

## YRU@BMR YOUTH AMBASSADOR RESEARCH PROGRAM ONLINE YOUTH OMNIBUS SURVEY

### TOPLINE RESEARCH REPORT

#### Introduction

In response to the need to better understand youth and youth issues, the Youth Research Unit (YRU) of the Bureau of Market Research (Pty) Ltd (BMR) at the University of South Africa (Unisa) launched the **YRU@BMR Youth Ambassador Research Program** towards the end of 2021. The main aim of this research flagship program is to allow young people (13 to 20 years) across South Africa to inform and participate in research projects investigating pertinent national issues related to the wellbeing of young people. Such information is pivotal to advance the knowledge economy on subject matters impacting the psychosocial and economic behaviour of the youth and effect on broader society.

To collect information from young people between 13 and 20 years, an online research omnibus platform has been developed for the **YRU@BMR Youth Ambassadors Research Program**. To commence with the initiative, the current omnibus online research study investigates three of the top psychosocial challenges faced by young people today. These challenges include substance abuse, online sexual exploitation, and cyberbullying.

In 2021, a pilot study was conducted including a total of 309 young people, representative of different genders and age groups, across all nine provinces of South Africa. This small-scale study investigated crucial components of the main study, which will be implemented by end-February 2022. The topline research report provides an overview of the key findings gained from the pilot study.

#### Substance Abuse



Substance abuse includes the harmful use of tobacco, drugs, and alcohol that leads to physical, mental, and social problems with lifelong consequences.

Based on the results obtained from the YRU@BMR online pilot study, tobacco use among young people remains a key concern in South Africa. Although the use of electronic cigarettes or “vaping” increasingly seems to become popular, the research findings confirmed that smoking the “Hookah Pipe” or “Hubbly Bubbly” remains a very popular activity among young people. Further investigation found that the main reasons for smoking tobacco products include reasons such as fun (59.3%), stress relief (40.7%), and experimenting (33.3%). These findings correspond with the findings from the previous YRU@BMR research studies conducted in 2012, 2014, and 2016 investigating substance abuse among young people.

Despite education campaigns and strict penalties for drug use, illicit drugs remain widespread and easily accessible to young people. The YRU@BMR online pilot study found that almost two in every 10 participants (15.5%), confirmed that they have friends that used drugs, and 3.2% personally ever used drugs. Further analysis found that drug use was more common amongst boys. Cannabis or “Dagga” remains the drug most frequently used among young people, followed by local concoctions known as “Nyoape” or “Whoonga” and Heroin. The study identified that drugs are mostly used for stress relief (40%), experimenting (30%) or due to peer pressure (30%). The high levels of stress experienced by young people remain a cause for concern. Since 2012, the YRU@BMR research studies identified high levels of stress as a significant factor contributing to substance abuse among young people in South Africa.

The YRU@BMR online pilot study also investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on substance abuse amongst young people in South Africa. Almost half the respondents (46.9%) were unsure if the COVID-19 contributed to an increase in drug use among young people. However, some respondents (10.4%) agreed that drug use has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly because of the school closures and children having more free time available as shown in the following verbatim quotes: ***“Children were not going to school and were on the streets most of the time, which lead them to be influenced by bad people to do bad things” (Respondent, YRU@BMR Pilot Study). “Children were at home in the townships where drugs are easily available” (Respondent, YRU@BMR Pilot Study).*** The increase in unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic and stress associated with the loss of income cannot be ignored as this was also identified by respondents as a contributing factor to drug abuse. The research findings also showcase that substance abuse among young people is not a new phenomenon but has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which stresses the social pressure and consequences of using drugs.

Similar to the previous YRU@BMR substance abuse studies, alcohol remains the most commonly used substance among young people. The pilot study found that 22.3% of respondents have friends who consume alcohol, 17.5% personally ever consumed alcohol and 12.0% were drunk. The results indicated that alcohol use was higher amongst boys and increased with age.

Further investigation into available support initiatives for young people identified that only 2.9% of respondents tried to get support for issues related to substance use and abuse. Noticeably, in

most instances an anonymous helpline (55.6%) was contacted. This finding highlights the importance of available online platforms which allow young people access to immediate support for issues related to substance use and abuse.

## Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

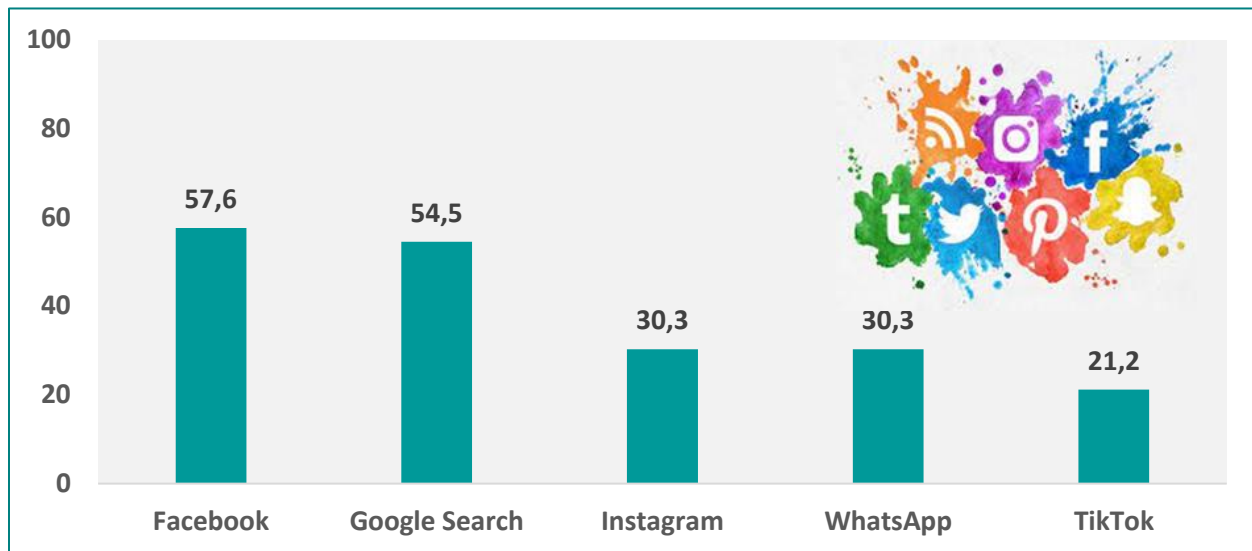


The YRU@BMR online pilot study explored the online sexual exploitation and abuse of young people, more specifically the exposure to online pornographic material. The COVID-19 pandemic required young people to increasingly access the online world for educational and entertainment purposes. This makes young people more vulnerable to online sexual exploitation and abuse and better protection and support services need to be implemented.

The pilot study confirmed that most children and young people between the ages of 13 to 20 years have access to the internet via their own smartphone (65%) or at home (22.7%). Further exploration of internet use found that 25.6% confirmed that their internet use increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 6.8% of the respondents noticed a change in the online content, which was mostly related to more information begin shared about the COVID-19 pandemic.

When searching the online world, almost half the respondents (44.8%) have seen online images that were disturbing. This included mainly violent (44.0%) and sexual (39.0%) online images. Further analyses revealed that of those children who have seen sexual images, approximately a third (33.0%) have seen pornographic images online. Gender analysis did not identify any significant difference between the exposure of boys and girls to online pornographic images. These images were mostly seen on social media platforms including Facebook (57.6%), Google Search (54.5%), Instagram (30.3%), WhatsApp (30.3%) and TikTok (21.2%).

**Graph 1: Exposure to Pornographic Images of Social Media Platforms (Percentage - %)**



The YRU@BMR online pilot study confirmed the powerful impact of exposure to online pornographic images amongst young people. It was found that 48.5% experienced mixed feelings, 27.3% felt overwhelmed and 15.2% experienced a lack of interest in everyday activities. Furthermore, 12.1% of children became withdrawn and 12.1% searched for more pornographic images. These findings highlight significant psychological and behavioural consequences associated with exposure of children to online pornographic material

Although there are various examples of awareness and educational campaigns addressing online sexual exploitation of children including exposure to online pornographic images within the South African context, the pilot study found that among those who have been exposed to online sexually explicit images, only 14.2% is aware that exposure of children to pornographic images is illegal and that there is existing legislation protecting children from online sexual exploitation and abuse. Also, only 8.7% were aware of Films and Publications Act of 1996 as Amended and 12.3% of the Sexual Offences and Related Matters Amendment Act 32 of 2007.

Based on the available research information there is an urgent need for improved protection and support services. Concerningly, only 4.8% of respondents tried to get support after being exposed to pornographic material online, despite the identified impact on their emotions and behaviour. Further investigation into support initiatives, identified that young people consider personal therapy (19.7%) and online counselling (18.8%) as the most effective support for children who have seen disturbing online images. Similar to previous YRU@BMR research results, the importance of online support platforms for young people was acknowledged. Online support platforms provide good, anonymous accessibility, for young people especially, in rural areas.

