBC Foundation, UNICEF Canada, the Government of Canada and the many other funders of the #CanadaWeWant Conference 2018, and all of the organizers, elders, adult allies, facilitators, and most of all the wonderful youth participants. Thank you to The Students Commission Conference Planning Committee for their hard work. Thank you to the federal government representatives and policymakers that attended the Conference and will continue to support the development of A Youth Policy for Canada.



*Our group came together to discuss youth identity development, from which we specified the discussion to: Online and Offline Young Relationships. From our diverse perspectives, we were able to highlight and address the main issues that affect youth across Canada today.*

## Executive Summary

Our recommendations were created by focusing on three main aspects of youth identity development: a sense of belonging in social groups, negative influences on identity that exist online, and the importance of authenticity on social media platforms.

There are positive and negative aspects of youth having a sense of belonging online. Platforms can be used to promote beneficial messages, such as those concerning social activism and inclusion. However, they can also provide an environment for violent and hateful groups to flourish. The presence of both of these potentialities means that either one could influence youth identity. For example, one youth shared:

*“Social media is a dirty thing. It makes me question my self-worth, and it makes me sad.”*

At the same time, another young person shared:

*“I’ve created and maintained some amazing connections with people from across the world by using social media. It gives me a sense of purpose.”*

Although positive interactions exist, negative cycles of interaction are a major issue for young people on social media today. Youth may feel a lack of belonging in their everyday lives, or sense of insecurity in themselves, that drives them to groups that are detrimental to themselves and others. They may be exposed to certain images that fracture their sense of identity by shaming them for not meeting certain standards. Young people in Canada need spaces, both virtual and physical, that promote self-acceptance so that youth have the confidence to embrace positive messages and reject harmful ones they interact with.

Authenticity online is an important aspect of online interaction. Young people are selective in choosing what information they share online. Issues relating to a lack of authenticity online include using fraudulent identities to obtain personal information and losing a sense of identity in the real world when a person takes on another in the online sphere.

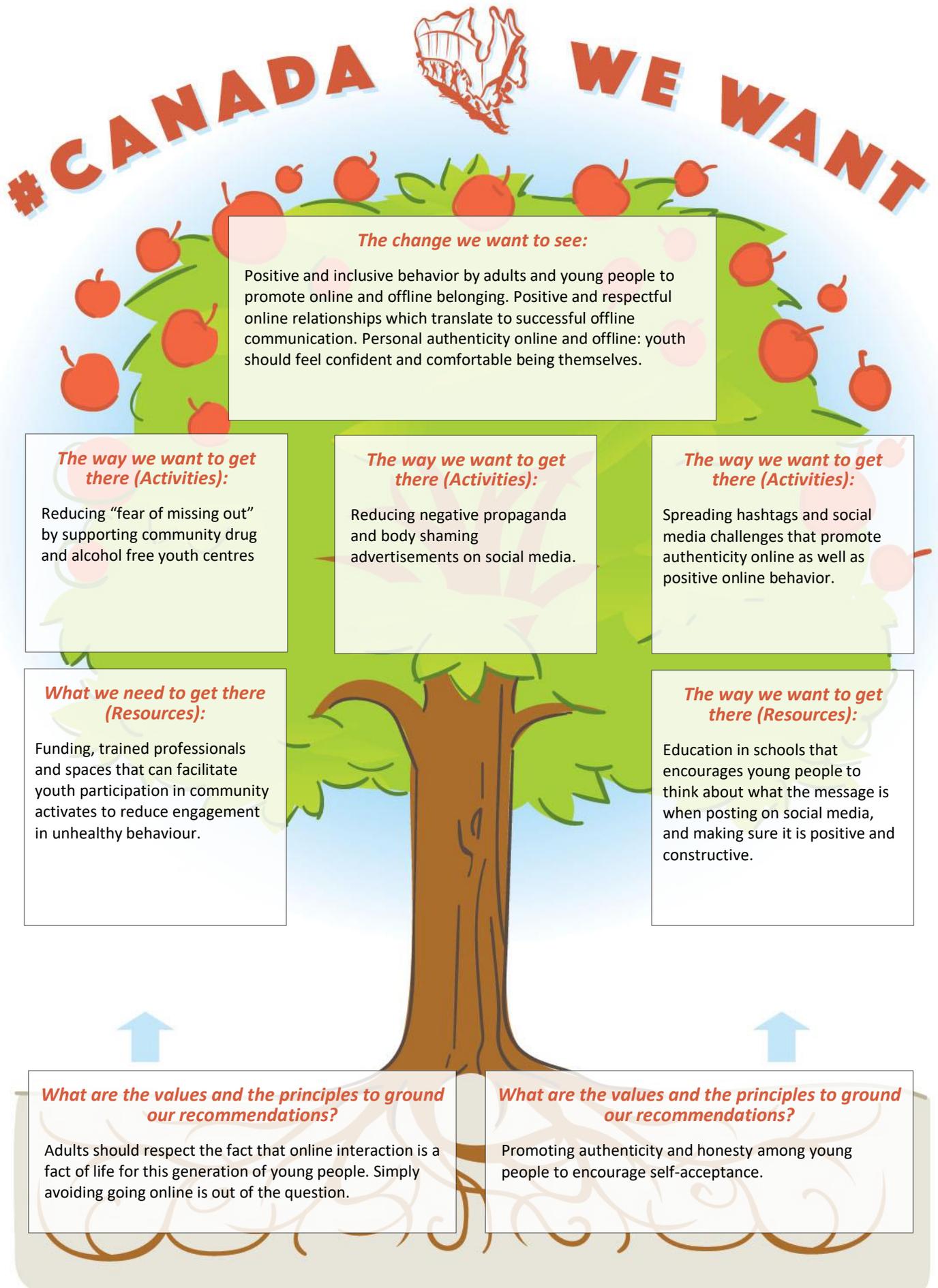
In the Canada We Want, young people are supported by adults and their peers, and have critical thinking skills so that they are able to reject misinformation and avoid internalizing negative interactions that may take place online.



