Growing Up Online

Children's online activities, harm and safety in Northern Ireland - an Evidence Report

September 2023

Prof Noel Purdy, Dr Mark Ballentine, Mrs Heather Lyle,
Dr Karen Orr, Dr Emilia Symington,
Dr Deborah Webster, Dr Leanne York

STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE | 100
Shaping education since 1922

Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement

SBNI
Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland

Executive Summary

Aims

This mixed-methods research study was funded by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland and conducted by a team from the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement at Stranmillis University College, Belfast.

The project set out to undertake an evidence report relating to children's online activities, harms and safety.

The project aimed, first, to address the emergence, nature and impact of online risks of harm and trends among all groups of children and young people in Northern Ireland, including risk and protective factors, access to support and intervention when issues arise and the implications for safety policy and practice; and, second, to review online safety provision including educational initiatives to safeguard and protect children online.

Methods

Two online surveys were administered to children and young people from across Northern Ireland, aged between 8-18 years. One version of the survey was administered to 8-13 year olds (with slight amendments made to ensure age appropriateness) and another version was given to 14-18 year olds. The surveys remained open for a period of 4 weeks, from 6th February to 6th March 2023. In total, 6481 children and young people responded to the surveys.

In addition, a wide variety of different target populations were recruited to take part in interviews and focus groups, almost all of which were conducted face-to-face (the remainder online). In total, 95 participants took part in the qualitative aspects of this research, including children and young people in primary, post-primary, special schools and youth club settings, as well as parents, teachers/school leaders, and professionals working in the field of online safety. The qualitative engagement included Traveller/Roma children, LGBTQI+ young people, children with (severe) learning difficulties, young people in a youth club setting in a disadvantaged urban context, and pupils from an Irish-medium school.

Two children and young people's advisory groups were established, one involving primary school children and another involving post-primary school children. These groups helped inform the design of the qualitative engagement with children and young people, and made recommendations regarding dissemination. The project was also supported by an expert advisory group convened by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland.

Findings/Conclusions

Finding/Conclusion 1

Children and Young People in Northern Ireland reported a wide range of positive online experiences. They use a range of online devices (predominantly phones) which allow them to enjoy listening to music, watching videos, playing games, messaging friends and family, shopping, sharing photos, following celebrities/ influencers, learning and much more. For children and young people, being online is not a bolt-on to their lives; it is absolutely integral to how they live almost every aspect of their lives today.

As one young person commented: "We're teenagers. We spend most of our day on the internet." For many children and young people and particularly for some young people at risk of exclusion (e.g. LGBTQI+ young people) being online represents an important source of 'comfort', support and genuine friendship. Such positive messages are an important and timely reminder to adults (parents, teachers, professionals, policy makers) who are prone to adopting an exclusively negative discourse when discussing children and young people's online lives.

Finding/Conclusion 2

This study has also provided evidence that children and young people are spending many hours online each day, on school days but especially at weekends and during holidays. While most internet use is within reasonable limits (2-4 hours per school day), there is evidence that many children and young people are spending much greater amounts of time online e.g. 34% of 14-18 years olds reported spending 4 hours or more online on a school day, while at weekends and during the holidays 64% reported that they spent 4 hours or more online, with 22% reporting more than 7 hours per day. Several young people in the focus groups reported even higher internet use, with up to 23 hours per day cited by one young person. The impact of this high usage, as reported by the young people and confirmed by their teachers, was a growing trend for pupils to come in to school "wrecked" or "in a complete state" or with their "heads down… sleeping" in class.

All post-primary focus groups confirmed that this was commonplace and becoming more common, while 27% of the survey respondents (aged 14-18) reported feeling tired the next day as a result of their online activity at night. While we would resist a simplistic binary association between screen time and wellbeing, we feel that there are nonetheless grounds for concern and would recommend that attention is given to this through meaningful dialogue with children and young people themselves in schools and in the home. We would therefore recommend and endorse the "precautionary approach" proposed by the UK Chief Medical Officers (2019), noting their concern that excessive screen time can "displace" (p.6) health-promoting activities by children such as physical activity, healthy diet, regular sleep and quality time spent with families. Moreover we would urge families to "try to find a healthy balance" (p.6), agreeing boundaries for screen use and with parents themselves being careful to model moderate screen use in front of their children.

Finding/Conclusion 3

A further conclusion relates to the role played by parents (and/or carers) in supporting their children to grow up safe online. The findings of this study found a disparity between children and young people's perceptions of their parents' (often low) level of interest in what they were doing online, and the genuine fears and concerns expressed by the primary and post-primary parents who volunteered for the focus groups. For instance, only 17% of 8-13 year olds and just 8% of 14-18 year olds reported that their parents were 'very interested' in what they were doing online, while 20% of 8-13 year olds and 34% of 14-18 year olds felt that their parents were 'not at all interested' in their online activities. By contrast, in the focus groups, parents seemed extremely interested in what their children were doing online. Indeed, they often expressed feelings of guilt, fear, powerlessness and exasperation as they sought to strike a balance between, on the one hand, the pressure to 'bow to peer pressure' by making it possible for their children to be online (by buying phones or downloading apps), and on the other hand, their very real concerns about what their children were being exposed to online and the impact that screen time was having on family relationships and their ability to communicate face-to-face. There is consequently a need for further research into parental experiences, perceptions and behaviours in relation to supporting their children's online lives, but also an urgent need for more training and resources to build confidence and competence among parents. Only through relevant and accessible training and support for parents, can we address the perception among too many children and young people that their parents are simply not interested in what they are doing online. The challenge in doing so is to develop an appropriate model to communicate effectively with busy parents, and to do so in a way that is informative, supportive and non-judgemental.

Finding/Conclusion 4

This study has found clear evidence that around 1 in 5 children and young people in Northern Ireland (20% of 8-13 year olds and 18% of 14-18 year olds) have experienced something nasty or unpleasant happening to them online over the past couple of months, most commonly on social media apps. While this compares favourably with two other recent studies (Ofcom, 2023 and Blurred Lives Project, 2023 in press), this still represents an issue of significant concern for policy makers and educators. This research has highlighted the wide range of online risks experienced by children and young people in Northern Ireland, especially 14-18 year olds. The results have also shown (as in other previous studies) that girls are much more likely to experience something nasty or unpleasant online, both among the younger cohort (23% girls vs 17% boys) and the older cohort (20% girls vs 15% boys). For instance, among the older cohort (14-18 years old), girls (5.4%) were 3 times more likely than boys (1.7%) to be asked to send nude photos/videos of themselves, girls (6.9%) were more than twice as likely as boys (3%) to be sent inappropriate photos they didn't ask for, and twice as likely to see or be sent pornography (girls: 5.6% vs boys 3.0%). Girls were also more likely to see or be sent content promoting self-harm (girls: 3.3% vs boys 2.2%), eating disorders (girls: 4.1% vs boys 1.6%) or suicide (girls: 3.6% vs boys 3.0%).

Levels of reporting were low for boys and girls (45% among 8-13 year olds and 30% among 14-18 year olds), and in both cases children and young people were most likely to report to friends and family. In terms of the outcome of reporting, over a quarter (27%) of 8-13 year olds and almost half (46%) of 14-18 year olds felt that the matter was not dealt with well at all.

Once again, this highlights the need for further research, particularly into the negative experiences of girls online, but already from this research it is clear that more needs to be done to protect girls in particular from online risk or harm through education, and a joined up approach which promotes healthy relationships both on- and offline for both boys and girls. Such an approach must involve schools, parents, youth workers and professionals working together with children and young people to address the targeting of girls online. A currently underexploited opportunity is offered by Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in the Northern Ireland Curriculum which has the potential to address these sensitive issues. It is recommended that content relating to healthy online relationships should become mandatory, not least given the growing prevalence (as evidenced in this report) of toxic masculinity and online pornography, and the negative impact this is having on boys' attitudes, language and behaviour towards girls.

The clear evidence presented through this study of the online (sexual) victimisation of girls in particular in Northern Ireland also serves to justify and inform the ongoing work of the Northern Ireland Executive Office to develop a much needed Ending Violence against Women and Girls Strategy.

Finding/Conclusion 5

While there were high levels of confidence in keeping themselves safe online among more than three-quarters of the children and young people, there is evidently a strong need to provide relevant, up-to-date, age-appropriate, supportive and engaging training and resources (in English and Irish) for children and young people, but also for parents and teachers/educators. This research has highlighted the benefits of children receiving online training, revealing that (across both age cohorts) children who had been trained were less likely to report recent negative online experiences happening to them than those children and young people who had not received any training. This evidence should serve as an encouragement to those currently providing such training: clearly online safety training is helping to protect more of our children and young people from harm. However, there were clear messages from children and young people, parents, teachers and professionals that we need to do more, and that there are genuine challenges in keeping up with the constant evolution, proliferation and diversification of online apps and the associated risks. From the data gathered and also the review of current training and resources undertaken, we would recommend that action is taken as a priority to provide a central, managed resource hub where children and young people, parents and teachers could easily find resources and training designed specifically for them. This would provide much-needed coherence and quality assurance to the training and resources currently available, where too often schools and parents are left to their own devices to source training and support, without the time or understanding to assess whether it is truly fit for purpose. We would also recommend that, where possible, children and young people themselves are involved in a participatory process of co-construction of future resources and training to help ensure relevance and appropriateness of content and mode of delivery.

Finding/Conclusion 6

Finally, we would recommend that there is greater regulation of social media companies by government to help ensure: closer monitoring of online material that is potentially offensive or harmful to children and young people; more transparent, consistent and child-friendly online reporting mechanisms; the timely removal of offensive material; and stricter enforcement of age restrictions on certain apps or sites, where currently it is much too easy for children to enter a false date of birth.

In conclusion, this has been a large, multi-method, participatory study which has yielded important new insights into the lived online experiences of a broad spectrum of children and young people in Northern Ireland. It is our sincere hope that its findings and recommendations will help to inform the delivery of the actions associated with the Northern Ireland Executive's *Keeping Children and Young People Safe: An Online Safety Strategy 2020-2025*, and so contribute to our children and young people growing up safe online.

Acknowledgements

The research team at the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU), Stranmillis University College, would like to thank all those who participated in this research project: children and young people; parents/carers; teachers; and expert professionals and stakeholders. We would especially like to thank our two advisory groups of children and young people and the adult expert advisory group for their advice and support throughout the project.

Finally, we are grateful to the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) for funding this important and timely research, and in particular to Orla O'Hagan, the SBNI's Online Safety Coordinator, for her guidance, wisdom and support throughout the research project.

Members of the SBNI Expert Advisory Group

- Bimpe Archer - Regulatory Affairs Associate Online Safety, Ofcom.
- Muriel Bailey - Director for Family Support Services, Parenting NI.
- DCI Kerry Brennan - Operational Lead for Child Abuse, CSE and Historical Sexual Abuse in the Public Protection Branch, PSNI.
- Dr Claire Dorris - Senior Research & Development Manager, National Children's Bureau.
- Geraldine Fee - Deputy Director, Ending Violence against Women and Girls Directorate, The Executive Office.
- Thomas Hutchinson - Principal Social Worker for Joint Protocol and ABE, Strategic Planning and Performance Group.
- Steven McNeill - Senior Social Work Practitioner and CSE lead, South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.
- Sonia Montgomery - Suicide Prevention & Emotional Health and Wellbeing Health Improvement, Western Health and Social Care Trust.
- Orla O'Hagan - Online Safety Coordinator, Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland.
- Michael Kelly - Interim Head of Service, Child Protection Support Service, Education Authority.
- Natalie Whelehan - Policy and Public Affairs Manager Northern Ireland, NSPCC.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Tables

List of Tables

List of Tables

List of Tables

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Figures

List of Figures

List of Figures

List of Figures

List of Figures

CHAPTER 1
Introduction

The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) is a partnership organisation consisting of all of the key statutory bodies, the major voluntary agencies and appointed independent persons that manage, operate and resource the safeguarding and child protection system. It was set up under the Safeguarding Board Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 and is the statutory body responsible for coordinating and ensuring the effectiveness of its 21 member bodies, for the purposes of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people in Northern Ireland. Online safety is one of its three main strategic priorities, in recognition of the SBNI's central role in coordinating the Northern Ireland Executive's five-year Online Safety Strategy Action Plan.

1.1 Online Safety Policy and Legislative Context

The *Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People* guidance (Department of Health, 2017) is the overarching government policy framework for safeguarding children and young people in Northern Ireland, and provides safeguarding guidance for all sectors involved with children and young people. This overarching framework provides the context for the more recent Northern Ireland *Keeping Children and Young People Safe: an Online Safety Strategy 2020-2025* (Northern Ireland Executive, 2021a) which commenced in 2022. To support the Online Safety Strategy, a three-year *Action Plan* has been devised (Northern Ireland Executive, 2021b).

The *Online Safety Strategy* is interrelated with various other government strategies including the *Children and Young People's Strategy* (Northern Ireland Executive, 2021a), which highlights the importance of online safety education for children and young people in addition to ensuring that parents are equipped with confidence and knowledge to oversee the online safety of their children. Other relevant strategies and legislation that are linked to the *Online Safety Strategy* are:

- Children's Service Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015
- *Protect Life 2 – Suicide Prevention Strategy* (Department of Health, 2019)
- draft *Programme for Government* (Northern Ireland Executive, 2021c)
- *Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031* (Department of Health, 2021)
- draft *Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy* (Department of Justice 2023)
- *Victim and Witness Strategy* 2021-2024 (Department of Justice, 2021)
- Ongoing work led by the Northern Ireland Executive Office to develop a *Strategy to End Violence Against Women and Girls*[1]

1 https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/topics/ending-violence-against-women-and-girls

Articles 19, 34 and 35 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC, 1989) state that children are entitled to have their needs respected, and to be protected from all forms of violence, neglect, exploitation and abuse. They also are entitled to have their voices heard in relation to issues that affect them, and for these views to be given due consideration (Article 12). Regarding an online context, the UNCRC General Comment No. 25 (2021) outlines that children have the right to be protected from various online risks, including 'cyberaggression and digital technology-facilitated and online child sexual exploitation and abuse' (p.5), also emphasising the importance of seriously considering the views of children and young people when developing programmes, policies and legislation pertaining to the online world.

The UNCRC (1989; 2021) provides the backdrop for the Northern Ireland *Online Safety Strategy*, the aim of which 'is that all children and young people enjoy the educational, social and economic benefits of the online world, and that they are empowered to do this safely, knowledgably and without fear' (Northern Ireland Executive, 2021a p.5). The strategy consists of five overall objectives to 'support the development of and implementation of a cross-government action plan that will improve online safety' (p.5). One of the strategy objectives details the participation of children and young people in the development of government policy, highlighting the importance of 'facilitating the meaningful participation of children and young people, parents and carers, and those who support them, in relevant policy and service development' (p. 5).

The *Online Safety Strategy* identifies a gap in the current available evidence about 'what works', and hence the need for a participatory research approach that provides children, young people, parents, carers, teachers and organisations with the opportunity to contribute their views to aid design and delivery of future online safety policies and initiatives (p.38).

The cross-departmental Child Protection Senior Officials Group (CPSOG), which provides strategic direction on cross-cutting child protection issues, has oversight of the strategy. It is supported by a dedicated Online Safety Strategy Cross-Departmental Implementation Group. The SBNI have a lead strategic role as central coordinating body with responsibility for online safety.

The SBNI is committed to delivering on the *Action Plan* (Northern Ireland Executive 2021b) which accompanies the *Online Safety Strategy* through the commissioning of this evidence-based report, which is in keeping with the SBNI's strategic commitment 'to ensure the views of children and young people inform and influence policy and practice development' (SBNI, 2022, p.16), which is also in keeping with the UNCRC (1989; 2021).

The action plan has three central sections with several subsections, with relevant actions. The initial section focuses on the creation of a 'sustainable online safety infrastructure for Northern Ireland' (Northern Ireland Executive, 2021b, p.1).

This involves the development of a 'central repository' focusing on information relating to online safety and signposting, which requires the development and ongoing management of a website and a social media presence to raise awareness of this repository (p.1). Another aspect of the initial section relates to reinforcing 'online safety structure' links between Northern Ireland and other regions within the UK, and also globally (p.1). This section also focuses on creating a coherent approach to online safety for all schools, which requires continued support and guidance from the Department of Education (see Circular 2016/27), particularly in relation to dissuading schools from installing internet services that are not within the C2K system by raising awareness of the risks of such action. The final part of the initial section relates to the development of years 4 and 5 of the action plan, which includes the identification of new actions, such as the creation of an accredited training scheme, and also considering funding opportunities to enable schools to avail of training from 'accredited delivery organisations' (p.1).

The action plan's second section focuses on online safety education for children and young people, parents, carers, those working with children and young people, and the community. The first subsection centres on the creation of 'a consistent approach to online safety messages' (p.1). This involves creating a central set of online safety messages for children, young people, parents and carers, together with 'key stakeholders' (p.1), also including the creation of additional online safety information for vulnerable groups.

Such core online safety messages will be delivered through age-appropriate resources in addition to a campaign to increase public awareness of relevant online safety information. In addition, a review of reporting pathways will be conducted, and will include the development of a signposting resource for children, young people, parents and carers, from which help and support may be sought.

Endorsing an ethos of online safety within schools, colleges, and youth organisations is the theme of the second subsection. This includes the development and distribution of materials to schools and organisations to highlight the importance of having an 'online safety lead' (p.2), and also the creation and distribution of sample online safety policies to schools and youth organisations. This section also includes a review of online safety curricular content, aiming to endorse and encompass consistent online safety information. The final subsection focuses on training for those who work with children, young people, and families. This will involve a review of the needs of professionals in relation to online safety training, and the way in which online safety is included in continuous professional development (CPD) and resource material. An additional action focuses on tertiary education, and involves reviewing the online safety information given to students who will ultimately work with children, young people and their families. As a result of this review, a pilot programme 'to incorporate a baseline knowledge of online safety messaging' will be incorporated into higher education courses (p.2).

The third and final section of the action plan concentrates on 'evidence-informed quality standards for online safety provision' (p.2). This involves assessing the prevalence of online safety incidents in Northern Ireland, and researching with children and young people, to obtain further information on issues such as online usage, the impact of online activity, and other important areas of online safety. An additional consideration is reinforcing 'self-assessment processes for online safety' (p.2), which involves the promotion of various audit tools to aid self-assessment such as '360 degree safe' for schools and colleges, and 'Online Compass Tool' for child and youth services. Finally, in years 4 and 5, the development of an accreditation programme for organisations offering online safety courses is planned.

A further and highly significant policy development is the development of the *Online Safety Bill*, a key piece of new UK-wide legislation which is currently progressing through parliament. Originally known as the Online Harms Bill, the legislation addresses content that is dangerous for adults, and also places a duty of care upon internet companies to protect children (UK Parliament, 2023; Milmo, 2023). Donelan (2022) outlines the intended aims of the Bill in relation to children and young people:

- Removing illegal content, including child sexual abuse and terrorist content.
- Protecting children from harmful and inappropriate content, from cyberbullying and pornography to posts that encourage eating disorders or depict violence.
- Putting legal duties on social media companies to enforce their own age limits - which for almost every single platform are set at age 13, and yet are rarely enforced.
- Making tech companies use age-checking measures to protect children from inappropriate content.
- Making posts that encourage self-harm illegal for the first time - both for children and adults.
- Ensuring more transparency on the risks and dangers posed to children on the largest platforms, including by making tech companies publish risk assessments.

The Bill confers new powers on the Office of Communications (OFCOM) enabling them to act as the online safety regulator. This role will include overseeing and enforcing the new regulatory regime (UK Parliament, 2023). The Bill focuses on internet companies that enable users to post their own material online (such as videos, comments, and images), and to communicate with others through comments or messages, on forums for example. Consequently, this includes social media sites, messaging apps, pornography sites, some online gaming sites, and search engines. Such companies will be legally obliged to protect their users, and hence will be held responsible for the content posted on their sites. Ofcom will be given the power to fine companies up to £18 million, or 10% of turnover if they fail in their new duty of care, and perhaps also block their sites within the UK (Donelan, 2022; Milmo, 2022). Whilst many internet companies are located outside of the UK, the draft Bill will still apply if their sites were accessible to UK users (Milmo, 2023).

The legislation will not only protect children and young people from illegal content but also include protections from legal content that could cause harm/ trauma, including the promotion of self-harming and eating disorders, online bullying, harassment, abuse, racism, and misogyny (Donelan, 2022; Milmo, 2022; Safer Schools NI, 2022).

In relation to this type of content, the internet companies will be legally obliged to assess the risks to children and young people, and subsequently take action if deemed to be a danger. In the event of traumatic content being viewed, the Bill specifies that the reporting process should be simple, and it will be a legal duty for the companies to report any abuse or child sexual exploitation content to the National Crime Agency (Safer Schools NI, 2022).

1.2 Aims of the current Evidence Report

One of the SBNI's strategic priorities is to support children and young people in exercising their rights to enjoy the benefits of the online world free from harm, fear, and abuse. In order to explore and identify risks and barriers to that strategic priority, the SBNI commissioned this evidence report relating to children's online activities, harms, and safety. The report examines the emergence, nature and impact of online risks of harm and trends among all groups of children and young people. This includes risk and protective factors, access to support and intervention when issues arise, and the implications for safety policy and practice.

One aspect of this report is the synthesis of available evidence on children's online activities, harm, and safety in order to reflect the experiences of children and young people growing up in Northern Ireland. This includes an overview of the nature, scope, and extent of online harm and safety experienced by children from different groups and communities, including the identification of trends and anticipated emerging issues, profile characteristics and vulnerable groups, and risk and protective factors, interventions, and suggestions.

Primary data collection utilised a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods and followed a participatory approach involving children and young people as co-designers of the research.

The following evidence report provides a uniquely detailed insight into how a wide range of children and young people in Northern Ireland experience growing up online. The extensive report provides a critical review of the recent and relevant research and policy literature; an outline of the methodological approach adopted by the research team; a comprehensive description and analysis of the quantitative and qualitative results from the children and young people's online survey, the extensive series of face-to-face and online interviews with children and young people, parents and teachers, and a qualitative survey completed by professionals working in this field; and, in the final sections, a series of key conclusions and recommendations to help inform the development and delivery of actions associated with the Northern Ireland Executive's *Keeping Children and Young People Safe: an Online Safety Strategy 2020-2025* and its accompanying 3 year *Action Plan*.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Existing Research Evidence

2.1 Positive Online Experiences of Children and Young People

It must be acknowledged at the outset that there are many positive benefits to the internet, and that, while not denying the potential dangers, children and young people (along with adults) willingly choose to spend time on a wide range of internet-capable devices, and report high levels of enjoyment.

Over a decade ago, Spears et al. (2012) led a participatory qualitative project across Europe in which researchers listened to young people themselves as they voiced their enthusiasm for the benefits of 'social networking sites'. The young people reported that such online engagement facilitated communication, boosted their confidence, encouraged learning, was convenient and cheap, gave them freedom, provided access to support and allowed them to be part of an online community.

In *Growing up in a connected World*, UNICEF (2019) reports on findings from 11 countries, suggesting that one child in three globally is an internet user, and that "children often go online for a variety of positive and enjoyable reasons" (p.14), with younger children most commonly watching video clips and playing games.

UNICEF add that, despite parental concerns, the data suggest that young children's early internet experiences of playing games and watching videos may help them to develop their interest and skills as they mature and begin to experience more educational, informative and social online experiences. Other benefits cited include developing the 'joy of creativity' and (in a minority of cases) becoming active citizens through expressing opinions on civic or political issues.

Most recently, in terms of the benefits of being online, in the recently published *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report 2023*, Ofcom (2023) reported that children aged 12-17 were able to identify a wide range of positive outcomes. For instance, 81% identified benefits in terms of helping with their homework (up from 77% in 2021), building and maintaining friendships (68%), finding useful information about personal issues (60%), learning a new skill (52%) and finding out about the news (48%). Almost three quarters of children and young people aged 8-17 reported that they felt safe using social media apps and there was an increase from 2021 in the percentage who claimed that social media apps made them feel happy (67% in 2022 vs 59% in 2021).

2.2 The Screen Time Debate

The binary public discussion around internet usage often focuses largely on the amount of screen time experienced by children and young people, and the assumed negative implications of any increase (offline = good; online = bad). For Livingstone (2021) however, this latest public *Angst* has to be seen as the latest manifestation of age-old anxieties raised in relation to any technological change, dating back as far as Plato's fear that writing would erase memory through to concerns in the 20th century that children were becoming more violent and aggressive as a result of watching too much television. As Livingstone recounts, the current public *malaise* around screen time has only served to create a "battlefield" (p.91) and a locus of conflict between parents and children, as parents try to police, control and monitor their seemingly errant children's online habits, while often appearing more concerned about screen *time* than about what their children are actually doing online. Moreover, Livingstone refers to the "pressing ambivalence" (p.92) that many parents feel, torn between, on the one hand, their desire to equip their children for the digital world and develop online skills including resilience, and, on the other hand, their anxiety, guilt and fear that their children's safety is at risk and their academic futures could be jeopardised by excessive internet use. Livingstone notes however that there is no strong causal link between screen time and wellbeing, and, citing a systematic review by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2019, p.3) emphasises that other important factors influencing wellbeing need to be taken in to consideration such as the contribution of "sleep, physical activity, eating and bullying as well as poverty." In conclusion, she notes that "no informed person can say simply that screen time is bad or good for children" (p.101) and adds that parents should try to engage with technological change in meaningful ways, maintaining important lines of communication within the family:

> "What surely matters is to encourage families to gain needed skills, deliberate together on their values, and find a way of living in today's digital world, and bringing up their children, that suits their circumstances and interests" (p.101).

A report by the UK Chief Medical Officers (2019) adopts a more cautious approach however. While it notes that current research does not present evidence of a causal relationship between screen time and mental health problems, it does acknowledge that there is some research which has found associations between screen-based activities and increased risk of anxiety or depression (though without proving causality). The Chief Medical Officers therefore recommend a "precautionary approach" (p.5). They warn that excessive screen time can "displace" (p.6) health-promoting activities such as physical activity, healthy diet, regular sleep and quality time spent with families, and urge families to "try to find a healthy balance" (p.6), agreeing boundaries for screen use and with parents modelling moderate screen use in front of children. This approach would seem to concur with Przybylski and Weinstein (2017) whose large-scale test of the links between digital screen time and mental well-being found

that a moderate level of access to digital technology is not intrinsically harmful and may indeed by advantageous, whereas too little access may deprive young people of important social information and digital skills, and too much access may displace other meaningful activities. Przybylski and Weinstein label this the *digital Goldilocks hypothesis*, suggesting that, as the fairy tale character of Goldilocks discovers in terms of the temperature of porridge or the size of beds, there is value in moderation or, in this case, in children and young people spending the 'just right' amount of screen time. Defining what exactly the 'just right' amount of screen time might be, however, is challenging as Przybylski and Weinstein note that 'not all digital activities are created equal' (2017, p.211) with some digital activities consuming more attention than others.

2.3 Media Use in the UK/Northern Ireland

The recently published *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report 2023* (Ofcom, March 2023) examines media use, attitudes and understanding among children and young people aged 3-17 and is based on data collected across the UK in 2022. The report is the most recent major study to be reported in the UK, and confirms many of the trends identified in the extensive review of earlier research carried out by the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (Livingstone et al., 2017). Given its importance as the most recent major study across the UK, a number of the most interesting findings from the 2023 Ofcom report are presented below (mostly on a UK-wide level), which have particular relevance to this study:

- In terms of online access and usage, most children aged 3-17 went online via mobile phones (69%) and tablets (64%), though older children (aged 12-17) were more likely to use mobile phones and younger children (aged 3-11) to use a tablet. Ofcom reports data from CHILDWISE which found that most 7-18 year olds (68%) owned a games console or handheld player and a further 9% had access to one.
- Ofcom highlights some interesting differences in media use by gender. While there was little difference in social media use generally among 3-17-year-old girls (65%) and boys (62%), there were greater differences in terms of individual app use: for instance, TikTok (girls: 45% vs 41%: boys), Snapchat (girls: 41% vs 34%: boys), Pinterest (girls: 13% vs 6%: boys), and BeReal (girls: 5% vs 2%: boys).
- The study also found that girls aged 8-17 were more likely to be active users of social media apps, sharing, commenting and posting (34% vs 27%), and were more likely to have posted their own videos (34% vs 29%). Conversely, boys were more likely than girls to view live streamed video content on YouTube (52% vs 44%). There were even greater differences in relative use of gaming consoles, with 73% of boys aged 3-17 using gaming consoles or handheld games players compared to just 45% of girls, and with boys more than three times more likely to play sports games such as FIFA or NBA (37% vs 11%).

- By contrast, children and young people were also able to identify some negative aspects of social media use. For instance, 40% of 8-17 year olds felt that people were mean or unkind to each other on social media and messaging apps all or most of the time, while just over a quarter (26%) reported pressure to be popular on these apps all or most of the time. When asked if they had experienced a person being nasty or hurtful to them via a communication technology, 29% overall reported that this had happened to them, with higher rates for older respondents (8-11 year olds: 20%; 12-15 year olds: 35%; 16-17 year olds: 37%). Ofcom also noted that 29% of 8-17 year olds had reported seeing something they found worrying or nasty online in the last 12 months (though this was down from 36% in 2021). More than four fifths (84%) of young people aged 8-17 told someone about it, but the proportion was higher among younger children (91%: 8-11 year olds; 82%: 12-15 year olds; 79%: 16-17 year olds).
- Internet safety messages had been received by someone outside the family by 80% of young people aged 8-17 (most commonly a teacher: 76%), but the most common source of internet safety guidance was from within the family (88%), usually a parent (86%).
- Only some of the data in the Ofcom report were disaggregated by each of the four UK jurisdictions, with the differences generally very small between the nations. For instance, 35% of children and young people aged 3-17 in Northern Ireland reported that they had seen something worrying or nasty online, which was equal to the percentage in Wales (35%) but higher than in Scotland (32%) and England (29%).

2.4 Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is understood to refer to bullying others by means of electronic and/or online technologies, using devices such as mobile phones, tablets, laptops, PCs and gaming consoles. Most definitions of cyberbullying have been adapted from earlier definitions of face-to-face bullying, which the 'father' of bullying research, Dan Olweus, defined as intentional behaviour to harm another, repeatedly, where it is difficult for the victim to defend him or herself (Olweus, 1999). One of the earliest definitions of cyberbullying, by UK expert Peter Smith, defines it as 'An aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself' (Smith et al., 2008, p.376). While this definition is still commonly used, the notions of repetition and imbalance of power are often contested in relation to all forms of bullying but perhaps especially in terms of cyberbullying: for instance, attention focuses on whether a single online posting of a nasty comment constitutes bullying since it has the potential to be shared by another; and whether there can exist an imbalance of power in the online world?

While the definitional debates continue unabated, Wingate et al. (2013, p.88) note that "the cyberbullying literature has suffered from the absence of a 'gold standard' definition".

Without greater clarity around definitions, measurement becomes problematic and comparison between studies is highly problematic. Consequently, estimates of incidence range widely, depending on factors such as the definitions used, time periods, gender and age of participants. For instance, rates will vary widely if children are presented with a narrow definition and asked to refer to the past two months (as in Olweus' frequently replicated work), compared to many other studies where no definition is given and children are asked if they have ever experienced online bullying or (more broadly still) any form of negative online behaviours. One recent systematic review, for instance, reported a variance between 13.99% and 57.5% based on the analysis of 63 studies (Zhu et al., 2021).

Studies of cyberbullying in Northern Ireland have characteristically varied in terms of sample, definition, time scale and age range. Using the Olweus definition and a two-month timeframe, the most recent DE-funded research into the nature and extent of bullying in Northern Ireland (DE, 2011) revealed that 11% of year 6 pupils had been bullied by module phone at least once but only 3.5% said that it had happened at least 2 or 3 times per month (suggesting a repeated pattern of victimisation).

Bunting et al. (2020) asked over 3000 children and young people in Northern Ireland whether they had been cyberbullied over the past month: 14.9% of respondents confirmed that they had been cyberbullied with more girls (17.9%) than boys (11.9%) reporting victimisation. In line with other studies, this contrasts with higher reporting of bullying overall (16.8%) and higher incidence among boys (20.7%) than girls (13%).

Since September 2021 all schools in Northern Ireland have had to comply with the Addressing Bullying in Schools (NI) Act 2016. This new legislation includes a new statutory definition of bullying, defines the areas of responsibility for schools/ boards of governors and introduces a requirement to record centrally all alleged incidents of bullying behaviour by means of the completion of the Bullying Concern Assessment Form. At the time of the Bill's passage through the Northern Ireland Assembly, a sub-clause relating to cyberbullying was added (see Purdy, 2016 for details) following discussion among the members of the Education Committee. This spells out the responsibility of schools as follows:

The Board of Governors of a grant-aided school may, to such extent as it thinks reasonable, consider measures to be taken at the school…with a view to preventing bullying involving a registered pupil… which

- *Involves the use of electronic communication*
- *Takes place in circumstances other than those listed [above]*
- *Is likely to have a detrimental effect on that pupil's education at the school*

This helps to address the concerns and confusion expressed by school leaders in Purdy and McGuckin's (2015) study of cyberbullying and the law in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and essentially gives schools in Northern Ireland the power to deal with cyberbullying incidents that happen outside hours and off-site, provided there is evidence of a 'detrimental impact' on the child's education in school.

In September 2022 the Education Authority established a new *Addressing Bullying in Schools Implementation Team* (ABSIT). Whilst the remit of this team is to develop a strategic and comprehensive approach to addressing bullying concerns more broadly in schools, the team's remit also covers online incidents. ABSIT provides a range of prevention, intervention and support provisions, for example, they: develop and provide training, resources and support for schools; consult with key stakeholders in the development of prevention, intervention, support and recovery services (through membership and participation in forums, most notably through the former Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum); collaborate (as part of an initial three-year plan) with over 100 schools through professional learning communities to align best practice; and they address any concerns regarding bullying type behaviour, including on-line/electronic bullying type behaviours, following robust processes and procedures, including the provision of support and signposting for parents and supporting schools seeking support and advice with significant cases. A recent series of online surveys conducted by ABSIT, the findings of which were shared with the Stranmillis research team, have provided some additional insights into the nature and extent of online victimisation in Northern Ireland following the commencement of the Addressing Bullying in Schools (NI) Act. The surveys focused more broadly on bullying in schools but several of the question items are of relevance to the current study: for instance, the findings show that 29% (n=58) of the cases referred to the ABSIT team between August 2022 and March 2023 related to social media/electronic forms of bullying. In the school leaders', teaching/non-teaching staff and governors' surveys, 32% of the 109 school leaders, 30% of the 244 teaching/non-teaching staff, and 26% of the 95 school governors similarly reported that online forms of bullying were most common, exceeded only by face-to-face verbal bullying in all three surveys. In terms of the post-primary survey, 65% of pupil respondents (n=642/991) revealed that online forms of bullying were the most common forms of bullying in their school, with face-to-face verbal bullying cited as the next most common form by 58% of respondents (n=571/991). A total of 23% of post-primary pupils (n=249/991) claimed that they had witnessed online bullying, while 9.8% (n=97) admitted to having displayed bullying type behaviours online. The primary survey revealed lower incidence rates of online bullying, as might be expected. 19% of the 661 respondents reported that online bullying was prevalent in their school, but this is much lower than the rates for verbal bullying (51%), physical bullying (44%) and indirect bullying (33%). A total of 18% (n=107/661) of primary respondents had witnessed online bullying, lower than post-primary, while 12% (n=80) admitted to having displayed bullying type behaviours online, representing (surprisingly) a higher proportion than among their post-primary peers. Further analysis of the EA survey is ongoing by the ABSIT team.

2.5 Self-generated Indecent Imagery

Children and young people (along with adults) use technology to socialise and frequently share daily life experiences in the form of photographs or status updates on social media sites (CCEA, 2015b), and it has to be recognised that this brings many advantages, is enjoyed by children and young people, and is commonly harmless (Ofcom, 2023). However, whilst technology has many benefits, it also poses a degree of risk.

In recent years, there have been particular concerns raised in relation to the sharing of nude or sexual images by, between or to children and young people. While debates remain as to how this practice should be named, the most commonly used term in the public arena and also in the research literature is 'sexting'. Sexting, for example, can result in various negative emotional consequences, including shaming (Setty, 2019) and potential legal consequences for young people under the age of 18 (Childnet International, 2021). Media headlines often feature sexting by young people; contributing to increased public unease and panic 'based on moral anxieties', as sexting behaviours are standardly viewed as detrimental and deviant (Jørgensen *et al*., 2019, p.26).

It is difficult to define sexting and consequently there are many definitions (Hinduja and Patchin, 2012; Holoyda *et al*., 2018). Based on five studies surveyed by Lounsbury *et al*. (2011, p. 1), sexting can be simply defined as 'the creation and transmission of sexual images by minors'. In contrast, Lenhart (2009, p.3) refers to sexting as 'the creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images'. However, Lounsbury *et al*. (2011) state that terms such as 'sexually suggestive', 'nude' or 'nearly nude' can be interpreted in a variety of ways, and notes that it also depends upon the context in which the images are sent. For instance, 'nearly nude' images could include underwear or swimwear which may well be innocent. Therefore, before a picture is classified as an illegal sexting image, the pose and motivation for taking the picture should be considered (York, 2019).

While the term sexting may be commonly used in the media and in the research literature, it is not a term used by young people themselves, and indeed Albury *et al*., (2013) report that young people believe the term 'sexting' was created and used by the media and adults. Rather than using the term 'sexting', young people more frequently use terms such as 'nudes', 'pornos', 'tit pic', 'dick pic', 'naked selfies', 'dirts' or 'nudies' (Döring, 2014; Lee *et al*., 2015; Jørgensen *et al*., 2019; York *et al*., 2021).

In a recent report on the impact of online pornography on the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of children and young people, Martellozzo et al. (2017) concur with the earlier findings of Albury et al. (2013) and suggest that young people's definition of 'sexting' is textual rather than visual, and interpret it as writing or sharing sexually explicit words rather than images. Consequently, they suggest that policy-making and education programmes should be based on a "better understanding of what young people are doing, and the ways in which they describe their behaviours' (Martellozzo et al., 2017, p.67). Consequently, the UK Council for Internet Safety (2020) has suggested the adoption of the term 'sharing nudes and semi-nudes' as it better reflects the language used and understood by young people themselves.

The difficulty of ascertaining the prevalence of sexting is illustrated in a review of sexting studies conducted in the USA, Europe and Latin America by Barrense-Dias et al. (2017) who report that the prevalence rates of sexting range from 0.9% to 60%. Prevalence discrepancies can be attributed to varying definitions of sexting, and differing methodologies and methods employed to collect data about sexting (Hinduja and Patchin, 2012; Lee et al., 2015; Madigan et al., 2018). In their 2022 Annual Report, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF, 2022) noted that over three-quarters (199,363 or 78%) of the 255,471 webpages actioned during 2022 were assessed as containing 'self-generated imagery' (child sexual abuse images and videos created using smartphones or webcams and then shared online), which represents a 6 percentage points increase on 2021.

Lenhart (2009) argues that the practice of sexting can be divided into three groups: sexually suggestive images being sent and viewed only between two romantic partners; images sent between partners in a romantic relationship which are subsequently shared with other people; and sending someone an intimate picture in the hope of initiating a romantic relationship with them. Reasons given for young people engaging in sexting range from wishing to seek popularity, flirting, hoping to begin a relationship, maintaining a relationship, and also as a reflection of the view that it represents a safer activity than having sex (Lenhart, 2009; Ringrose *et al*., 2012; Davidson, 2014; Lippman and Campbell, 2014; York, 2019).

Whilst many young people view sexting as a normal behaviour (Phippen, 2012; Davidson, 2014; Agnew, 2021; York *et al*., 2021), young people identify certain sexting behaviours as unacceptable, and these include forwarding an image without consent from the person featured, sending an unsolicited image, and pressuring someone to send an image (Albury *et al*., 2013; York *et al*., 2021). Whilst girls can pressurise boys for a picture, it is boys who more commonly pressurise girls for such images (Phippen, 2012; Jørgensen et al., 2019; Agnew, 2021; York *et al*., 2021). As a result of societal double standards, girls tend to be judged more harshly than boys for engaging in sexual behaviours, including online. Similarly, girls risk being shamed and humiliated when an image is forwarded to an unintended audience, whilst boys are often commended for their sexual behaviour (Ringrose *et al*., 2012; Davidson, 2014; Lippman and Campbell, 2014; York *et al*., 2021).

Sexting behaviour may be viewed as a spectrum, ranging from what could be considered to be a non-injurious aspect of adolescent development through to a dangerous pursuit with the clear intention to cause harm (Hinduja and Patchin, 2010; Holoyda *et al*., 2018). Indeed, Ringrose *et al*. (2012) report that, unlike bullying for example, all sexting should not be considered an issue, but contend that sexting can be a normal part of teenage sexual development where sexual ideas and relationship/dating behaviours are explored. However, sexting becomes an issue when a young person coerces another to gain images with the intention of causing harm (Ringrose *et al*., 2012). The challenge for law enforcement, policy makers and educators is how to understand and deal with the broad range of sexting behaviours.

While a child may technically break the law by sharing an image of themselves, law enforcement do not seek to criminalise this behaviour and instead a have adopted a child safeguarding response. This includes the 'Sexting Referral Scheme' partnership initiative between the PSNI and Youth Justice Agency. The service seeks to support children who have been involved in relatively minor 'sexting' type offence behaviour who would benefit from education rather than a formal justice disposal. The 2020-21 Annual Report of the Youth Justice Agency (DoJ, 2022) notes that there were 167 sexting referrals during that year. Feedback from an overwhelming majority of young people (98.8%) and parents/carers (98.6%) rated their experience of the Sexting Awareness Programme as 'good' or 'very good'. Further information regarding the breakdown of referrals is not publicly available.

Finally, the findings of the 2022 Northern Ireland Young Life and Times survey (with over 1000 responses from 16-year-olds) explored young people's exposure to violent acts and behaviours, many of which were online. These formed the basis of a report published by the Executive Office (2022) as part of its work to develop a strategy to end violence against women and girls. The report is entitled *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls: Experiences and Attitudes of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland*. When the results are analysed by gender, there were often stark differences in incidence levels between males and females. These differences related particularly to experiences of receiving and sharing intimate photos and/or videos: for instance, there were statistically significant differences in incidence rates of receiving an unwanted intimate photo/video (females: 52%, males 20%); of someone requesting or putting pressure on them to share an intimate photo or video (females: 40%, males 15%); of being sent unwanted sexually explicit pictures, photos of videos online (females: 59%, males 29%); and of being shown sexually explicit pictures, photos of videos in person (females: 52%, males 36%). The differences by gender are greater still in terms of the percentage of respondents who have 'sometimes' or 'often' experienced these behaviours: for instance, 28% of females (but only 6% of males) reported receiving an intimate photo or video 'sometimes' or 'often', 38% of females (but only 13% of males) reported being sent unwanted sexually explicit pictures, photos or videos online, while 8 times more females (24%) than males (3%) reported that someone 'sometimes' or 'often' requested or put pressure on them to share an intimate photo or video. These results suggest that 16-year-old girls in Northern Ireland are especially vulnerable to receiving intimate/sexual images and video and to be pressurized to send such images or videos. Alarmingly, the study also found that males were significantly less likely than females to deem certain acts to be never acceptable e.g. sharing intimate photos/videos of others without agreement (females 96%, males 91%).

However, there appeared to be little difference by gender in terms of receiving more general abuse or threats on social media or via messaging services such as Snapchat or Instagram (females: 50%, males 47%). The Executive Office report is also important in highlighting higher levels of incidence of online negative behaviours experienced by those 16-year-olds with a disability (compared to those without) and those of non-heterosexual orientation (compared to heterosexual young people).

2.6 Online Gaming and Gambling

Several recent studies have highlighted the popularity of online gaming, particularly among boys. As cited above, Ofcom (2023) reported that almost nine in ten (89%) children aged 3-17 played video games, but found that boys aged 3-17 were almost twice as likely as girls to use gaming consoles or handheld games players, and were more likely than girls to play popular sports games such as FIFA or NBA, or shooter games such as Call of Duty. It is also concerning that 25% of 8-17 year olds surveyed played with and 22% talked to people they didn't know outside of the online game. As many as 42% of 12-15 year olds and 47% of 16-17 year olds reported that they had spoken to people they only knew through the game.

Several studies have sought to explore whether there is a link between online gaming and bullying (e.g. Livingstone et al., 2017). In a US study involving 1500 respondents aged 12-17 years, Patchin (2018) reported that students who self-identified as "gamers" were significantly more likely to have said that they bullied or cyberbullied others during the previous 30 days, but were also more likely than non-gamers to be the victim of bullying at school or online too. Incidence was also found to relate to the amount of hours played per day and the type of online games played, with respondents who played multiplayer online battle games and first/third person short games significantly more likely to report participation in cyberbullying than those who played other types of games.

A more recent, larger UK study by Przybylski (2019) among over 2000 British adolescents found that bullying in online games was relatively common (33.5%), with around one in ten (9.3%) reported experiencing repeated bullying through online games. Przybylski notes that this is a cause for concern as it is much higher than the rate of general cyberbullying. Higher incidence was found among males, those from a minority ethnic background, and those whose caregivers reported that they already had psychosocial difficulties. Przybylski also found that while almost half reported feeling fairly or very upset by the bullying, they were very unlikely to report the victimisation to the gaming platform, preferring instead to report it to their parents and existing social networks.

This remains however an area of enquiry where more research is urgently needed, with a total absence of Northern Ireland research data focusing on online gaming and its links with cyberbullying among children and young people.

A further area of concern relates to the ease with which young people can access online gambling sites directly (through a lack of age verification) or the rise of in-app purchases or add-ons that can be bought to (potentially) make progress within a game. Players may also be encouraged to buy so-called 'loot boxes' featuring mystery prizes, but without any certainty of winning anything. Children and young people may also play games, making bets on who might win. Once again, the lack of regulation of age or activity makes the nature and extent of online gambling among young people difficult to measure.

The UK Gambling Commission's 2022 report into *Young People and Gambling* (Gambling Commission, 2022) found that 5% of young people aged 11-16 had used their parents' account to enter the National Lottery with their permission and, similarly, 5% had used their parents' account to play on gambling websites or place bets online with their permission. Only 1% had entered the National Lottery or played on other gambling websites using their parents' account without their permission. However, 39% of young people surveyed (boys: 52%, girls: 24%) had paid for in-game items and 24% (boys: 37%, girls: 11%) had paid to open loot boxes and/or packs and/or chests to get in-game items. Whether this constitutes gambling behaviour or not is contested (see Parentzone, 2019), however Zendle and Cairns (2019) have argued that loot boxes may be a 'gateway' to problem gambling, though without being able to determine causality (i.e. whether loot box use leads to problem gambling or whether problem gamblers are naturally attracted to spend money on loot boxes).

2.7 Pornography

Recent research into prevalence rates for children and young people's access to pornography in Northern Ireland is also lacking. Several national and international reviews are however available.

In their review of the literature for the UK Council for Child Internet Safety, Livingstone et al. (2017) cite the NPSCC study conducted by Martellozzo et al. (2017) which found that more boys view online pornography by choice than girls; at 11 a majority of children had not seen online pornography but by 15 a majority of young people had seen online pornography; and, children were as likely to stumble across pornography (e.g. via pop-ups) as to search for it on purpose or to be shown pornography by others. In a systematic review of adolescent pornography use, Peter and Valkenburg (2016) found that prevalence rates for adolescent consumption of pornography varied greatly between studies, and that causality was not always clear between pornography, sexual attitudes and sexual behaviours of young people.

Two reports in 2023 from the Children's Commissioner in England shed further light on the subject. The first report (Children's Commissioner, 2023a), published in January 2023, highlights how widespread child/adolescent consumption of pornography has become: the average age at which children first viewed pornography was 13 years old; a significant minority of children have been exposed to pornography at an early age: 10% had seen it by the age of 9, 27% by the age of 11 and 50% by the age of 13. The study also found that half of survey respondents seek out pornography themselves online (58% of boys and 42% of girls aged 16-21). Rates of dependency differ by gender, as 21% of males aged 16-21 viewed pornography at least once a day in the 2 weeks prior to the survey, compared to just 7% of girls. More than three quarters (78%) of 18-21 year olds had seen content involving sexual violence before turning 18, while 36% had sought out such content. This also has an impact on attitudes: almost half (47%) of all respondents aged 16-21 were of the opinion that girls expect sex to involve physical aggression while 42% agreed that most girls enjoy acts of sexual aggression. While the report concludes with

recommendations which include increased age verification measures to prevent young children and adolescents from accessing pornography, the Children's Commissioner recognises that age verification alone is not a 'silver bullet' (p.8) and that improved education and media literacy strategies for schools and parents are important, so that children and young people can grow up with "healthy, safe and respecting relationships" (p.8).

More recently, a second report (Children's Commissioner, 2023b), published in May 2023, presented findings from analysis of interviews with and other documentation relating to child sexual abuse victims, and found that in 50% of cases, the transcripts include words referring to at least one specific act of sexual violence commonly seen in pornography. In 32 of the transcripts, there were direct links made between the incident of abuse and the abuser's exposure to pornography. As the Children's Commissioner concludes, "this is deeply worrying" (2023b, p.12).

2.8 Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

Once again, local Northern Ireland prevalence data and focused research studies into online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSAE) in Northern Ireland are few in number.

The *Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People* guidance defines child sexual abuse as follows:

> Sexual Abuse occurs when others use and exploit children sexually for their own gratification or gain or the gratification of others. Sexual abuse may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape, or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside clothing. It may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in the production of sexual images, forcing children to look at sexual images or watch sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways or grooming a child in preparation for abuse (including via e-technology). Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children. (DoH, 2017, p14)

This definition highlights clearly that sexual abuse may involve physical contact or non-physical contact, and can take place in person or via technology. Within the *Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People* guidance, Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) is described as follows:

> Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/ or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology. (DoH, 2017, p55)

Further, the guidance refers to online CSAE as "involving a range of offending which includes, but is not limited to, online grooming and can occur without a child or young person's knowing they are being targeted." (DOH, 2017, p55).