## Online Violence (Cyberbullying)



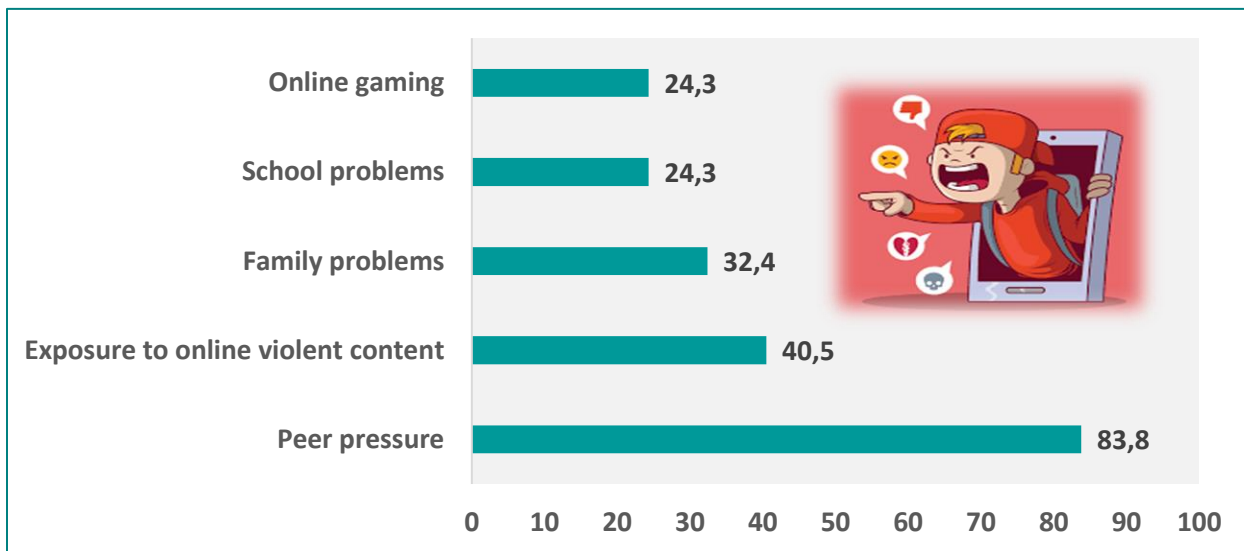
Cyberbullying remains a great concern among young people in South Africa and it is speculated that increased screen time resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, presented more opportunities for cyberbullying to take place.

Similar to the previous YRU@BMR research studies conducted in 2012, 2014, and 2016, the online pilot study found that cyberbullying is prevalent among young people. Approximately one out of every 10 participants (11.3%) confirmed that they have experienced cyberbullying. Further analysis identified that false statements made about a person or threatening messages happened most frequently. Notably, the research results show no statistical significance when analysing the extent of cyberbullying by gender. However, it seems that young people between 16 to 17 years are more likely to experience cyberbullying.

The research findings confirmed that cyberbullying is a traumatic experience and victims experience mixed feelings including anger (62.2%), sadness (45.9%) and frustration (45.9%). In an attempt to stop the cyberbullying, most respondents either deleted the online messages or blocked the perpetrator from contacting them again in the future. A small number of victims of cyberbullying (24.3%) reported the incident in an attempt to get support and prevent the bullying from happening again.

Further investigation into what motivates cyberbullying among young people, found that peer pressure (83.8%), exposure to online violent content (40.5%) and family problems (32.4%) mainly motivate cyberbullying. It is noteworthy that the effect of exposure to online violent content as well as online gaming (24.3%) was identified as leading motivating factors for online cyberbullying. These findings highlight the effect of exposure to inappropriate online content and need for online content regulation.

**Graph 2: Motivation for Cyberbullying (Percentage - %)**



Similar to 2012, 2014, and 2016 YRU@BMR research findings on cyberbullying, victims of cyberbullying are less likely to report incidents. However, it is reassuring that nearly all respondents who reported incidents of cyberbullying, received support to deal with the bullying.

Of those respondents who experience cyberbullying, more than a third of young people who experienced cyberbullying (37.8%), also bullied someone online. Due to their own experience of online bullying, these respondents were motivated to engage in bullying behaviour out of revenge or anger.

Based on the research results, respondents did not notice a significant change in online bullying since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately one in every 10 respondents (7.1%) agreed that cyberbullying increased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was attributed to lockdown regulations and having more free time available as shown in the following verbatim quotes: ***“In my opinion, it increased because everyone was at home so the only way to contact people was online” (Respondent, YRU@BMR Pilot Study). “Since the start of COVID 19, many children had more access to cell phones and the internet so online bullying has increased” (Respondent, YRU@BMR Pilot Study).***

## Conclusion

It can be concluded that by collecting research information on pertinent youth issues such as substance abuse, online sexual exploitation and abuse as well as cyberbullying, valuable knowledge is gained that can inform policy development and the development of support services aimed at young people in South Africa. For more information about the **YRU@BMR Youth Ambassadors Research Program and online omnibus survey, please contact the Youth Research Unit of the Bureau of Market Research (Pty) Ltd.**

The following organisations can be contacted for assistance	
Substance abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ LifeLine 0861 322 322</li> </ul>
Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ MobieG (WhatsApp 060 047 0000 or online at help@mobieg.co.za)</li> <li>▪ Childline South Africa (Helpline 116 or visit the online counselling chatrooms)</li> </ul>
Cyberbullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) (Helpline 0800 12 13 14 or SMS 32312)</li> </ul>