*“I still feel empty inside  
even when I post a picture  
on social media and  
receive a lot of likes.”*



# #CANADA WE WANT



## *The change we want to see:*

Positive and inclusive behavior by adults and young people to promote online and offline belonging. Positive and respectful online relationships which translate to successful offline communication. Personal authenticity online and offline: youth should feel confident and comfortable being themselves.

## *The way we want to get there (Activities):*

Reducing “fear of missing out” by supporting community drug and alcohol free youth centres

## *The way we want to get there (Activities):*

Reducing negative propaganda and body shaming advertisements on social media.

## *The way we want to get there (Activities):*

Spreading hashtags and social media challenges that promote authenticity online as well as positive online behavior.

## *What we need to get there (Resources):*

Funding, trained professionals and spaces that can facilitate youth participation in community activities to reduce engagement in unhealthy behaviour.

## *The way we want to get there (Resources):*

Education in schools that encourages young people to think about what the message is when posting on social media, and making sure it is positive and constructive.

## *What are the values and the principles to ground our recommendations?*

Adults should respect the fact that online interaction is a fact of life for this generation of young people. Simply avoiding going online is out of the question.

## *What are the values and the principles to ground our recommendations?*

Promoting authenticity and honesty among young people to encourage self-acceptance.

*“Social media is part of my routine. It helps me feel engaged with what’s going on with my friends and family and with the rest of the world.”*



## Our Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** The Government of Canada should support and initiate online movements such as hashtags and challenges to support positivity and authenticity online.

**Recommendation 2:** All teachers should have social media safety and healthy habits training to teach to their students.

**Recommendation 3:** More community youth spaces should be created and maintained across the country to create supportive environments that exist as an alternative to engagement in unhealthy behaviour.

## Conclusion

The #CanadaWeWant is one in which youth have a greater sense of belonging in positive online spaces, and have tools provided to differentiate between positive and negative messages.

Negative interaction cycles online can come to a halt through the promotion of inclusion, self-acceptance, and prioritization of preserving a personal sense of identity in public spaces such as schools. Policies should support campaigns that promote online authenticity and end the divide between a person’s online identity and their offline persona.