While not the sole focus of research, the online sexual abuse and exploitation of children and young people in NI has been identified as an issue of concern in a number of different reports. (e.g. Beckett, 2011; Pinkerton et al., 2015).

The first major study in Northern Ireland was the Independent Inquiry led by Professor Kathleen Marshall (Marshall, 2014) which was commissioned following a Ministerial Summit on the subject in 2013 and focused on both children and young people living at home and those living in care. While the focus of the Marshall Report was broad, extending to all forms of CSE, and while none of the 17 recommendations referred specifically to online CSE, the report did note that "increasingly today, children and young people can be exploited through the internet and social media; through grooming that may or may not lead to face-to-face contact; or through the generation and sharing of indecent images of the young person (sexting), which can become the focus of bullying and/or blackmail." (p.11). Significantly, the Marshall Report concluded that CSE posed a serious risk to children in Northern Ireland.

By 2018, NICCY had expressed grave concerns that the recommendations of the Marshall Report had not been actioned and that progress reports had been "fragmented" and "inconsistent" (NICCY, 2018, p.1), concluding that "it is not acceptable that so little reported progress has been achieved…in the intervening period" (p.11).

However, a report two years later by Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) noted that "there had been great efforts to enhance the response to child sexual exploitation following the Marshall Report" (CJI, 2020, p.6) but noted the lack of a cross-departmental strategy for children at risk of sexual abuse including child sexual exploitation was absent. (CJINI, 2020, p6).

A further review commissioned by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) on how CSE was being assessed and managed by its member agencies was published in 2020. It revealed particular concerns about the increase of online sexual exploitation incidents not being reported to the PSNI (Leonard et al., 2020), concluding that multi-agency training on online CSE was required.

Due to the power imbalance involved, CSE is a hidden crime, where young people are often groomed (on- or offline) into trusting their abuser and may not even realise or understand that they are victims of abuse. Victims may also depend on their abuser and be too scared to report what is happening as they don't want to lose them or get into trouble. They may even believe that they are in a consensual and loving relationship (NSPCC, 2021). The NSPCC (2021) further notes that online CSE may result in young people being persuaded to: have sexual conversations by text or online; to send or post sexually explicit images of themselves; or to take part in sexual activities via a webcam or smartphone. Following this, abusers can threaten to share the images, videos or conversations with friends and family unless they take part in further sexual activity.

While online sexual abuse and exploitation of children and young people has been a persistent issue of concern within NI, there is clearly a need for more research to focus on the nature of online sexual crimes, those who perpetrate them and the impact of these crimes on children.

2.9 Online Blackmail and Sextortion in Northern Ireland

Evidence would suggest that the incidence of online blackmail and sextortion in Northern Ireland is growing. Sextortion refers to online blackmail of an intimate or sexual nature. In a recent interview, a Detective Chief Inspector from the PSNI provided the following overview of the nature of the activity involved:

> "Typically, a person uses a false identity to befriend a victim via social media. The exchange may start with flirting or flattery, but ends with the victim coaxed into sending intimate images or performing sexual acts online, unwittingly in front of a camera. Behind the fake and attractive guise, there's a criminal. These people are often part of sophisticated and organised crime groups, mostly based overseas. They extort their victims by threatening to share those images or recordings unless demands for money are met. Innocent people are left feeling humiliated and distraught, but the important message is that victims shouldn't let embarrassment stop them from reporting what's happened." (CYPSP, 2023)

CYPSP report that the PSNI received approximately 40 reports of sextortion per month in 2022, a marked increase on the 10-20 reports per month in 2020. Most victims (80%) are males under 30, with 15% aged under 15.

2.10 Recorded Crimes in Northern Ireland

Recent PSNI statistics for recorded crime in Northern Ireland (PSNI, 2023b) reveal that in 2022/23 there were 1098 recorded online crimes against victims aged under 18. This total has risen steadily since 2014/15 (n=127) and represents 21% of the total number of online recorded crimes in Northern Ireland 2021/22 (see table below from PSNI, 2023). The 1098 recorded crimes include 345 cases of malicious communications and 290 sexual offences. There were 226 cases of online blackmail in 2022/23, more than double the number of cases in 2021/22 (n=93). Further analysis shows that the overwhelming majority of online blackmail offences where the victim is under 18 were carried out against males (96%, n=218), of whom 27% (n=59) were aged 11-14, 44% (n=95) were aged 15-16 and 29% (n=64) were aged 17. The PSNI stats branch do not collate further information to determine the details of the offence, i.e. if it was 'sextortion'.

The figures reveal a year on year increase in the offence of 'sexual communication with a child' since it was first recorded in 2016/17. More precisely, there were 198 'sexual communication with a child' offences recorded between April 2022 and March 2023, a slight increase of 0.5% over the last year (since 2021/22), but representing a stark increase of 141% since 2017/18 (n=82).

The PSNI stats branch have identified that of the 198 recorded sexual communication with a child offences in 2022/23, 68% (n=134) were known to be female of whom 38% were aged under 12 and 62% (n=83) were aged 12 to 15.

The published statistics further highlight that there were 690 obscene publications and protected sexual material offences relating to children in 2022/23, reflecting an annual increase of 32% since 2021/22 and a three-fold increase since 2014/15 (n=228).

Online crime by age of victim, 2014/15 to 2022/23

	under 18								
	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
VICTIM-BASED OFFENCES									
Violence against the person	57	57	41	116	195	414	469	554	578
3B Threats to kill	*10*	*9*	*3*	*6*	*4*	*5*	*0*	*6*	*2*
8L Harassment	*42*	*43*	*31*	*31*	*44*	*118*	*124*	*179*	*224*
8R Malicious Communications	*..*	*..*	*0*	*72*	*142*	*284*	*344*	*359*	*345*
All other violence against the person	*5*	*5*	*7*	*7*	*5*	*7*	*1*	*10*	*7*
Sexual offences	66	138	176	170	241	263	303	260	290
Sexual activity	*61*	*114*	*157*	*120*	*160*	*155*	*179*	*142*	*147*
All other sexual offences	*5*	*24*	*19*	*50*	*81*	*108*	*124*	*118*	*143*
Burglary, robbery, theft and criminal damage	4	11	18	7	25	31	60	93	226
35 Blackmail (theft offences)	*3*	*10*	*17*	*7*	*25*	*31*	*59*	*92*	*226*
All other offences of burglary, robbery, theft and criminal damage	*1*	*1*	*1*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*1*	*1*	*0*
OTHER CRIMES AGAINST SOCIETY	0	0	1	2	0	0	4	1	4
66 Other offences against the State and public order	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*
59 Threat or possession with intent to commit criminal damage	*0*	*0*	*1*	*2*	*0*	*0*	*4*	*1*	*4*
79 Perverting the course of justice	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*
86 Obscene publications, etc. and protected sexual material	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*
All other crimes against society	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*
TOTAL RECORDED CRIME - ALL OFFENCES	**127**	**206**	**236**	**295**	**461**	**708**	**836**	**908**	**1,098**

While the PSNI data is useful, there is currently no publicly available data on the age or gender of the offenders, nor the online platform (e.g. social media, online gaming, direct message etc.) where the offences occurred. Similarly, there is no publicly available data on the victim, beyond age and gender.

For instance, it would be important to discover if data regarding any of the equality characteristics of offenders or victims could be made available, while recognising the importance of protecting anonymity.

2.11 European Research: The Blurred Lives Project 2017-19

Only one study in recent years has focused solely on cyberbullying among Northern Ireland young people: the *Blurred Lives Project* - a cross-national, co-participatory exploration of cyberbullying, young people and socio-economic disadvantage. The two-year project (2017-2019) was funded by Erasmus+ under Key Action 2: Strategic Partnerships for School Education and was led by 5 EU partners from Northern Ireland, England, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. The entire project was coordinated by Stranmillis University College, Belfast, and focused on the online experiences of 14-16 year olds in schools in disadvantaged urban areas in each partner country. Importantly, the project also aimed to facilitate pupil voice through the creation of resources and/or recommendations for teachers, pupils, parents/carers and social networking providers. The title of the project was a reflection of the shift in recent years from the "wired" to the "wireless" child and the consequent blurring of online and offline identities, realities and experiences for many young people whose social interactions are increasingly dominated by mobile technologies (Slee, Campbell & Spears, 2012; Spears & Kofoed, 2013; Ofcom, 2018).

In the first phase of the project an online survey was completed by 400-700 pupils in 5+ schools in each country, and explored pupils' online access and negative experiences. Pupils were first invited to provide background demographic information and to detail the nature and extent of their regular online activity. They were then asked to describe a nasty or unpleasant online experience that had happened to them personally over the past couple of months, to indicate who they had reported it to (if anyone) and what happened as a result. They were also asked to describe a nasty online experience that had happened to someone else they know well, and to describe anything nasty or unpleasant that they had done themselves to someone online over the past couple of months. Finally, the survey invited the young people to provide suggestions as to how teachers, parents/carers and friends could help more. The survey revealed high levels of internet use by the young people (highest in Northern Ireland: 81% spent more than 3 hours per day online), with 25% overall (Northern Ireland: 22%) reporting that they had experienced something nasty or unpleasant online in the past couple of months. Of those who reported such a nasty or unpleasant experience, 31% told a friend, 19% a parent or other adult in the family and 10% told a sibling, while 14% told no one. A total of 33% had witnessed something nasty or unpleasant happening online to someone they know well, while 11% had done something nasty or unpleasant to someone else online. Work is ongoing to analyse and categorise the negative online experiences of the 2500+ young people in the Blurred Lives study, but the draft categorisation model (which helped inform the survey design for this project) comprises 4 macro-categories: 1) Types of online experience (WHAT happened?); 2) Types of platform (WHERE did it happen?); 3) Motivation/pretext (WHY did it happen?); and 4) Person(s) responsible (WHO did it?). Disaggregated figures

from Northern Ireland (where surveys were completed in schools with 40%+ Free School Meal entitlement) showed that 96% of the pupils (aged 14-16) had their own phones. When analysed further by gender, some interesting findings emerged: most notably, that 70% of the Northern Ireland girls but only 37% of the Northern Ireland boys 'often' or 'always' tell their parents/carers which sites or apps they are using online. Furthermore, 31% of Northern Ireland boys but only 14% of Northern Ireland girls reported that their parents were not interested in their online experiences. When something nasty or unpleasant did happen to them online, rates of reporting also varied by gender: Northern Ireland boys were 3 times more likely than Northern Ireland girls to tell nobody, while Northern Ireland girls were more than twice as likely to tell a parent/carer and three times more likely to tell a teacher than boys. When asked how teachers could help more, the most popular suggestion among the Northern Ireland respondents was to develop better student-teacher relationships (e.g. "Being there to speak to pupils who are bothered by things online", "Listen to us", "Get more involved with students"). This was replicated in terms of how parents/carers could help more, where the most popular suggestions again related to better parent/child relationships (e.g. "Be more involved in their child's life", "Ask me what's up instead of seeing me lock myself in my room", "By looking over them and making sure they are safe").

The second co-participatory phase of the project aimed to provide up-to-date resources ("intellectual outputs") for teachers, pupils and parent/carers, and make important recommendations to social networking providers, building on ideas from the pupils themselves and so acknowledging the importance of hearing the voice of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who are often overlooked. This was achieved through a combination of Sequential Focus Groups and Quality Circles, carried out intensively with two classes of 14-16-year-old pupils in each country. The first Sequential Focus Group was used to present some of the findings of the survey and to explore pupils' online experiences in more qualitative detail. There followed a series of Quality Circles where pupils worked in groups with experienced facilitators to create original resources for particular audiences: teachers, pupils, parents/carers and social networking providers. The number and length of each Quality Circle session varied between schools and countries, depending on school timetables and availability of time. However, in each case, pupils were encouraged and empowered to work together (often outside normal friendship groups) with a common purpose to design appropriate and targeted guidance and/or resources, and to share their resources with others in their class or year group or senior teaching staff from their school. A full account of the second phase of the project is provided by Hamilton et al. (2020), Purdy et al. (2021) and Mameli et al. (2022), while the resources produced by the young people, translated into 4 different languages (English, German, Dutch and Italian) can be downloaded free of charge from the project website: https://www.ou.nl/en/web/blurred-lives.

2.12 Other International Research and Identification of Research Gaps

A recent, international study funded by UNICEF (Stoilova et al., 2021) also considered the potential positive outcomes of online activity for children and young people's wellbeing. The study found that, although children from the global south and from poorer backgrounds faced significant inequalities in terms of digital access, connectivity and support, the internet nonetheless represented an important source of physical and mental health knowledge for children which could have a positive effect on their mental health and wellbeing.

However, Stoilova et al. also highlight that while internet use can help children to develop skills and enjoy activities, they can also be exposed to inappropriate or potentially harmful content online, and this can result in harm to the child:

> "Some studies show a positive association between internet use, risk encounters and negative outcomes. These outcomes include anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts and panic disorder." (2021, p.8).

Cyberbullying in particular is identified with lower psychosocial wellbeing and externalizing behaviours. There are further associations identified: for instance, older teenagers, LGBTQI children and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds were found to be more likely to engage in 'sexting' and to be victims of 'sextortion'.

The study also found that girls were more likely than boys to be victims of online sexual solicitation, coercive sexting, and cyber-dating violence. In terms of protective factors, the research found that protective factors for cyberbullying included: "a positive relationship with parents, parental monitoring of children's activities, teacher care, enforced school rules, higher self-efficacy, self-confidence and resilience" (p.9).

In identifying gaps in the research, Stoilova et al. point to the need for more robust research involving representative samples of children and young people; further investigation of the positive effects of children's internet use (only a fifth of the studies examined explored this at all); greater focus on *how* children are spending their time online (rather than simply recording the length of time they spend online); more longitudinal studies focusing on the long-term consequences of children's online activity in terms of wellbeing, mental health and resilience; more evidence to explain the links between children's online and offline vulnerability, exposure to risk and response to risk; and more child-centred research methods to explore how children themselves experience and view the reality of their online lives.

2.13 Review of Current Northern Ireland Curricular Content on Online Safety

Online safety for all age groups is addressed through the cross curricular skill of Using ICT. Within Using ICT, schools are encouraged to integrate online safety into relevant topics across the curriculum to provide children and young people with the chance to increase their knowledge and understanding of online safety, including acceptable online behaviour (CCEA, 2023a)

Online safety is also a priority area of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) which is a compulsory part of the Northern Ireland curriculum (CCEA, 2023b). RSE is part of Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) for Foundation Stage, Key Stages 1 and 2 in primary schools; and Learning for Life and Work (LLW) in post-primary schools (CCEA, 2023b). Within the post-primary curriculum, RSE is addressed primarily through Personal Development and, to a lesser degree, in Home Economics, both of which are components of Key Stage 3 LLW. RSE is also a compulsory element of Personal Development in LLW at Key Stage 4 (CCEA, 2023b).

CCEA (2022, p.1) have provided schools with the RSE Progression Framework which is a 'non-statutory progression pathway' for all Key Stages from Foundation to post-16 and covers all the priority areas of RSE, including online safety. The framework covers the main themes of RSE, and online safety is integrated into the theme of Safety and Well-being (Self-Awareness, Feelings and Emotions) for Foundation and Key Stages 1 and 2; whilst at Key Stages 3, 4 and post-16 it is within the theme of Self-Awareness (CCEA, 2022). The Framework also details what children and young people are expected to learn and how this can be assessed. For each of the themes, there are links to the RSE Hub which contains guidance, resources, links to external resources and information to support schools in the teaching of RSE (CCEA, 2023c).

CCEA (2015a) advises that PDMU should provide children with the opportunity to learn how to use technology in a safe and responsible way and to identify possible risks. This is evidenced in the RSE Progression Framework, which indicates that children at Foundation Stage will learn about rules that keep them safe online, including learning about who they can and cannot trust, the sharing of personal information and how to seek help. The Framework advises that Key Stage 1 children should have the opportunity to explore the advantages of the internet, reflect on their own online behaviour, as well as think about the dangers of the internet. Consideration of what should be included in an online profile, the positives of the internet and the importance of reflecting on their own online behaviour are all covered at Key Stage 2 (CCEA, 2022). It is also within PDMU that children are expected to 'learn about friendships, healthy relationships and behaviours with others' (CCEA, 2015a, p.4), and is also included within the RSE Framework under the theme of Relationships. This theme includes what it is to be a good friend, to be respectful and respect the choices of others (CCEA, 2022).

The Personal Development section of (post-primary) LLW expects that young people should 'develop an understanding of relationships, sexuality and the responsibilities of healthy relationships (Northern Ireland Curriculum, 2011, p.18). When studying RSE young people should be given the opportunity to learn about sensitive sexual issues such as sexting and, according to CCEA (2015b, p.6), this should include topics such as 'what constitutes an inappropriate image, and why young people send sexually explicit images', as well as discussion of the consequences of sexting, including the legal impact. These issues are likewise explored within the RSE Framework. At Key Stage 3, online safety includes the topic areas of cyberbullying, sexting, consent and what constitutes a healthy relationship, whilst Key Stage 4 explores various topics, such as the law in relation to pornography and sharing images, and the role of technology in unwanted sexual attention. The RSE Framework for Post-16 focuses on topics such as how sexually explicit content can influence self-esteem and gender stereotypes, and the impact of pornography on expectations of women and men (CCEA, 2022).

RSE should equip young people to make well-informed decisions when interacting with the online digital world in a safe and responsible way (CCEA, 2015b). However, it would appear that RSE does not adequately equip young people with such skills when issues arise with cyberbullying and sexting, even though the Key Stage 4 LLW curriculum provides the opportunity for young people to explore the 'benefits and misuse of social media' (CCEA, 2017, p.14).

In accordance with the UNCRC (1989) children and young people are entitled to a 'good quality education' and should experience 'quality teaching and learning across the curriculum', including RSE (UNICEF, 1989; CCEA, 2015b, p.5). All schools must have a written policy detailing how RSE is taught in their school (CCEA, 2015b). However, unlike other curricular subjects which are mandatory, schools are accorded flexibility with what to include within their RSE curriculum to reflect their ethos. This can result in more sensitive topics either not being covered or not covered in the depth required to fully equip young people with the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions (Miller, 2021; Safeguarding and Child Protection Association [SACPA], 2022).

This flexibility has also been identified as an issue in the Gender Equality Strategy:

> 'the onus on schools, their management teams and Board of Governors to establish their own bespoke programme inevitably results in different and inconsistent learning experiences and outcomes for young people' (Gray et al., 2020, p.166).

Consequently, there have been calls to have mandatory inclusive RSE content that must be taught in schools (Miller, 2021; SACPA, 2022). Young people do want to talk about sensitive issues in school but report that they do not always get the opportunity to do so (Belfast Youth Forum, 2019; York et al., 2021).

In Northern Ireland, recent research highlights that young people report having received little or no RSE lessons despite RSE being a compulsory area of study, whilst others were negative about the topics addressed or the way in which it was taught. Young people also regard RSE as unrealistic, unhelpful, basic, and lacking detail (Schubotz, 2012; Belfast Youth Forum, 2019; York et al., 2021).

Receiving less than adequate RSE teaching can, according to CCEA (2015b), make young people more vulnerable to being sexually exploited or abused and engaging in unsuitable sexual behaviours. Consequently, young people can end up relying on misguided or poor RSE information from other sources such as their friends, media and pornography, thereby acquiring inadequate knowledge of appropriate relationship and sexual behaviour (CCEA, 2015b; Belfast Youth Forum, 2019; York et al., 2021).

It is important that online safety is linked to realistic age-appropriate exploration of relationship behaviours and sensitive issues in RSE; a boy, for example, may be aware of how to keep himself safe online and yet still coerce girls into giving pictures. Similarly, a girl may also be knowledgeable regarding her own online safety but demand pictures from boys (York, 2019). Other genders may also be exposed to stereotypes and biases about their sexuality, or not have access to good quality, research informed information.

In their recent report on *The Preventative Curriculum in Schools and Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) Centres*, based on 14,665 pupil questionnaire responses, 509 school/centre responses and 50 inspection visits, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) highlight how the growing use of social media and the resulting implications for pupils' online safety represent a significant challenge for schools/centres (ETI, April 2023). The report refers to an increasing number of online bullying and digital safeguarding incidents that happen outside school (though impacting on pupil wellbeing), including sexting and sharing related images. Moreover, echoing earlier reports (e.g. Purdy & McGuckin, 2015) addressing such issues requires a significant time and effort on the part of teachers and senior leaders. The ETI report notes however that there is "considerable variation" (2023, p.5) in the effectiveness and range of approaches taken by schools/centres in delivering the taught elements of the preventative curriculum, with too many schools/centres avoiding completely or glossing over many of the more sensitive aspects of the RSE preventative curriculum.

In the questionnaire responses from schools/centres, online digital safety ranked as the second most commonly reported safeguarding issue cited, and this was the case across all phases/sectors (primary, post-primary, special and EOTAS). In the primary phase, principals reported that pupils are often reluctant to report online incidents to their parents for fear of losing access to their online devices. Special school leaders expressed concerns about the lack of protective filters in place at home, while in post-primary 55% of the pupils expressed confidence that their schools deal with all forms of bullying (including online) in a fair way.

The ETI (correctly) note that schools must ensure that they comply with their responsibilities under the Addressing Bullying in Schools (NI) Act 2016, which commenced in September 2021. The ETI report also considered levels of teacher confidence and found very high levels of teacher confidence in terms of digital safeguarding: almost three-quarters (74%) of teachers felt that they had received sufficient training in the area of online safety.

Recently, on 6 June 2023, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Rt Hon Chris Heaton-Harris issued a statement in which he noted that he was under a statutory duty under the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 to implement recommendation 86(d) of the Report of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination of Women (CEDAW). In amending the Education (NI) Order 2006 and the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (NI) 2007 in relation to Key Stages 3 and 4, the Secretary of State has made it compulsory for schools to provide "age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion". There will also be a duty on the Department of Education to issue guidance on the content and delivery of the education to be provided by 1 January 2024. This is a highly significant move, in that it signals the end to the completely non-statutory nature of RSE in Northern Ireland, and, while not making it statutory to address sexting in RSE, does nonetheless suggest that, where deemed necessary in the future, a statutory requirement could once again be placed on schools.

2.14 Training Needs for Practitioners Working with Children and Young People

The EU Kids Online Project found that in most European countries, over four in five children receive advice on safe internet use from parents, teachers or their friends (2020) and according to Ofcom, 84% of parents of 12-15 year olds in the UK have at least one rule in place regarding the use of their children's phones (Ofcom, 2020). Despite this, children are still at risk from online harms in terms of the Content, Contact, Conduct and Contract (Livingstone et al., 2021). Parents and professionals working with children are often found to be lacking in knowledge, skills and confidence in order to guide children and young people in their care.

Parenting NI found that 80% of parents either agreed or strongly agreed that social media has a significant impact on the wellbeing of their children (Parenting NI, 2020) and in her book, *The Cyber Effect*, Aiken comments that many parents are so overwhelmed with the advancement of technology that they simply give up (Aiken, 2015). Parents need to take a proactive approach to their child's online activity and this starts with ensuring internet filtering and parental controls are put in place (Choo, 2009). Parents indicate that they prefer to be their children's primary educators about child sexual abuse (Foster, 2017).

However, research has repeatedly found that parents are reluctant to talk with their children about these issues, resulting in parents becoming protectors rather than educators (Rudolph & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2018).

With the fast pace of technological advancement and social media trends ever-changing, parents need to be equipped with up-to-date information and advice. Schools, youth organisations and community groups can use their structures to help parents to be kept informed, often with the help of external organisations who can provide workshops, information, and support.

The school environment has been found to be the best place to facilitate critical thinking of children and young people in their own use of social networking sites and to encourage healthy online relationships (Webster et al., 2021). A whole school approach is a successful way to address safeguarding and wellbeing within a school (Weare, 2015) and this also applies to issues relating to social media use (Burnette et al, 2017). A whole school approach involves working to equip parents, educate pupils and train staff on both the benefits and risks of using the internet. Burnette et al. (2017) found that the school environment and the role of parents were associated with the attitudes and behaviours of girls regarding social media and body image. They displayed high media literacy and strategies learnt at school that appeared to help mitigate the potential negative impact between social media use and body image.

OFSTED require organisations working with children and young people to educate them about the risks of grooming (Ofsted, 2022) and the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCIS) Education Group has produced detailed guidelines to assist and enable schools to develop online safety policy and practice, by using an approach that includes parents and the wider community as well as regular training for all staff which includes online safeguarding risks (UKCIS, 2017). Young people need to be made aware of the risks online; how to be critical thinkers (Reeves, 2017) in order to mitigate these risks and to discern what is acceptable online behaviour and what is not (Hooft Graafland, 2018). In other words, children and young people need digital resilience education (Webster, 2021).

In order to be taught this in schools, educators need to know how young people are using the online space, the risks that are present and guidance to deal with pastoral issues pertaining to the use of social media. For schools to be able to do this effectively, there is a need for investment in evidence-informed, up-to-date and practical professional development within Initial Teacher Education as well as CPD/in-service training for all education staff (Dubicka & Theodosiou, 2020). This should not be limited to school teachers, as all professionals working with children need to be aware of the online risks. For example, child psychiatrists need to consider the impact of social media on all children they assess (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2019).

Paat and Markham (2021) insist that schools need not only policies developed for digital safeguarding but both preventative and intervention initiatives. Areas of particular concern would be grooming; pornography; sharing of images and cyberbullying. Guggisberg (2020) recommends school-based prevention programmes focused on online pornography as well as early intervention for those young people already viewing online pornography. Van Ouytsel et al. (2019) recommend healthy relationship programmes to help with cyberbullying among young people; Patchin and Hinduja (2019) recommend that all professionals working with young people should seek to discuss the risks of sharing online images in an open, non-judgemental dialogue, often a taboo and difficult subject for young people to talk about. According to Shin and Lwin (2017), discussions with teachers about the internet can be effective in reducing young people's potential exposure to online risks. Overall, it is important that teachers and professionals working with young people can create an environment which is a safe space for pupils to report online sexual exploitation (Wittes et al., 2016) and that teachers and professionals can seek any interventions or extra support that they may need. In order to do this effectively, training, support and guidance for teachers are crucial.

CHAPTER 3
Methodology

This study adopted a mixed methodological approach involving: a large-scale online survey aimed at children and young people; a range of face-to-face (in-person and virtual) interviews and focus groups with a variety of different adult and child participant groups; and written submissions from industry professionals/ expert stakeholders.

Stakeholder advisory groups

This project adopted a children's rights informed approach whereby it was guided by Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) and informed by the Lundy model of child participation (Lundy, 2007). Two children and young people's advisory groups were established, one involving primary school children and another involving post-primary school children. Considering the tight time frames within which this project operated, the input of the advisory groups was focussed around two key junctures of the project: the advisory groups helped co-design the research instruments, questions to be asked and engagement techniques for the qualitative interviews and focus groups (with children and young people) as well as advising on interpretation, recommendations and dissemination.

In addition to the child/young person advisory groups, the SBNI's Expert Advisory Group also acted as advisors to the research project.

Their particular remit was around advising on the online survey instruments as well as the recruitment of appropriate stakeholders for the qualitative interviews and focus groups.

Growing up online surveys

Participants: Two online surveys were administered to children and young people from across Northern Ireland, aged between 8-18 years. One version of the survey was administered to 8-13 year olds (with slight amendments made to ensure age appropriateness) and another version was given to 14-18 year olds.

Procedure: The surveys were hosted online using Smart Survey. Schools were invited to participate via a request from the Education Authority's Child Protection Support Service. This request was delivered around Internet Safety Day to encourage participation. The surveys were also advertised via social media platforms and remained open for a period of 4 weeks, from 06.02.2023 until 06.03.2023. In total, 6481 children and young people responded to the surveys.

Analysis: Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics (using Microsoft Excel, including the PivotTable feature). Two surveys were initially formed based on two age ranges namely, 8 – 13, and 14 – 18, given the requirement for age-appropriate question design.

The data for each survey was initially cleaned and sorted to enable analysis of each question (or variable), including frequency counts and percentages, in respect to responses. Graphs were colour coded depending on the survey (or age range) they belong to. This was followed by bi-variate analysis, comparing key variables to identify any relationships in the data, for each of the surveys or age ranges.

In addition, open-ended responses were separated from the quantitative data, and organised to enable thematic analysis.

Qualitative interviews and focus groups

Participants: A variety of different target populations were recruited to take part in interviews and focus groups (see Table 1 for a breakdown of participants). In total, 95 participants took part in the qualitative aspects of this research.

	Participant sample group	Structure	Format	Number of participants
Advisory Groups	Advisory Group 1A (primary)	Advisory Group (initial)	face-to-face	6
	Advisory Group 1B (primary)	Advisory Group (final)	face-to-face	6
	Advisory Group 2A (post-primary)	Advisory Group (initial)	face-to-face	6
	Advisory Group 2B (post-primary)	Advisory Group (final)	face-to-face	6
Children & Young People	Mainstream primary group 1	Focus group	face-to-face	6 (KS1)
	Mainstream primary group 2	Focus group	face-to-face	6 (Year 6)
	Mainstream post-primary group 1	Focus group	face-to-face	7 (Year 11)
	Mainstream post-primary group 2	Focus group	face-to-face	8 (Year 10)
	Special school group	Focus group	face-to-face	9 (aged 13-15)
	Youth club setting in a socially disadvantaged context	Focus group	face-to-face	8 (post-primary)
	Traveller/Roma group	Focus group	face-to-face	2 (primary)
	LGBTQI+ young people group	Focus group	face-to-face	6 (post-primary)
	Irish Medium School	Focus Group	face-to-face	8 (Year 11)
Adults	Teacher group	Group Interview	online	8
	Professionals group	Qualitative survey	online	15
	Parents group 1 (primary)	Group Interview	face-to-face	5
	Parents group 2 (post-primary)	Group Interview	online	7
			Total	**95 excluding the Children & Young People's Advisory Groups**

Procedure: Semi-structured interview and focus group protocols were developed (alongside the advisory groups who advised on the child/ young people focus groups) to suit the specific requirements and experiences of each of the different participant groups. The child/young person focus groups discussions were supplemented by a range of different interactive and arts-based activities, used to stimulate discussion (see Appendices 1-4). Interviews lasted between approximately 30 and 60 minutes, depending upon the participants and context. Interviews and focus groups were recorded using an audio recorder and were subsequently transcribed verbatim. With regard to the professionals' group, due to the challenges encountered with convening a focus group of relevant industry professionals, an online qualitative survey was developed and administered requesting written submissions regarding their perceptions on this area (framed around three core questions) – see Appendix 5.

Analysis: Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis and guided by the principles reported by Braun & Clark (2006).

Ethical considerations

Full ethical permission for the study was sought and granted by the Research and Ethics Committee of Stranmillis University College, Belfast, in line with the College's Code of Ethics in Research[2] and the 4th edition of the *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (British Educational Research Association, 2018)[3]. Every effort was made throughout the research project to ensure that participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the study, their right to withdraw, confidentiality and anonymity, and data storage arrangements. All participants were required to read a full information sheet before consenting to participate in this research. Note also that signposting towards relevant support and information sources was provided to the participating children and young people and appropriate safeguarding procedures were implemented.

2 Stranmillis University College (2022) *Code of Ethics in Research.* Belfast: Stranmillis University College, Belfast. Available at: https://www.stran.ac.uk/research/research-integrity/

3 BERA (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* 4th edition. London: BERA. Available at: https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018.

CHAPTER 4

Survey Results

The results of the SBNI survey analysis are presented in this section. Firstly, common demographics for all ages 8 – 18 (n=6481) are presented, followed by a comparison of the survey results for two age ranges, namely, 8-13 (n=3826), and 14-18 (n=2655). The survey was split into two age ranges given differing age-appropriate question design.

4.1 Common Demographics (all ages 8 – 18)

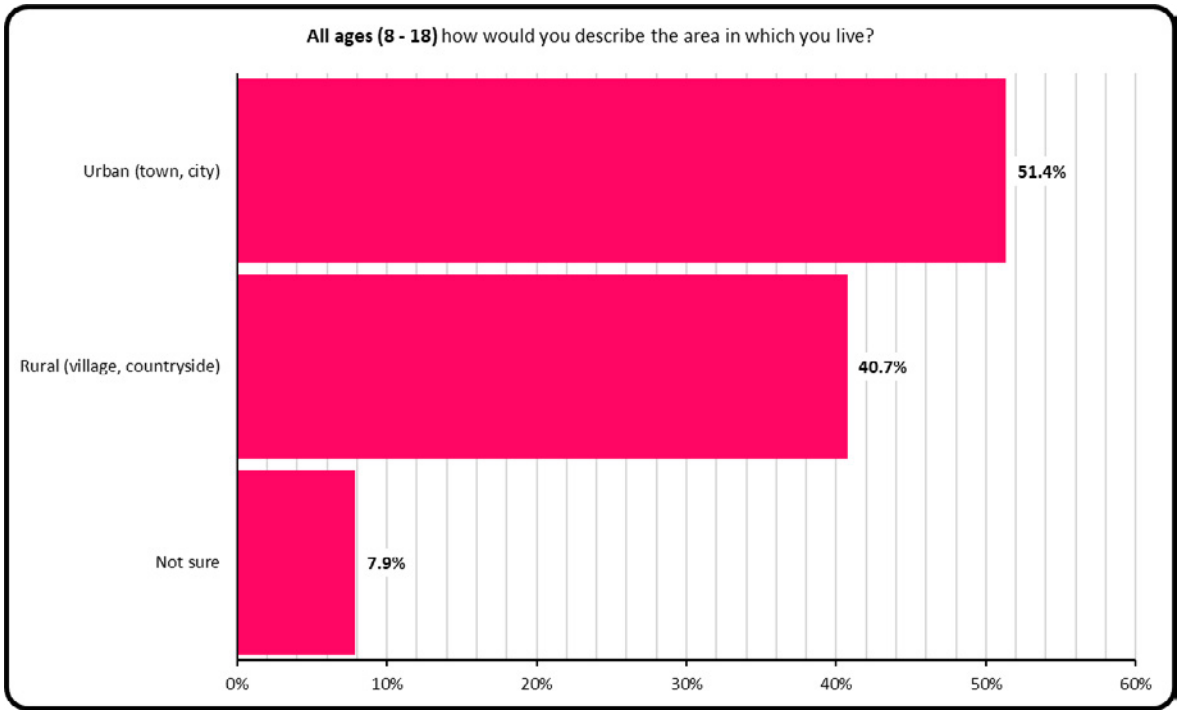
Area in which survey participants live:

As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, 51.35% (n=3328) of survey respondents, live in an urban area, and 40.75% (n=2641) live in a rural area.

Table 1. All ages (8 - 18) how would you describe the area in which you live?

All ages (8 - 18) how would you describe the area in which you live?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Not sure	7.90%	n = 512
Rural (village, countryside)	40.75%	n = 2641
Urban (town, city)	51.35%	n = 3328
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 6481

Figure 1. All ages (8 - 18) how would you describe the area in which you live?



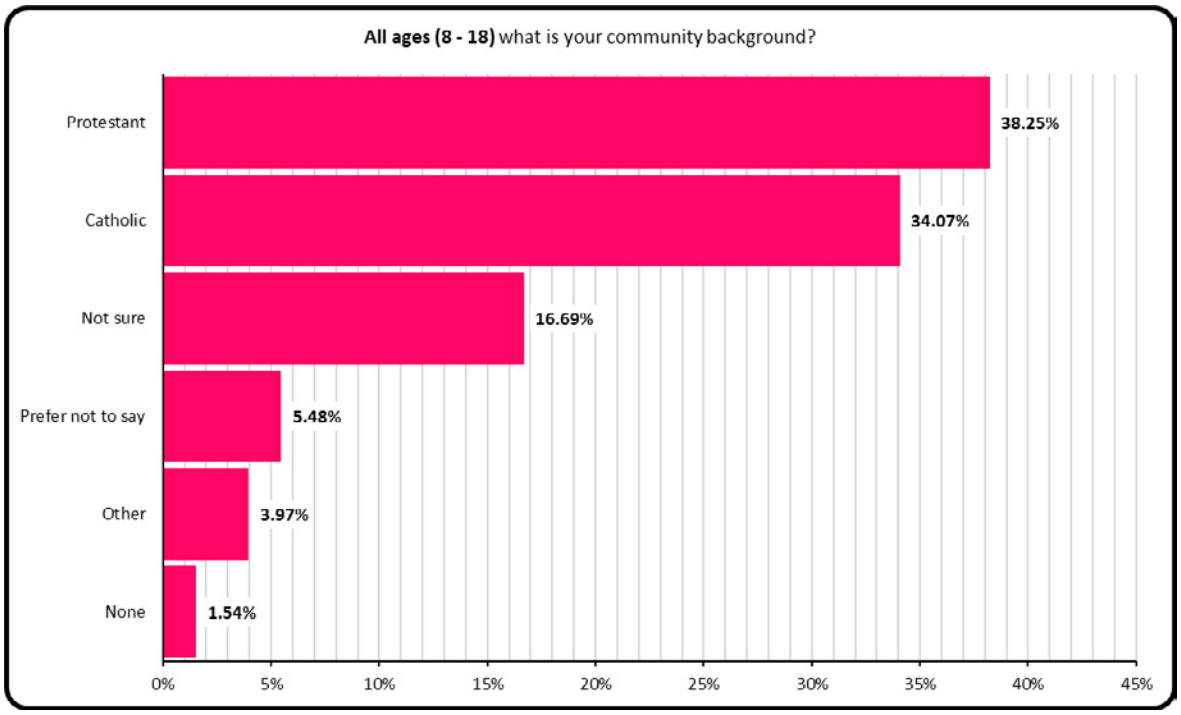
Community background of survey participants:

As shown in Table 2 and Figure 2, most survey respondents were from a Protestant community background (38.25%, n=2479), followed closely by number of participants from a Catholic community background (34.07%, n=2208).

Table 2. All ages (8 - 18) what is your community background?

All ages (8 - 18) what is your community background?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
None	1.54%	n = 100
Other	3.97%	n = 257
Prefer not to say	5.48%	n = 355
Not sure	16.69%	n = 1082
Catholic	34.07%	n = 2208
Protestant	38.25%	n = 2479
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 6481

Figure 2. All ages (8 - 18) what is your community background?



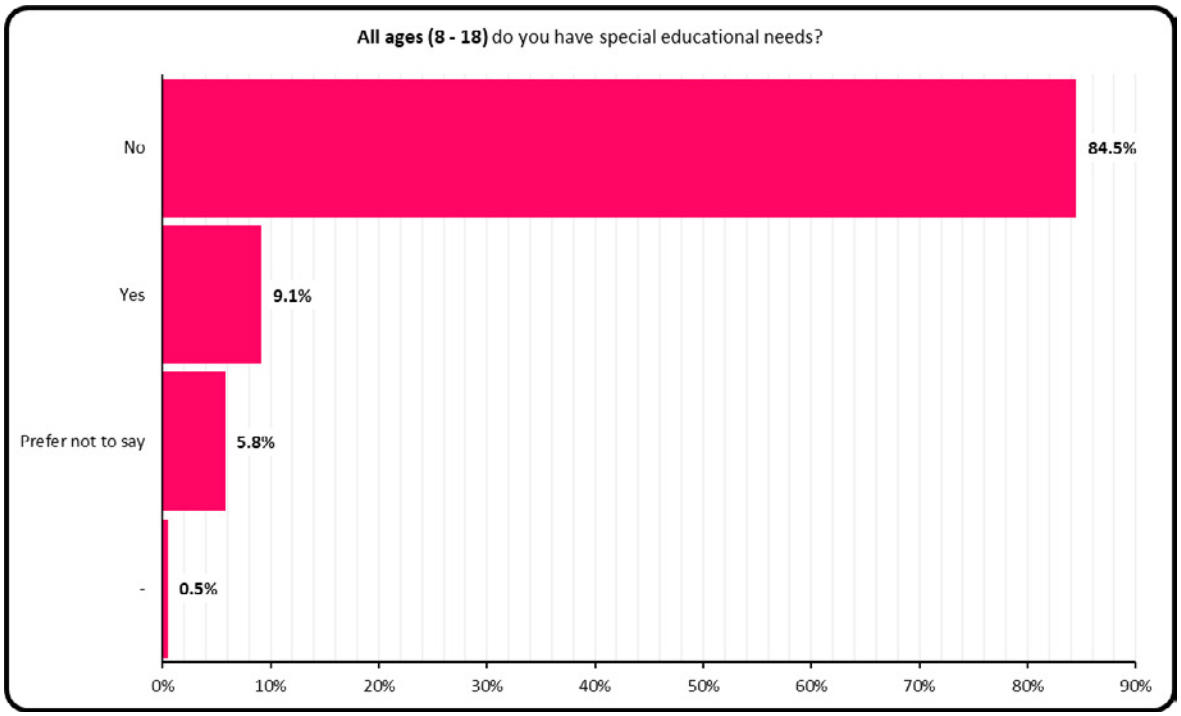
Survey participants' special educational needs:

As shown in Table 3 and Figure 3, 9.15% (n=593) of survey respondents reported as having special educational needs (SEN).

Table 3. All ages (8 - 18) do you have special educational needs?

All ages (8 - 18) do you have special educational needs?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
- (null responses)	0.51%	n = 33
Prefer not to say	5.83%	n = 378
Yes	9.15%	n = 593
No	84.51%	n = 5477
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 6481

Figure 3. All ages (8 - 18) do you have special educational needs?



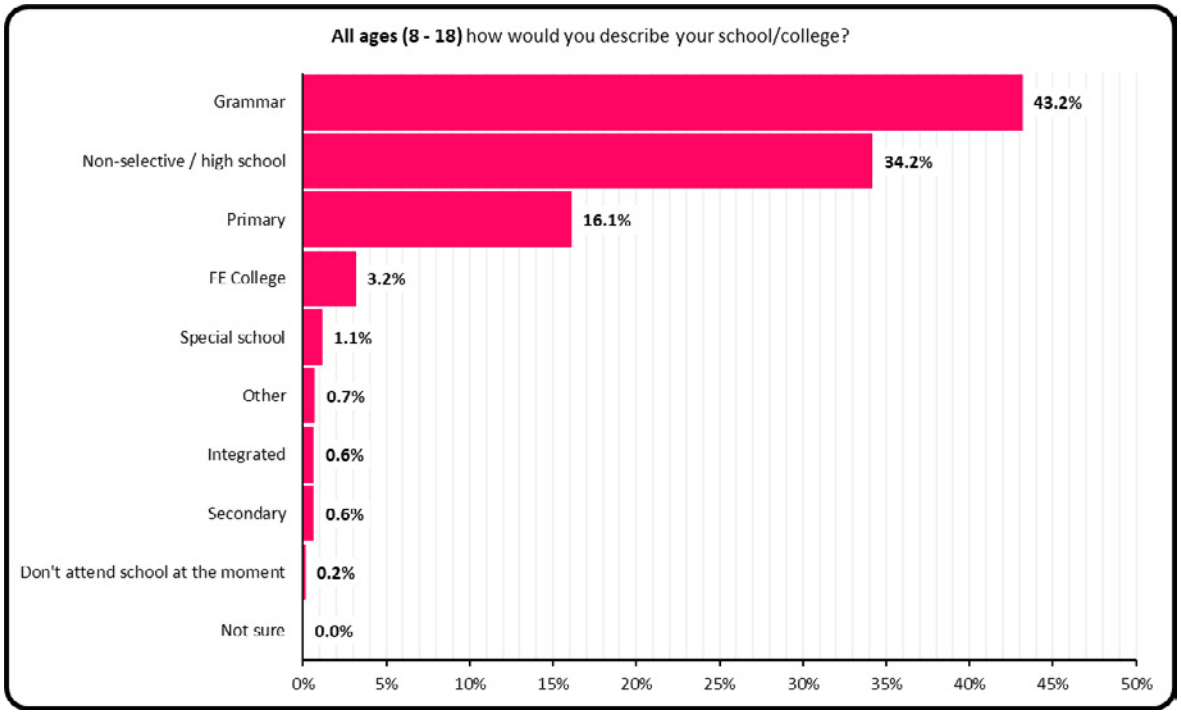
Survey participants school/college

As shown in Table 4 and Figure 4, there was a wide range of educational settings reported. 43.20% (n=2800) of survey respondents describe their school/college as being a grammar, followed by non-selective/high-school (34.19%, n=2216), primary (16.11%, n=1044), further education (FE) college (3.18%, n=206), special school (1.14%, n=74), and small frequencies for other, integrated, and secondary.

Table 4. All ages (8 - 18) how would you describe your school/college?

All ages (8 - 18) how would you describe your school/college?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Not sure	0.03%	n = 2
Don't attend school at the moment	0.15%	n = 10
Secondary	0.65%	n = 42
Integrated	0.65%	n = 42
Other	0.69%	n = 45
Special school	1.14%	n = 74
FE College	3.18%	n = 206
Primary	16.11%	n = 1044
Non-selective / high school	34.19%	n = 2216
Grammar	43.20%	n = 2800
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 6481

Figure 4. All ages (8 - 18) how would you describe your school/college?



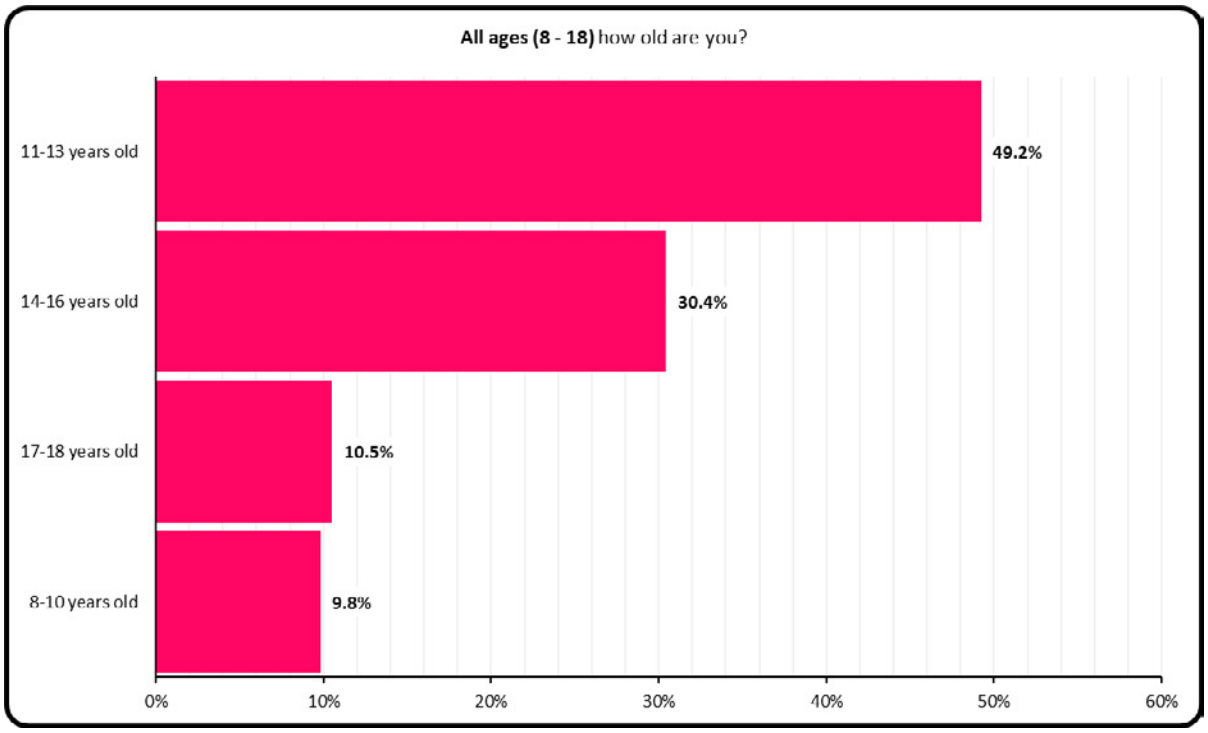
Age of survey participants

As shown in Table 5 and Figure 5, most survey respondents were 11-13 years old (49.22%, n=3190), followed by 14-16 years old (30.44%, n=1973), 17-18 years old (10.52%, n=682), and 8-10 years old (9.81%, n=636).

Table 5. All ages (8 - 18) how old are you?

All ages (8 - 18) how old are you?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
8-10 years old	9.81%	n = 636
17-18 years old	10.52%	n = 682
14-16 years old	30.44%	n = 1973
11-13 years old	49.22%	n = 3190
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 6481

Figure 5. All ages (8 - 18) how old are you?



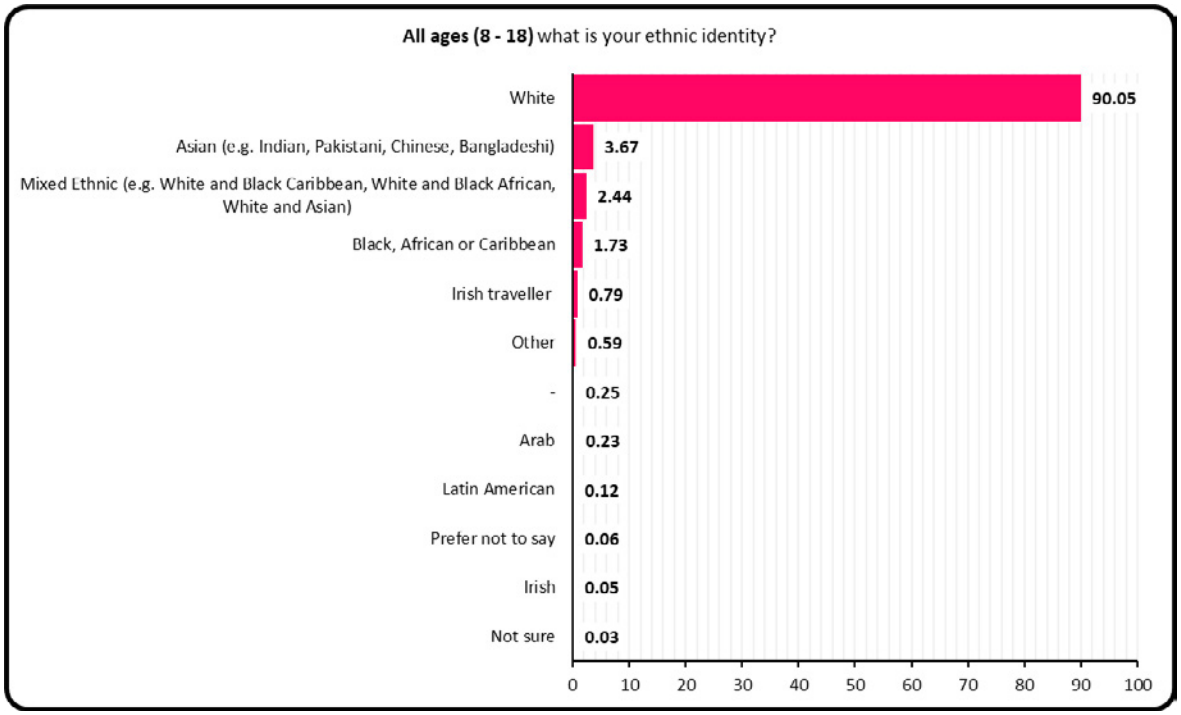
Ethnicity of survey respondents

As shown in Table 6 and Figure 6, most survey respondents were white (90.05%, n=5836).

Table 6. All ages (8 - 19) what is your ethnic identity?

All ages (8 - 19) what is your ethnic identity?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Not sure	0.03%	n = 2
Irish	0.05%	n = 3
Prefer not to say	0.06%	n = 4
Latin American	0.12%	n = 8
Arab	0.23%	n = 15
- (null responses)	0.25%	n = 16
Other	0.59%	n = 38
Irish traveller	0.79%	n = 51
Black, African or Caribbean	1.73%	n = 112
Mixed Ethnic (e.g. White and Black Caribbean, White and Black African, White and Asian)	2.44%	n = 158
Asian (e.g. Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, Bangladeshi)	3.67%	n = 238
White	90.05%	n = 5836
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 6481

Figure 6. All ages (8 - 19) what is your ethnic identity?



4.2 Gender of Respondents

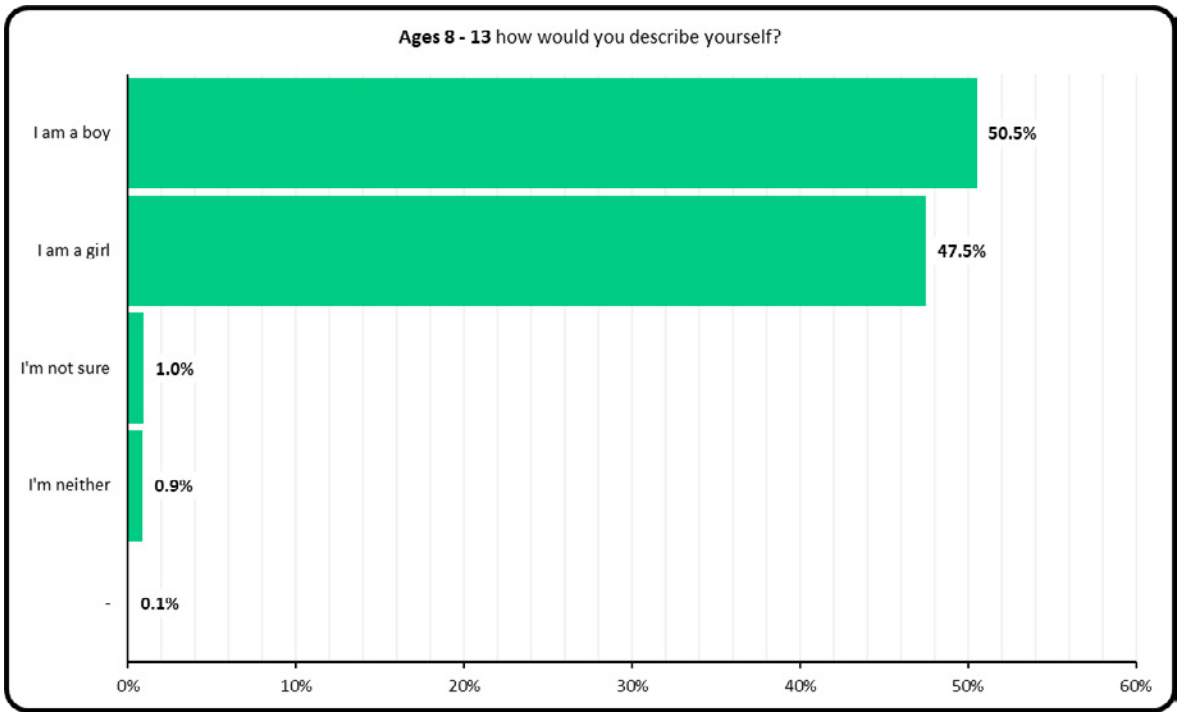
Gender (ages 8 – 13)

As shown in Table 7 and Figure 7, 50.52% (n=1933), of ages 8 – 13, described themselves as being a boy, followed by 47.52% (n=1818) as being a girl, and 0.97% (n=37) as being unsure, and 0.91% (n=35) as being neither.

Table 7. Ages 8 - 13 how would you describe yourself?

Ages 8 - 13 how would you describe yourself?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
- (null responses)	0.08%	n = 3
I'm neither	0.91%	n = 35
I'm not sure	0.97%	n = 37
I am a girl	47.52%	n = 1818
I am a boy	50.52%	n = 1933
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826

Figure 7. Ages 8 - 13 how would you describe yourself?



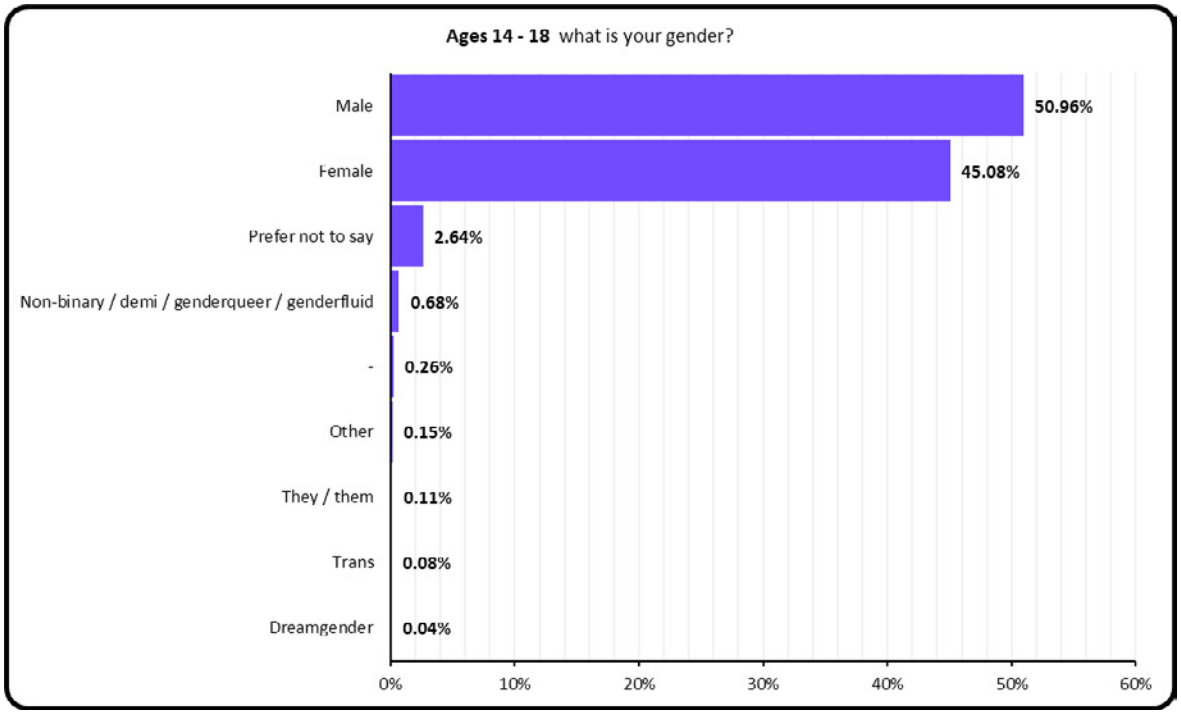
Gender (ages 14 – 18)

As shown in Table 8 and Figure 8, 50.96% (n=1353), of ages 14 – 18, described themselves as being male, followed by 45.08% (n=1197) as being female, with small frequencies (between n=1 and 18) for non-binary / demi / genderqueer / genderfluid, other, they / them, trans, and dreamgender. 2.64% (n=70) preferred not to say.

Table 8. Ages 14 - 18 what is your gender?

Ages 14 - 18 what is your gender?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Dreamgender	0.04%	n = 1
Trans	0.08%	n = 2
They / them	0.11%	n = 3
Other	0.15%	n = 4
- (null responses)	0.26%	n = 7
Non-binary / demi / genderqueer / genderfluid	0.68%	n = 18
Prefer not to say	2.64%	n = 70
Female	45.08%	n = 1197
Male	50.96%	n = 1353
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 8. Ages 14 - 18 what is your gender?

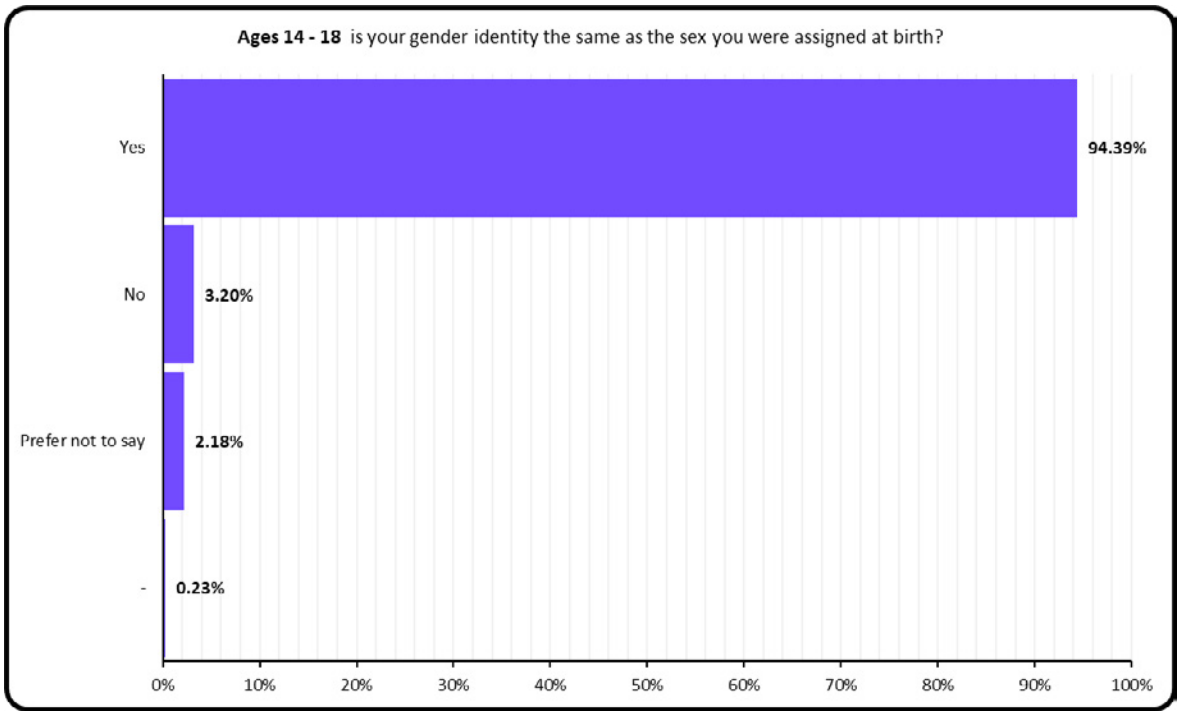


As shown in Table 9 and Figure 9, 94.39% (n=2506), of ages 14 – 18, stated that their gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth. 3.20% (n=85) reported that the gender identity is different than the sex assigned at birth.

Table 9. Ages 14 - 18 is your gender identity the same as the sex you were assigned at birth?

Ages 14 - 18 is your gender identity the same as the sex you were assigned at birth?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
- (null responses)	0.23%	n = 6
Prefer not to say	2.18%	n = 58
No	3.20%	n = 85
Yes	94.39%	n = 2506
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 9. Ages 14 - 18 is your gender identity the same as the sex you were assigned at birth?

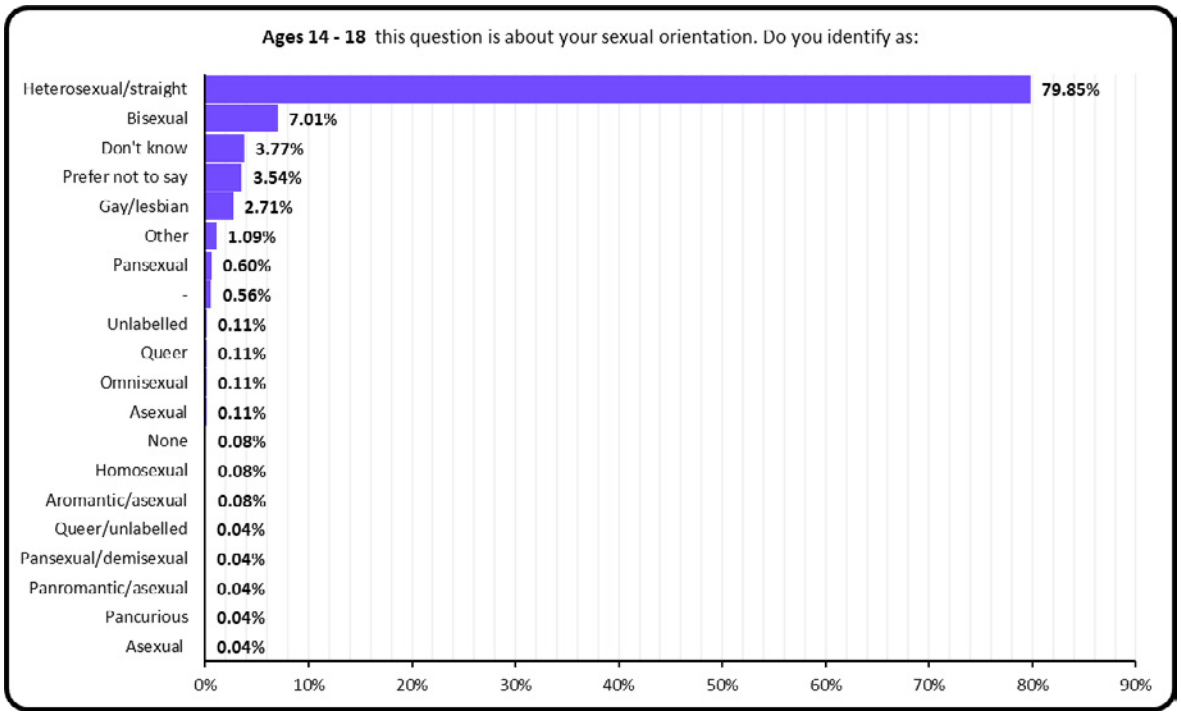


As shown in Table 10 and Figure 10, there were a wide range of sexual orientations reported by respondents at ages 14-18. However, most respondents reported being heterosexual/ straight (79.85%, n=2120).

Table 10. Ages 14 - 18 this question is about your sexual orientation. Do you identify as:

Ages 14 - 18 this question is about your sexual orientation. Do you identify as:		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Asexual	0.04%	n = 1
Pancurious	0.04%	n = 1
Panromantic/asexual	0.04%	n = 1
Pansexual/demisexual	0.04%	n = 1
Queer/unlabelled	0.04%	n = 1
Aromantic/asexual	0.08%	n = 2
Homosexual	0.08%	n = 2
None	0.08%	n = 2
Asexual	0.11%	n = 3
Omnisexual	0.11%	n = 3
Queer	0.11%	n = 3
Unlabelled	0.11%	n = 3
-	0.56%	n = 15
Pansexual	0.60%	n = 16
Other	1.09%	n = 29
Gay/lesbian	2.71%	n = 72
Prefer not to say	3.54%	n = 94
Don't know	3.77%	n = 100
Bisexual	7.01%	n = 186
Heterosexual/straight	79.85%	n = 2120
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 10. Ages 14 - 18 this question is about your sexual orientation. Do you identify as:



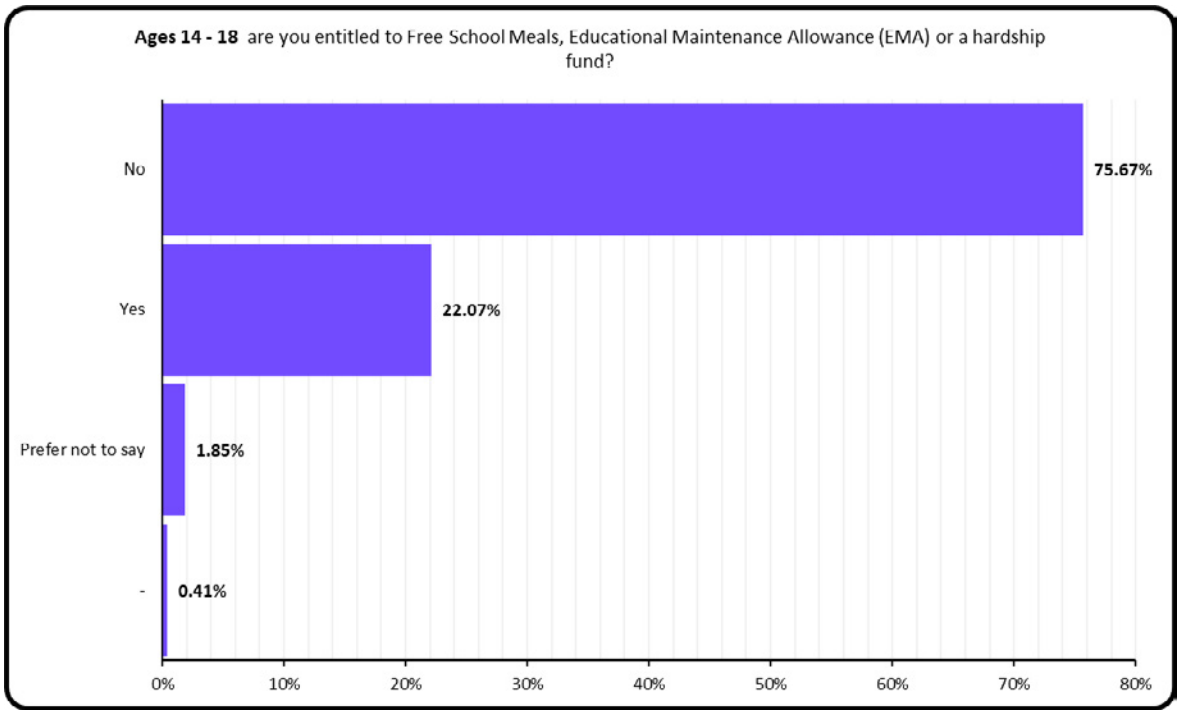
4.3 Free School Meal Entitlement, EMA or Hardship Fund

As shown in Table 11 and Figure 11, 22.07% (n=586) of survey respondents, ages 14 – 18, said that they are entitled to Free School Meals (FSM), Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) or a hardship fund.

Table 11. Ages 14 - 18 are you entitled to Free School Meals, Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) or a hardship fund?

Ages 14 - 18 are you entitled to Free School Meals, Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) or a hardship fund?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
-	0.41%	n = 11
Prefer not to say	1.85%	n = 49
Yes	22.07%	n = 586
No	75.67%	n = 2009
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 11. Ages 14 - 18 are you entitled to Free School Meals, Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) or a hardship fund?



4.4 Time Spent Online

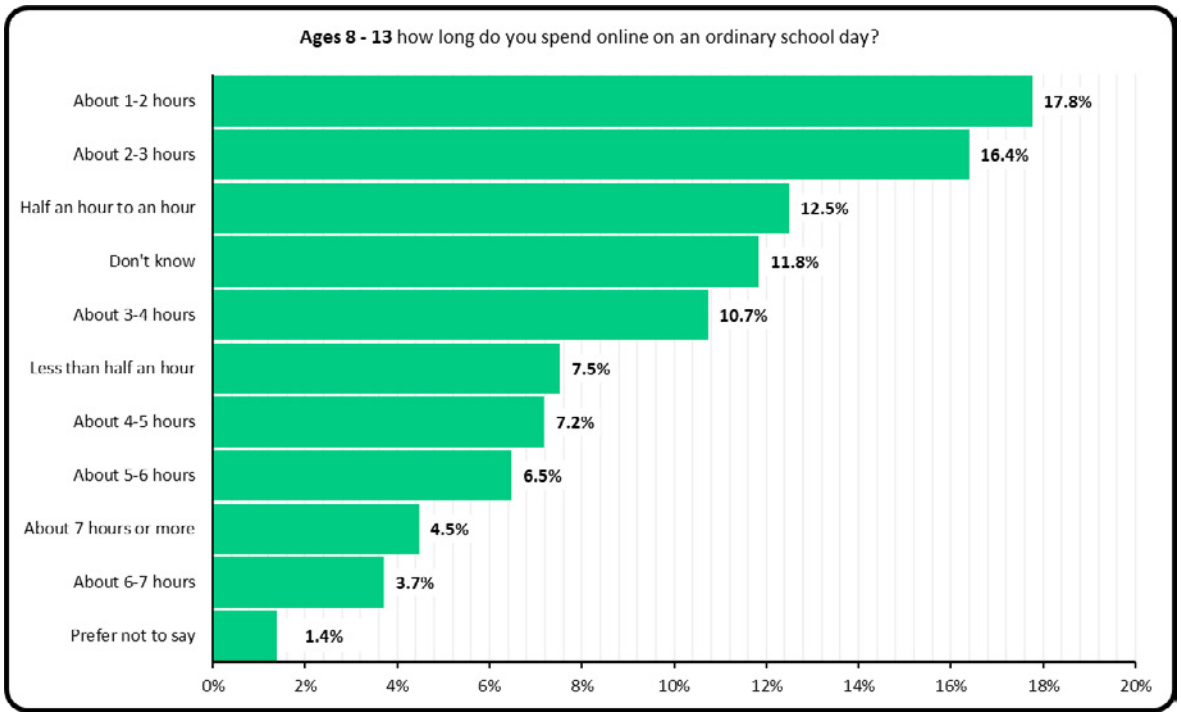
Time spent online (age 8 – 13)

As shown in Table 12 and Figure 12, the most commonly reported amount of time spent online, for ages 8 – 13, on an ordinary school day, was about 1-2 hours (17.77%, n=680), followed by 2-3 hours (16.39%, n=627), and so forth. 6-7 hours (3.71%, n=142), and 7 hours or more (4.47%, n=171), were the least commonly reported, on an ordinary school day.

Table 12. Ages 8 - 13 how long do you spend online on an ordinary school day?

Ages 8 - 13 how long do you spend online on an ordinary school day?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Prefer not to say	1.39%	n = 53
About 6-7 hours	3.71%	n = 142
About 7 hours or more	4.47%	n = 171
About 5-6 hours	6.48%	n = 248
About 4-5 hours	7.19%	n = 275
Less than half an hour	7.53%	n = 288
About 3-4 hours	10.74%	n = 411
Don't know	11.84%	n = 453
Half an hour to an hour	12.49%	n = 478
About 2-3 hours	16.39%	n = 627
About 1-2 hours	17.77%	n = 680
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826

Figure 12. Ages 8 - 13 how long do you spend online on an ordinary school day?

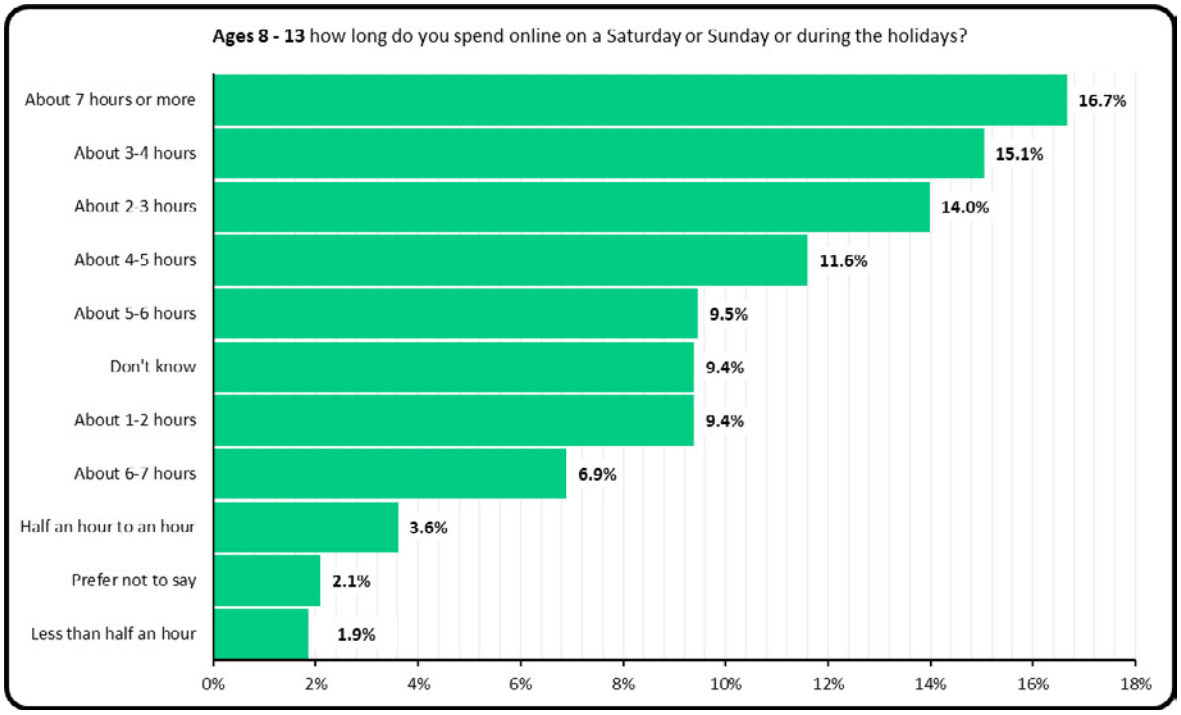


As shown in Table 13 and Figure 13, the most commonly reported amount of time spent online, for ages 8-13, on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays, was about 7 hours or more (16.68%, n=638), followed by 3-4 hours (15.05%, n=576), and so forth. Less than half an hour (1.86%, n=71), and half an hour to an hour (3.61%, n=138), were the least commonly reported, on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays. This is in contrast to an ordinary school day, as respondents are spending more time on average, online, on the weekends or during holidays.

Table 13. Ages 8 - 13 how long do you spend online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays?

Ages 8 - 13 how long do you spend online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Less than half an hour	1.86%	n = 71
Prefer not to say	2.09%	n = 80
Half an hour to an hour	3.61%	n = 138
About 6-7 hours	6.90%	n = 264
About 1-2 hours	9.38%	n = 359
Don't know	9.38%	n = 359
About 5-6 hours	9.46%	n = 362
About 4-5 hours	11.60%	n = 444
About 2-3 hours	13.98%	n = 535
About 3-4 hours	15.05%	n = 576
About 7 hours or more	16.68%	n = 638
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826

Figure 13. Ages 8 - 13 how long do you spend online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays?

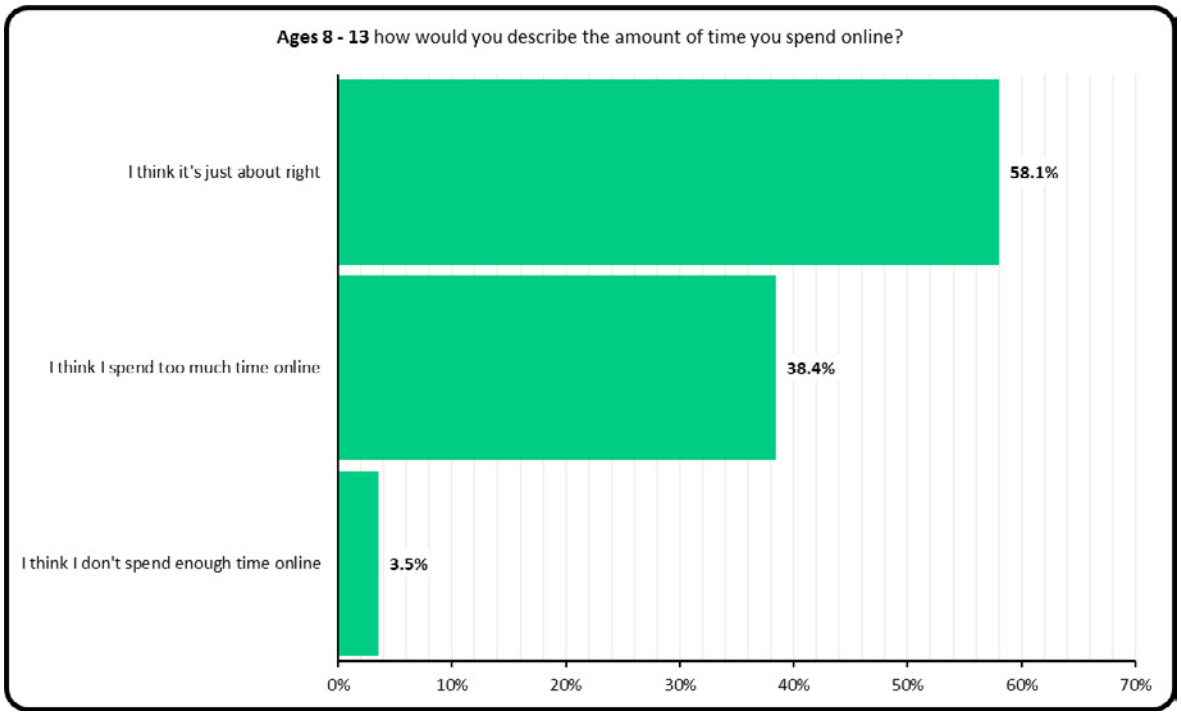


As shown in Table 14 and Figure 14, for ages 8 – 13, 58.05% (n=2221) of survey respondents think the amount of time they spend online is just about right. 38.42% (n=1470) think they spend too much time online, and 3.53% (n=135) think they do not spend enough time online.

Table 14. Ages 8 - 13 how would you describe the amount of time you spend online?

Ages 8 - 13 how would you describe the amount of time you spend online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
I think I don't spend enough time online	3.53%	n = 135
I think I spend too much time online	38.42%	n = 1470
I think it's just about right	58.05%	n = 2221
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826

Figure 14. Ages 8 - 13 how would you describe the amount of time you spend online?

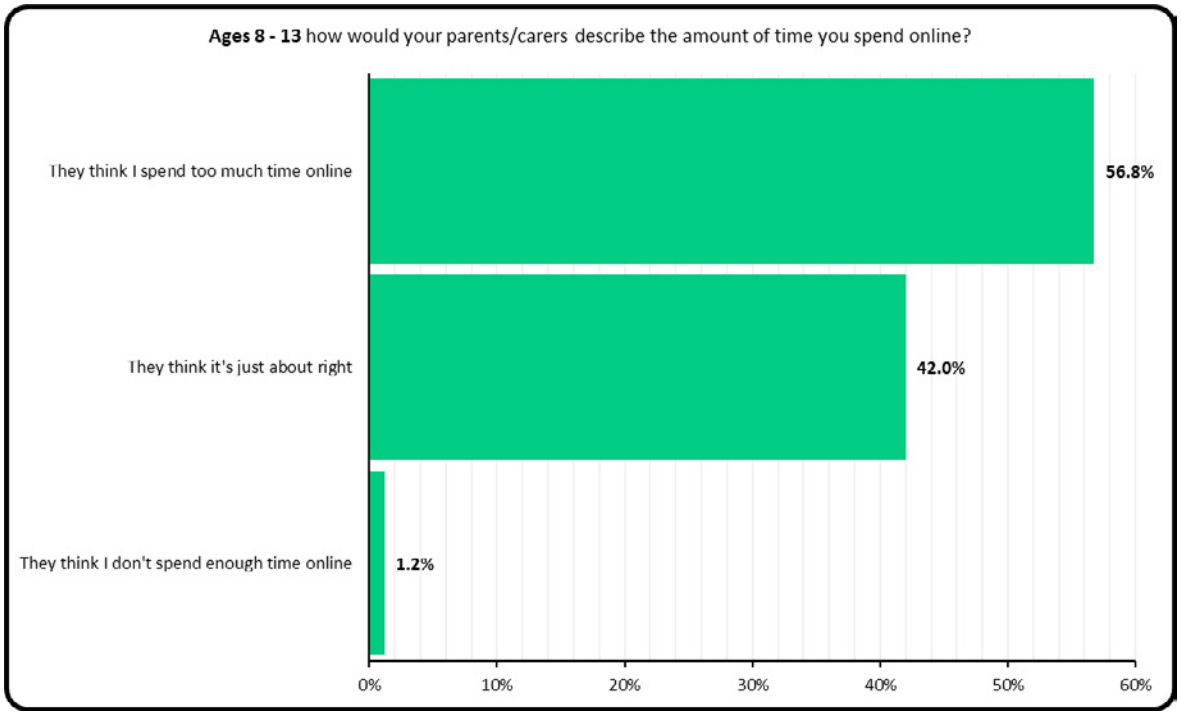


As shown in Table 15 and Figure 15, for ages 8 – 13, 56.77% (n=2172) of respondents reported that their parents/carers would describe their time spent online as too much. 42.03% (n=1608) reported that they would think their time spent online was just about right, and 1.2% (n=46), that they do not spend enough time online. Therefore, most respondents of this age range, think they their parents would have negative opinions on the time their children spend online.

Table 15. Ages 8 - 13 how would your parents/carers describe the amount of time you spend online?

Ages 8 - 13 how would your parents/carers describe the amount of time you spend online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
They think I don't spend enough time online	1.20%	n = 46
They think it's just about right	42.03%	n = 1608
They think I spend too much time online	56.77%	n = 2172
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826

Figure 15. Ages 8 - 13 how would your parents/carers describe the amount of time you spend online?



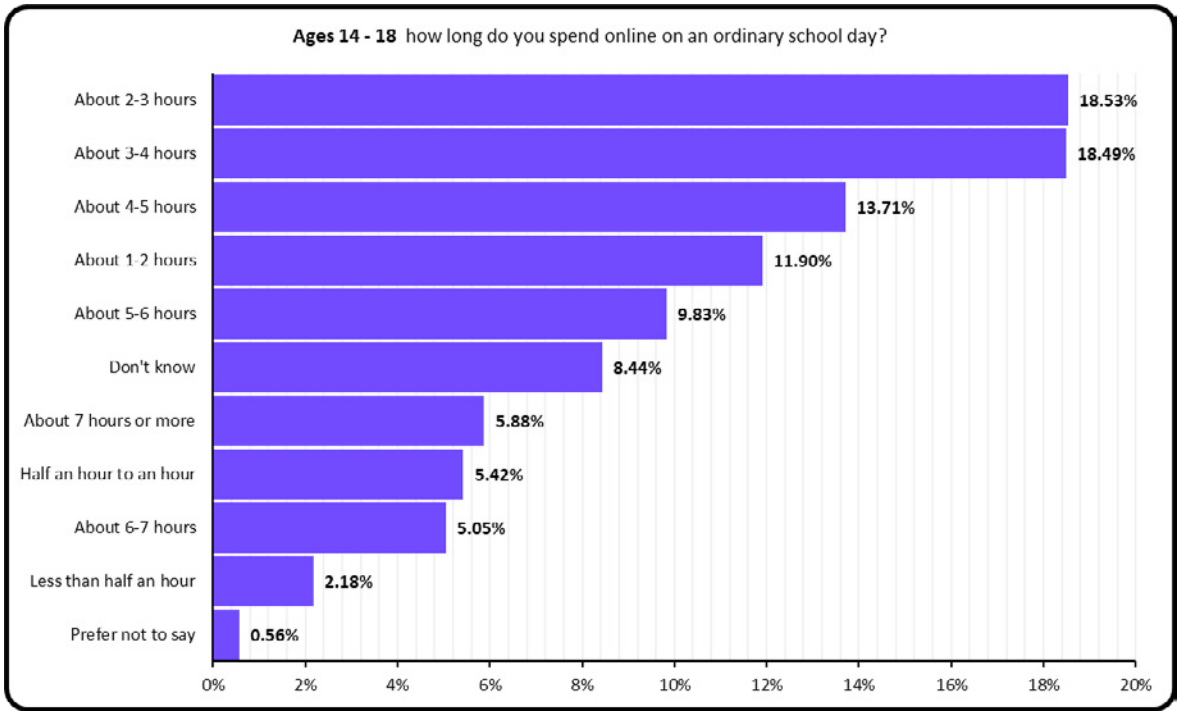
Time spent online (age 14 – 18)

As shown in Table 16 and Figure 16, the most commonly reported amount of time spent online, for ages 14 – 18, on an ordinary school day, was about 2-3 hours (18.53%, n=492), followed closely by 3-4 hours (18.49%, n=491), and so forth. Less than half an hour (2.18%, n=58), and 6-7 hours (5.05%, n=134), were the least commonly reported, on an ordinary school day. Thus, this age group, is on average, spending more time online, compared with the younger age group, on an ordinary school day.

Table 16. Ages 14 - 18 how long do you spend online on an ordinary school day?

Ages 14 - 18 how long do you spend online on an ordinary school day?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Prefer not to say	0.56%	n = 15
Less than half an hour	2.18%	n = 58
About 6-7 hours	5.05%	n = 134
Half an hour to an hour	5.42%	n = 144
About 7 hours or more	5.88%	n = 156
Don't know	8.44%	n = 224
About 5-6 hours	9.83%	n = 261
About 1-2 hours	11.90%	n = 316
About 4-5 hours	13.71%	n = 364
About 3-4 hours	18.49%	n = 491
About 2-3 hours	18.53%	n = 492
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 16. Ages 14 - 18 how long do you spend online on an ordinary school day?

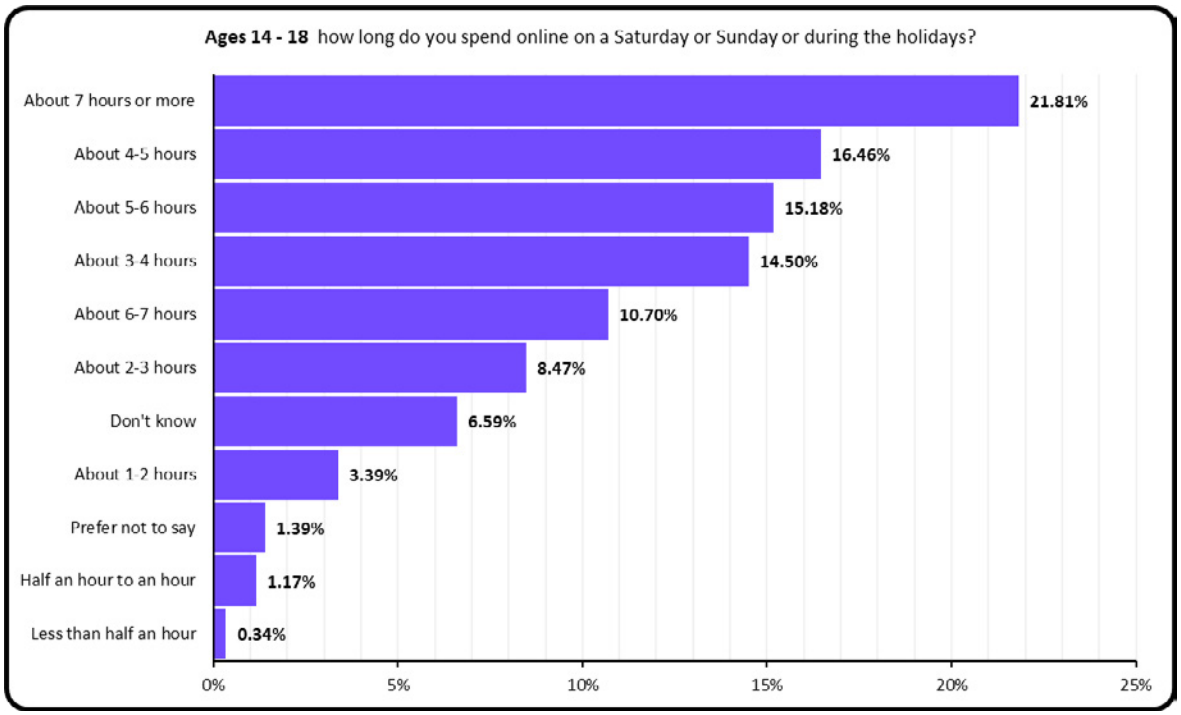


As shown in Table 17 and Figure 17, the most commonly reported amount of time spent online, for ages 14 – 18, on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays, was about 7 hours or more (21.81%, n=579), followed by 4-5 hours (16.46%, n=437), and so forth. Less than half an hour (0.34%, n=9), and half an hour to an hour (1.17%, n=31), were the least commonly reported, on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays. This is in contrast to an ordinary school day, as respondents are spending more time on average, online, on the weekends or during holidays. These results also show that this age group, is spending on average, slightly more time online on the weekends or during holidays, than the younger, 8 – 13 age group.

Table 17. Ages 14 - 18 how long do you spend online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays?

Ages 14 - 18 how long do you spend online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Less than half an hour	0.34%	n = 9
Half an hour to an hour	1.17%	n = 31
Prefer not to say	1.39%	n = 37
About 1-2 hours	3.39%	n = 90
Don't know	6.59%	n = 175
About 2-3 hours	8.47%	n = 225
About 6-7 hours	10.70%	n = 284
About 3-4 hours	14.50%	n = 385
About 5-6 hours	15.18%	n = 403
About 4-5 hours	16.46%	n = 437
About 7 hours or more	21.81%	n = 579
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 17. Ages 14 - 18 how long do you spend online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays?

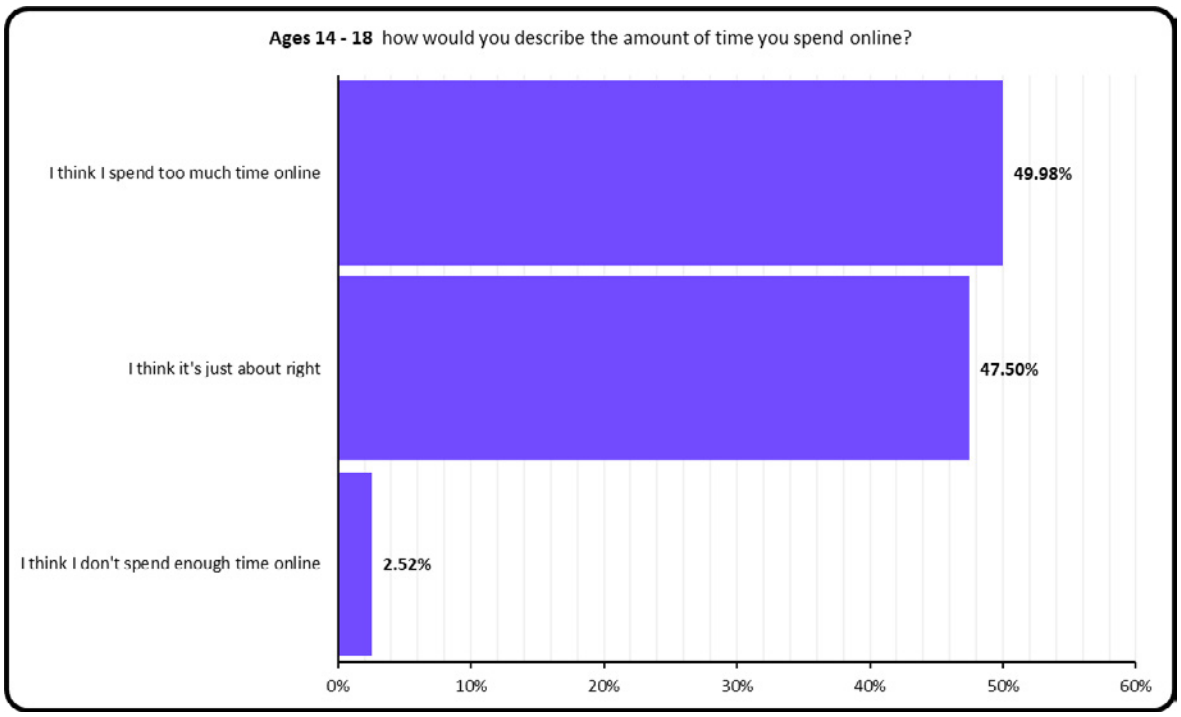


As shown in Table 18 and Figure 18, for ages 14 – 18, 49.98% (n=1327) think that they spend too much time one, and 47.50% (n=1261), think that it's just about right. Only 2.52% (n=67) think that they do not spend enough time online.

Table 18. Ages 14 - 18 how would you describe the amount of time you spend online?

Ages 14 - 18 how would you describe the amount of time you spend online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
I think I don't spend enough time online	2.52%	n = 67
I think it's just about right	47.50%	n = 1261
I think I spend too much time online	49.98%	n = 1327
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 18. Ages 14 - 18 how would you describe the amount of time you spend online?

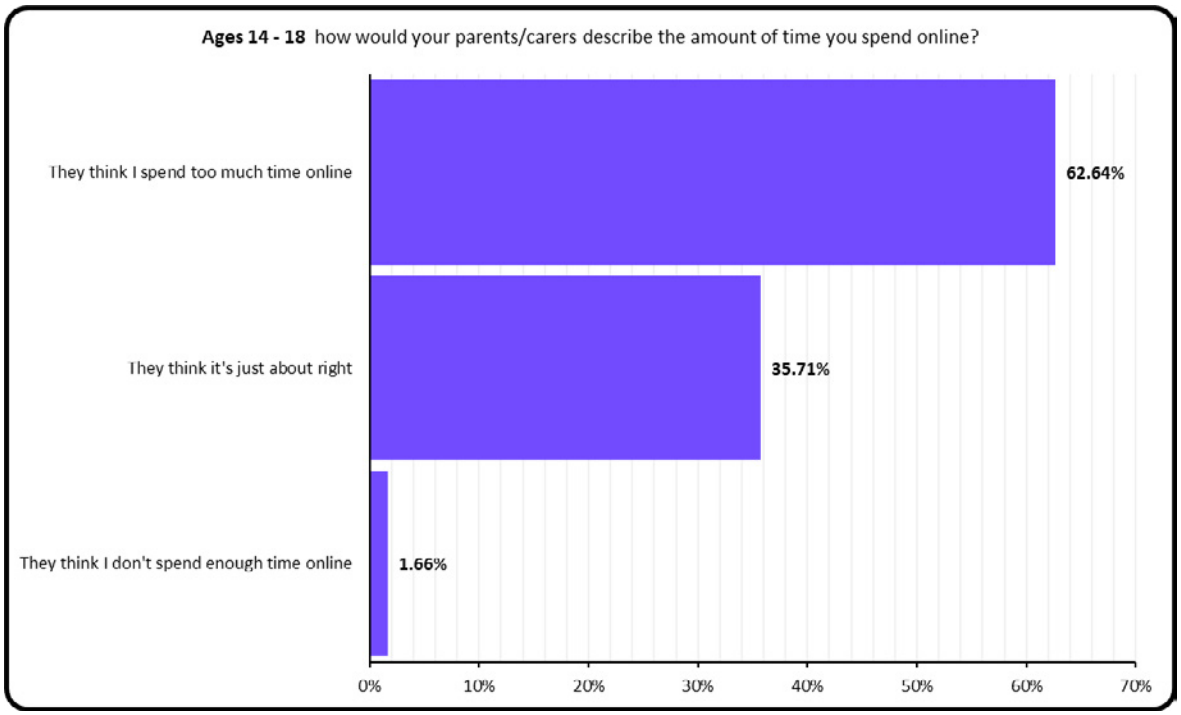


As shown in Table 19 and Figure 19, for ages 14 – 18, 62.64% (n=1663) responded that their parents think that they spend too much time online, and 35.71% (n=948), just about the right amount of time.

Table 19. Ages 14 - 18 how would your parents/carers describe the amount of time you spend online?

Ages 14 - 18 how would your parents/carers describe the amount of time you spend online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
They think I don't spend enough time online	1.66%	n = 44
They think it's just about right	35.71%	n = 948
They think I spend too much time online	62.64%	n = 1663
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 19. Ages 14 - 18 how would your parents/carers describe the amount of time you spend online?



4.5 Devices Used and Getting Online

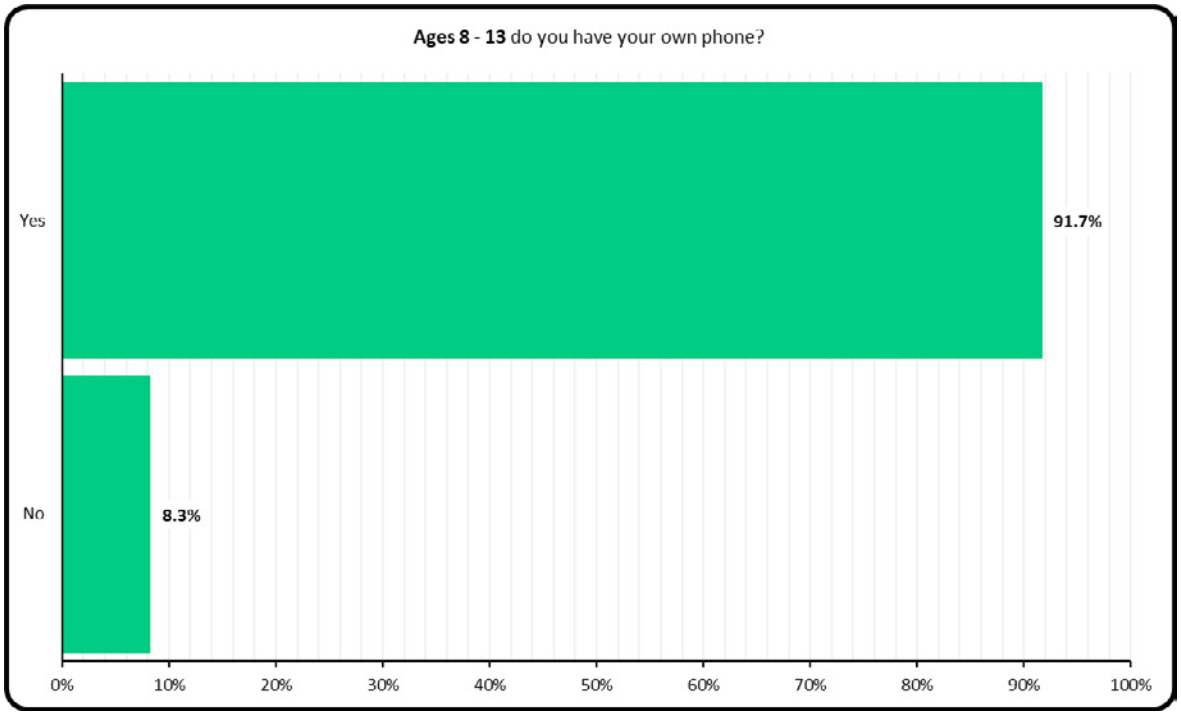
Devices and getting online (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 20 and Figure 20, for ages 8 – 13, 91.74% (n=3510) have their own phone.

Table 20. Ages 8 - 13 do you have your own phone?

Ages 8 - 13 do you have your own phone?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
No	8.26%	n = 316
Yes	91.74%	n = 3510
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826

Figure 20. Ages 8 - 13 do you have your own phone?

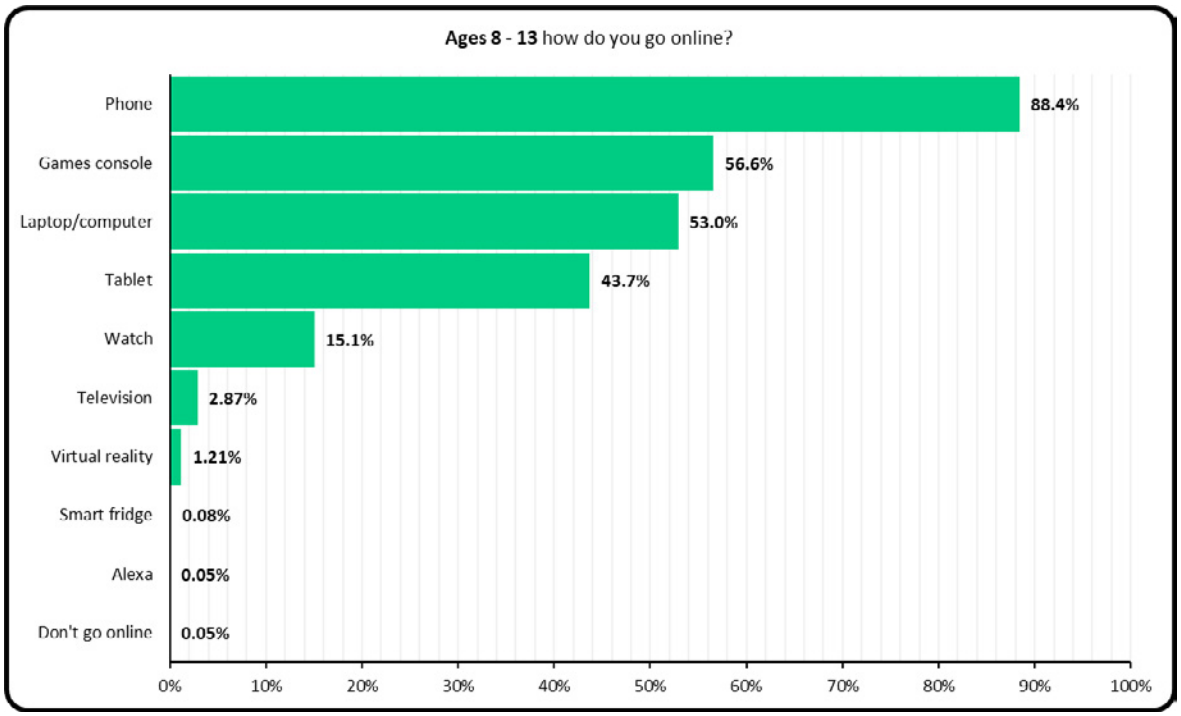


As shown in Table 21 and Figure 21, for ages 8 – 13, phones are the most common means of going online (88.45%), followed by for example, games console (56.59%), laptop/computer (52.95%), and tablet (43.70%). There are also small percentages for smart technologies such as Alexa and smart appliances in the home, television, watch, and technologies such as virtual reality.

Table 21. Ages 8 - 13 how do you go online?

Ages 8 - 13 how do you go online?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Don't go online	0.05%
Alexa	0.05%
Smart fridge	0.08%
Virtual reality	1.21%
Television	2.87%
Watch	15.08%
Tablet	43.70%
Laptop/ computer	52.95%
Games console	56.59%
Phone	88.45%

Figure 21. Ages 8 - 13 how do you go online?

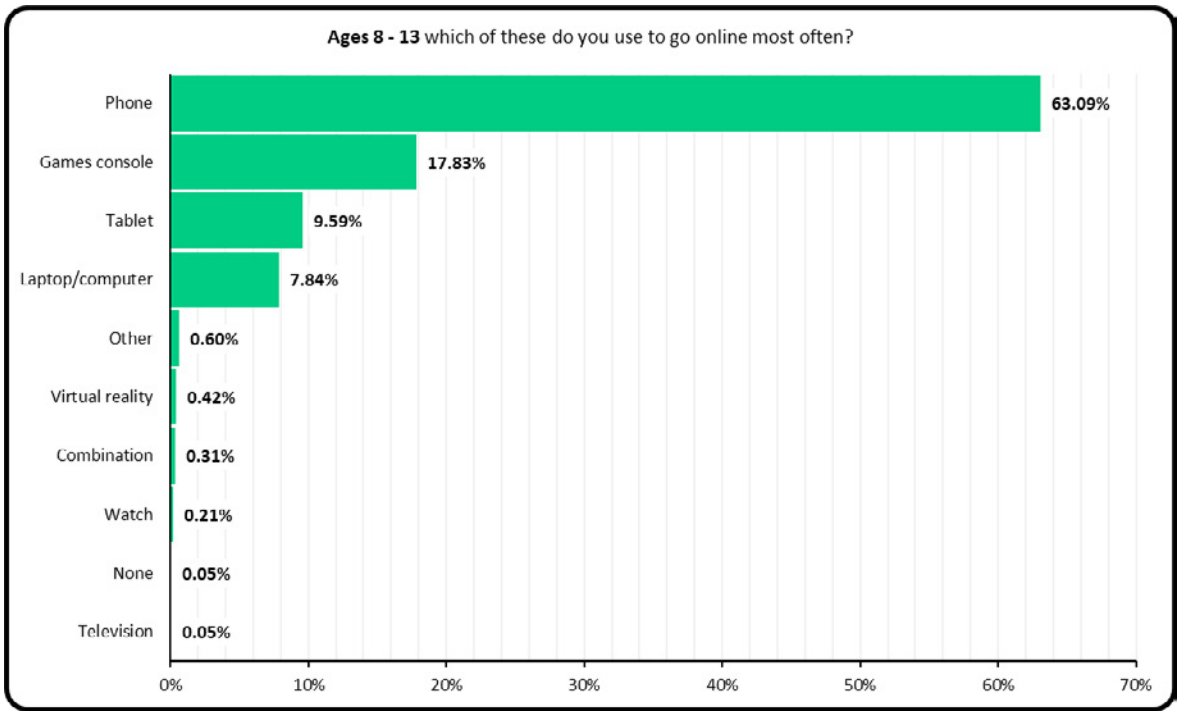


As shown in Table 22 and Figure 22, for ages 8 – 13, phones are used to go online most often (63.09%) by a considerable margin.

Table 22. Ages 8 - 13 which of these do you use to go online most often?

Ages 8 - 13 which of these do you use to go online most often?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Television	0.05%
None	0.05%
Watch	0.21%
Combination	0.31%
Virtual reality	0.42%
Other	0.60%
Laptop/computer	7.84%
Tablet	9.59%
Games console	17.83%
Phone	63.09%

Figure 22. Ages 8 - 13 which of these do you use to go online most often?

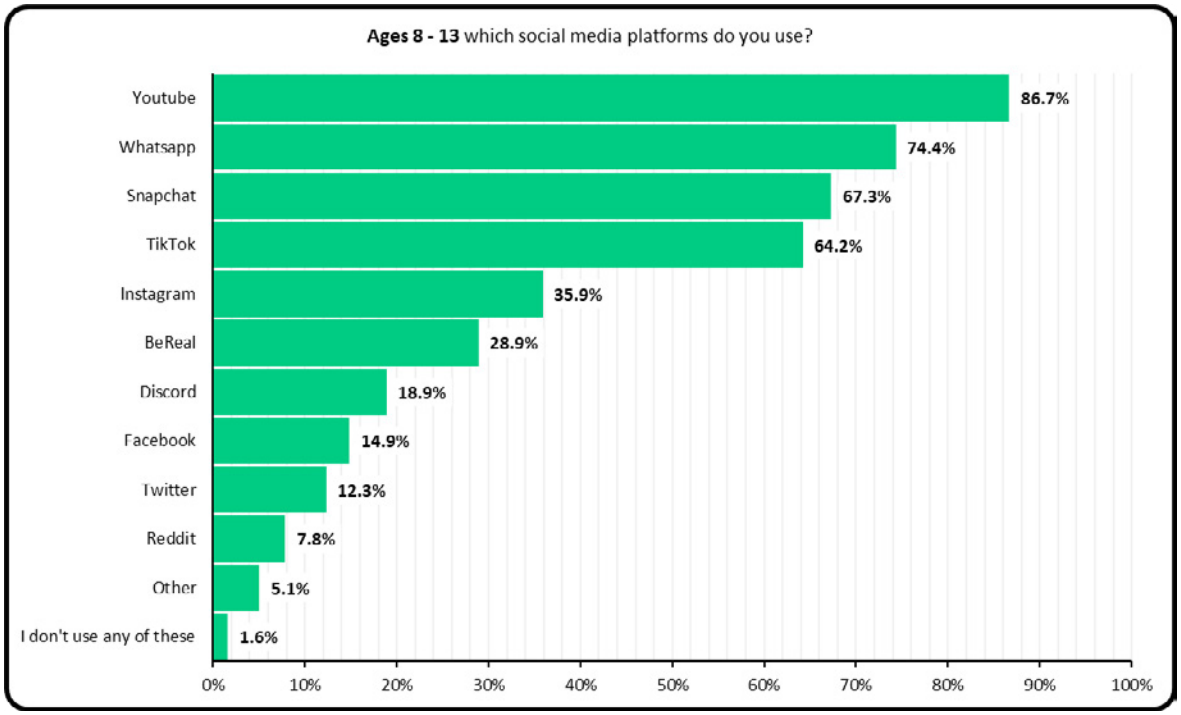


As shown in Table 23 and Figure 23, for ages 8 – 13, the most commonly used social media platform is YouTube (86.67%), followed by for example, WhatsApp (74.36%), Snapchat (67.30%), and TikTok (64.24%).

Table 23. Ages 8 - 13 which social media platforms do you use?

Ages 8 - 13 which social media platforms do you use?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
I don't use any of these	1.62%
Other	5.06%
Reddit	7.84%
Twitter	12.31%
Facebook	14.87%
Discord	18.87%
BeReal	28.93%
Instagram	35.91%
TikTok	64.24%
Snapchat	67.30%
Whatsapp	74.36%
Youtube	86.67%

Figure 23. Ages 8 - 13 which social media platforms do you use?



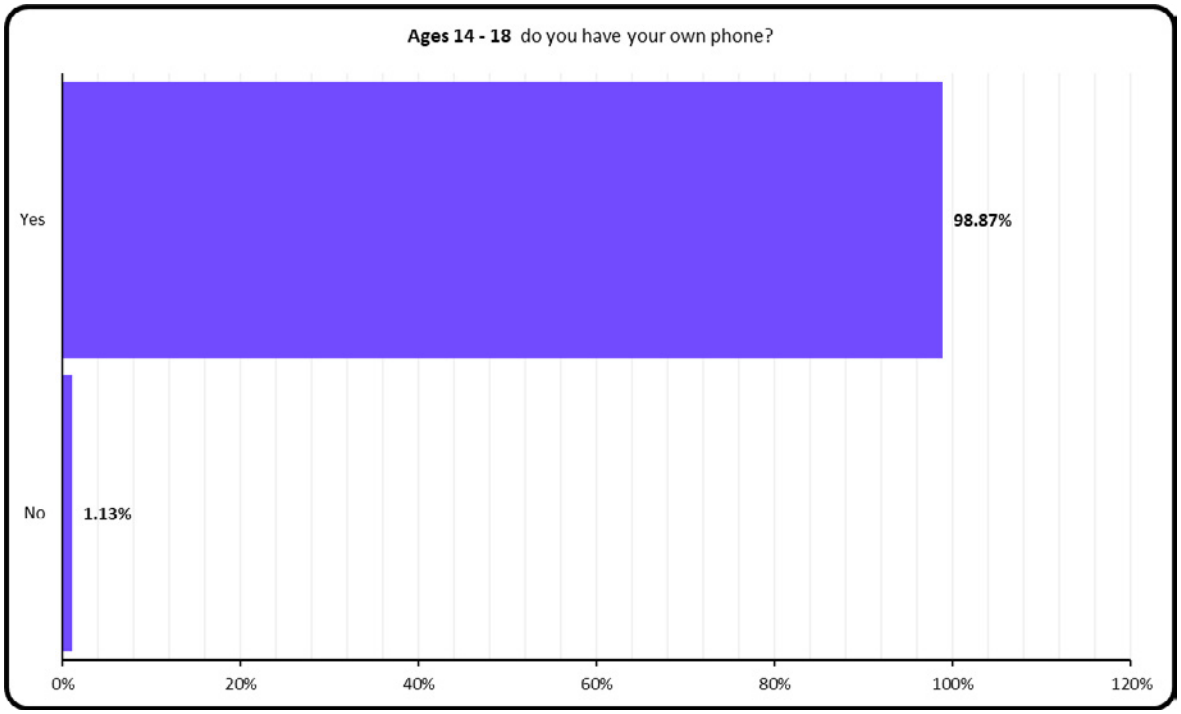
Devices and getting online (ages 14 – 18):

As shown in Table 24 and Figure 24, for ages 14 – 18, 98.87% (n=2625) have their own phone, which is comparable to the younger 8 – 13 age group.

Table 24. Ages 14 - 18 do you have your own phone?

Ages 14 - 18 do you have your own phone?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
No	1.13%	n = 30
Yes	98.87%	n = 2625
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 24. Ages 14 - 18 do you have your own phone?

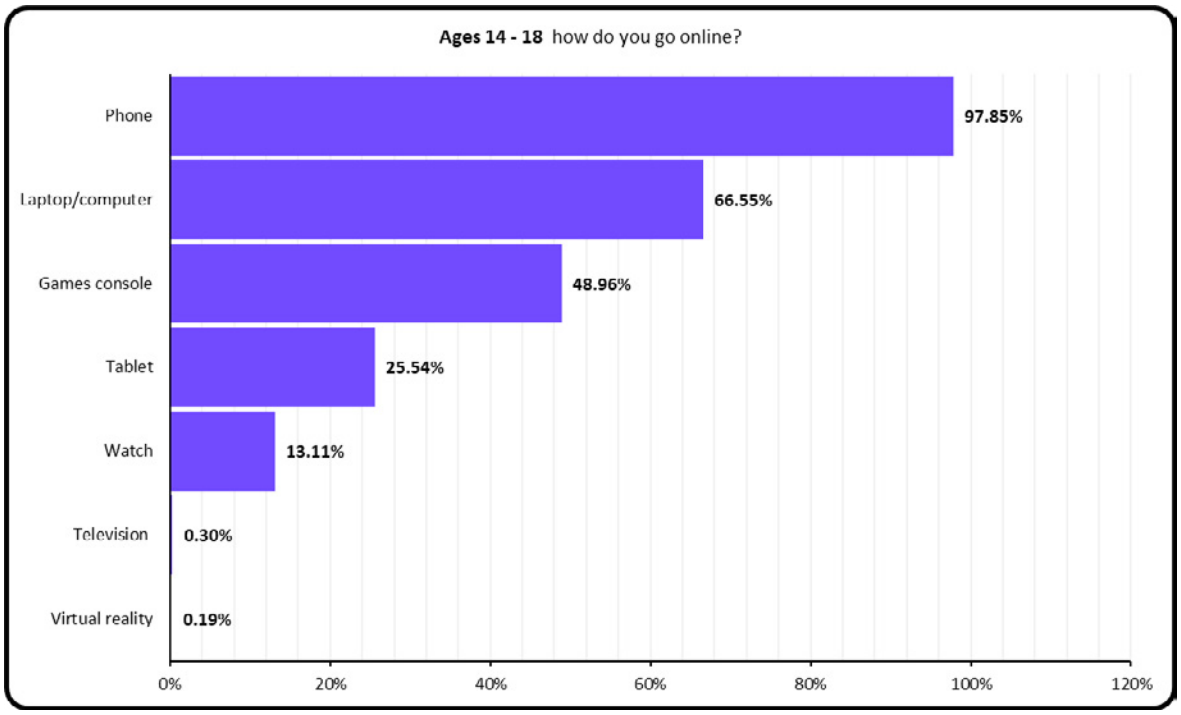


As shown in Table 25 and Figure 25, for ages 14 – 18, the most common means for going online is the phone (97.85%), followed by for example, laptop/computer (66.55%), games console (48.96%), and tablet (25.54%). There are also small percentages who use virtual reality, television, and watch.

Table 25. Ages 14 - 18 how do you go online?

Ages 14 - 18 how do you go online?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Virtual reality	0.19%
Television	0.30%
Watch	13.11%
Tablet	25.54%
Games console	48.96%
Laptop/computer	66.55%
Phone	97.85%

Figure 25. Ages 14 - 18 how do you go online?

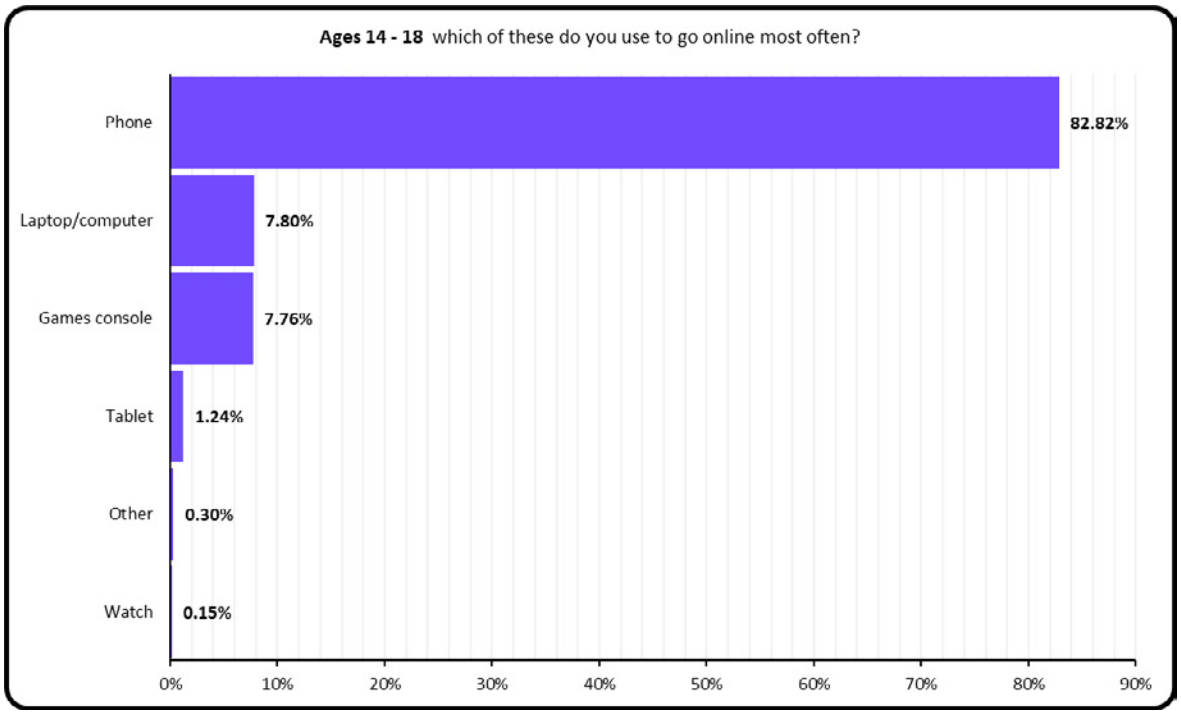


As shown in Table 26 and Figure 26, for ages 14 – 18, phones are used to go online most often by a considerable margin (82.71%, n=2196), again comparable to the younger 8 – 13 age group.

Table 26. Ages 14 - 18 which of these do you use to go online most often?

Ages 14 - 18 which of these do you use to go online most often?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
amogus	0.04%	n = 1
buying novel and manga	0.04%	n = 1
chromebook	0.04%	n = 1
Console and phone	0.04%	n = 1
mr grills iphone	0.04%	n = 1
nothing	0.04%	n = 1
ps5	0.04%	n = 1
Samsung smart fridge	0.04%	n = 1
Tablet and phone	0.04%	n = 1
tn	0.04%	n = 1
your dea	0.04%	n = 1
Other (please specify):	0.08%	n = 2
PC	0.08%	n = 2
ipad	0.11%	n = 3
Watch	0.15%	n = 4
Tablet	1.09%	n = 29
Games console	7.68%	n = 204
Laptop/computer	7.68%	n = 204
Phone	82.71%	n = 2196
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 26. Ages 14 - 18 which of these do you use to go online most often?

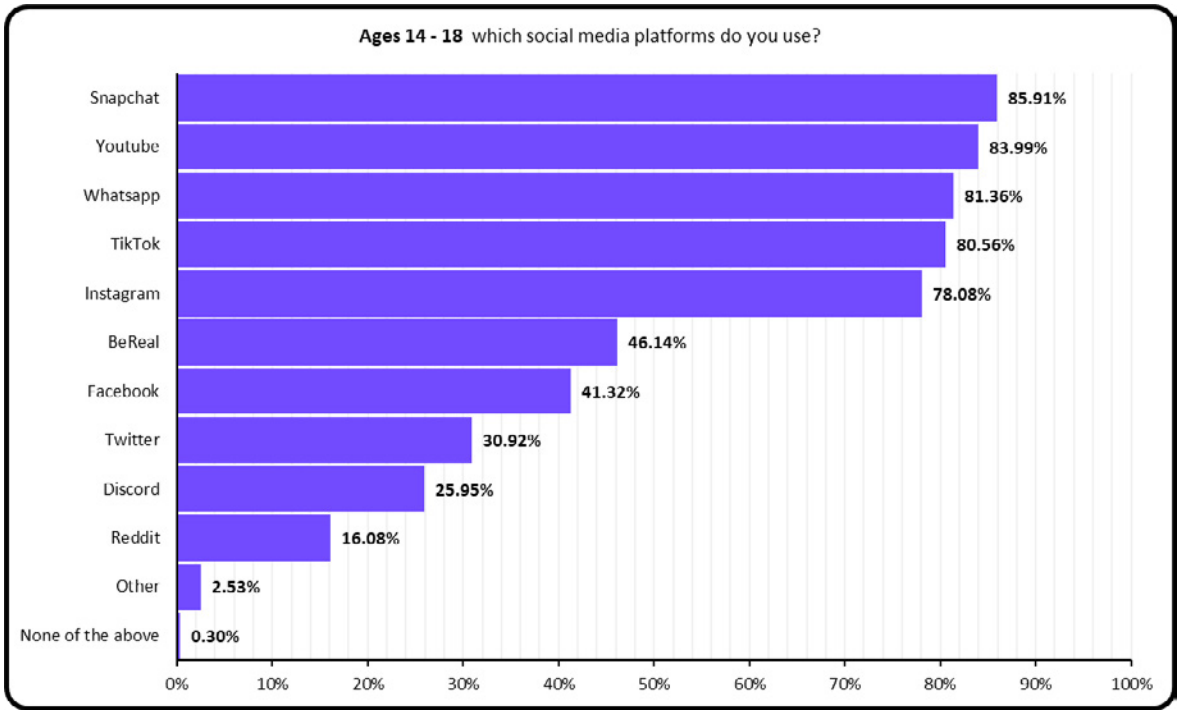


As shown in Table 27 and Figure 27, for ages 14 – 18, the most common social media platform is Snapchat (85.91%), followed by YouTube (83.99%), WhatsApp (81.36%), and TikTok (80.56%). However, platforms such as Instagram (78.08%), Facebook (41.32%) and Twitter (30.92%) appear to be used more often than with the younger 8 – 13 age group.

Table 27. Ages 14 - 18 which social media platforms do you use?

Ages 14 - 18 which social media platforms do you use?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
None of the above	0.30%
Other	2.53%
Reddit	16.08%
Discord	25.95%
Twitter	30.92%
Facebook	41.32%
BeReal	46.14%
Instagram	78.08%
TikTok	80.56%
WhatsApp	81.36%
YouTube	83.99%
Snapchat	85.91%

Figure 27. Ages 14 - 18 which social media platforms do you use?



4.6 Impact of Going Online

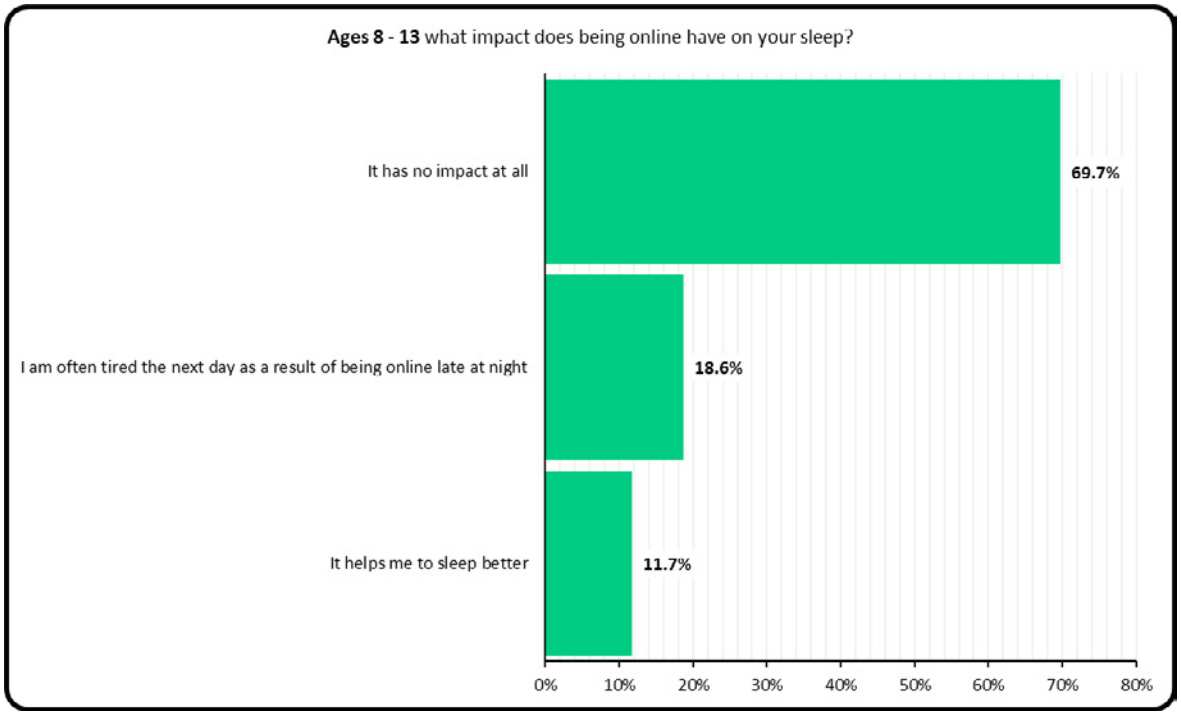
Impact of going online (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 28 and Figure 28, for ages 8 – 13, 69.65% (n=2665) responded that being online has no impact at all on their sleep, with 18.64% (n=713) responding that they are often tired the next day due to being online late at night, and 11.71% (n=448) responded that it helps them to sleep better.

Table 28. Ages 8 - 13 what impact does being online have on your sleep?

Ages 8 - 13 what impact does being online have on your sleep?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
It helps me to sleep better	11.71%	n = 448
I am often tired the next day as a result of being online late at night	18.64%	n = 713
It has no impact at all	69.65%	n = 2665
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826

Figure 28. Ages 8 - 13 what impact does being online have on your sleep?

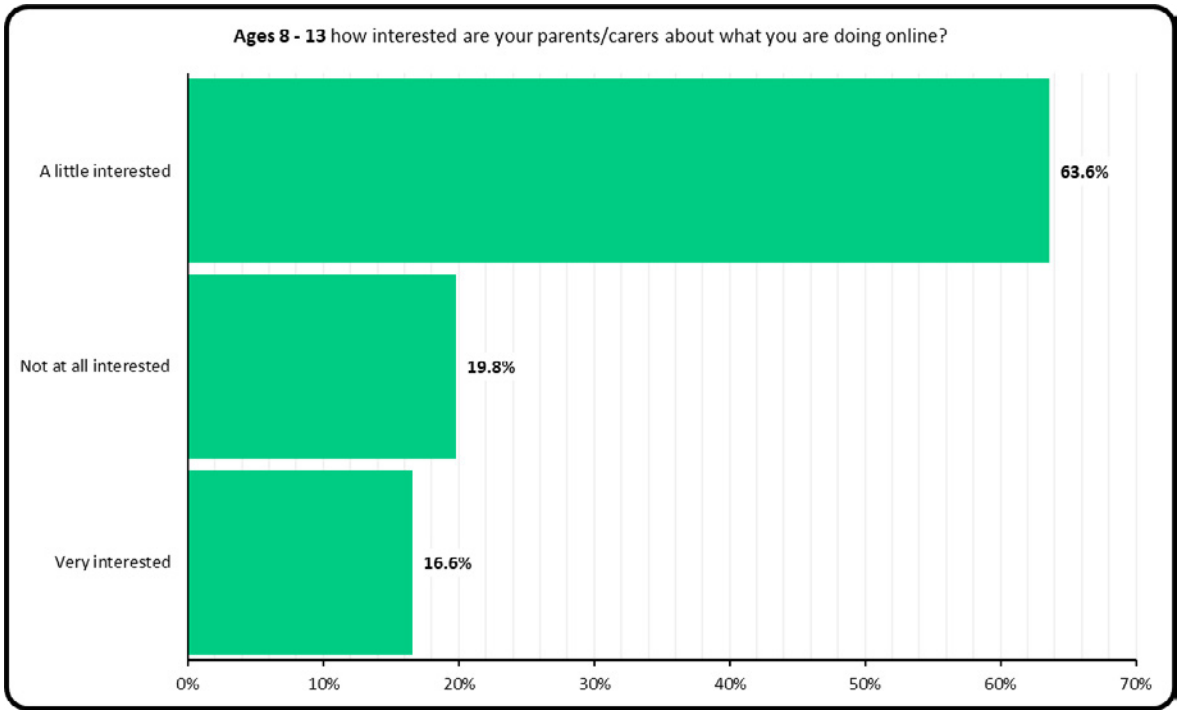


As shown in Table 29 and Figure 29, for ages 8 – 13, 63.62% (n=2434) responded that their parents/carers are a little interested in what they are doing online. 19.79% (n=757) responded that their parents/carers are not at all interested, and 16.60% (n=635) responded very interested.

Table 29. Ages 8 - 13 how interested are your parents/carers about what you are doing online?

Ages 8 - 13 how interested are your parents/carers about what you are doing online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Very interested	16.60%	n = 635
Not at all interested	19.79%	n = 757
A little interested	63.62%	n = 2434
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826

Figure 29. Ages 8 - 13 how interested are your parents/carers about what you are doing online?

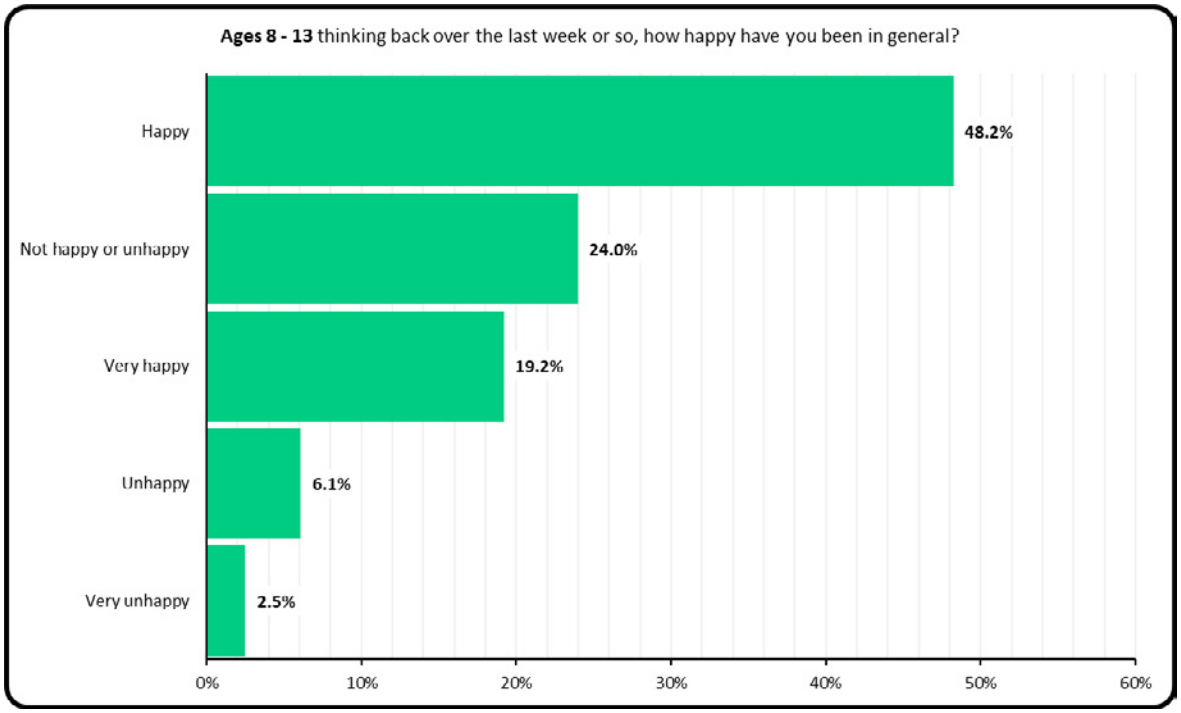


As shown in Table 30 and Figure 30, for ages 8 – 13, 48.25% (n=1846) responded that they have been happy over the last week or so. However, 23.99% (n=918) responded that they have been not happy or unhappy, and 19.18% (n=734) very happy, with small percentages for unhappy (6.06%, n=232), and very unhappy (2.51%, n=96).

Table 30. Ages 8 - 13 thinking back over the last week or so, how happy have you been in general?

Ages 8 - 13 thinking back over the last week or so, how happy have you been in general?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Very unhappy	2.51%	n = 96
Unhappy	6.06%	n = 232
Very happy	19.18%	n = 734
Not happy or unhappy	23.99%	n = 918
Happy	48.25%	n = 1846
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826

Figure 30. Ages 8 - 13 thinking back over the last week or so, how happy have you been in general?

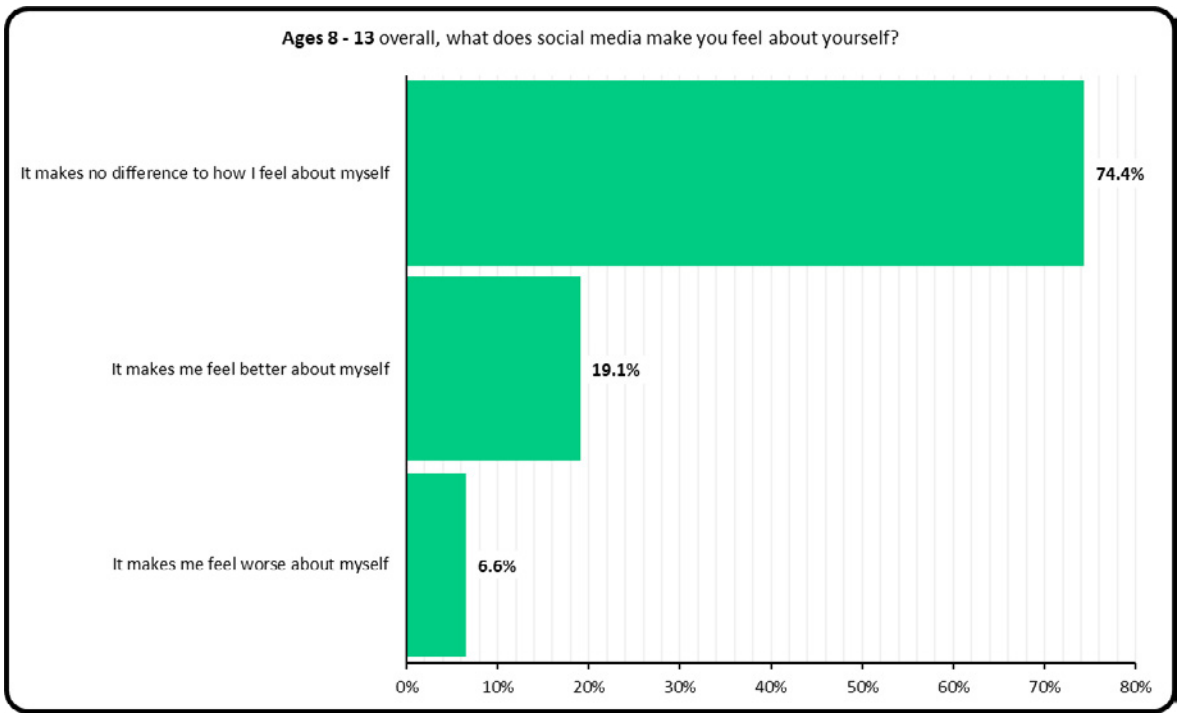


As shown in Table 31 and Figure 31, for ages 8 – 13, 74.36% (n=2845) responded that social media makes no difference to how they feel about themselves, 19.08% (n=730) that it makes them feel better about themselves, and 6.56% (n=251) that it makes them feel worse about themselves.

Table 31. Ages 8 - 13 overall, what does social media make you feel about yourself?

Ages 8 - 13 overall, what does social media make you feel about yourself?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
It makes me feel worse about myself	6.56%	n = 251
It makes me feel better about myself	19.08%	n = 730
It makes no difference to how I feel about myself	74.36%	n = 2845
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826

Figure 31. Ages 8 - 13 overall, what does social media make you feel about yourself?



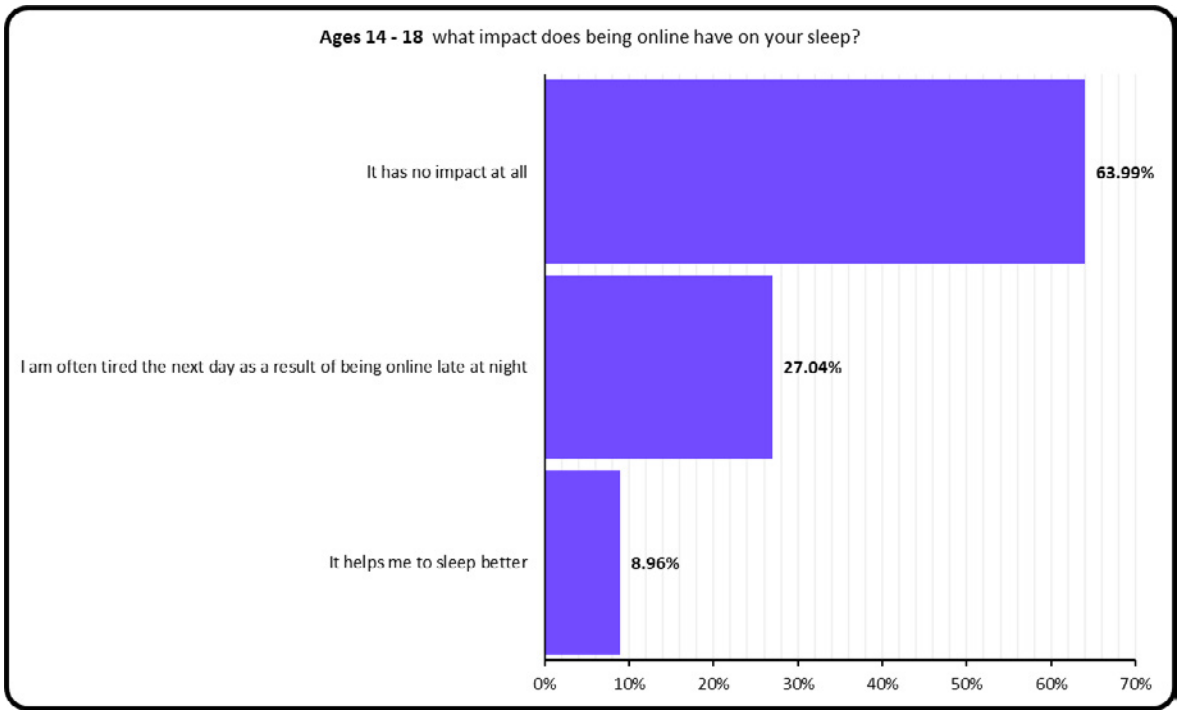
Impact of going online (ages 14 – 18):

As shown in Table 32 and Figure 32, for ages 14 – 18, 63.99% (n=1699) responded that being online has no impact at all on their sleep. 27.04% (n=718) responded that they are often tired the next day after being online late at night, and 8.96% (n=238) responded that it helps them to sleep better.

Table 32. Ages 14 - 18 what impact does being online have on your sleep?

Ages 14 - 18 what impact does being online have on your sleep?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
It helps me to sleep better	8.96%	n = 238
I am often tired the next day as a result of being online late at night	27.04%	n = 718
It has no impact at all	63.99%	n = 1699
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 32. Ages 14 - 18 what impact does being online have on your sleep?

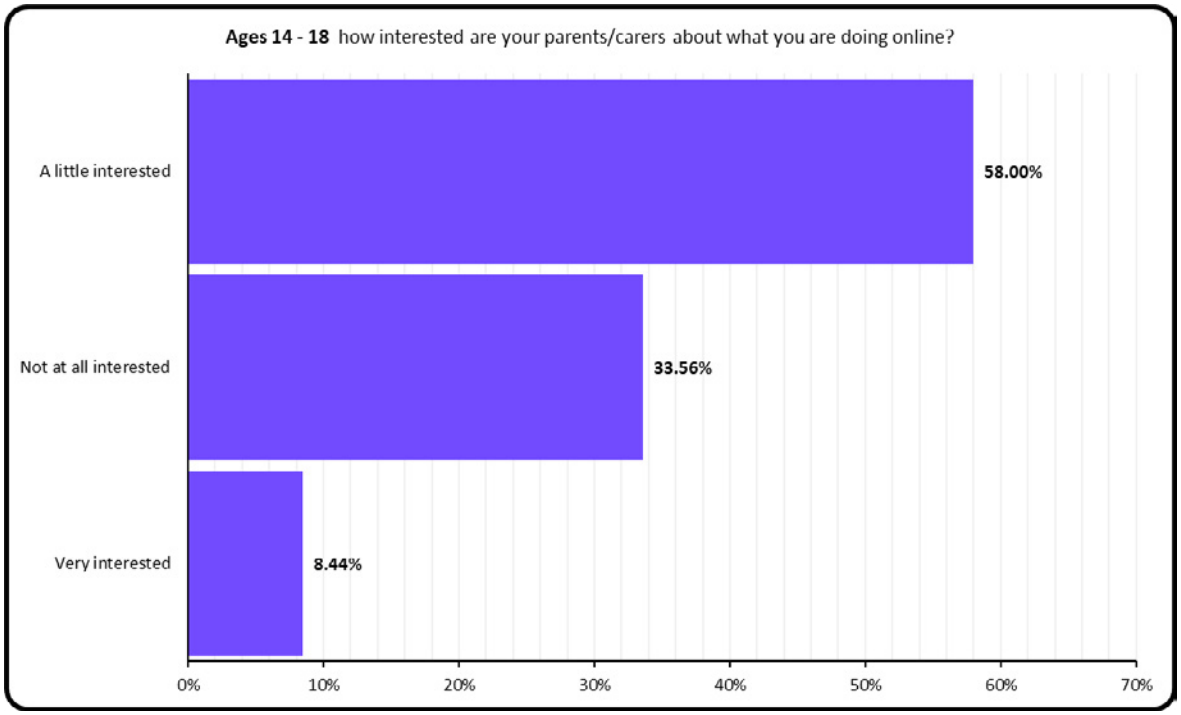


As shown in Table 33 and Figure 33, for ages 14 – 18, 58.00% (n=1540) responded that their parents/carers are a little interested about what they are doing online. 33.56% (n=891) responded that their parents/carers are not at all interested, and 8.44% (n=224) that they are very interested.

Table 33. Ages 14 - 18 how interested are your parents/carers about what you are doing online?

Ages 14 - 18 how interested are your parents/carers about what you are doing online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Very interested	8.44%	n = 224
Not at all interested	33.56%	n = 891
A little interested	58.00%	n = 1540
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 33. Ages 14 - 18 how interested are your parents/carers about what you are doing online?

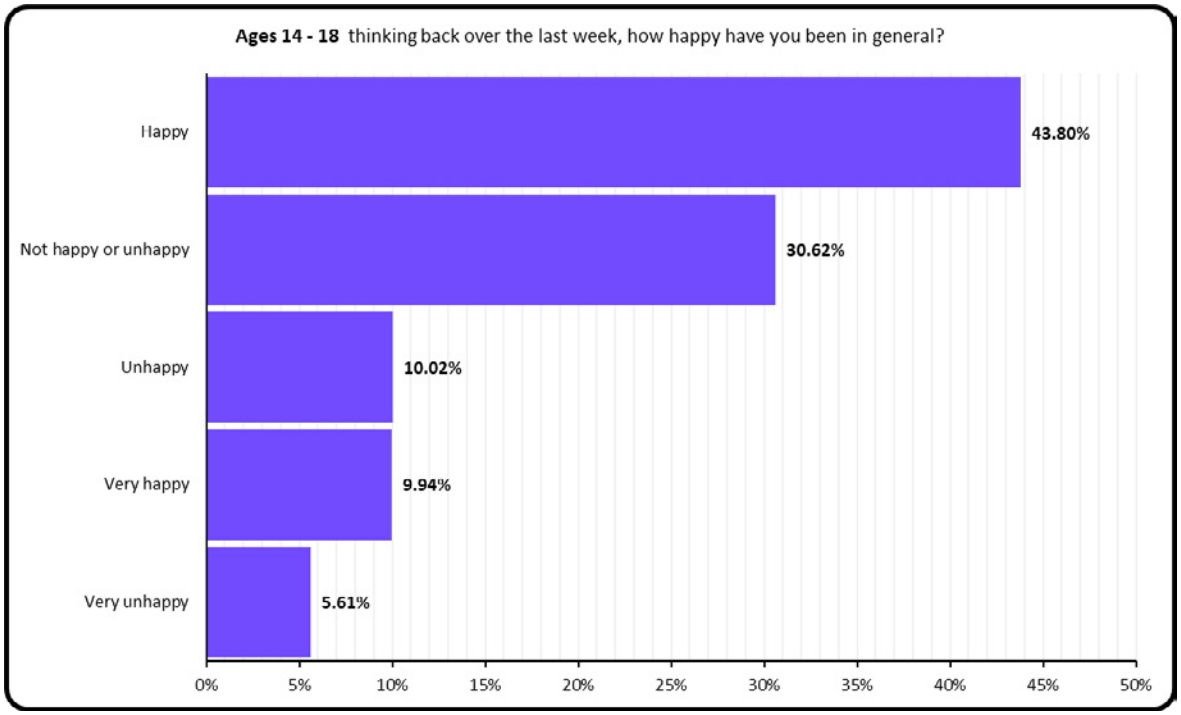


As shown in Table 34 and Figure 34, for ages 14 – 18, 43.80% (n=1163) responded that they have been happy over the last week. However, 30.62% (n=813) responded that they were not happy or unhappy. These results are similar to the younger 8 – 13 age group.

Table 34. Ages 14 - 18 thinking back over the last week, how happy have you been in general?

Ages 14 - 18 thinking back over the last week, how happy have you been in general?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Very unhappy	5.61%	n = 149
Very happy	9.94%	n = 264
Unhappy	10.02%	n = 266
Not happy or unhappy	30.62%	n = 813
Happy	43.80%	n = 1163
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 34. Ages 14 - 18 thinking back over the last week, how happy have you been in general?

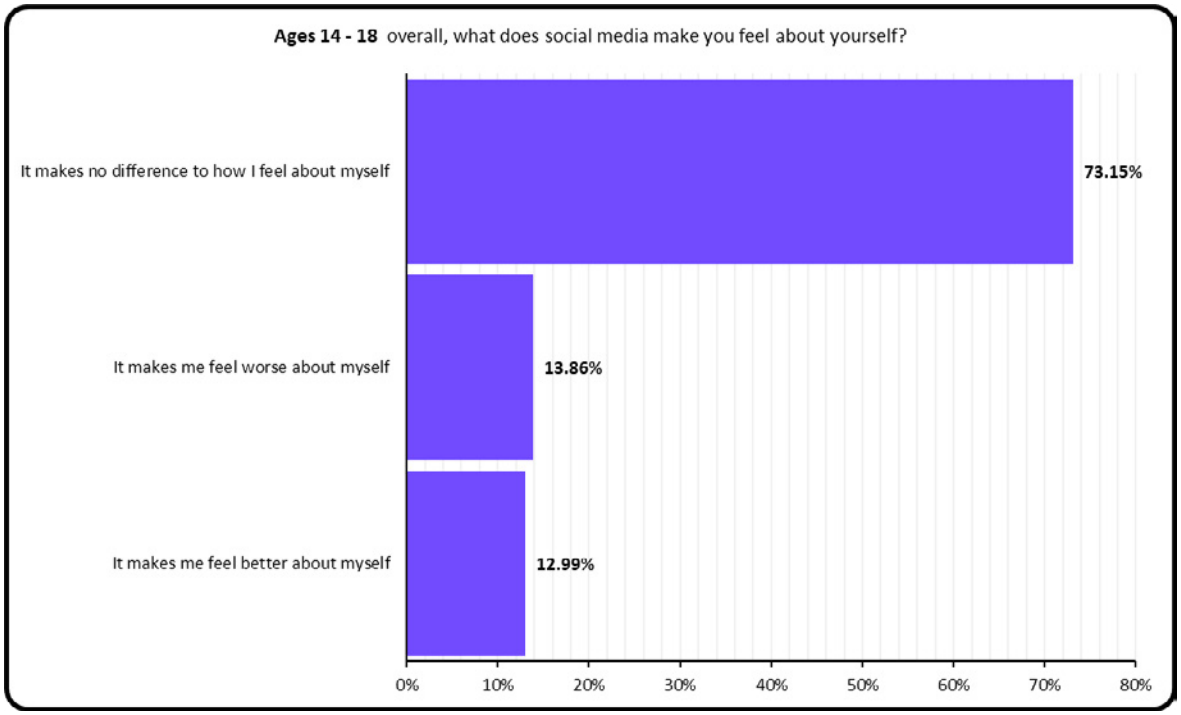


As shown in Table 35 and Figure 35, for ages 14 – 18, 73.15% (n=1942) responded that social media makes no difference to how they feel about themselves. 13.86% (n=368) responded that it makes them feel worse about themselves, and 12.99% (n=345) that it makes them feel better about themselves.

Table 35. Ages 14 - 18 overall, what does social media make you feel about yourself?

Ages 14 - 18 overall, what does social media make you feel about yourself?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
It makes me feel better about myself	12.99%	n = 345
It makes me feel worse about myself	13.86%	n = 368
It makes no difference to how I feel about myself	73.15%	n = 1942
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 35. Ages 14 - 18 overall, what does social media make you feel about yourself?



4.7 Preferred Online Activities

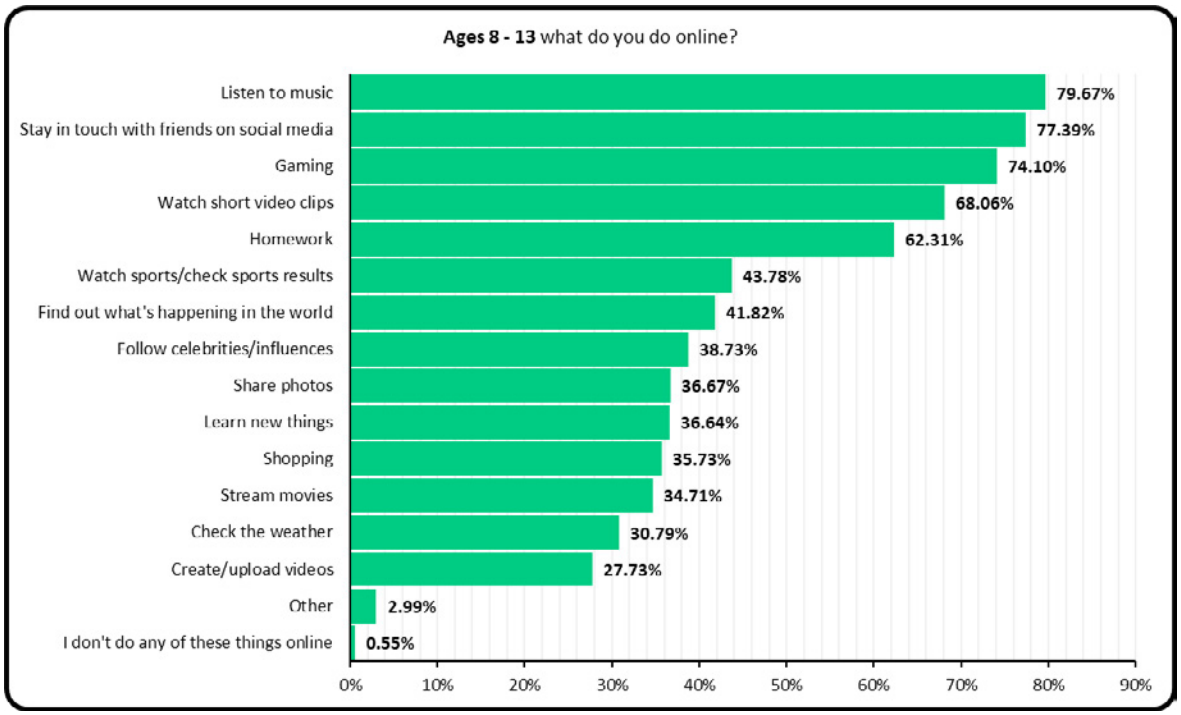
Online activities (ages 8 – 13)

As shown in Table 36 and Figure 36, for ages 8 – 13, the most common things to do online included for example, in descending order, listening to music, staying in touch with friends on social media, gaming, watching short video clips, homework, watching sports and checking results, find out what is happening in the world, follow celebrities/influencers, sharing photos, and learn new things.

Table 36. Ages 8 - 13 what do you do online?

Ages 8 - 13 what do you do online?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
I don't do any of these things online	0.55%
Other	2.99%
Create/upload videos	27.73%
Check the weather	30.79%
Stream movies	34.71%
Shopping	35.73%
Learn new things	36.64%
Share photos	36.67%
Follow celebrities/influences	38.73%
Find out what's happening in the world	41.82%
Watch sports/check sports results	43.78%
Homework	62.31%
Watch short video clips	68.06%
Gaming	74.10%
Stay in touch with friends on social media	77.39%
Listen to music	79.67%

Figure 36. Ages 8 - 13 what do you do online?

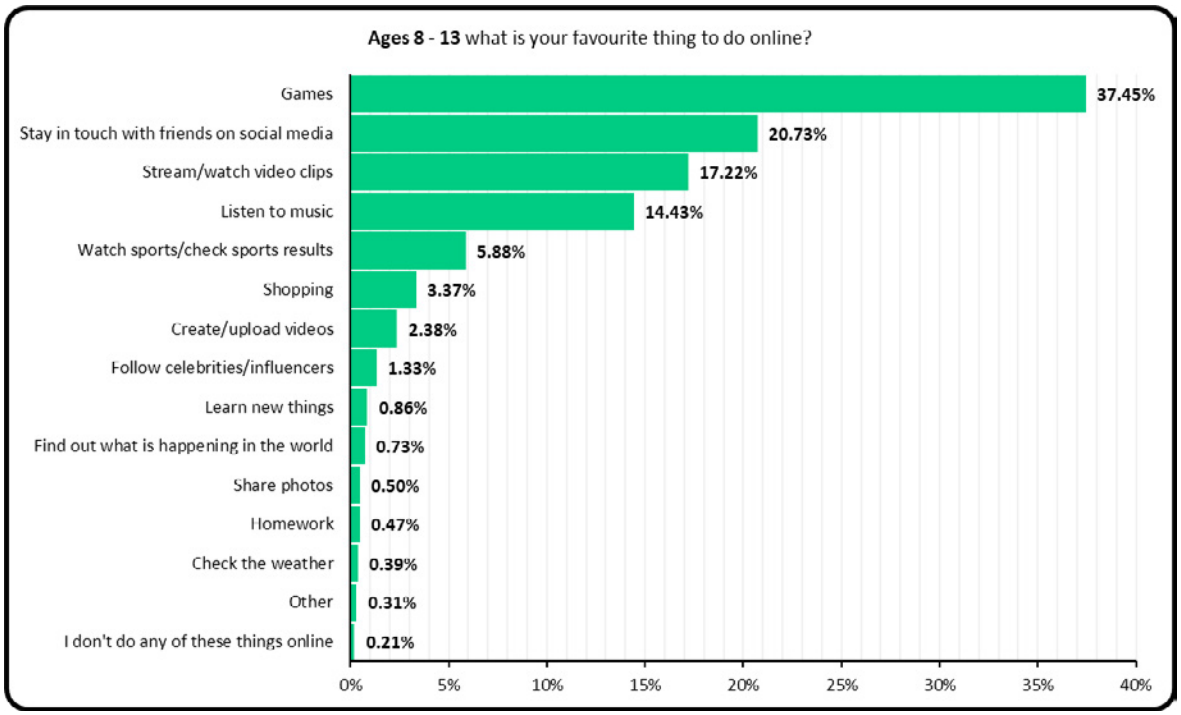


As shown in Table 37 and Figure 37, for ages 8 – 13, the most common favourite thing to do online is games (37.45%), followed by, for example, staying in touch with friends on social media (20.73%).

Table 37. Ages 8 - 13 what is your favourite thing to do online?

Ages 8 - 13 what is your favourite thing to do online?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
I don't do any of these things online	0.21%
Other	0.31%
Check the weather	0.39%
Homework	0.47%
Share photos	0.50%
Find out what is happening in the world	0.73%
Learn new things	0.86%
Follow celebrities/influencers	1.33%
Create/upload videos	2.38%
Shopping	3.37%
Watch sports/check sports results	5.88%
Listen to music	14.43%
Stream/watch video clips	17.22%
Stay in touch with friends on social media	20.73%
Games	37.45%

Figure 37. Ages 8 - 13 what is your favourite thing to do online?

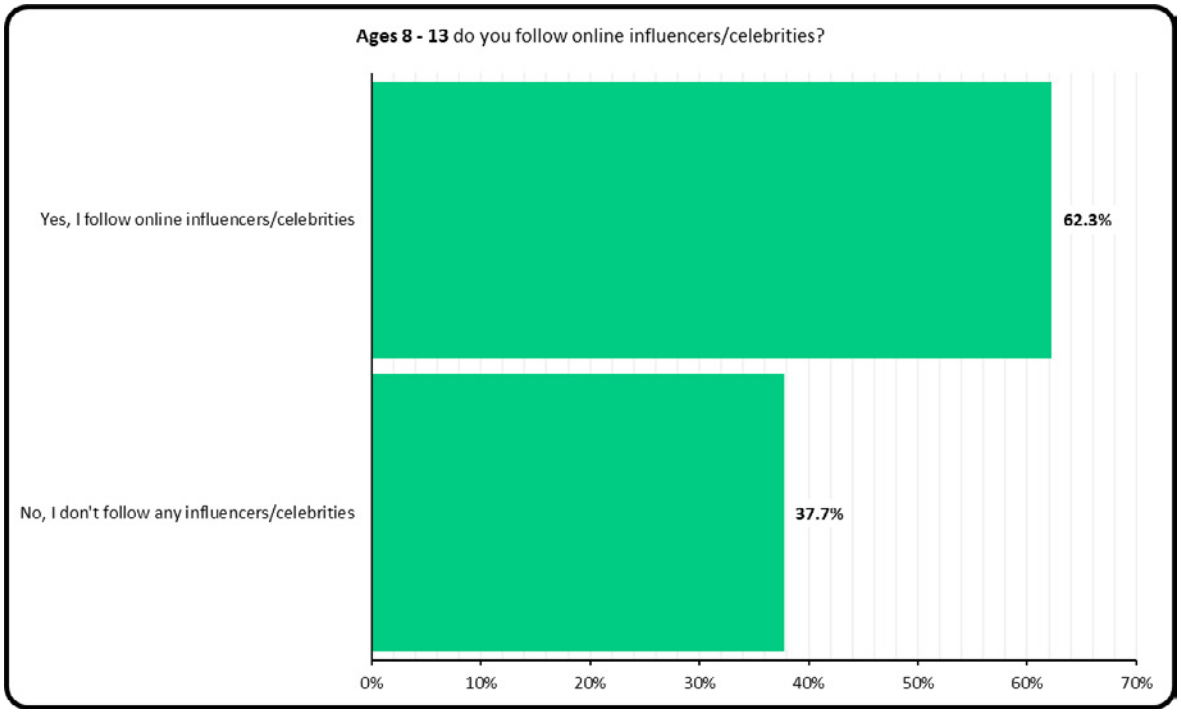


As shown in Table 38 and Figure 38, for ages 8 – 13, 62.26% (n=2382) follow online influencers/celebrities.

Table 38. Ages 8 - 13 do you follow online influencers/celebrities?

Ages 8 - 13 do you follow online influencers/celebrities?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
No, I don't follow any influencers/celebrities	37.74%	n = 1444
Yes, I follow online influencers/celebrities	62.26%	n = 2382
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826

Figure 38. Ages 8 - 13 do you follow online influencers/celebrities?

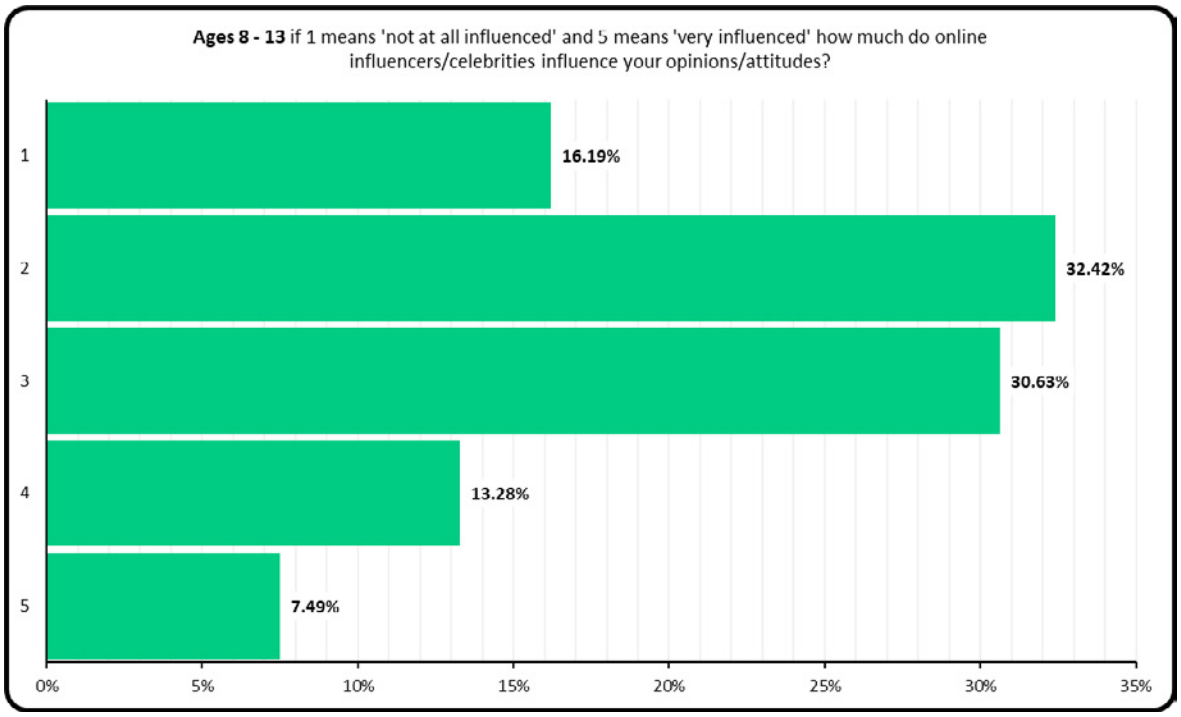


As shown in Table 39 and Figure 39, for ages 8 – 13, a majority of 32.42% (n=779) responded with a 2 on a scale of 1 (not at all influenced) to 5 (very influenced) in respect to how much online influencers/celebrities influence their opinions/attitudes. This was followed by, in descending percentage order, with a 3, 1, 4, and 5. 2 and 3 responses account for a total of 63.05%.

Table 39. Ages 8 - 13 if 1 means 'not at all influenced' and 5 means 'very influenced' how much do online influencers/celebrities influence your opinions/attitudes?

Ages 8 - 13 if 1 means 'not at all influenced' and 5 means 'very influenced' how much do online influencers/celebrities influence your opinions/attitudes?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
5	7.49%	180
4	13.28%	319
3	30.63%	736
2	32.42%	779
1	16.19%	389
Grand Total	100.00%	2403

Figure 39. Ages 8 - 13 if 1 means 'not at all influenced' and 5 means 'very influenced' how much do online influencers/celebrities influence your opinions/attitudes?

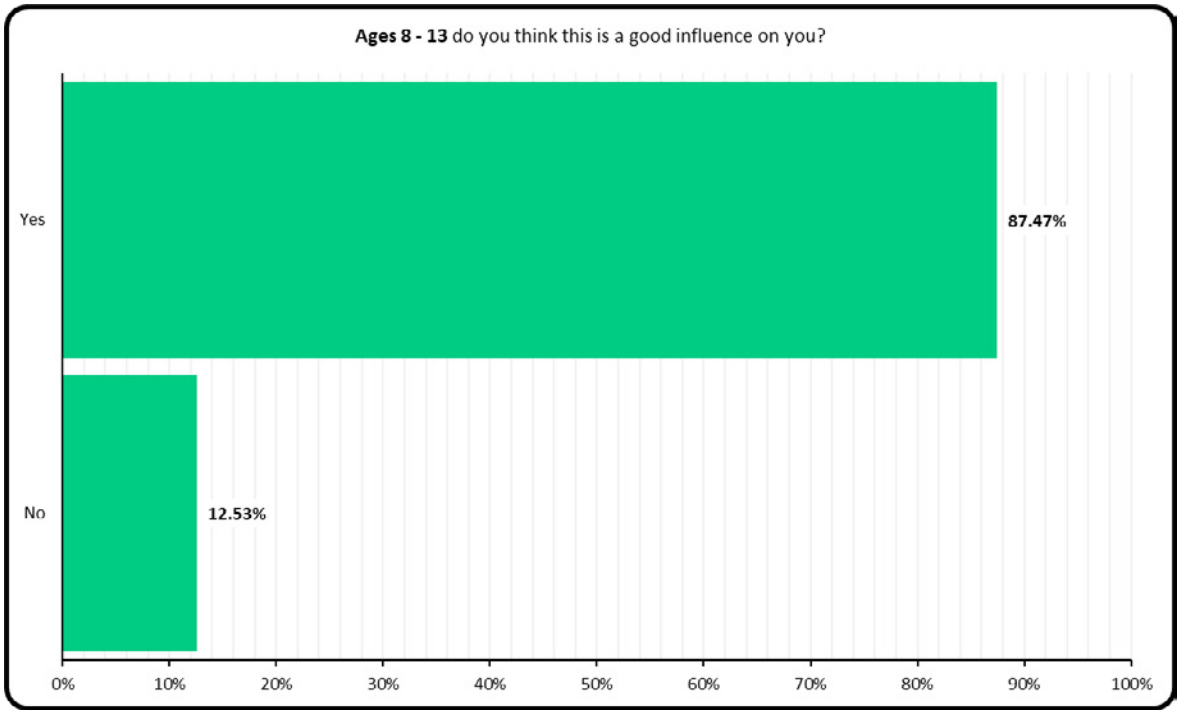


As shown in Table 40 and Figure 40, for ages 8 – 13, 87.47% (n=2088) responded, in respect to the previous question, that this was a good influence on them. However, 12.53% (n=299) responded that it was not a good influence on them.

Table 40. Ages 8 - 13 do you think this is a good influence on you?

Ages 8 - 13 do you think this is a good influence on you?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
No	12.53%	299
Yes	87.47%	2088
Grand Total	100.00%	2387

Figure 40. Ages 8 - 13 do you think this is a good influence on you?

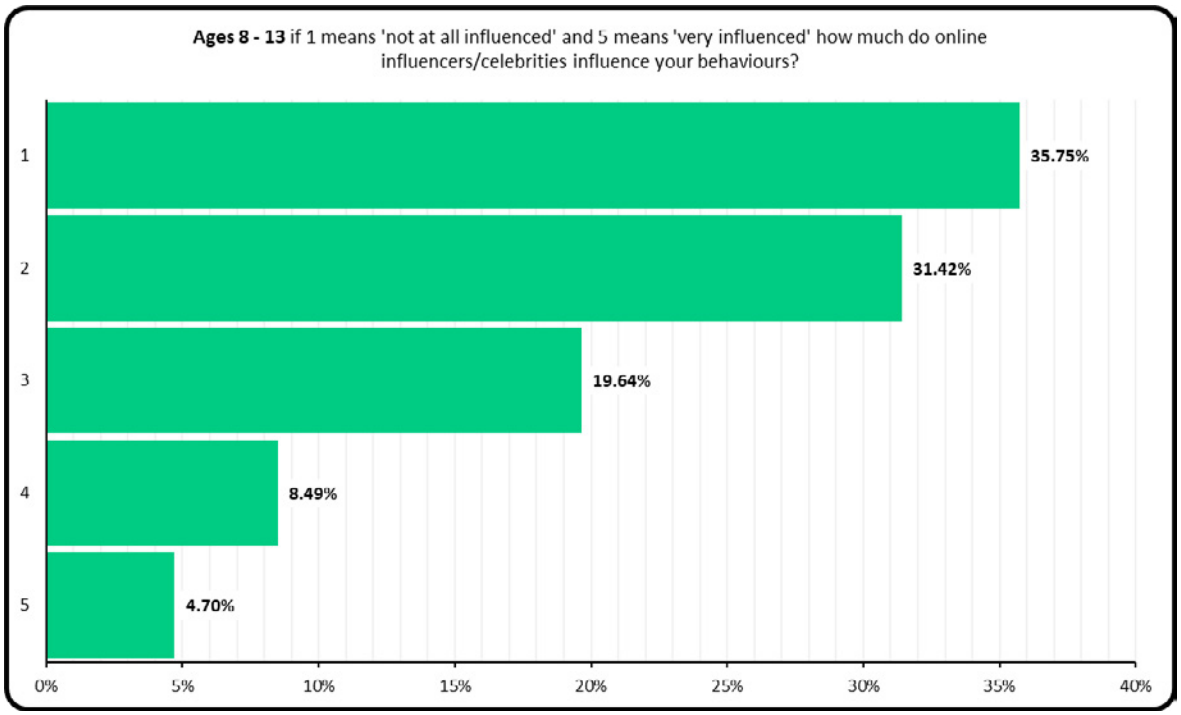


As shown in Table 41 and Figure 41, for ages 8 – 13, a majority of 35.75% (n=859) responded with a 1 on a scale of 1 (not at all influenced) to 5 (very influenced) in respect to how much online influencers/celebrities influence their behaviours. This was followed by, in descending percentage order, with 2, 3, 4, and 5.

Table 41. Ages 8 - 13 if 1 means 'not at all influenced' and 5 means 'very influenced' how much do online influencers/celebrities influence your behaviours?

Ages 8 - 13 if 1 means 'not at all influenced' and 5 means 'very influenced' how much do online influencers/celebrities influence your behaviours?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
5	4.70%	113
4	8.49%	204
3	19.64%	472
2	31.42%	755
1	35.75%	859
Grand Total	100.00%	2403

Figure 41. Ages 8 - 13 if 1 means 'not at all influenced' and 5 means 'very influenced' how much do online influencers/celebrities influence your behaviours?

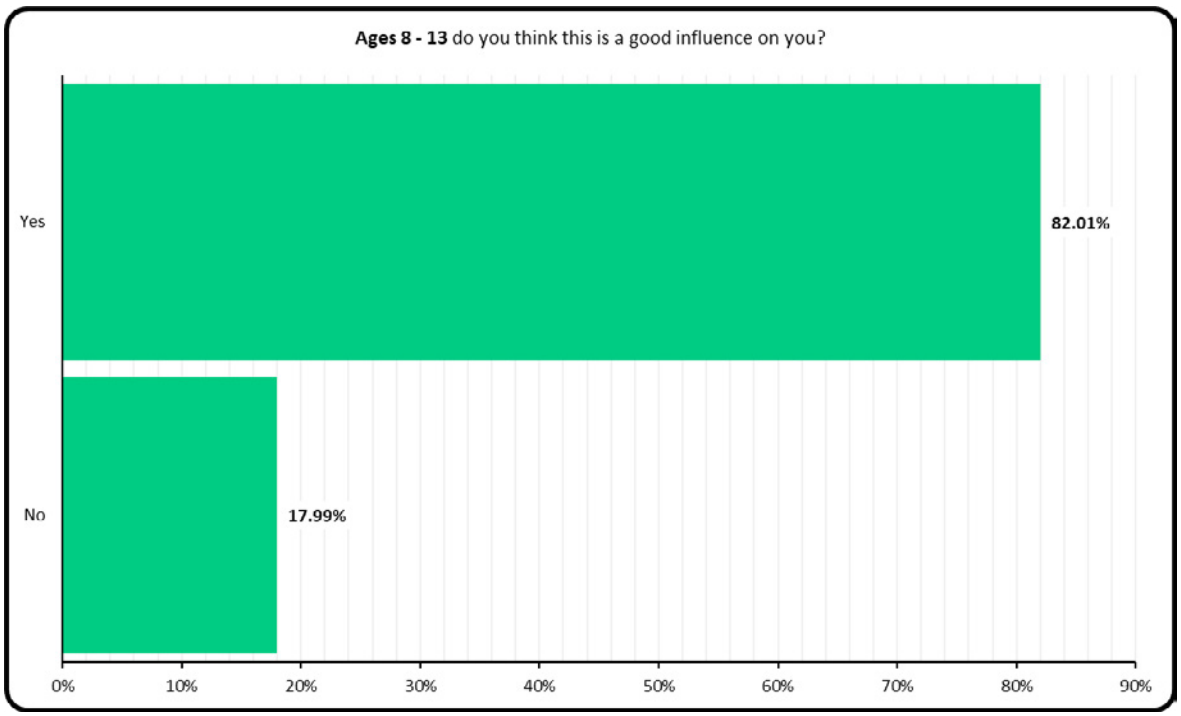


As shown in Table 42 and Figure 42, for ages 8 – 13, 82.01% (n=1955) responded, in respect to the previous question, that this is a good influence on them. However, 17.99% (n=429) said that it was not a good influence on them.

Table 42. Ages 8 - 13 do you think this is a good influence on you?

Ages 8 - 13 do you think this is a good influence on you?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequencies
No	17.99%	429
Yes	82.01%	1955
Grand Total	100.00%	2384

Figure 42. Ages 8 - 13 do you think this is a good influence on you?



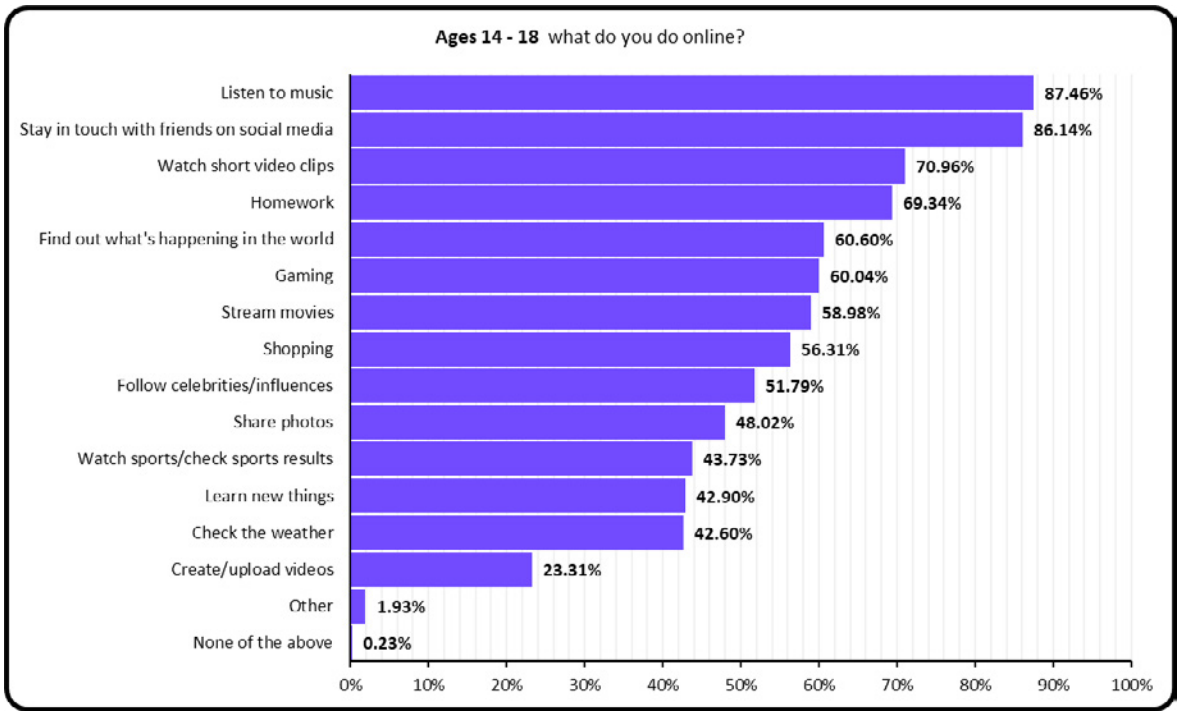
Online Activities (ages 14 – 18)

As shown in Table 43 and Figure 43, for ages 14 – 18, the most common thing to do online is listen to music (87.46%), followed by, for example, staying in touch with friends on social media, watching short video clips, homework, find out what is happening in the world, gaming, streaming movies, shopping, following celebrities/influencers, and sharing photos.

Table 43. Ages 14 - 18 what do you do online?

Ages 14 - 18 what do you do online?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
None of the above	0.23%
Other	1.93%
Create/upload videos	23.31%
Check the weather	42.60%
Learn new things	42.90%
Watch sports/check sports results	43.73%
Share photos	48.02%
Follow celebrities/influencers	51.79%
Shopping	56.31%
Stream movies	58.98%
Gaming	60.04%
Find out what's happening in the world	60.60%
Homework	69.34%
Watch short video clips	70.96%
Stay in touch with friends on social media	86.14%
Listen to music	87.46%

Figure 43. Ages 14 - 18 what do you do online?

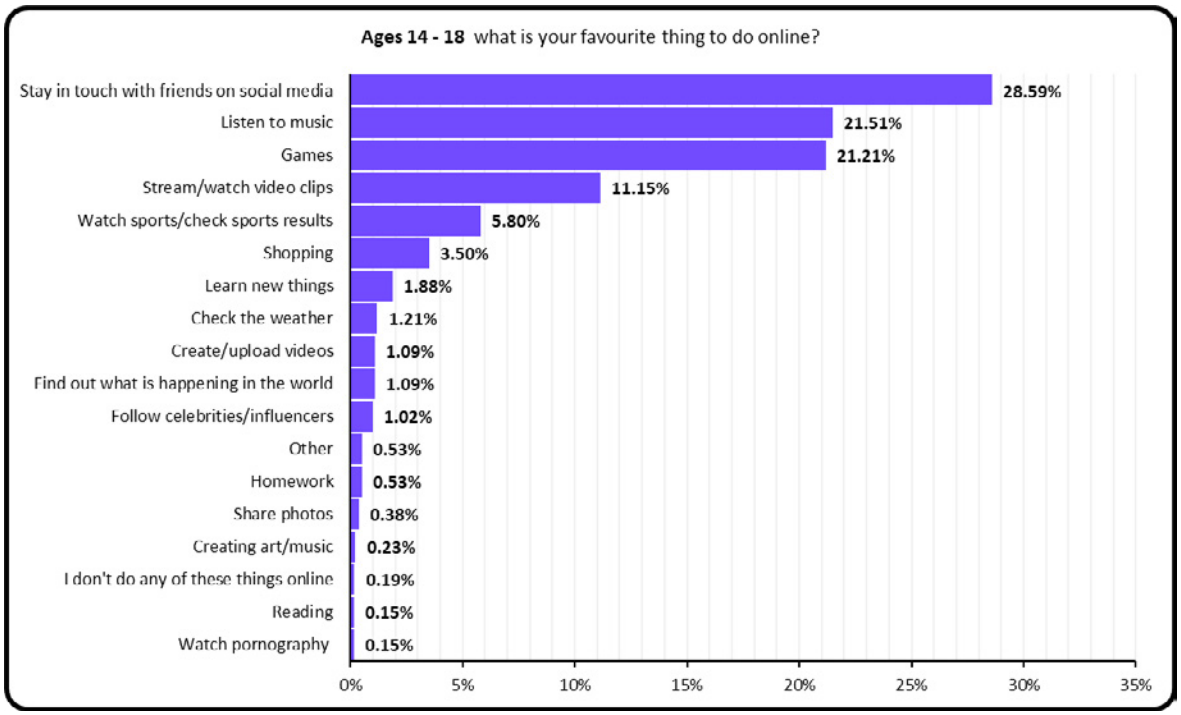


As shown in Table 44 and Figure 44, for ages 14 – 18, the most common favourite thing to do online is staying in touch with friends on social media (28.59%), followed by, for example, listening to music, games, streaming/watching video clips, watching sports/checking results, shopping, and learning new things.

Table 44. Ages 14 - 18 what is your favourite thing to do online?

Ages 14 - 18 what is your favourite thing to do online?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Watch pornography	0.15%
Reading	0.15%
I don't do any of these things online	0.19%
Creating art/music	0.23%
Share photos	0.38%
Homework	0.53%
Other	0.53%
Follow celebrities/influencers	1.02%
Find out what is happening in the world	1.09%
Create/upload videos	1.09%
Check the weather	1.21%
Learn new things	1.88%
Shopping	3.50%
Watch sports/check sports results	5.80%
Stream/watch video clips	11.15%
Games	21.21%
Listen to music	21.51%
Stay in touch with friends on social media	28.59%

Figure 44. Ages 14 - 18 what is your favourite thing to do online?

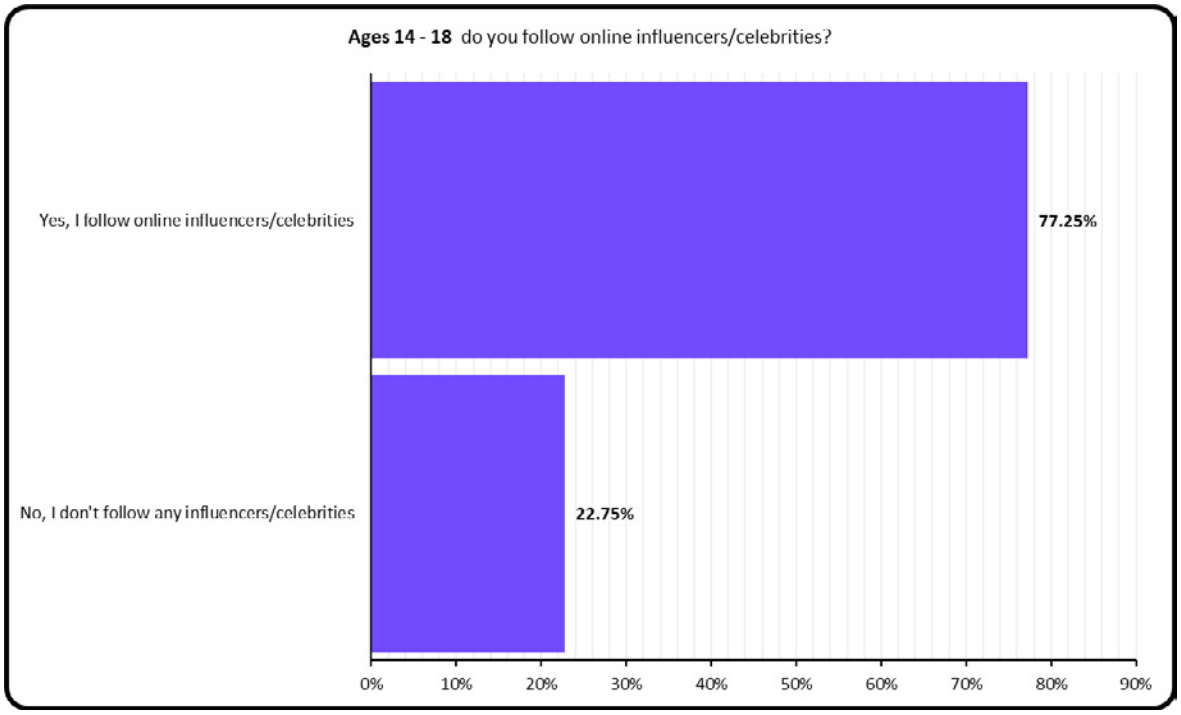


As shown in Table 45 and Figure 45, for ages 14 – 18, 77.25% (n=2051) follow online influencers/celebrities, which is slightly higher than for the younger 8 – 13 age group.

Table 45. Ages 14 - 18 do you follow online influencers/celebrities?

Ages 14 - 18 do you follow online influencers/celebrities?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
No, I don't follow any influencers/celebrities	22.75%	n = 604
Yes, I follow online influencers/celebrities	77.25%	n = 2051
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 45. Ages 14 - 18 do you follow online influencers/celebrities?

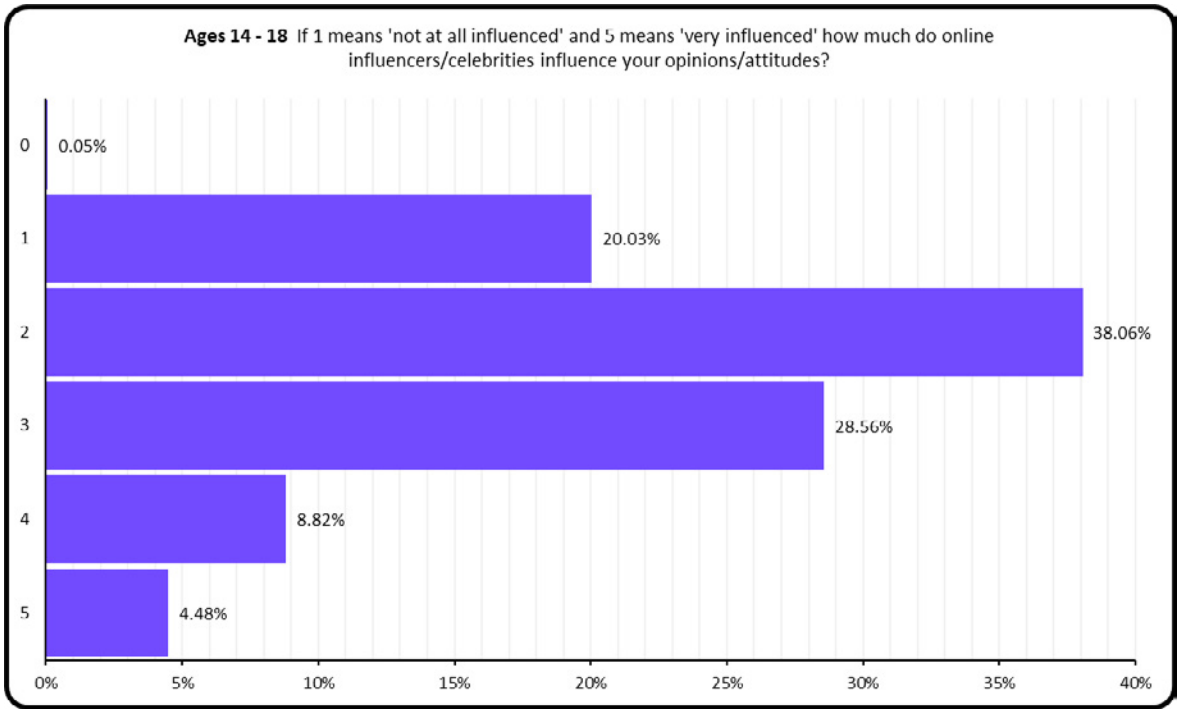


As shown in Table 46 and Figure 46, for ages 14 – 18, a majority 38.06% (n=781) responded 2, on a scale where 1 means 'not at all influenced' and 5 means 'very influenced', in respect to how much online influencers/celebrities influence their opinions/attitudes. 28.56% (n=586) responded with a 3. 2 and 3 thus, accounts for 66.62%.

Table 46. Ages 14 - 18 If 1 means 'not at all influenced' and 5 means 'very influenced' how much do online influencers/celebrities influence your opinions/ attitudes?

Ages 14 - 18 If 1 means 'not at all influenced' and 5 means 'very influenced' how much do online influencers/celebrities influence your opinions/attitudes?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
5	4.48%	92
4	8.82%	181
3	28.56%	586
2	38.06%	781
1	20.03%	411
0	0.05%	1
Grand Total	100.00%	2052

Figure 46. Ages 14 - 18 If 1 means 'not at all influenced' and 5 means 'very influenced' how much do online influencers/celebrities influence your opinions/ attitudes?

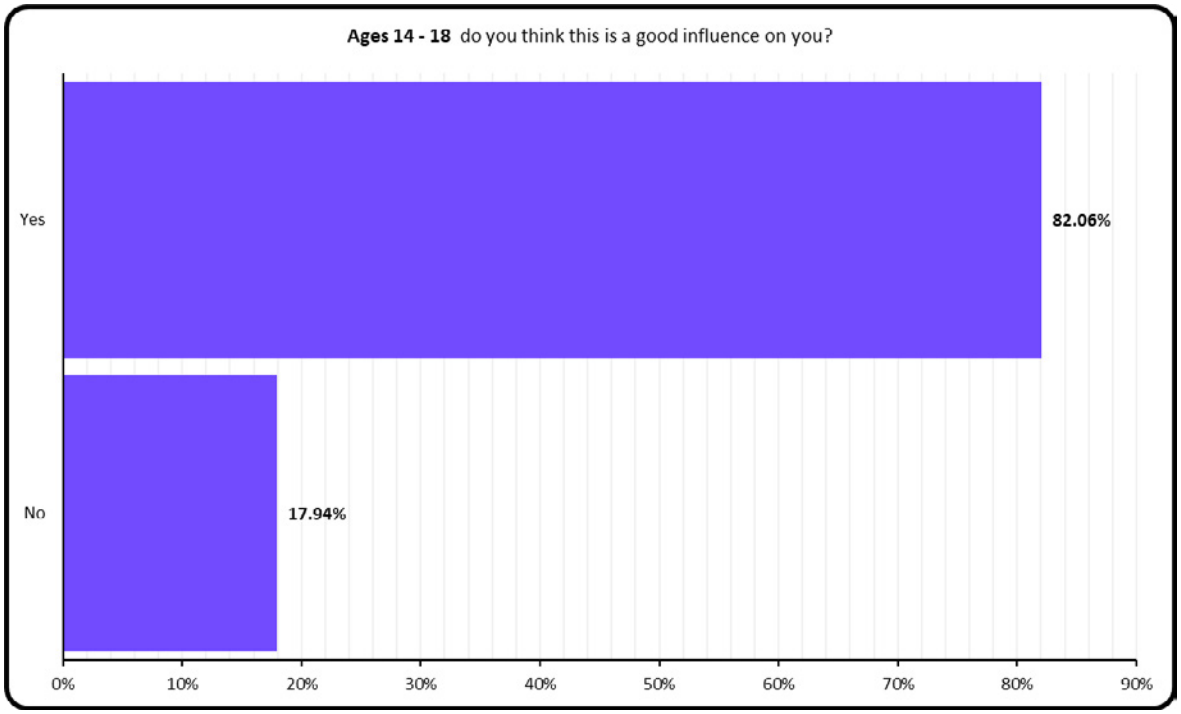


As shown in Table 47 and Figure 47, for ages 14 – 18, 82.06% (n=1683) responded, in respect to the previous question, that this had a good influence on them. However, 17.94% (n=368) responded that it did not have a good influence on them.

Table 47. Ages 14 - 18 do you think this is a good influence on you?

Ages 14 - 18 do you think this is a good influence on you?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
No	17.94%	368
Yes	82.06%	1683
Grand Total	100.00%	2051

Figure 47. Ages 14 - 18 do you think this is a good influence on you?

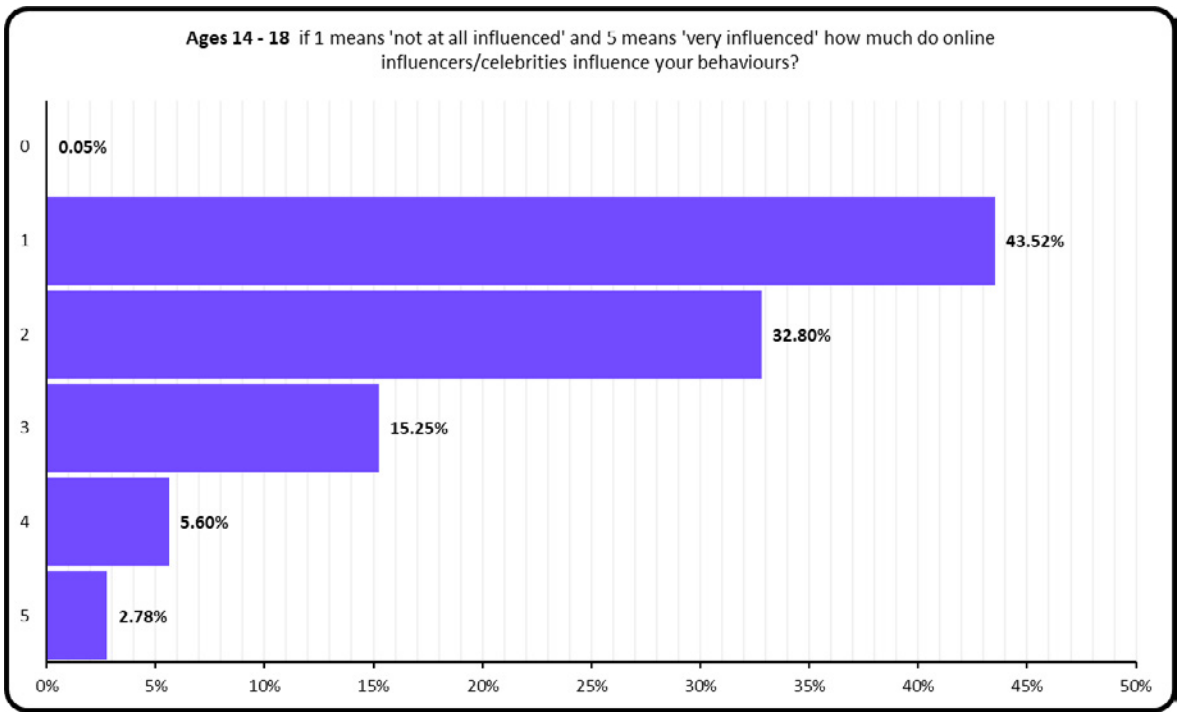


As shown in Table 48 and Figure 48, for ages 14 – 18, 43.52% (n=893) responded with a 1, on a scale where 1 means 'not at all influenced' and 5 means 'very influenced', in respect to how much online influencers/celebrities influence their behaviours. This was followed, by descending percentage, with 2, 3, 4, and 5.

Table 48. Ages 14 - 18 if 1 means 'not at all influenced' and 5 means 'very influenced' how much do online influencers/celebrities influence your behaviours?

Ages 14 - 18 if 1 means 'not at all influenced' and 5 means 'very influenced' how much do online influencers/celebrities influence your behaviours?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
5	2.78%	57
4	5.60%	115
3	15.25%	313
2	32.80%	673
1	43.52%	893
0	0.05%	1
Grand Total	100.00%	2052

Figure 48. Ages 14 - 18 if 1 means 'not at all influenced' and 5 means 'very influenced' how much do online influencers/celebrities influence your behaviours?

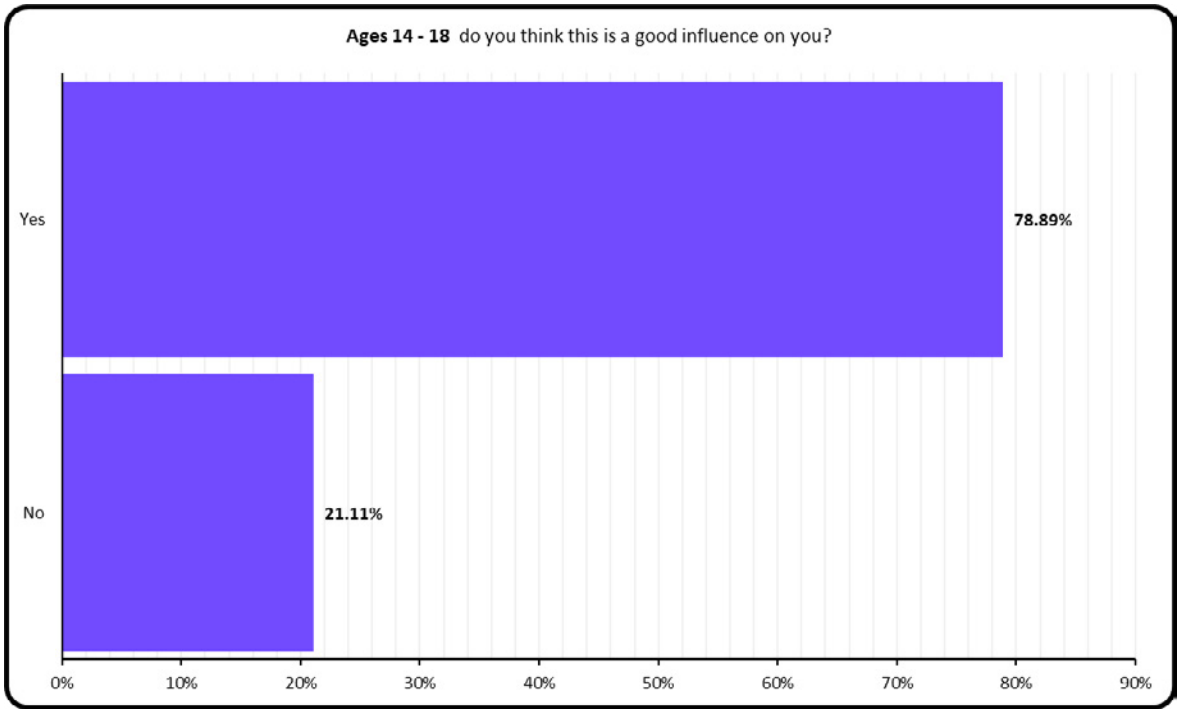


As shown in Table 49 and Figure 49, for ages 14 – 18, 78.89% (n=1618) responded, in respect to the previous question, that this was a good influence on them. However, 21.11% (n=433) responded that this was not a good influence on them.

Table 49. Ages 14 - 18 do you think this is a good influence on you?

Ages 14 - 18 do you think this is a good influence on you?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
No	21.11%	433
Yes	78.89%	1618
Grand Total	100.00%	2051

Figure 49. Ages 14 - 18 do you think this is a good influence on you?



4.8 Children and Young People's Own Negative Online Experiences

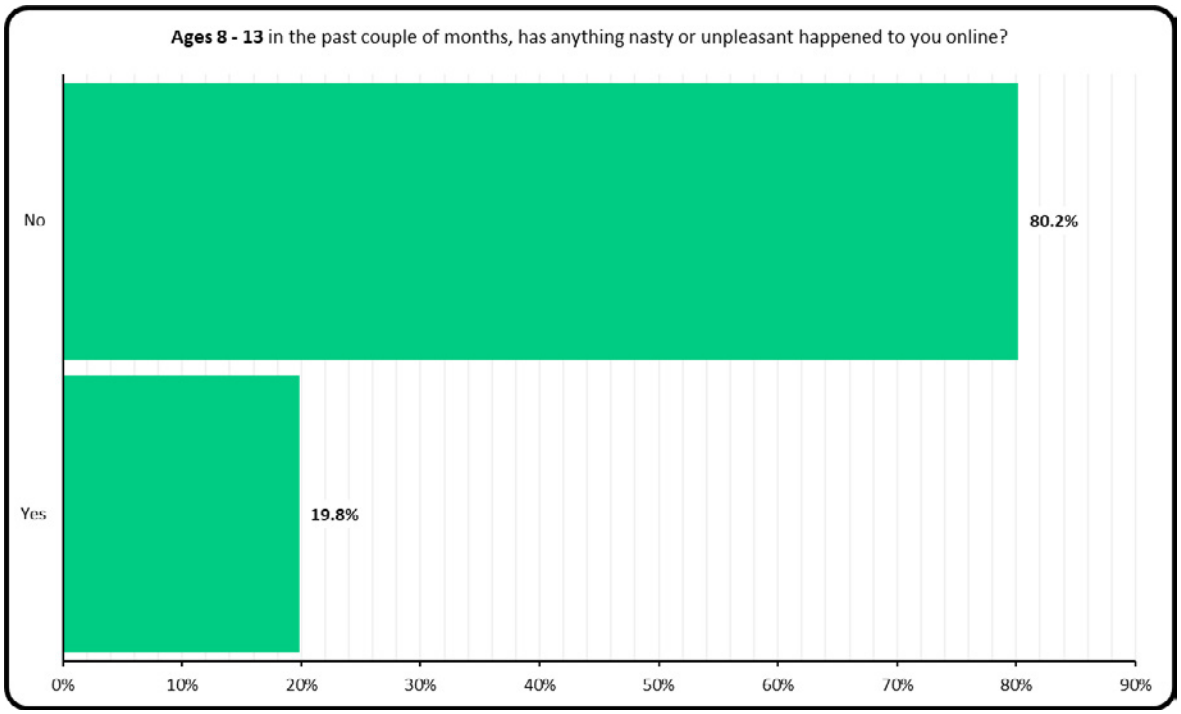
Experience of being online (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 50 and Figure 50, for ages 8 – 13, 19.84% (n=759) responded that, in the past couple of months, something nasty or unpleasant happened to them.

Table 50. Ages 8 - 13 in the past couple of months, has anything nasty or unpleasant happened to you online?

Ages 8 - 13 in the past couple of months, has anything nasty or unpleasant happened to you online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Yes	19.84%	n = 759
No	80.16%	n = 3067
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826

Figure 50. Ages 8 - 13 in the past couple of months, has anything nasty or unpleasant happened to you online?

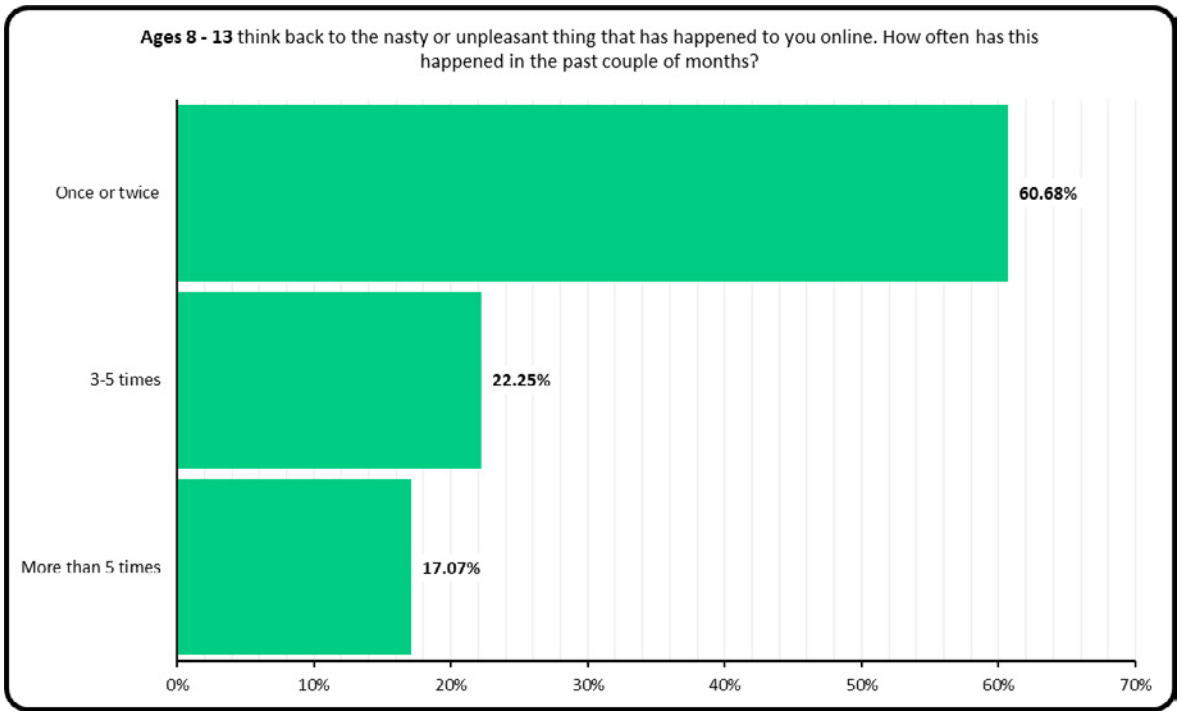


As shown in Table 51 and Figure 51, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response, in respect to how often the nasty or unpleasant thing happened to them, was one or twice (60.68%, n=480), followed by 3-5 times (22.25%, n=176), and more than 5 times (17.07%, n=135).

Table 51. Ages 8 - 13 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing that has happened to you online. How often has this happened in the past couple of months?

Ages 8 - 13 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing that has happened to you online. How often has this happened in the past couple of months?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
More than 5 times	17.07%	135
3-5 times	22.25%	176
Once or twice	60.68%	480
Grand Total	100.00%	791

Figure 51. Ages 8 - 13 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing that has happened to you online. How often has this happened in the past couple of months?

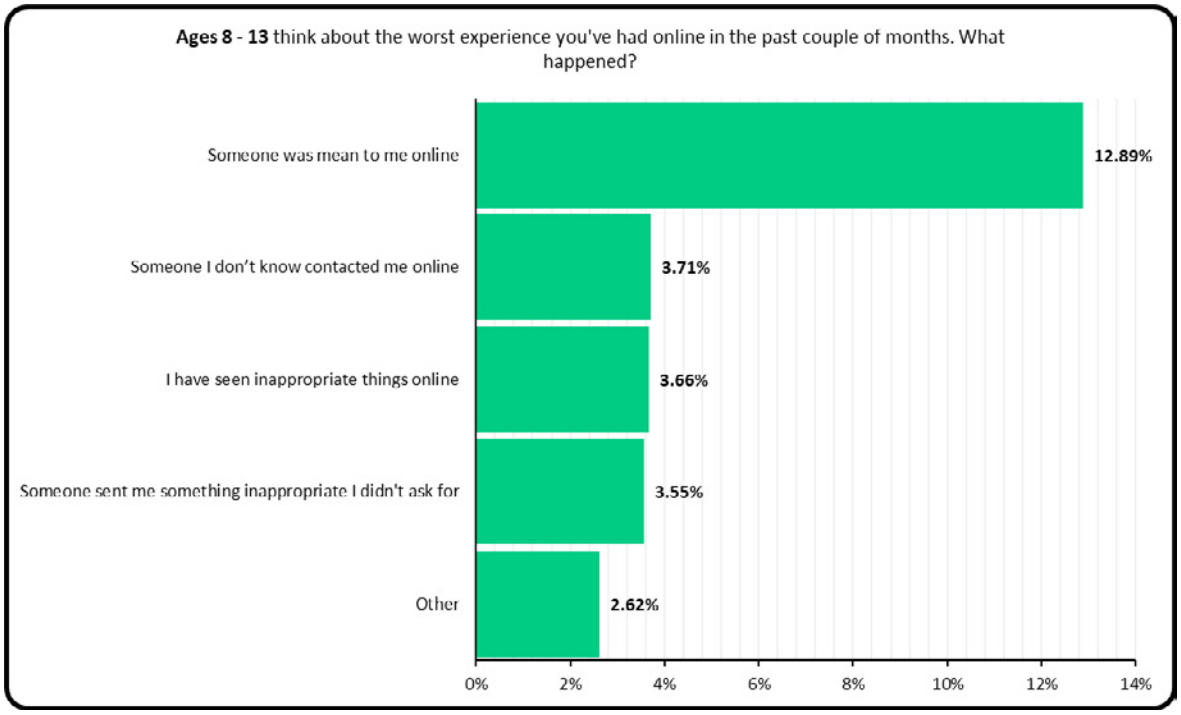


As shown in Table 52 and Figure 52, for ages 8 – 13, 12.89% (n=493) of all respondents, responded that someone was mean to them.

Table 52. Ages 8 - 13 think about the worst experience you've had online in the past couple of months. What happened?

Ages 8 - 13 think about the worst experience you've had online in the past couple of months. What happened?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Other	2.62%
Someone sent me something inappropriate I didn't ask for	3.55%
I have seen inappropriate things online	3.66%
Someone I don't know contacted me online	3.71%
Someone was mean to me online	12.89%

Figure 52. Ages 8 - 13 think about the worst experience you've had online in the past couple of months. What happened?

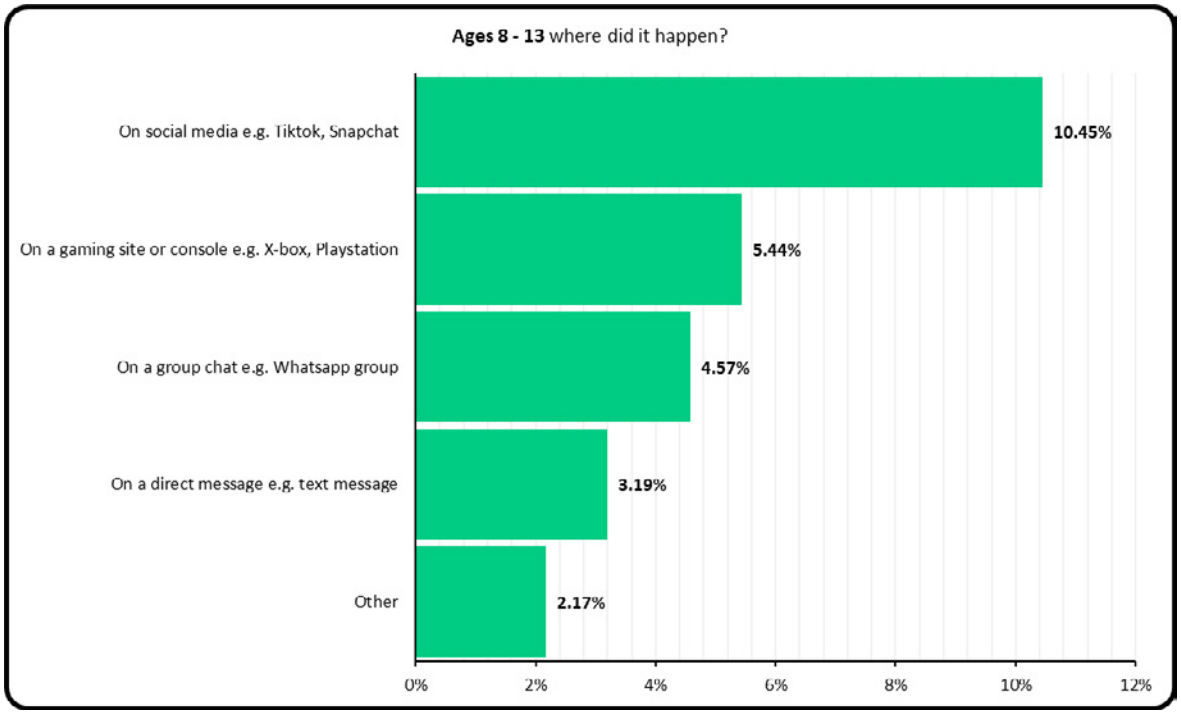


As shown in Table 53 and Figure 53, for ages 8 – 13, 10.45% (n=400), of all respondents, reported that this happened on social media.

Table 53. Ages 8 - 13 where did it happen?

Ages 8 - 13 where did it happen?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Other	2.17%
On a direct message e.g., text message	3.19%
On a group chat e.g., WhatsApp group	4.57%
On a gaming site or console e.g., X-box, PlayStation	5.44%
On social media e.g., TikTok, Snapchat	10.45%

Figure 53. Ages 8 - 13 where did it happen?

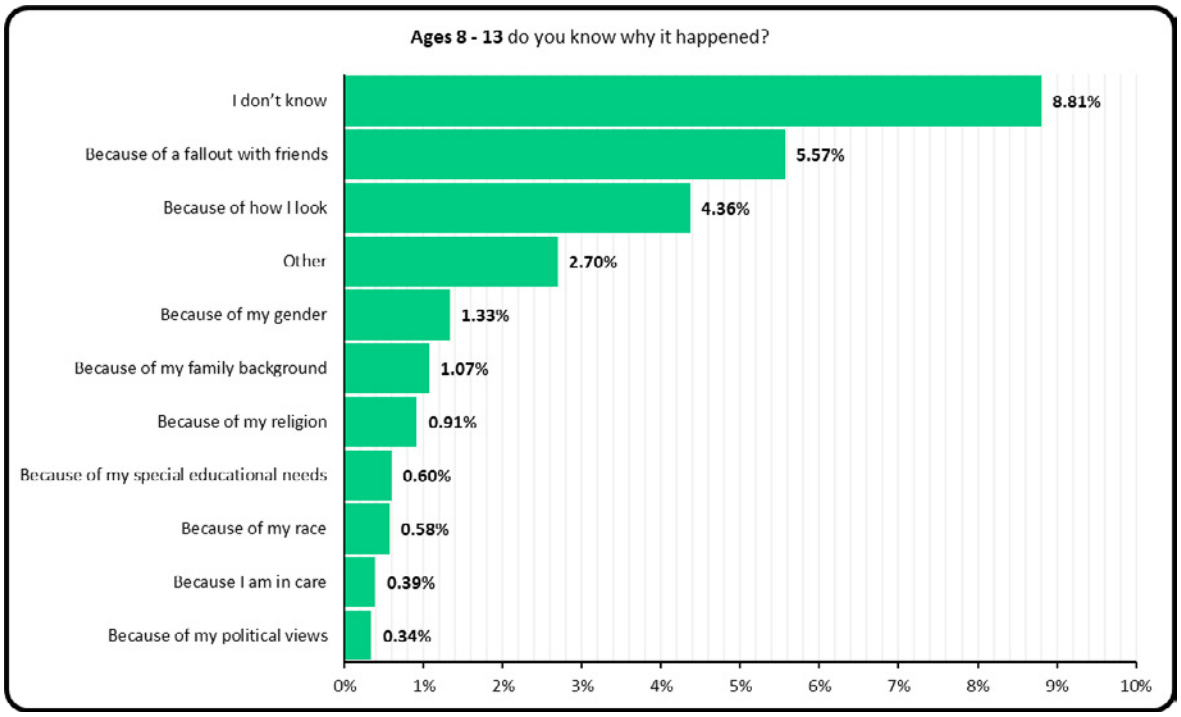


As shown in Table 54 and Figure 54, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response in respect to why this happened was 'I don't know' (8.81%, n=337, of all respondents).

Table 54. Ages 8 - 13 do you know why it happened?

Ages 8 - 13 do you know why it happened?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Because of my political views	0.34%
Because I am in care	0.39%
Because of my race	0.58%
Because of my special educational needs	0.60%
Because of my religion	0.91%
Because of my family background	1.07%
Because of my gender	1.33%
Other	2.70%
Because of how I look	4.36%
Because of a fallout with friends	5.57%
I don't know	8.81%

Figure 54. Ages 8 - 13 do you know why it happened?

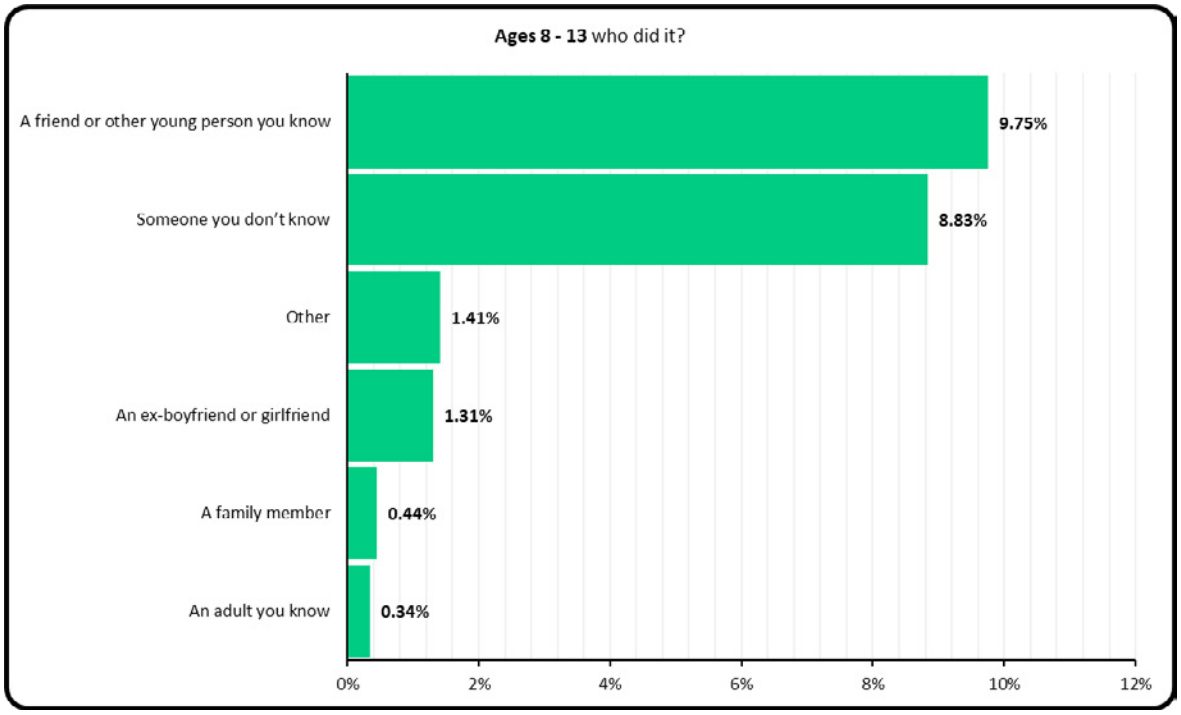


As shown in Table 55 and Figure 55, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response, in respect to who did it, was a friend, or other young person you know (9.75%, n=373, of all respondents).

Table 55. Ages 8 - 13 who did it?

Ages 8 - 13 who did it?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
An adult you know	0.34%
A family member	0.44%
An ex-boyfriend or girlfriend	1.31%
Other	1.41%
Someone you don't know	8.83%
A friend or other young person you know	9.75%

Figure 55. Ages 8 - 13 who did it?

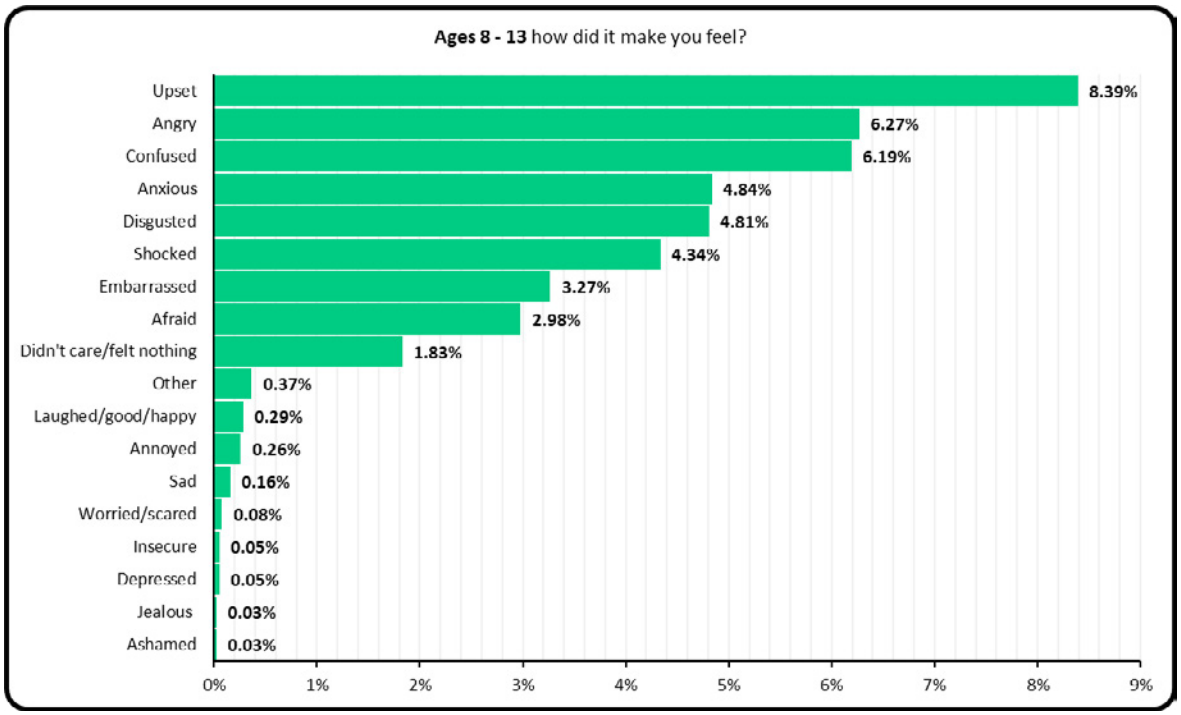


As shown in Table 56 and Figure 56, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response for how it made them feel was upset (8.39%, n=321, of all respondents), followed by, for example, angry, confused, anxious, disgusted, shocked, embarrassed, and afraid.

Table 56. Ages 8 - 13 how did it make you feel?

Ages 8 - 13 how did it make you feel?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Ashamed	0.03%
Jealous	0.03%
Depressed	0.05%
Insecure	0.05%
Worried/scared	0.08%
Sad	0.16%
Annoyed	0.26%
Laughed/good/happy	0.29%
Other	0.37%
Didn't care/felt nothing	1.83%
Afraid	2.98%
Embarrassed	3.27%
Shocked	4.34%
Disgusted	4.81%
Anxious	4.84%
Confused	6.19%
Angry	6.27%
Upset	8.39%

Figure 56. Ages 8 - 13 how did it make you feel?

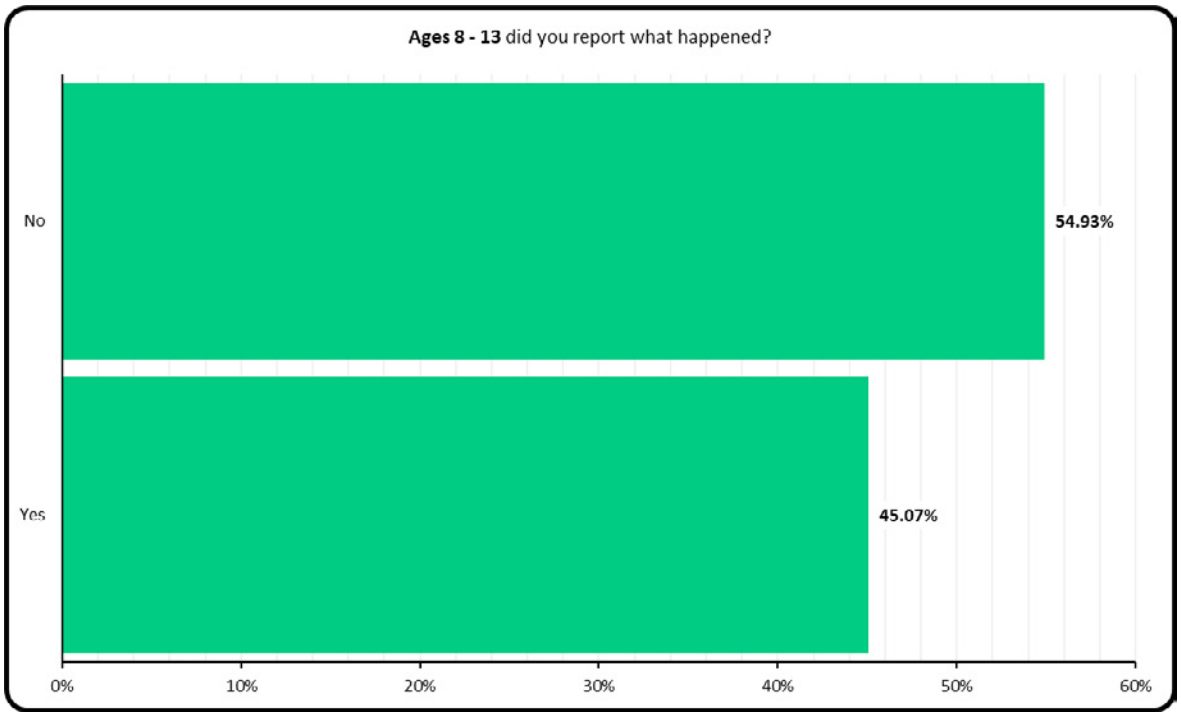


As shown in Table 57 and Figure 57, for ages 8 – 13, 45.07% (n=338), of those who responded, said that they reported it.

Table 57. Ages 8 - 13 did you report what happened?

Ages 8 - 13 did you report what happened?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Yes	45.07%	338
No	54.93%	412
Grand Total	100.00%	750

Figure 57. Ages 8 - 13 did you report what happened?

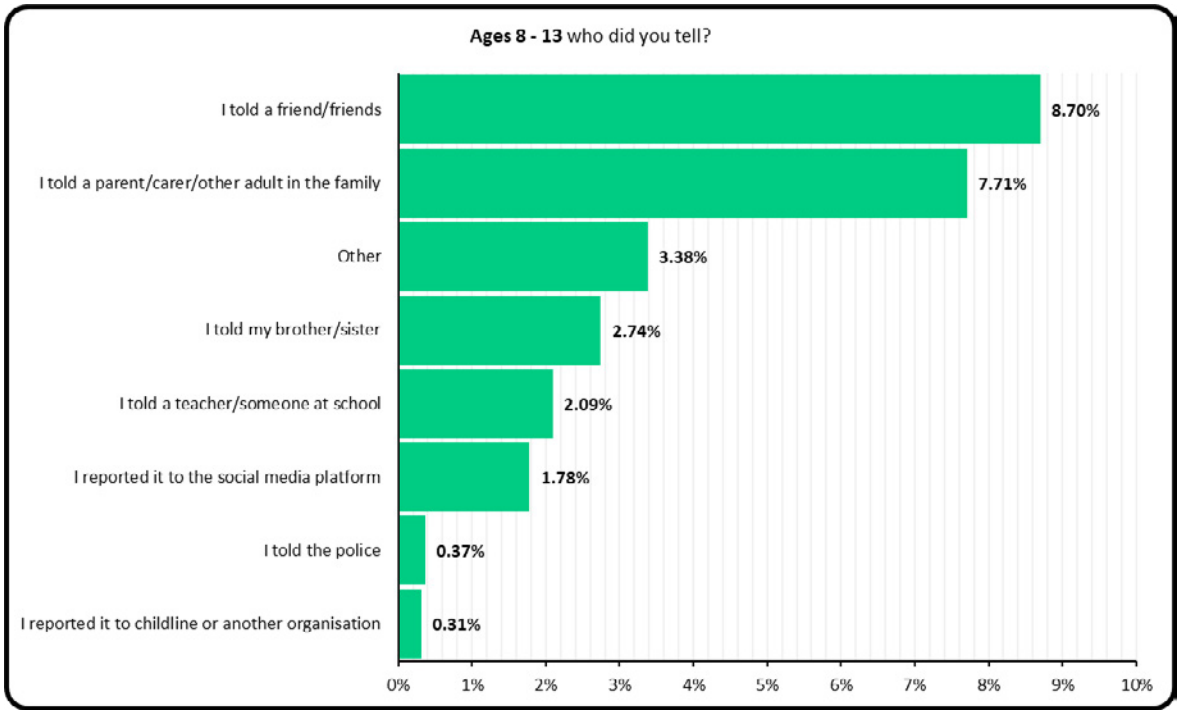


As shown in Table 58 and Figure 58, for ages 8 – 13, the most common person to tell was a friend/friends (8.70%, n=333, of all respondents). This was closely followed by parent/carer/ other adult in the family.

Table 58. Ages 8 - 13 who did you tell?

Ages 8 - 13 who did you tell?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
I reported it to childline or another organisation	0.31%
I told the police	0.37%
I reported it to the social media platform	1.78%
I told a teacher/someone at school	2.09%
I told my brother/sister	2.74%
Other	3.38%
I told a parent/carer/other adult in the family	7.71%
I told a friend/friends	8.70%

Figure 58. Ages 8 - 13 who did you tell?

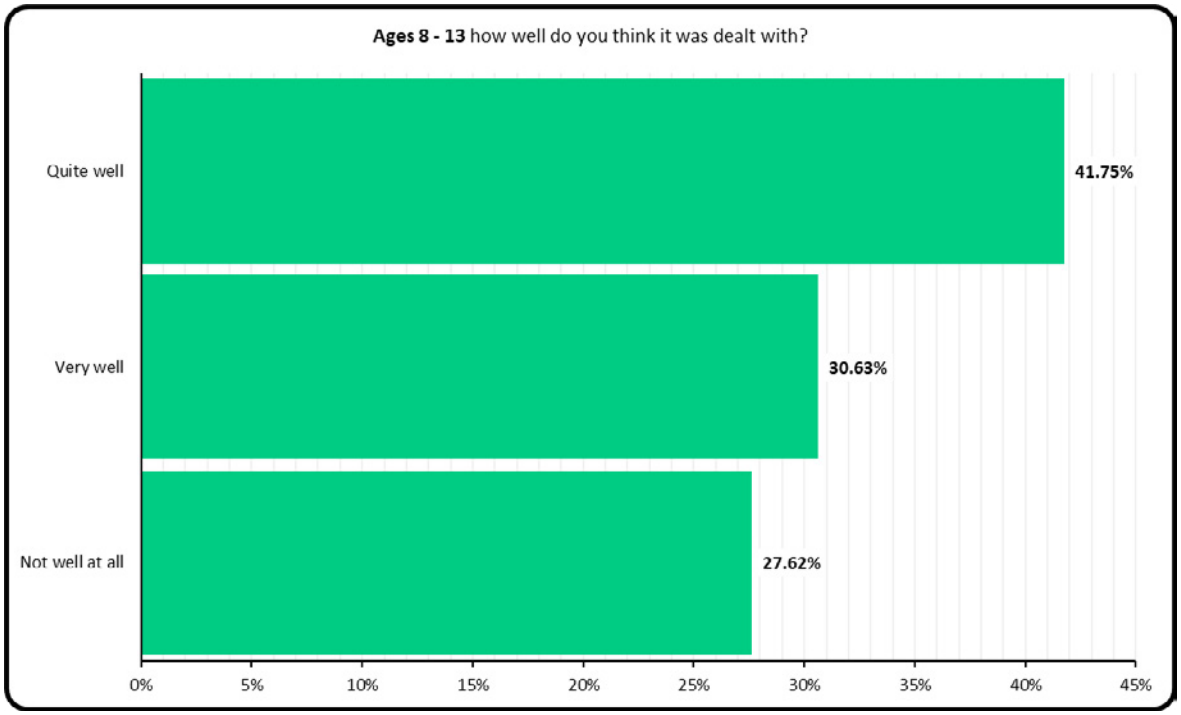


As shown in Table 59 and Figure 59, for ages 8 – 13, 41.75% (n=319), of those who responded, thought that it was dealt with quite well, and 30.63% (n=234) very well. However, 27.62% (n=211) thought that it wasn't dealt with well.

Table 59. Ages 8 - 13 how well do you think it was dealt with?

Ages 8 - 13 how well do you think it was dealt with?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Not well at all	27.62%	211
Very well	30.63%	234
Quite well	41.75%	319
Grand Total	100.00%	764

Figure 59. Ages 8 - 13 how well do you think it was dealt with?



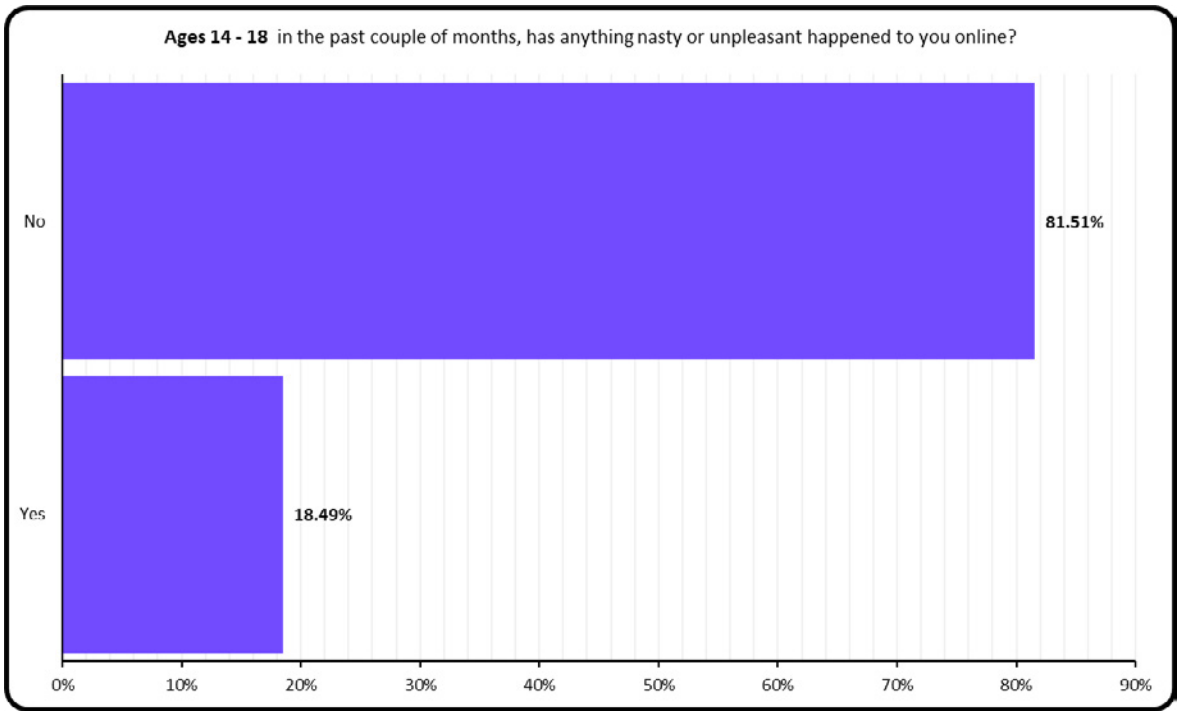
Experience of being online (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 60 and Figure 60, for ages 14 – 18, 18.49% (n=491) responded that they had experienced something nasty or unpleasant online in the past couple of months.

Table 60. Ages 14 - 18 in the past couple of months, has anything nasty or unpleasant happened to you online?

Ages 14 - 18 in the past couple of months, has anything nasty or unpleasant happened to you online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Yes	18.49%	n = 491
No	81.51%	n = 2164
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 60. Ages 14 - 18 in the past couple of months, has anything nasty or unpleasant happened to you online?

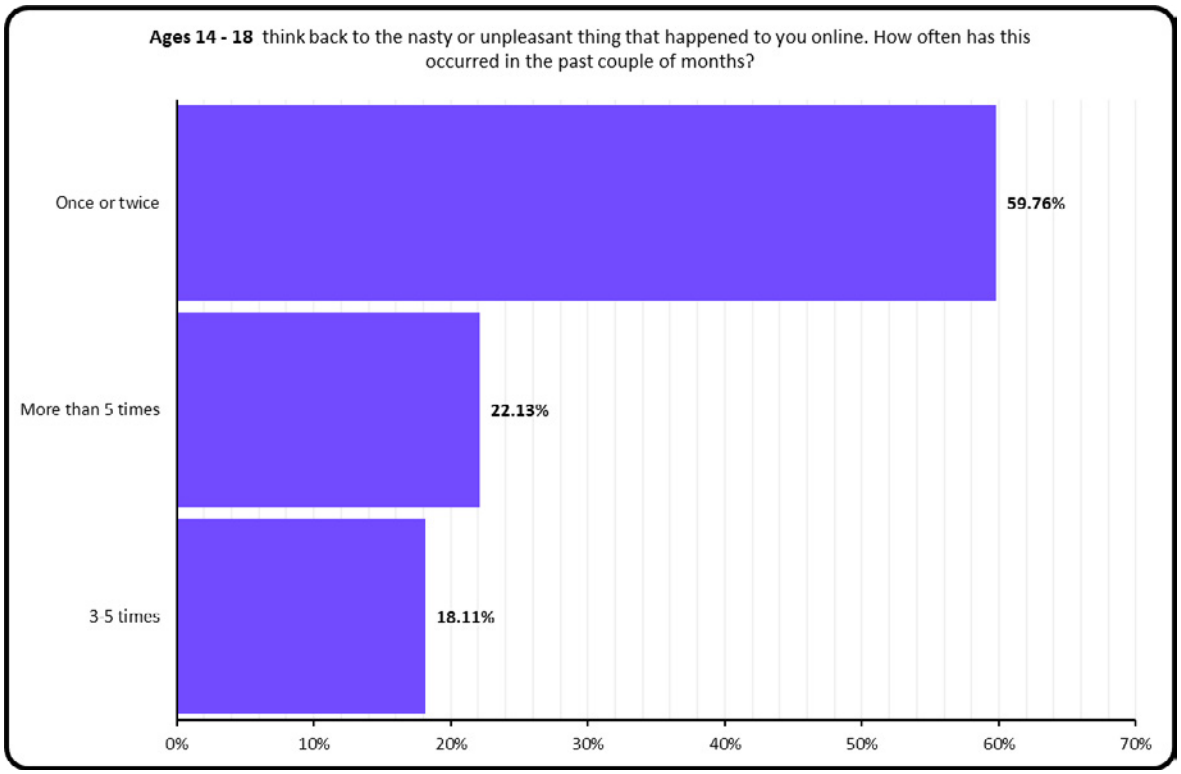


As shown in Table 61 and Figure 61, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response, from those who responded, in respect to how often the nasty or unpleasant thing happened to them, was one or twice (59.76%, n=297), followed by more than 5 times (22.13%, n=110), and 3-5 times (18.11%, n=90).

Table 61. Ages 14 - 18 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing that happened to you online. How often has this occurred in the past couple of months?

Ages 14 - 18 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing that happened to you online. How often has this occurred in the past couple of months?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
3-5 times	18.11%	90
More than 5 times	22.13%	110
Once or twice	59.76%	297
Grand Total	100.00%	497

Figure 61. Ages 14 - 18 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing that happened to you online. How often has this occurred in the past couple of months?

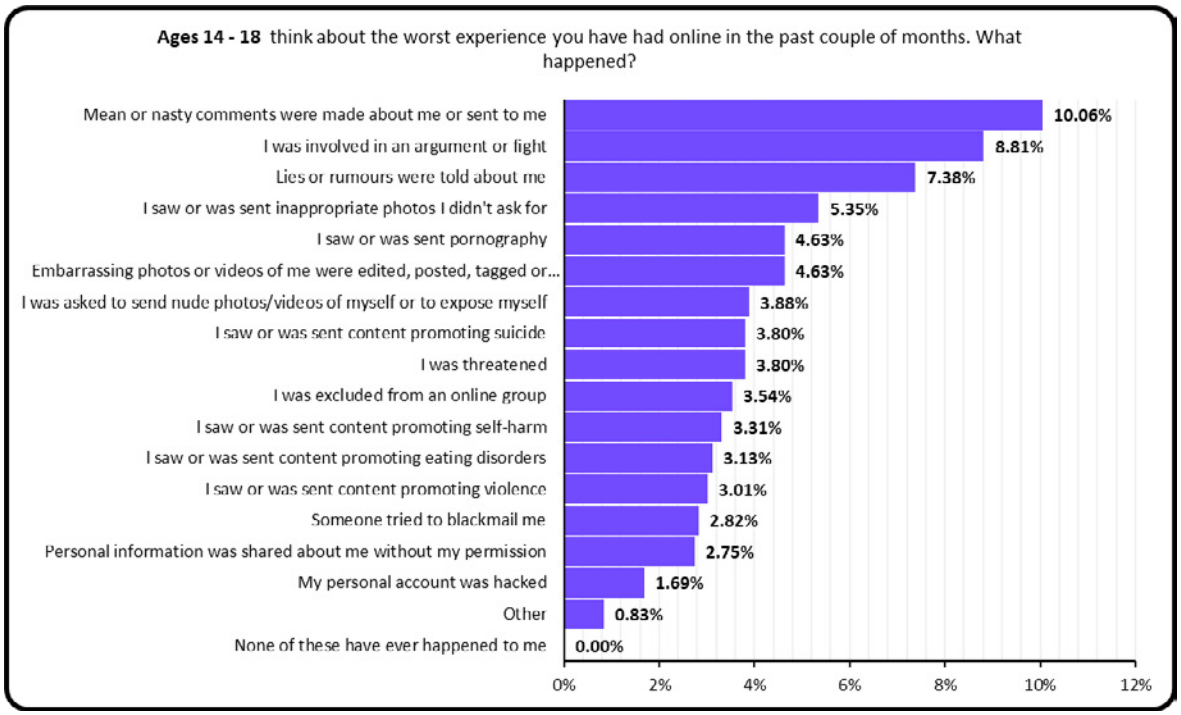


As shown in Table 62 and Figure 62, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response, in respect to what happened, was mean or nasty comments made about them or sent to them (10.06%, n=267, of all respondents).

Table 62. Ages 14 - 18 think about the worst experience you have had online in the past couple of months. What happened?

Ages 14 - 18 think about the worst experience you have had online in the past couple of months. What happened?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
None of these have ever happened to me	0.00%
Other	0.83%
My personal account was hacked	1.69%
Personal information was shared about me without my permission	2.75%
Someone tried to blackmail me	2.82%
I saw or was sent content promoting violence	3.01%
I saw or was sent content promoting eating disorders	3.13%
I saw or was sent content promoting self-harm	3.31%
I was excluded from an online group	3.54%
I was threatened	3.80%
I saw or was sent content promoting suicide	3.80%
I was asked to send nude photos/videos of myself or to expose myself	3.88%
Embarrassing photos or videos of me were edited, posted, tagged or shared without my permission	4.63%
I saw or was sent pornography	4.63%
I saw or was sent inappropriate photos I didn't ask for	5.35%
Lies or rumours were told about me	7.38%
I was involved in an argument or fight	8.81%
Mean or nasty comments were made about me or sent to me	10.06%

Figure 62. Ages 14 - 18 think about the worst experience you have had online in the past couple of months. What happened?

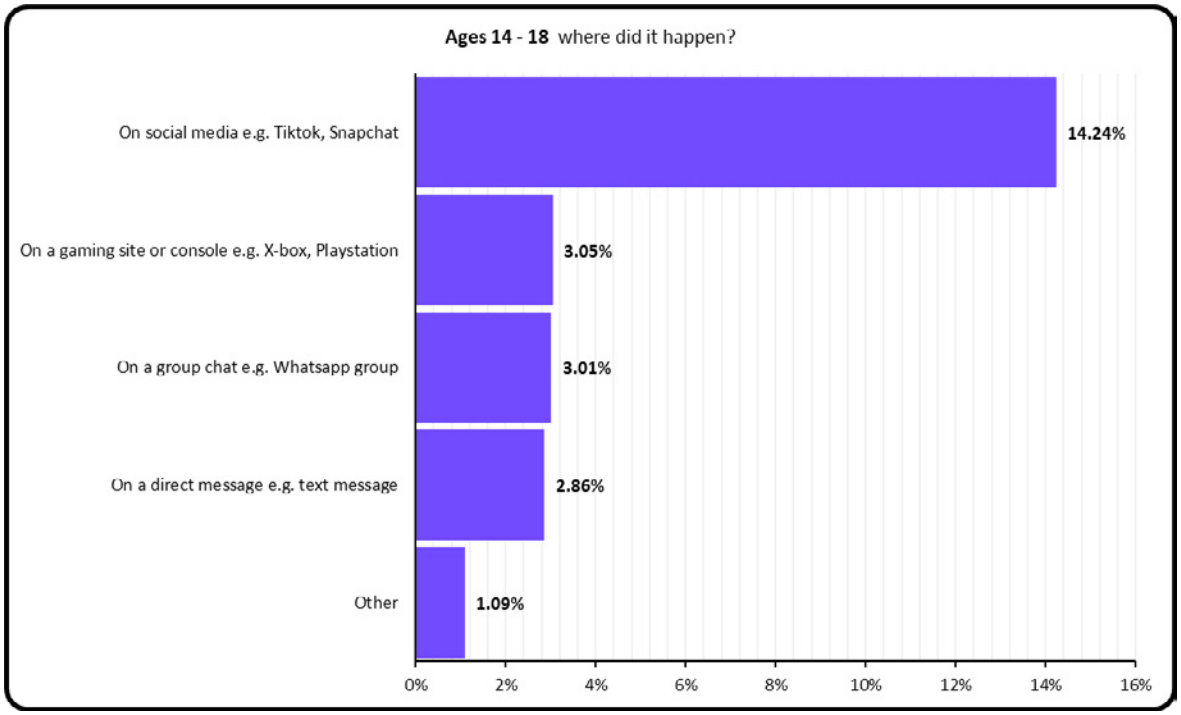


As shown in Table 63 and Figure 63, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response for where this happened, was on social media (14.24%, n=378, of all respondents).

Table 63. Ages 14 - 18 where did it happen?

Ages 14 - 18 where did it happen?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Other	1.09%
On a direct message e.g. text message	2.86%
On a group chat e.g. WhatsApp group	3.01%
On a gaming site or console e.g. X-box, PlayStation	3.05%
On social media e.g. Tiktok, Snapchat	14.24%

Figure 63. Ages 14 - 18 where did it happen?

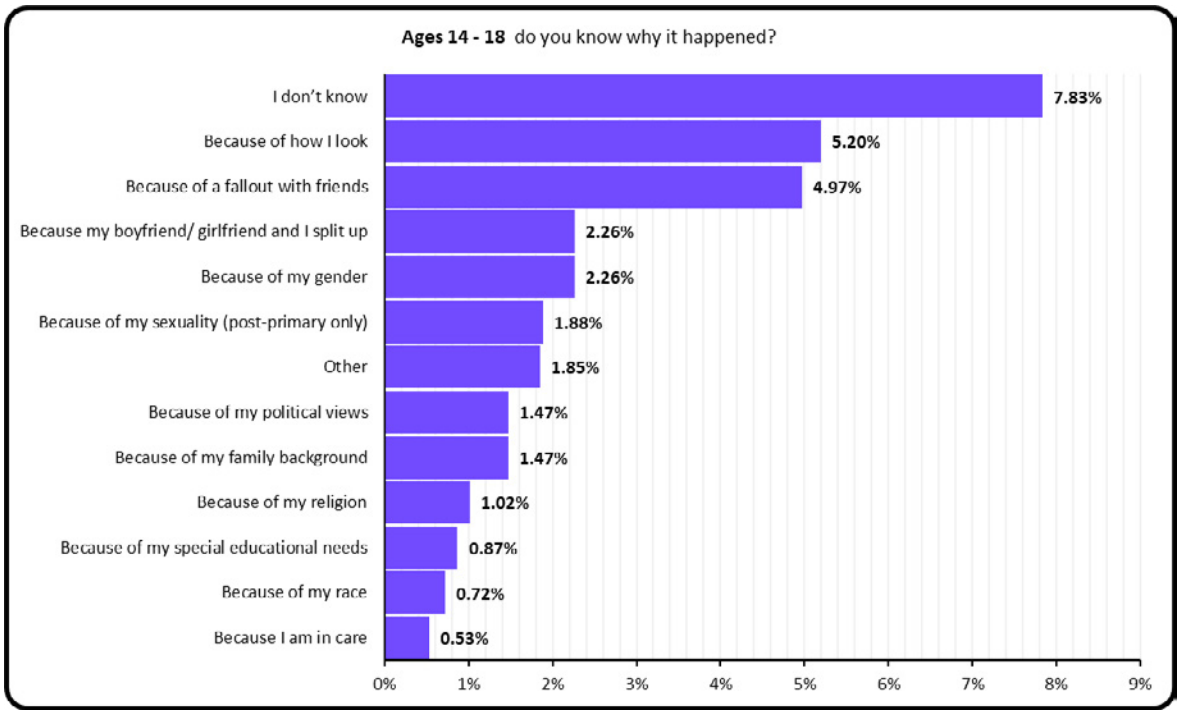


As shown in Table 64 and Figure 64, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response for why it happened was I don't know (7.83%, n=208, of all respondents).

Table 64. Ages 14 - 18 do you know why it happened?

Ages 14 - 18 do you know why it happened?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Because I am in care	0.53%
Because of my race	0.72%
Because of my special educational needs	0.87%
Because of my religion	1.02%
Because of my family background	1.47%
Because of my political views	1.47%
Other	1.85%
Because of my sexuality (post-primary only)	1.88%
Because of my gender	2.26%
Because my boyfriend/ girlfriend and I split up	2.26%
Because of a fallout with friends	4.97%
Because of how I look	5.20%
I don't know	7.83%

Figure 64. Ages 14 - 18 do you know why it happened?

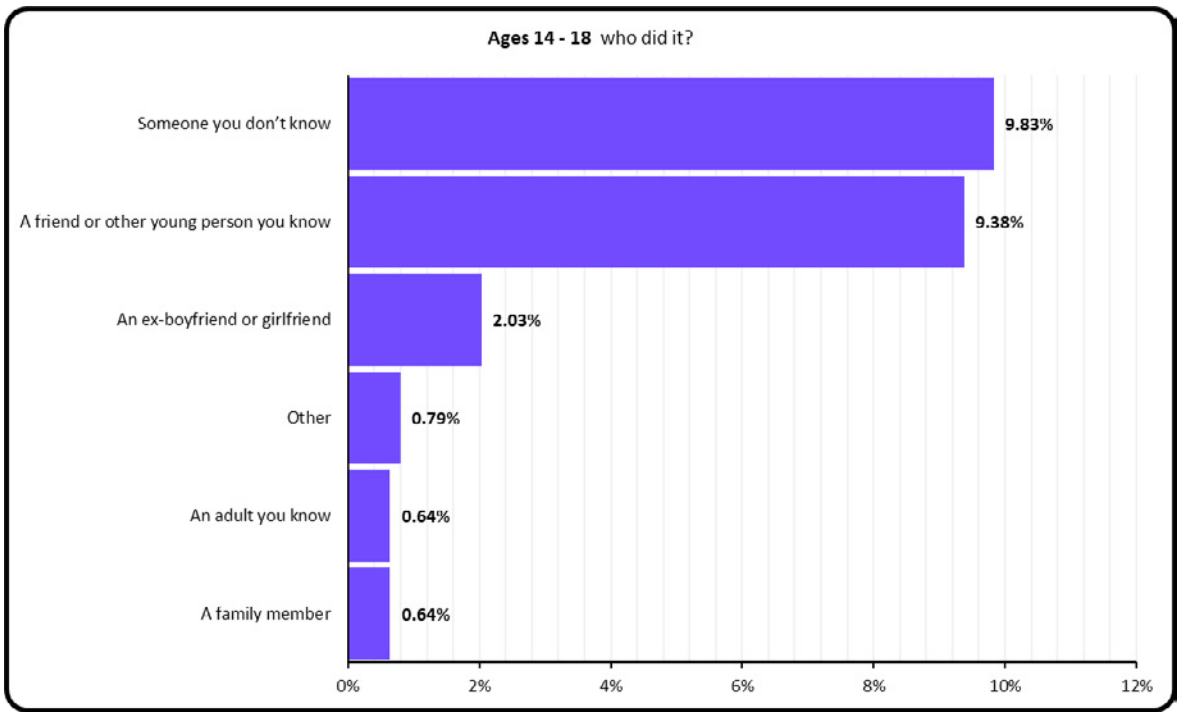


As shown in Table 65 and Figure 65, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response for who did it was someone you don't know (9.83%, n=261, of all respondents).

Table 65. Ages 14 - 18 who did it?

Ages 14 - 18 who did it?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
A family member	0.64%
An adult you know	0.64%
Other	0.79%
An ex-boyfriend or girlfriend	2.03%
A friend or other young person you know	9.38%
Someone you don't know	9.83%

Figure 65. Ages 14 - 18 who did it?

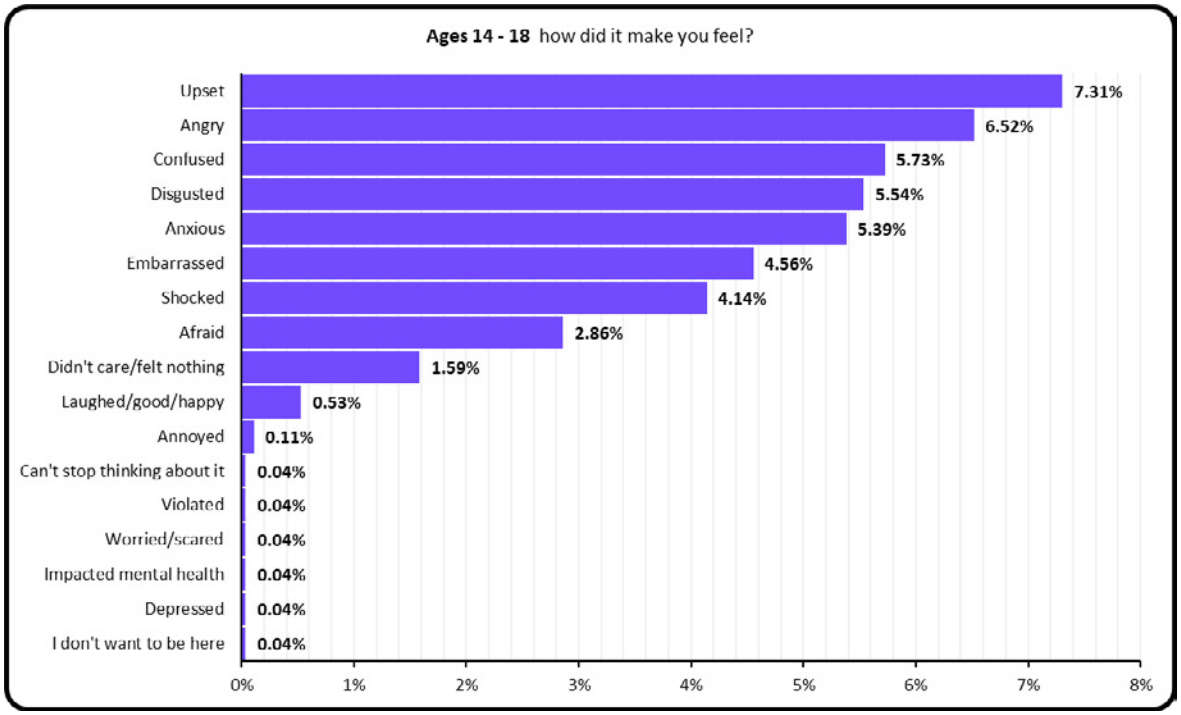


As shown in Table 66 and Figure 66, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response for how it made them feel was upset (7.31%, n=194, of all respondents), followed by, for example, angry, confused, disgusted, anxious, embarrassed, shocked, and afraid.

Table 66. Ages 14 - 18 how did it make you feel?

Ages 14 - 18 how did it make you feel?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
I don't want to be here	0.04%
Depressed	0.04%
Impacted mental health	0.04%
Worried/scared	0.04%
Violated	0.04%
Can't stop thinking about it	0.04%
Annoyed	0.11%
Laughed/good/happy	0.53%
Didn't care/felt nothing	1.59%
Afraid	2.86%
Shocked	4.14%
Embarrassed	4.56%
Anxious	5.39%
Disgusted	5.54%
Confused	5.73%
Angry	6.52%
Upset	7.31%

Figure 66. Ages 14 - 18 how did it make you feel?

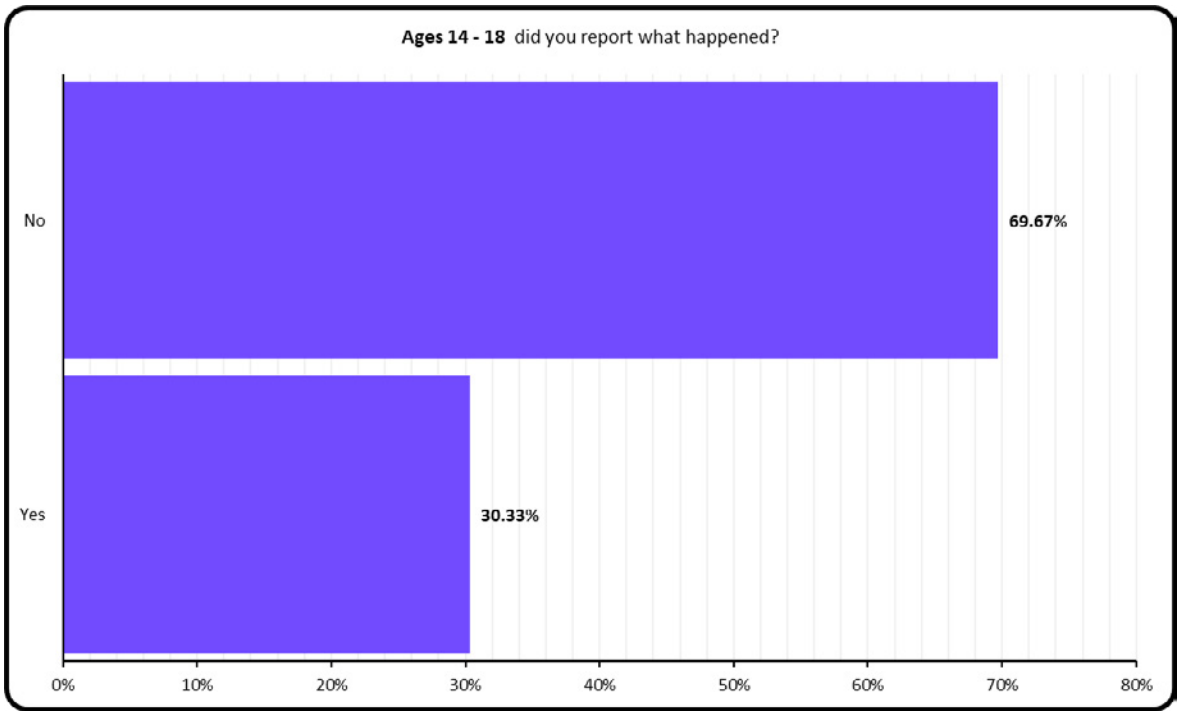


As shown in Table 67 and Figure 67, for ages 14 – 18, 30.33% (n=148) of those who responded to this question, said that they did report it.

Table 67. Ages 14 - 18 did you report what happened?

Ages 14 - 18 did you report what happened?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Yes	30.33%	148
No	69.67%	340
Grand Total	100.00%	488

Figure 67. Ages 14 - 18 did you report what happened?

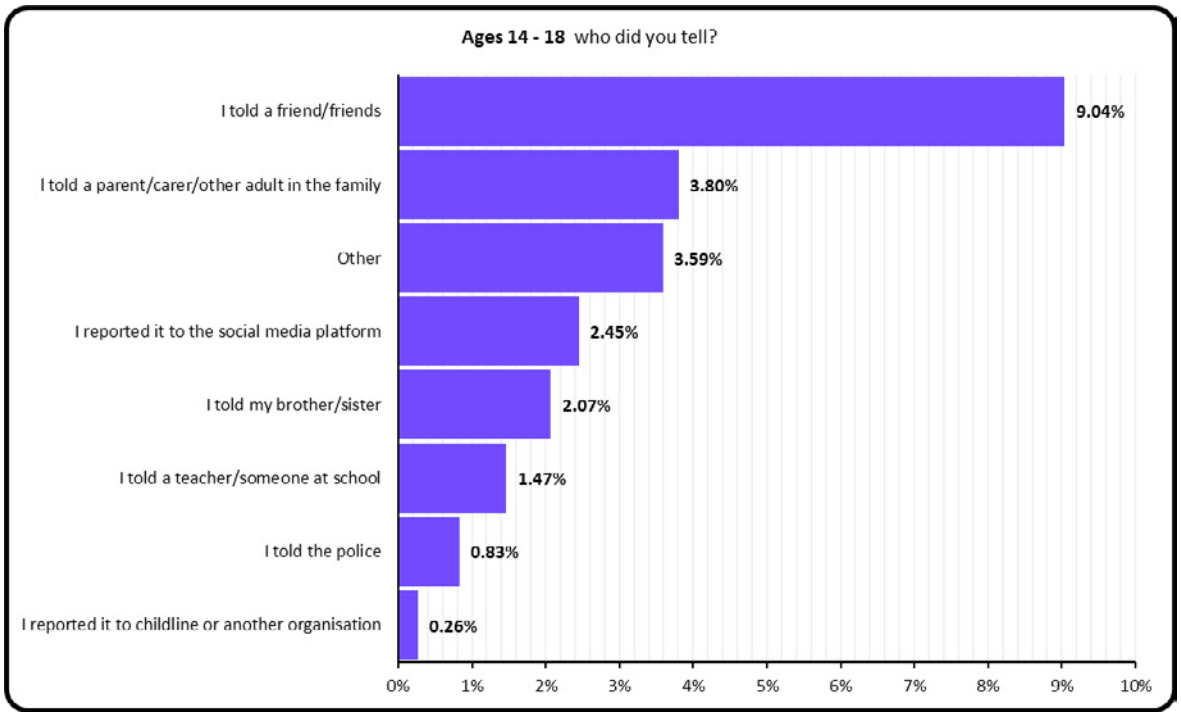


As shown in Table 68 and Figure 68, for ages 14 – 18, 9.04% (n=240, of all respondents) said they told a friend/friends, followed by, for example, a parent/carer/other adult in the family.

Table 68. Ages 14 - 18 who did you tell?

Ages 14 - 18 who did you tell?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
I reported it to Childline or another organisation	0.26%
I told the police	0.83%
I told a teacher/someone at school	1.47%
I told my brother/sister	2.07%
I reported it to the social media platform	2.45%
Other	3.59%
I told a parent/carer/other adult in the family	3.80%
I told a friend/friends	9.04%

Figure 68. Ages 14 - 18 who did you tell?

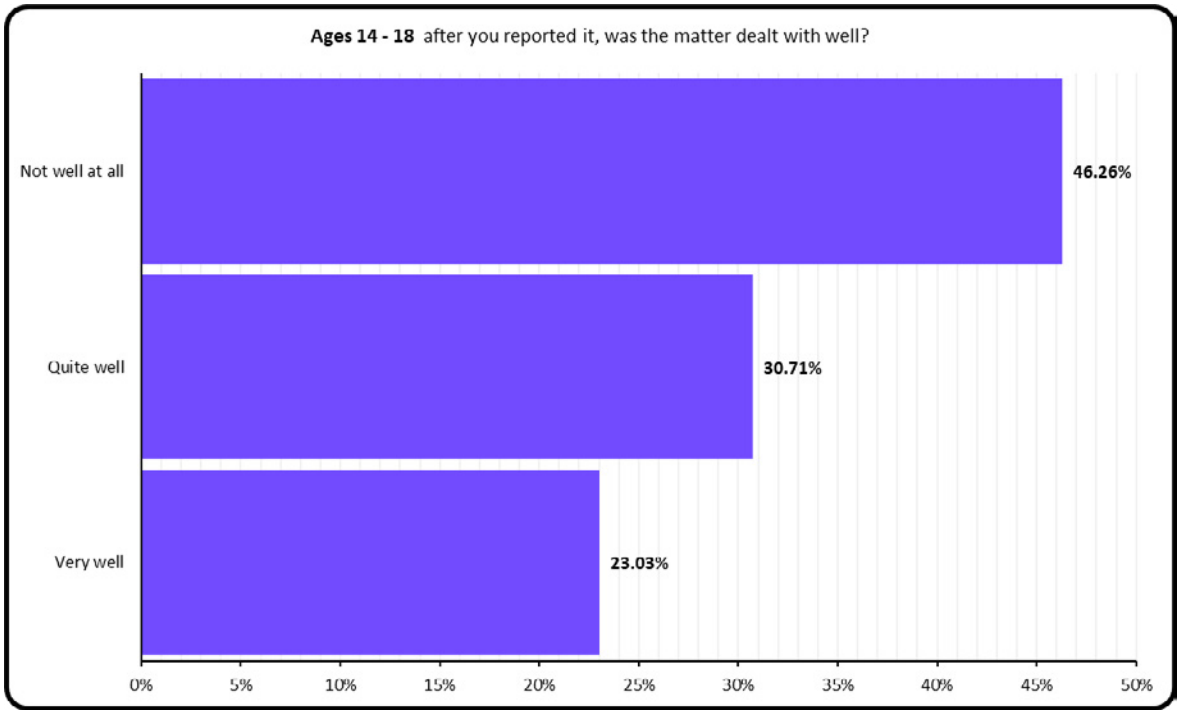


As shown in Table 69 and Figure 69, for ages 14 – 18, 46.26% (n=229) of those who responded to this question, said that it wasn't dealt with well, 30.71% (n=152) said quite well, and 23.03% (n=114) said very well.

Table 69. Ages 14 - 18 after you reported it, was the matter dealt with well?

Ages 14 - 18 after you reported it, was the matter dealt with well?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Very well	23.03%	114
Quite well	30.71%	152
Not well at all	46.26%	229
Grand Total	100.00%	495

Figure 69. Ages 14 - 18 after you reported it, was the matter dealt with well?



4.9 Negative Online Experiences of Friends and Family

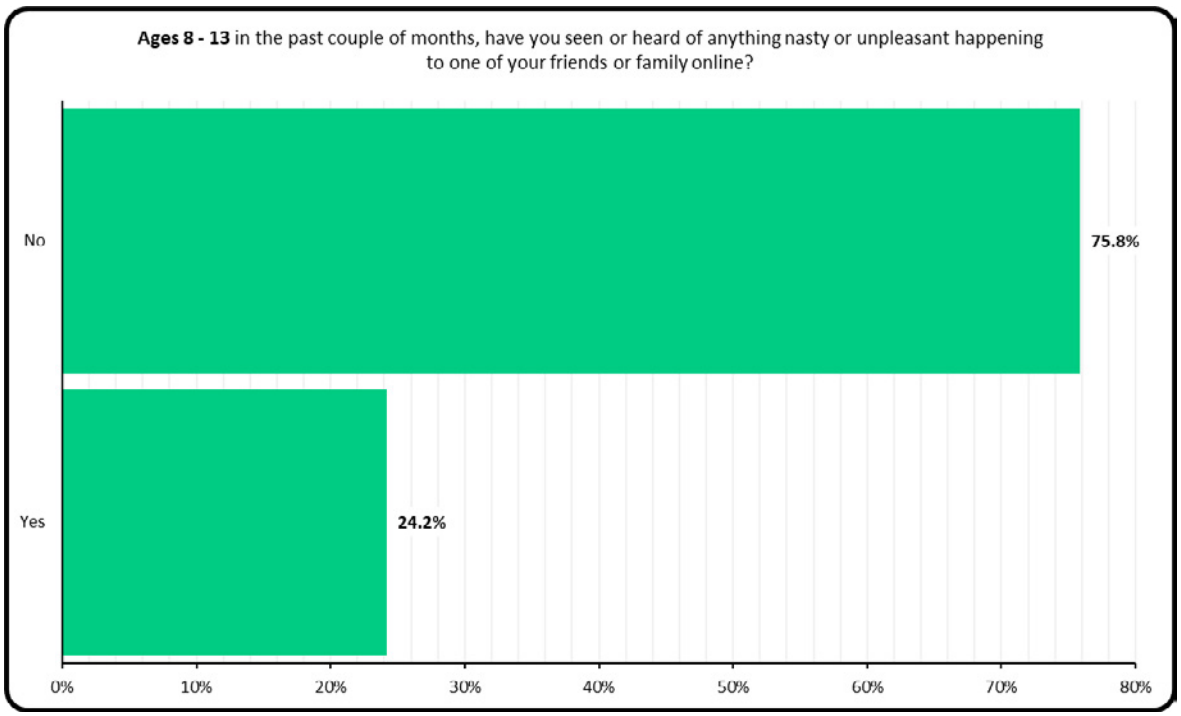
Experiences of friends and family online (ages 8 – 13)

As shown in Table 70 and Figure 70, for ages 8 – 13, 24.15% (n=924) said that in the past couple of months, they had seen or heard something nasty or unpleasant happening to one of their friends or family.

Table 70. Ages 8 - 13 in the past couple of months, have you seen or heard of anything nasty or unpleasant happening to one of your friends or family online?

Ages 8 - 13 in the past couple of months, have you seen or heard of anything nasty or unpleasant happening to one of your friends or family online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Yes	24.15%	n = 924
No	75.85%	n = 2902
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826

Figure 70. Ages 8 - 13 in the past couple of months, have you seen or heard of anything nasty or unpleasant happening to one of your friends or family online?

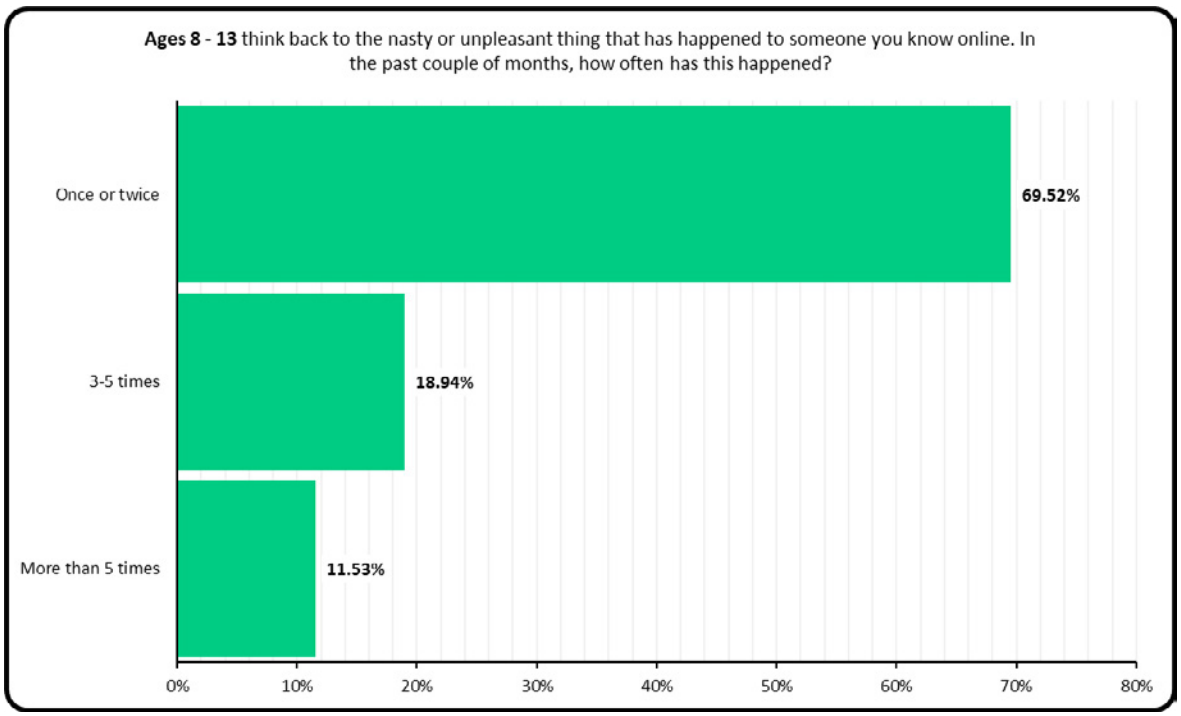


As shown in Table 71 and Figure 71, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response for how often the nasty or unpleasant thing happened to someone they know, was once or twice (69.52%, n=657), followed by 3-5 times (18.94%, n=179), and more than 5 times (11.53%, n=109).

Table 71. Ages 8 - 13 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing that has happened to someone you know online. In the past couple of months, how often has this happened?

Ages 8 - 13 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing that has happened to someone you know online. In the past couple of months, how often has this happened?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
More than 5 times	11.53%	109
3-5 times	18.94%	179
Once or twice	69.52%	657
Grand Total	100.00%	945

Figure 71. Ages 8 - 13 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing that has happened to someone you know online. In the past couple of months, how often has this happened?

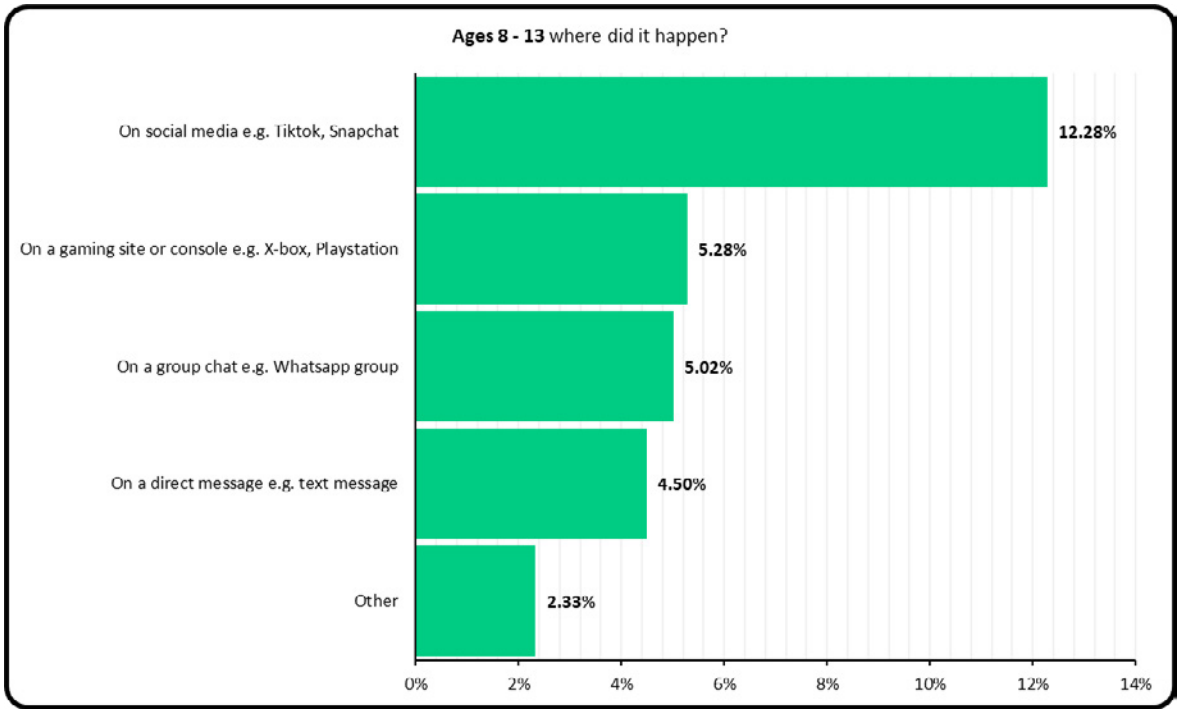


As shown in Table 72 and Figure 72, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response for where the nasty or unpleasant thing happened to someone they know, was on social media (12.28%, n=470, of all respondents).

Table 72. Ages 8 - 13 where did it happen?

Ages 8 - 13 where did it happen?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Other	2.33%
On a direct message e.g., text message	4.50%
On a group chat e.g., WhatsApp group	5.02%
On a gaming site or console e.g., X-box, PlayStation	5.28%
On social media e.g., TikTok, Snapchat	12.28%

Figure 72. Ages 8 - 13 where did it happen?

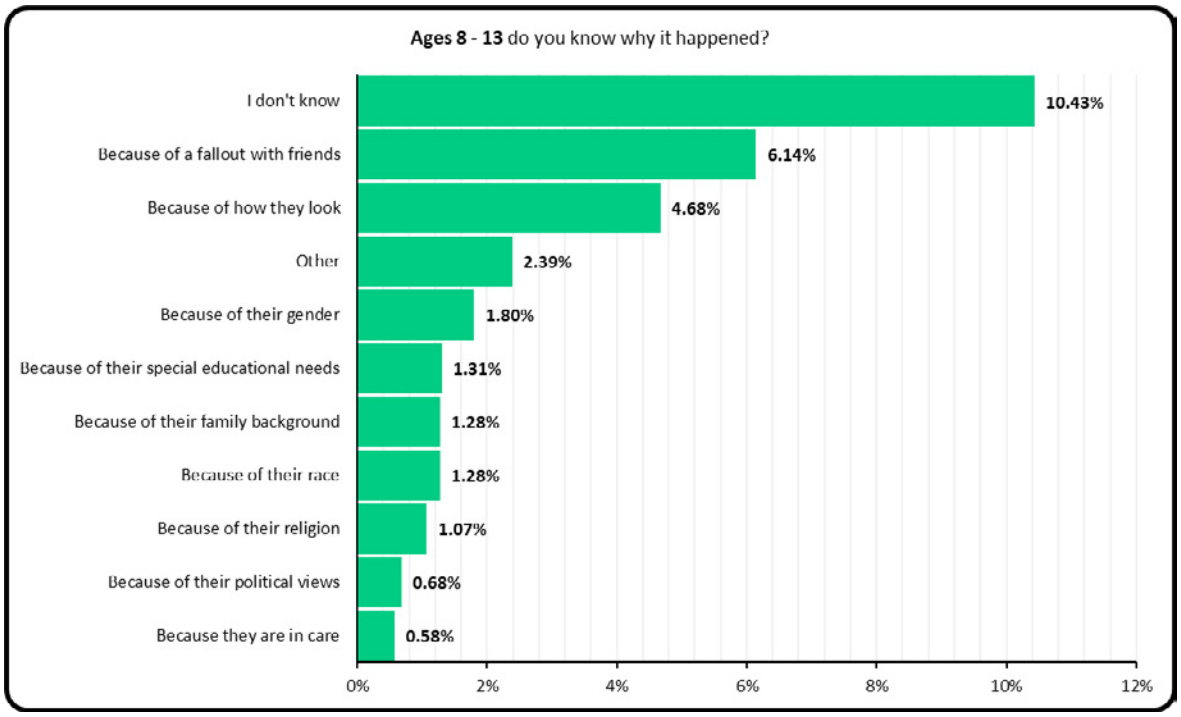


As shown in Table 73 and Figure 73, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response, for why it happened was, I don't know (10.43%, n=399, of all respondents).

Table 73. Ages 8 - 13 do you know why it happened?

Ages 8 - 13 do you know why it happened?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Because they are in care	0.58%
Because of their political views	0.68%
Because of their religion	1.07%
Because of their race	1.28%
Because of their family background	1.28%
Because of their special educational needs	1.31%
Because of their gender	1.80%
Other	2.39%
Because of how they look	4.68%
Because of a fallout with friends	6.14%
I don't know	10.43%

Figure 73. Ages 8 - 13 do you know why it happened?

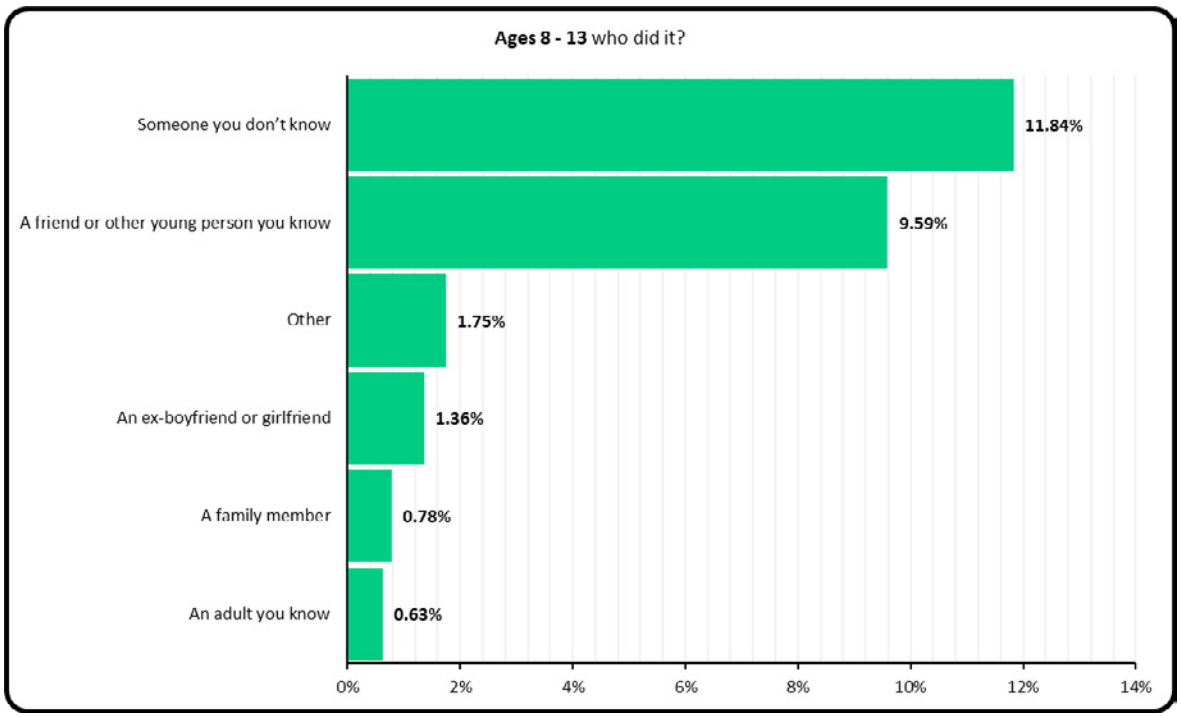


As shown in Table 74 and Figure 74, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response for who did it was someone you don't know (11.84%, n=453, of all respondents).

Table 74. Ages 8 - 13 who did it?

Ages 8 - 13 who did it?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
An adult you know	0.63%
A family member	0.78%
An ex-boyfriend or girlfriend	1.36%
Other	1.75%
A friend or other young person you know	9.59%
Someone you don't know	11.84%

Figure 74. Ages 8 - 13 who did it?



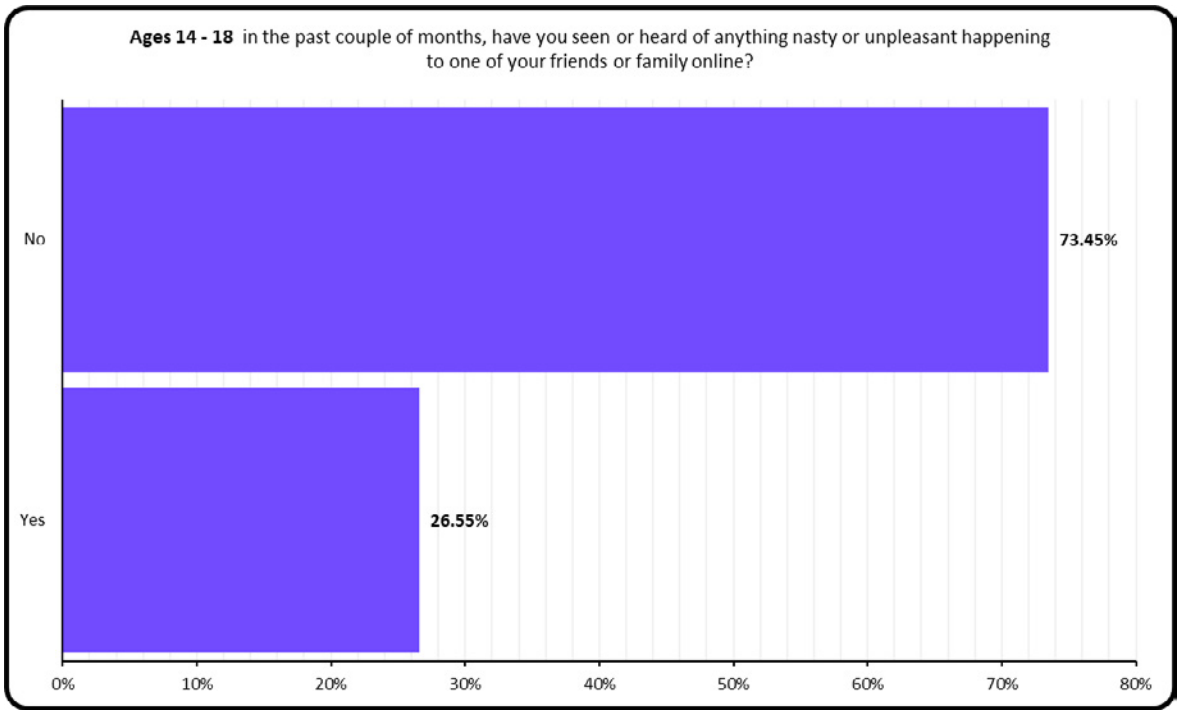
Experiences of friends and family online (ages 14 – 18)

As shown in Table 75 and Figure 75, for ages 14 – 18, 26.55% (n=705) reported that they seen or heard something nasty or unpleasant happen to one their friends or family online.

Table 75. Ages 14 - 18 in the past couple of months, have you seen or heard of anything nasty or unpleasant happening to one of your friends or family online?

Ages 14 - 18 in the past couple of months, have you seen or heard of anything nasty or unpleasant happening to one of your friends or family online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Yes	26.55%	n = 705
No	73.45%	n = 1950
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 75. Ages 14 - 18 in the past couple of months, have you seen or heard of anything nasty or unpleasant happening to one of your friends or family online?

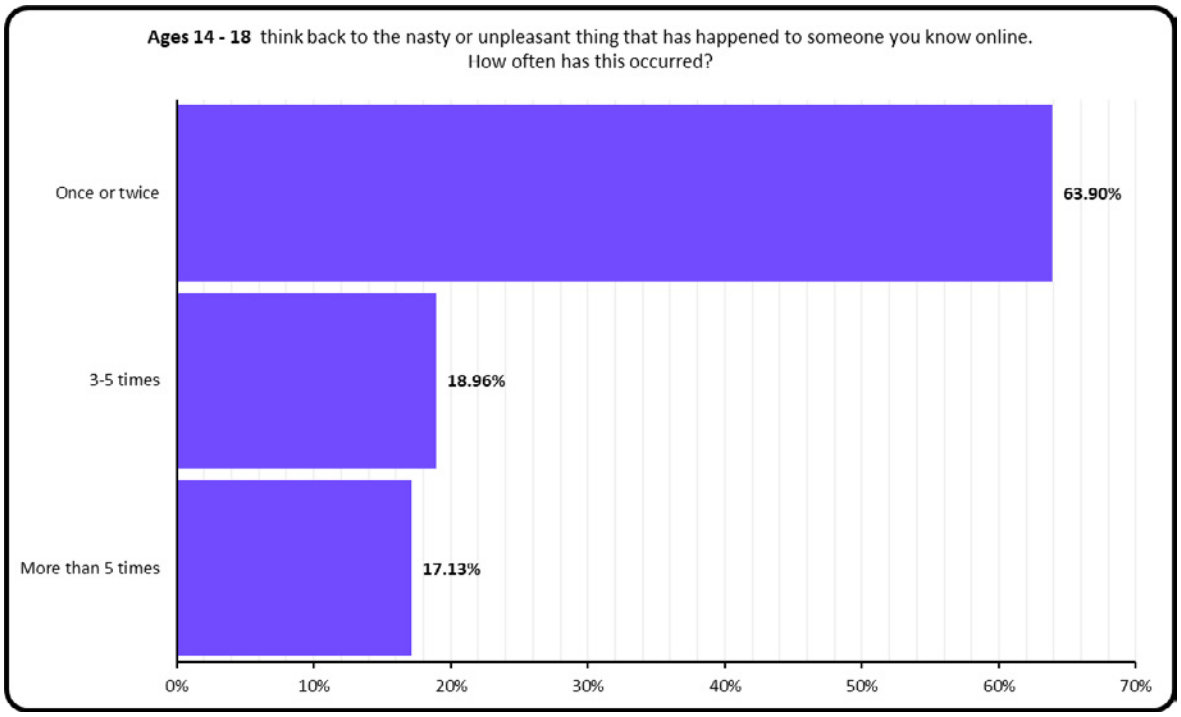


As shown in Table 76 and Figure 76, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response, from those who responded to this question, for how often the nasty or unpleasant thing happened to someone they know, was one or twice (63.90%, n=455), followed by 3-5 times (18.96%, n=135), and more than 5 times (17.13%, n=122).

Table 76. Ages 14 - 18 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing that has happened to someone you know online. How often has this occurred?

Ages 14 - 18 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing that has happened to someone you know online. How often has this occurred?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
More than 5 times	17.13%	122
3-5 times	18.96%	135
Once or twice	63.90%	455
Grand Total	100.00%	712

Figure 76. Ages 14 - 18 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing that has happened to someone you know online. How often has this occurred?

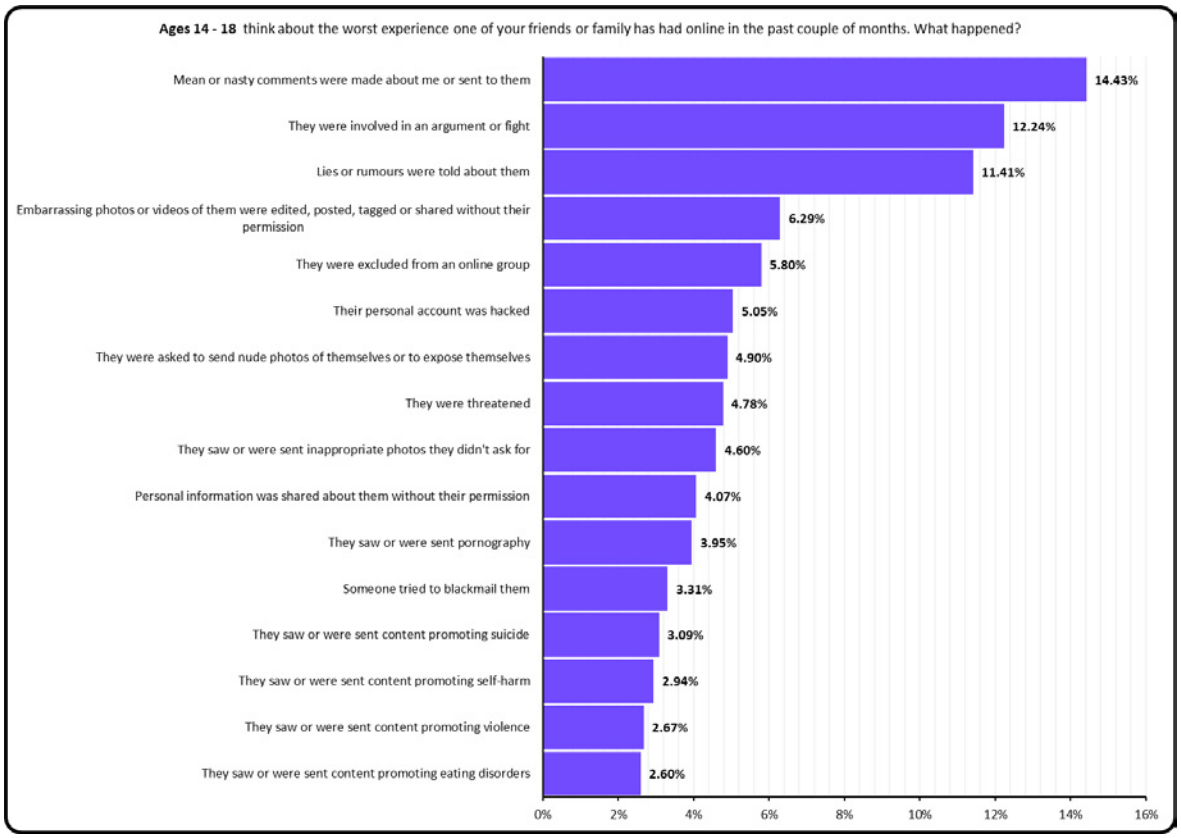


As shown in Table 77 and Figure 77, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response, for what happened, was mean or nasty comments (14.43%, n=383, of all respondents).

Table 77. Ages 14 - 18 think about the worst experience one of your friends or family has had online in the past couple of months. What happened?

Ages 14 - 18 think about the worst experience one of your friends or family has had online in the past couple of months. What happened?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
They saw or were sent content promoting eating disorders	2.60%
They saw or were sent content promoting violence	2.67%
They saw or were sent content promoting self-harm	2.94%
They saw or were sent content promoting suicide	3.09%
Someone tried to blackmail them	3.31%
They saw or were sent pornography	3.95%
Personal information was shared about them without their permission	4.07%
They saw or were sent inappropriate photos they didn't ask for	4.60%
They were threatened	4.78%
They were asked to send nude photos of themselves or to expose themselves	4.90%
Their personal account was hacked	5.05%
They were excluded from an online group	5.80%
Embarrassing photos or videos of them were edited, posted, tagged or shared without their permission	6.29%
Lies or rumours were told about them	11.41%
They were involved in an argument or fight	12.24%
Mean or nasty comments were made about me or sent to them	14.43%

Figure 77. Ages 14 - 18 think about the worst experience one of your friends or family has had online in the past couple of months. What happened?

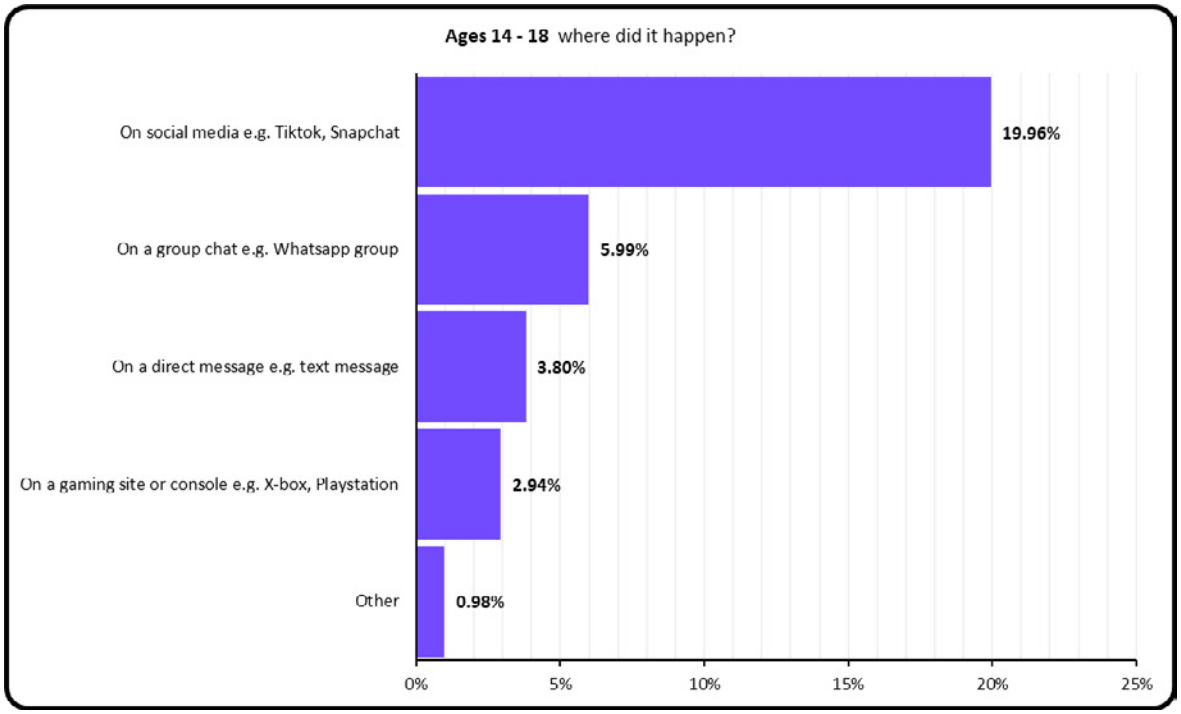


As shown in Table 78 and Figure 78, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response for where the nasty or unpleasant thing happened to someone they know, was on social media (19.96%, n=530, of all respondents).

Table 78. Ages 14 - 18 where did it happen?

Ages 14 - 18 where did it happen?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Other	0.98%
On a gaming site or console e.g., X-box, PlayStation	2.94%
On a direct message e.g., text message	3.80%
On a group chat e.g., WhatsApp group	5.99%
On social media e.g., TikTok, Snapchat	19.96%

Figure 78. Ages 14 - 18 where did it happen?

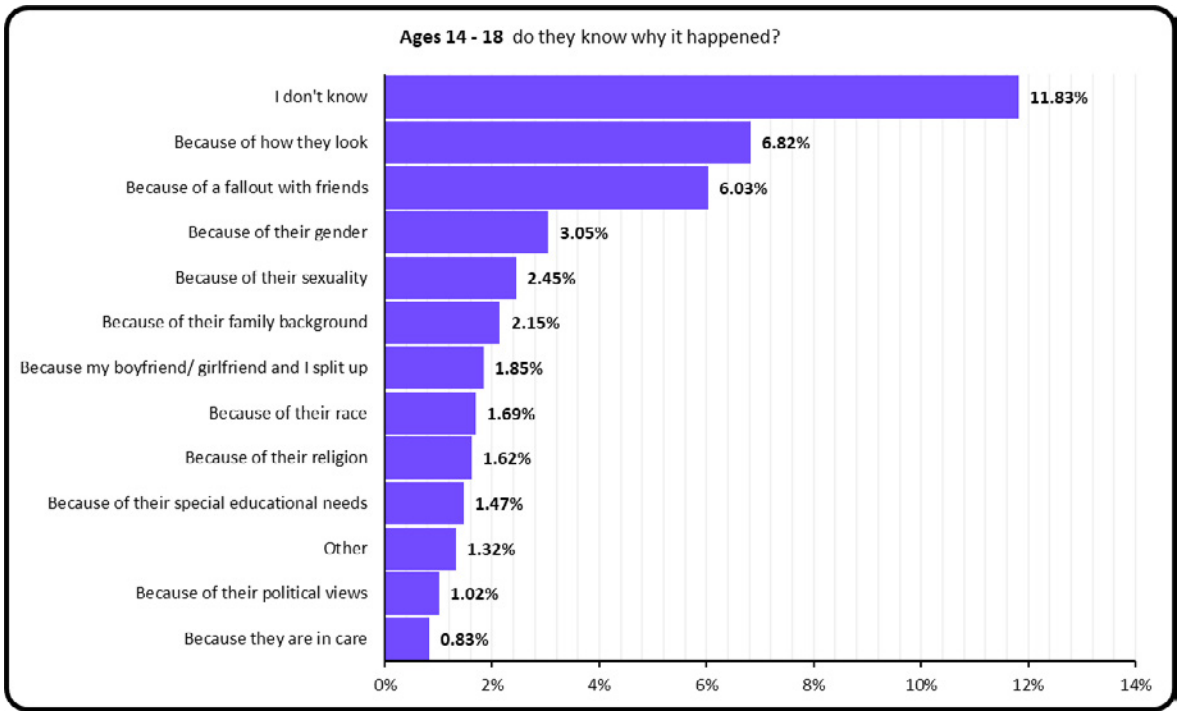


As shown in Table 79 and Figure 79, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response for why it happened, was I don't know (11.83%, n=314, of all respondents).

Table 79. Ages 14 - 18 do they know why it happened?

Ages 14 - 18 do they know why it happened?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Because they are in care	0.83%
Because of their political views	1.02%
Other	1.32%
Because of their special educational needs	1.47%
Because of their religion	1.62%
Because of their race	1.69%
Because my boyfriend/ girlfriend and I split up	1.85%
Because of their family background	2.15%
Because of their sexuality	2.45%
Because of their gender	3.05%
Because of a fallout with friends	6.03%
Because of how they look	6.82%
I don't know	11.83%

Figure 79. Ages 14 - 18 do they know why it happened?

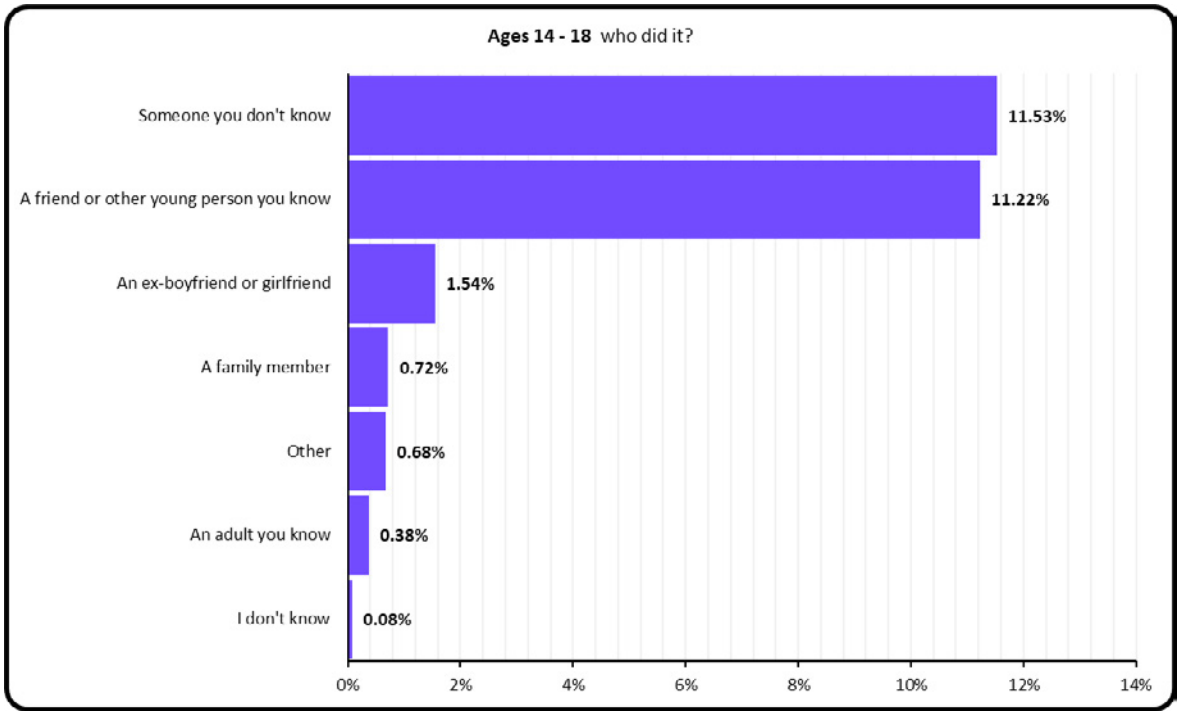


As shown in Table 80 and Figure 80, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response for who did it, was someone you don't know (11.53%, n=306, of all respondents).

Table 80. Ages 14 - 18 who did it?

Ages 14 - 18 who did it?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
I don't know	0.08%
An adult you know	0.38%
Other	0.68%
A family member	0.72%
An ex-boyfriend or girlfriend	1.54%
A friend or other young person you know	11.22%
Someone you don't know	11.53%

Figure 80. Ages 14 - 18 who did it?



4.10 Negative Online Actions Done to Others

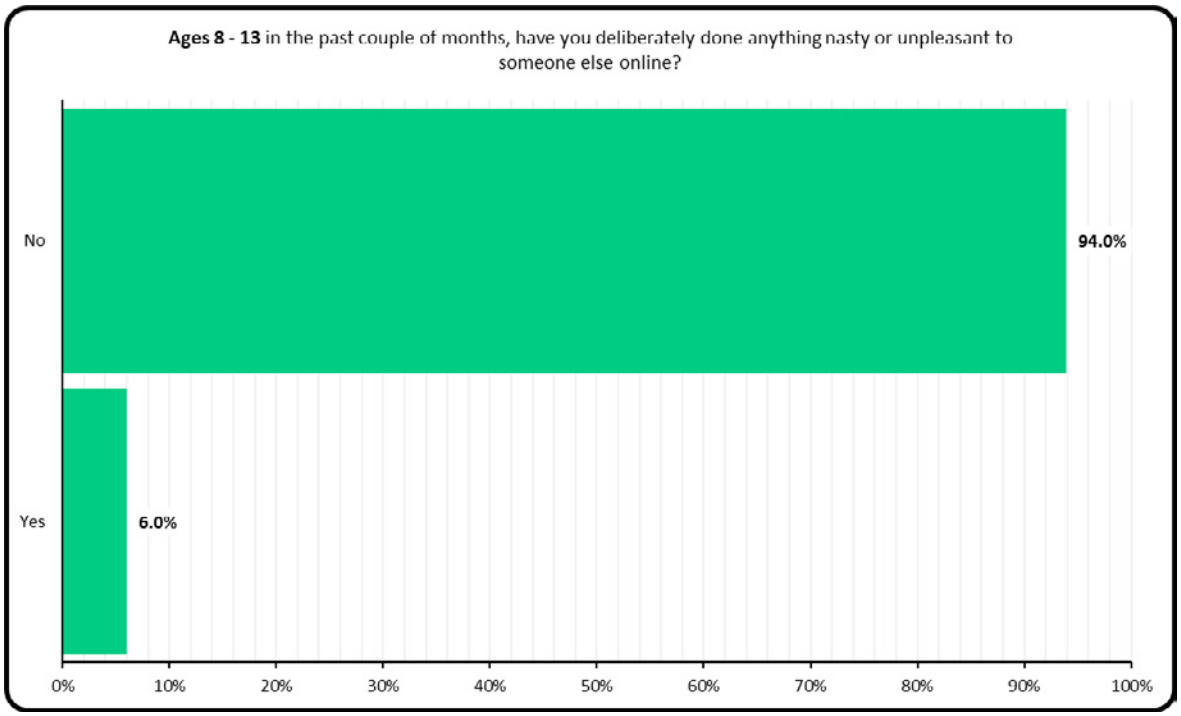
Things you have done online to others (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 81 and Figure 81, for ages 8 – 13, 6.04% (n=231) reported deliberately doing something nasty or unpleasant to someone else online.

Table 81. Ages 8 - 13 in the past couple of months, have you deliberately done anything nasty or unpleasant to someone else online?

Ages 8 - 13 in the past couple of months, have you deliberately done anything nasty or unpleasant to someone else online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Yes	6.04%	n = 231
No	93.96%	n = 3595
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826

Figure 81. Ages 8 - 13 in the past couple of months, have you deliberately done anything nasty or unpleasant to someone else online?

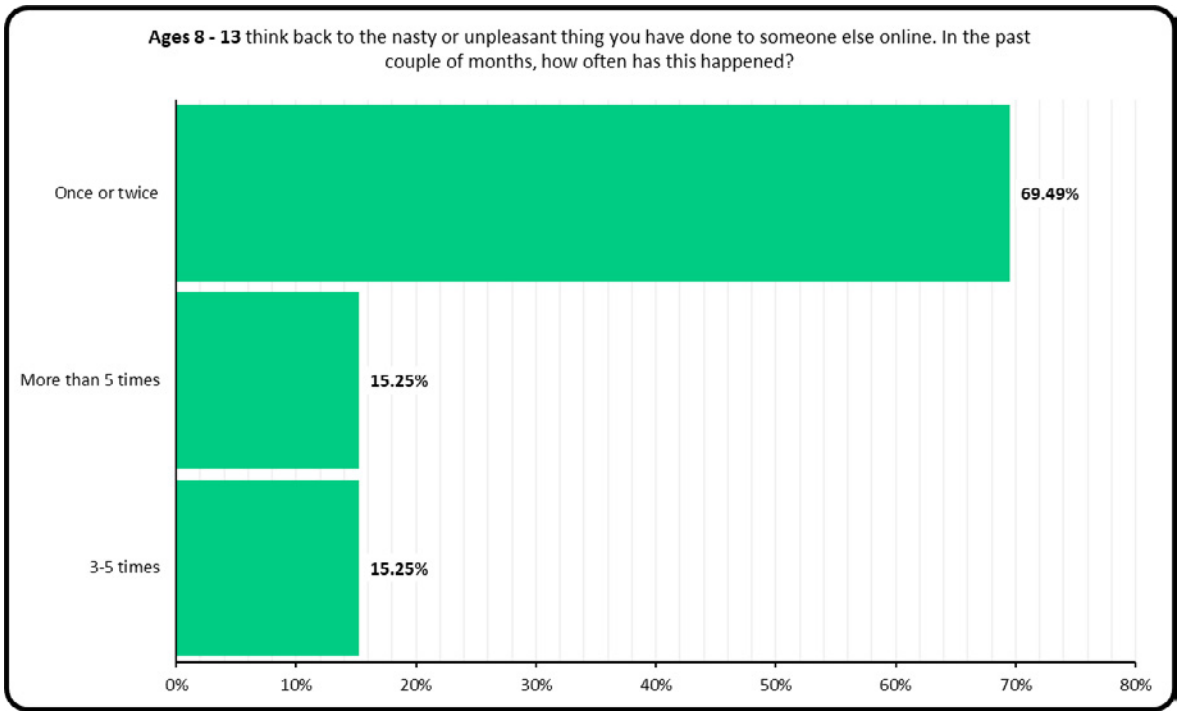


As shown in Table 82 and Figure 82, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response, from those who responded to this question, in respect to how often they did something to someone else, was once or twice (69.49%, n=164), followed by more than 5 times and 3-5 times (both 15.25%, n=36).

Table 82. Ages 8 - 13 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing you have done to someone else online. In the past couple of months, how often has this happened?

Ages 8 - 13 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing you have done to someone else online. In the past couple of months, how often has this happened?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
3-5 times	15.25%	36
More than 5 times	15.25%	36
Once or twice	69.49%	164
Grand Total	100.00%	236

Figure 82. Ages 8 - 13 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing you have done to someone else online. In the past couple of months, how often has this happened?

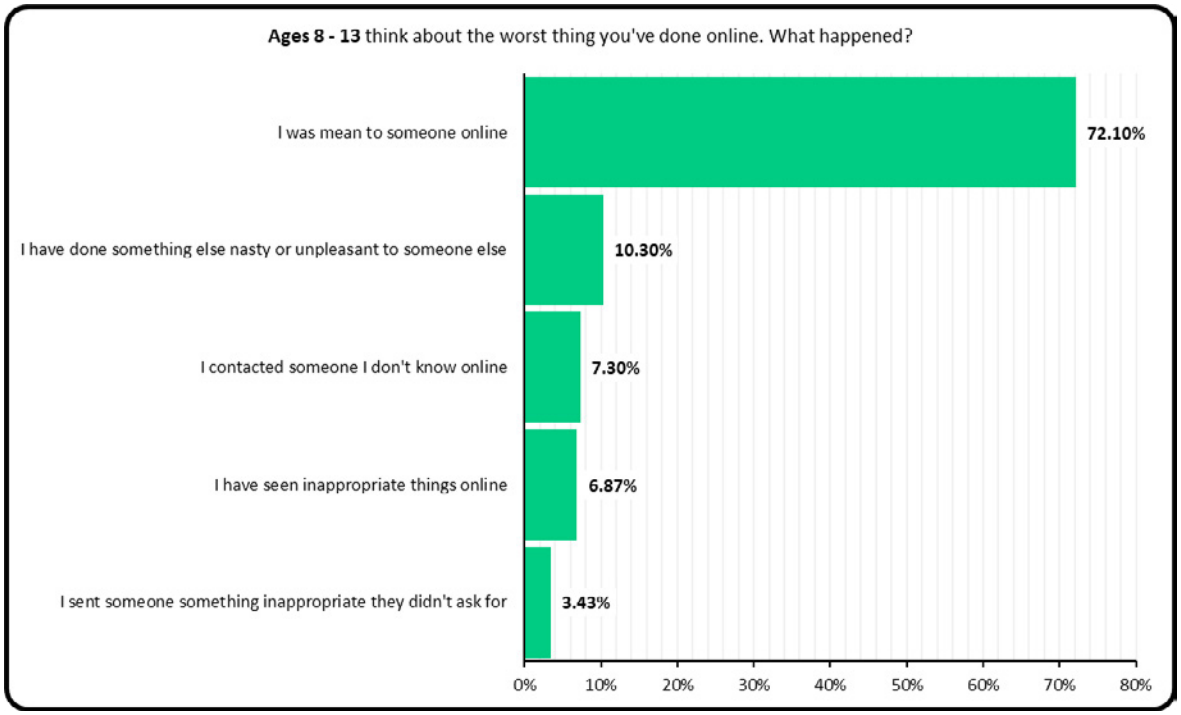


As shown in Table 83 and Figure 83, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response, from those who responded to this question, in respect to what happened, was I was mean to someone online (72.10%, n=168).

Table 83. Ages 8 - 13 think about the worst thing you've done online. What happened?

Ages 8 - 13 think about the worst thing you've done online. What happened?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
I sent someone something inappropriate they didn't ask for	3.43%	8
I have seen inappropriate things online	6.87%	16
I contacted someone I don't know online	7.30%	17
I have done something else nasty or unpleasant to someone else	10.30%	24
I was mean to someone online	72.10%	168
Grand Total	100.00%	233

Figure 83. Ages 8 - 13 think about the worst thing you've done online. What happened?

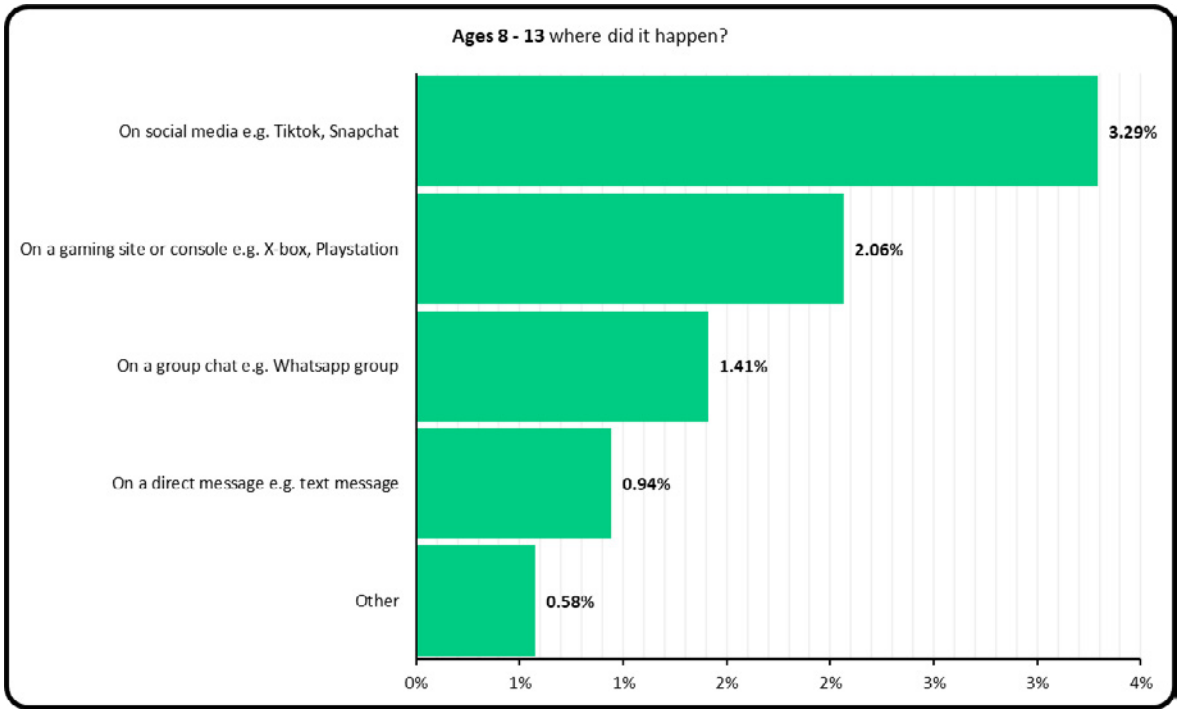


As shown in Table 84 and Figure 84, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response in respect to where it happened, was on social media (3.29%, n=126, of all respondents).

Table 84. Ages 8 - 13 where did it happen?

Ages 8 - 13 where did it happen?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Other	0.58%
On a direct message e.g., text message	0.94%
On a group chat e.g., WhatsApp group	1.41%
On a gaming site or console e.g., X-box, PlayStation	2.06%
On social media e.g., TikTok, Snapchat	3.29%

Figure 84. Ages 8 - 13 where did it happen?

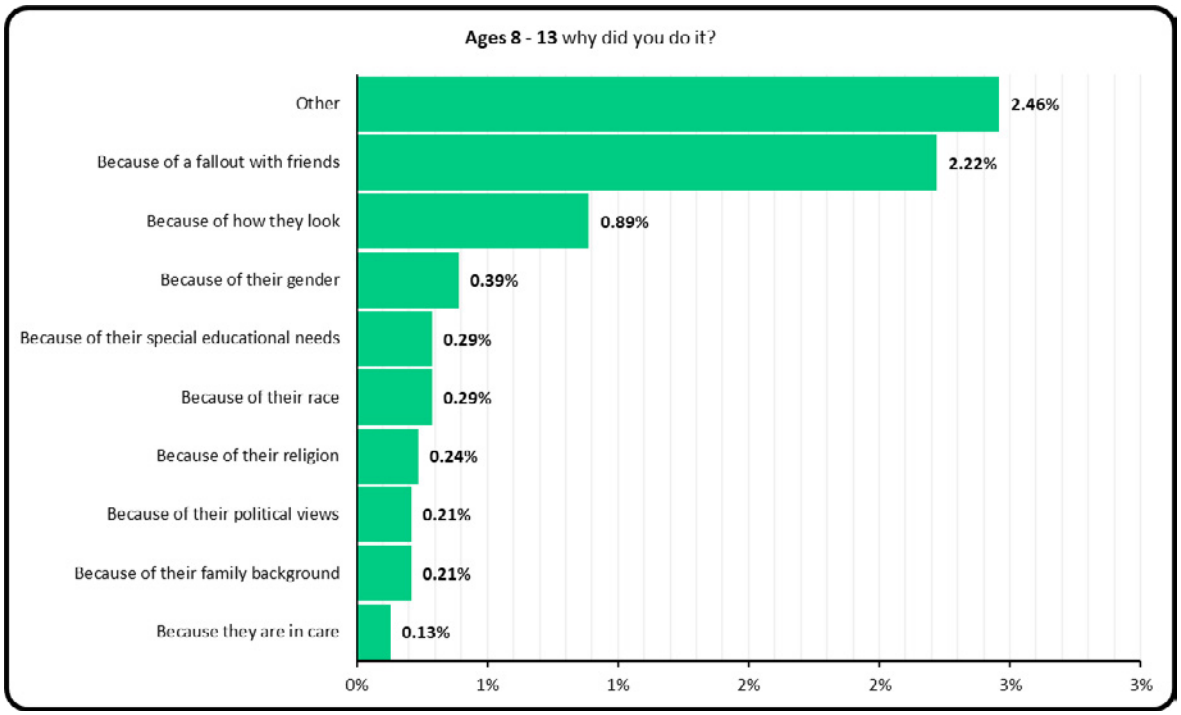


As shown in Table 85 and Figure 85, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response for why the respondents did it, was other (2.46%, n=94, of all respondents).

Table 85. Ages 8 - 13 why did you do it?

Ages 8 - 13 why did you do it?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Because they are in care	0.13%
Because of their family background	0.21%
Because of their political views	0.21%
Because of their religion	0.24%
Because of their race	0.29%
Because of their special educational needs	0.29%
Because of their gender	0.39%
Because of how they look	0.89%
Because of a fallout with friends	2.22%
Other	2.46%

Figure 85. Ages 8 - 13 why did you do it?

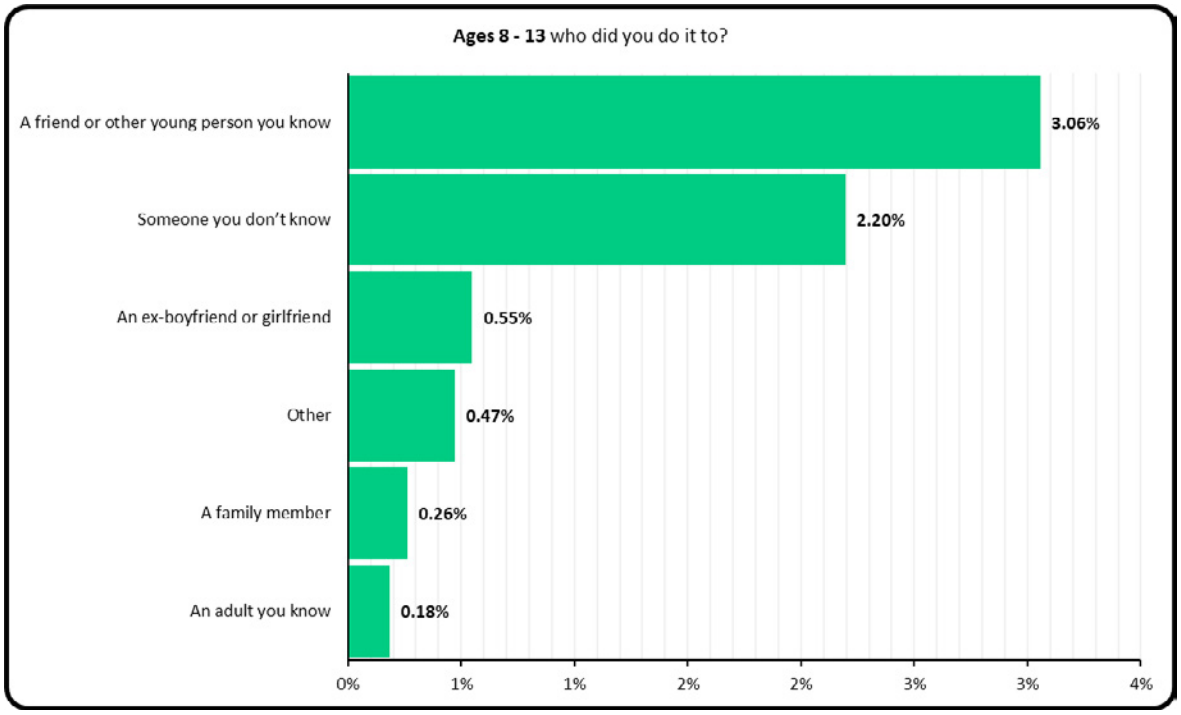


As shown in Table 86 and Figure 86, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response for who the respondents did it to, was a friend or other young person they know (3.06%, n=117, of all respondents).

Table 86. Ages 8 - 13 who did you do it to?

Ages 8 - 13 who did you do it to?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
An adult you know	0.18%
A family member	0.26%
Other	0.47%
An ex-boyfriend or girlfriend	0.55%
Someone you don't know	2.20%
A friend or other young person you know	3.06%

Figure 86. Ages 8 - 13 who did you do it to?

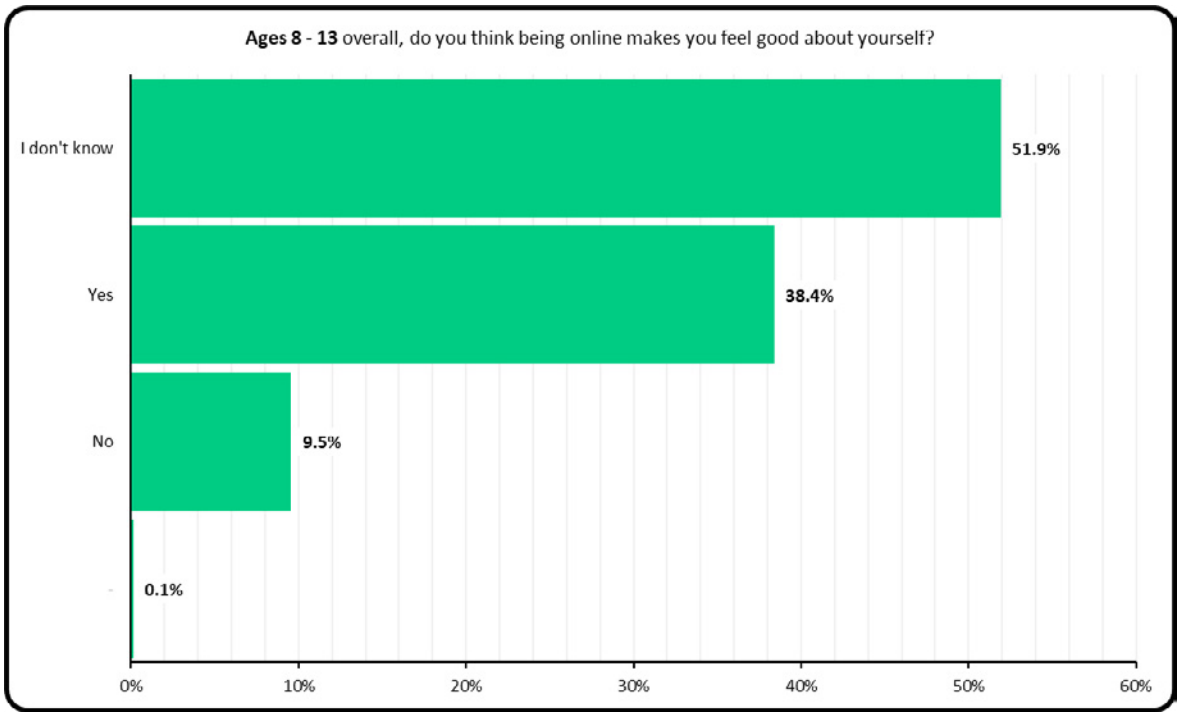


As shown in Table 87 and Figure 87, for ages 8 – 13, 51.93% (n=1987) reported that they don't know if being online makes them feel good about themselves. 38.40% (n=1469) said that being online does make them feel good about themselves. However, 9.54% (n=365) reported that being online doesn't make them feel good about themselves.

Table 87. Ages 8 - 13 overall, do you think being online makes you feel good about yourself?

Ages 8 - 13 overall, do you think being online makes you feel good about yourself?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
-	0.13%	n = 5
No	9.54%	n = 365
Yes	38.40%	n = 1469
I don't know	51.93%	n = 1987
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826

Figure 87. Ages 8 - 13 overall, do you think being online makes you feel good about yourself?



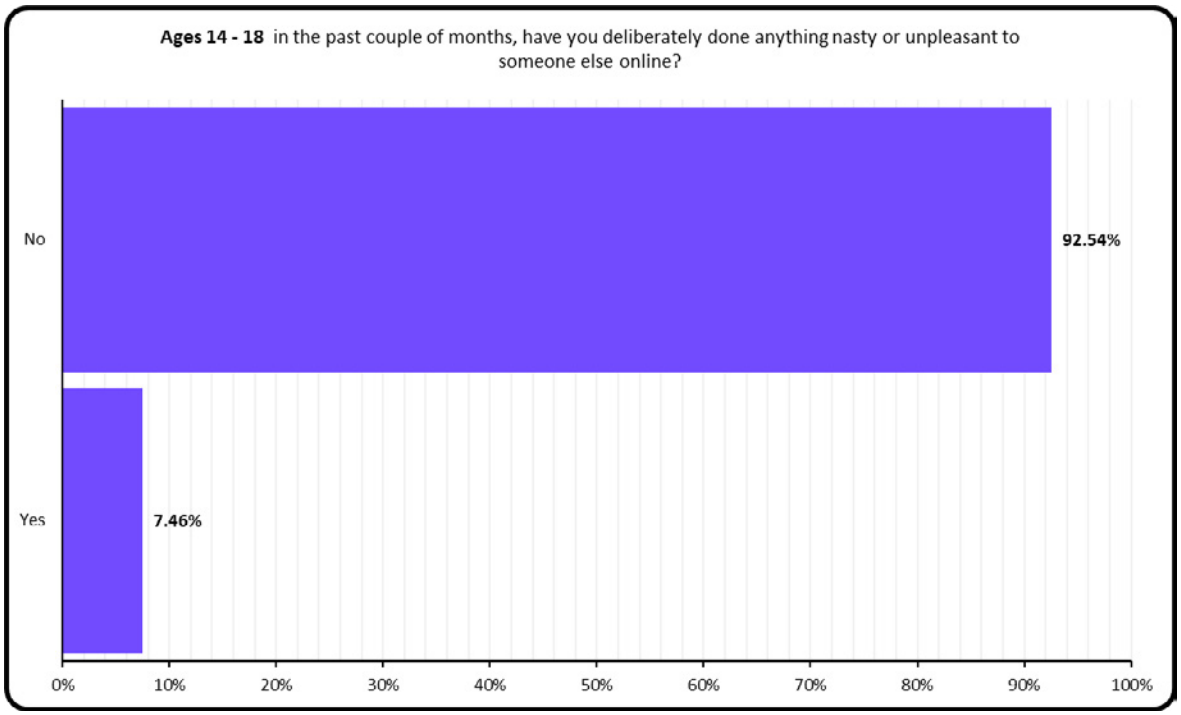
Things you have done online to others (ages 14 – 18):

As shown in Table 88 and Figure 88, for ages 14 – 18, 7.46% (n=198) reported deliberately doing something nasty or unpleasant to someone else online.

Table 88. Ages 14 - 18 in the past couple of months, have you deliberately done anything nasty or unpleasant to someone else online?

Ages 14 - 18 in the past couple of months, have you deliberately done anything nasty or unpleasant to someone else online?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Yes	7.46%	n = 198
No	92.54%	n = 2457
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 88. Ages 14 - 18 in the past couple of months, have you deliberately done anything nasty or unpleasant to someone else online?

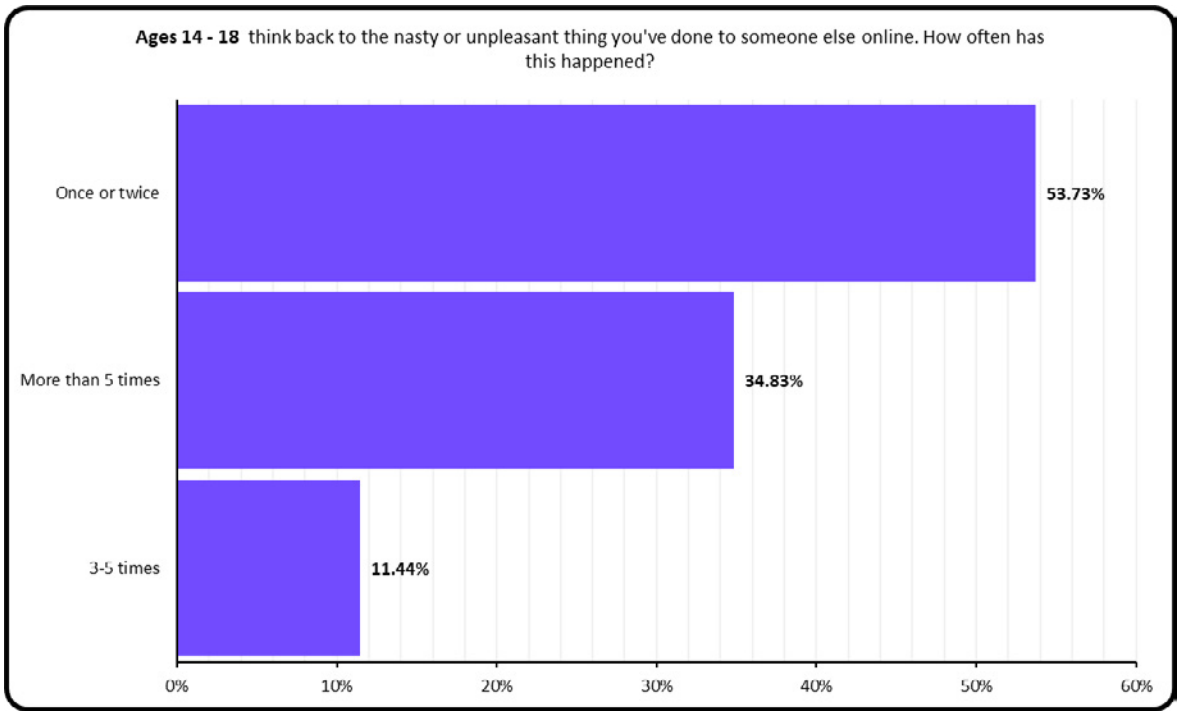


As shown in Table 89 and Figure 89, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response, from those who responded to this question, in respect to how often they did something to someone else, was one or twice (53.73%, n=108), followed by more than 5 times (34.83%, n=70), and 3-5 times (11.44%, n=23).

Table 89. Ages 14 - 18 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing you've done to someone else online. How often has this happened?

Ages 14 - 18 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing you've done to someone else online. How often has this happened?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
3-5 times	11.44%	23
More than 5 times	34.83%	70
Once or twice	53.73%	108
Grand Total	100.00%	201

Figure 89. Ages 14 - 18 think back to the nasty or unpleasant thing you've done to someone else online. How often has this happened?

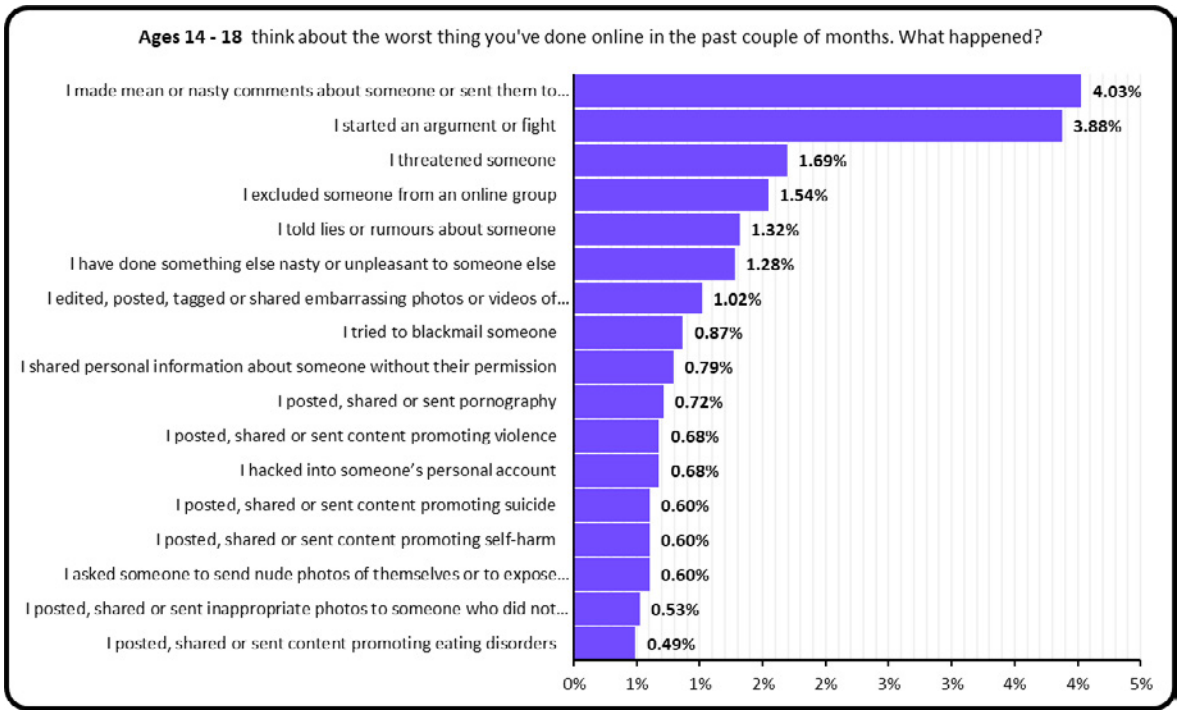


As shown in Table 90 and Figure 90, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response, to the worst thing respondents have done online to someone else, was I made mean or nasty comments about someone or sent them to someone (4.03%, n=107, of all respondents).

Table 90. Ages 14 - 18 think about the worst thing you've done online in the past couple of months. What happened?

Ages 14 - 18 think about the worst thing you've done online in the past couple of months. What happened?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
I posted, shared or sent content promoting eating disorders	0.49%
I posted, shared or sent inappropriate photos to someone who did not ask for them	0.53%
I asked someone to send nude photos of themselves or to expose themselves	0.60%
I posted, shared or sent content promoting self-harm	0.60%
I posted, shared or sent content promoting suicide	0.60%
I hacked into someone's personal account	0.68%
I posted, shared or sent content promoting violence	0.68%
I posted, shared or sent pornography	0.72%
I shared personal information about someone without their permission	0.79%
I tried to blackmail someone	0.87%
I edited, posted, tagged or shared embarrassing photos or videos of someone without their permission	1.02%
I have done something else nasty or unpleasant to someone else	1.28%
I told lies or rumours about someone	1.32%
I excluded someone from an online group	1.54%
I threatened someone	1.69%
I started an argument or fight	3.88%
I made mean or nasty comments about someone or sent them to someone	4.03%

Figure 90. Ages 14 - 18 think about the worst thing you've done online in the past couple of months. What happened?

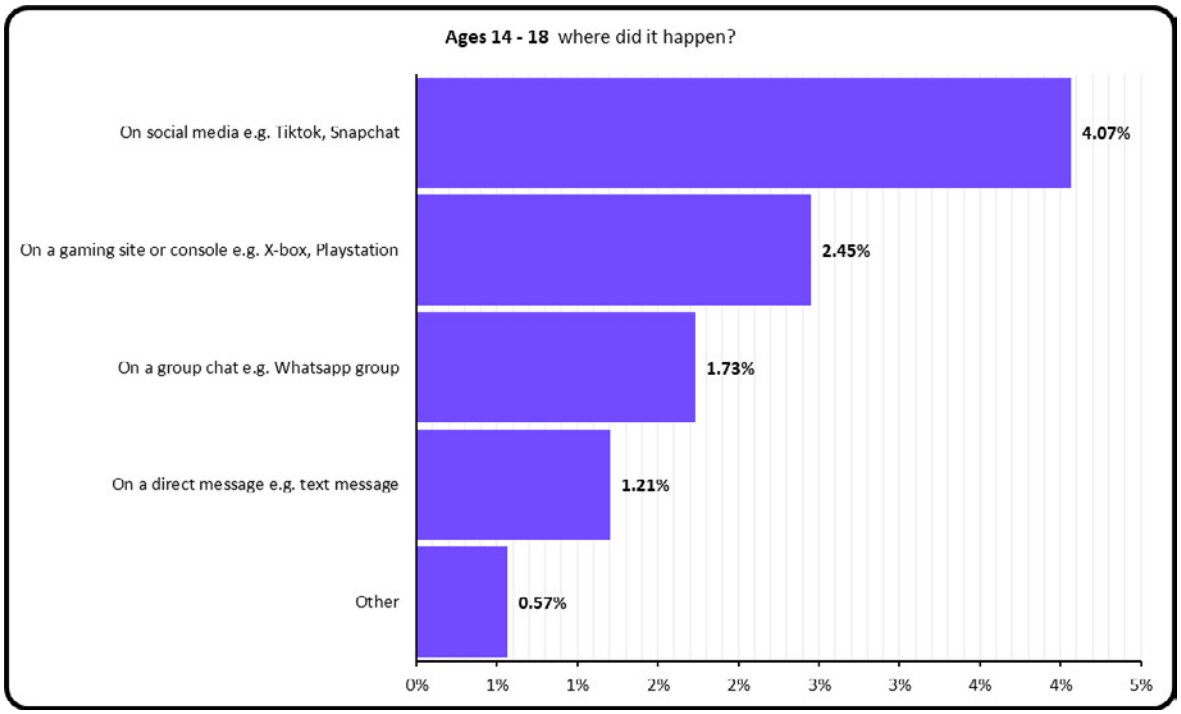


As shown in Table 91 and Figure 91, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response, to where did it happen, was on social media (4.07%, n=108, of all respondents).

Table 91. Ages 14 - 18 where did it happen?

Ages 14 - 18 where did it happen?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Other	0.57%
On a direct message e.g., text message	1.21%
On a group chat e.g., WhatsApp group	1.73%
On a gaming site or console e.g., X-box, PlayStation	2.45%
On social media e.g., TikTok, Snapchat	4.07%

Figure 91. Ages 14 - 18 where did it happen?

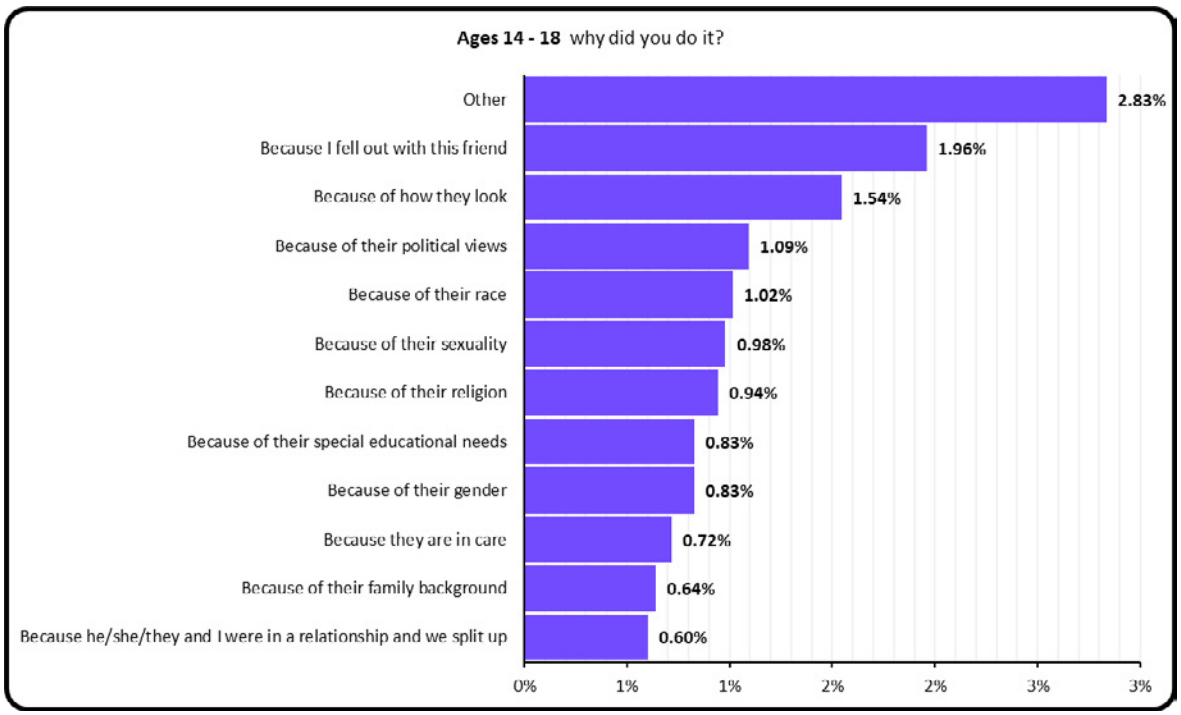


As shown in Table 92 and Figure 92, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response, to why did you do it, was other (2.83%, n=75, of all respondents).

Table 92. Ages 14 - 18 why did you do it?

Ages 14 - 18 why did you do it?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Because he/she/they and I were in a relationship and we split up	0.60%
Because of their family background	0.64%
Because they are in care	0.72%
Because of their gender	0.83%
Because of their special educational needs	0.83%
Because of their religion	0.94%
Because of their sexuality	0.98%
Because of their race	1.02%
Because of their political views	1.09%
Because of how they look	1.54%
Because I fell out with this friend	1.96%
Other	2.83%

Figure 92. Ages 14 - 18 why did you do it?

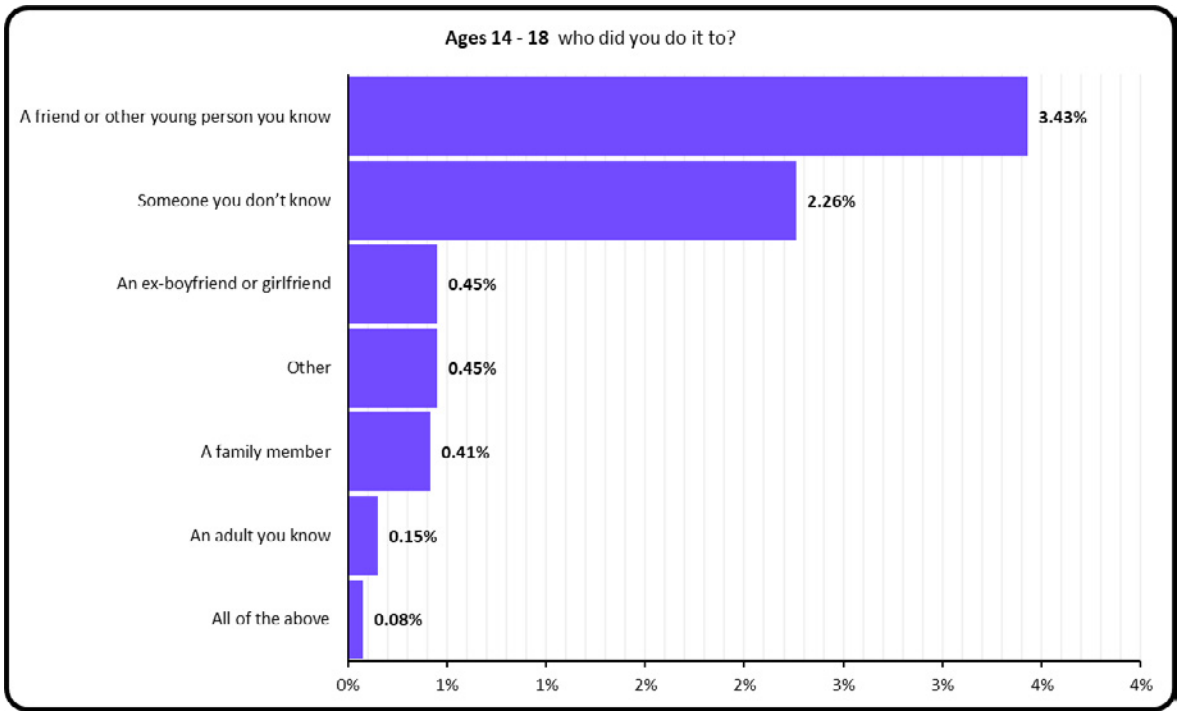


As shown in Table 93 and Figure 93, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response, to who did you do it to, was a friend or other young person you know (3.43%, n=91, of all respondents).

Table 93. Ages 14 - 18 who did you do it to?

Ages 14 - 18 who did you do it to?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
All of the above	0.08%
An adult you know	0.15%
A family member	0.41%
Other	0.45%
An ex-boyfriend or girlfriend	0.45%
Someone you don't know	2.26%
A friend or other young person you know	3.43%

Figure 93. Ages 14 - 18 who did you do it to?

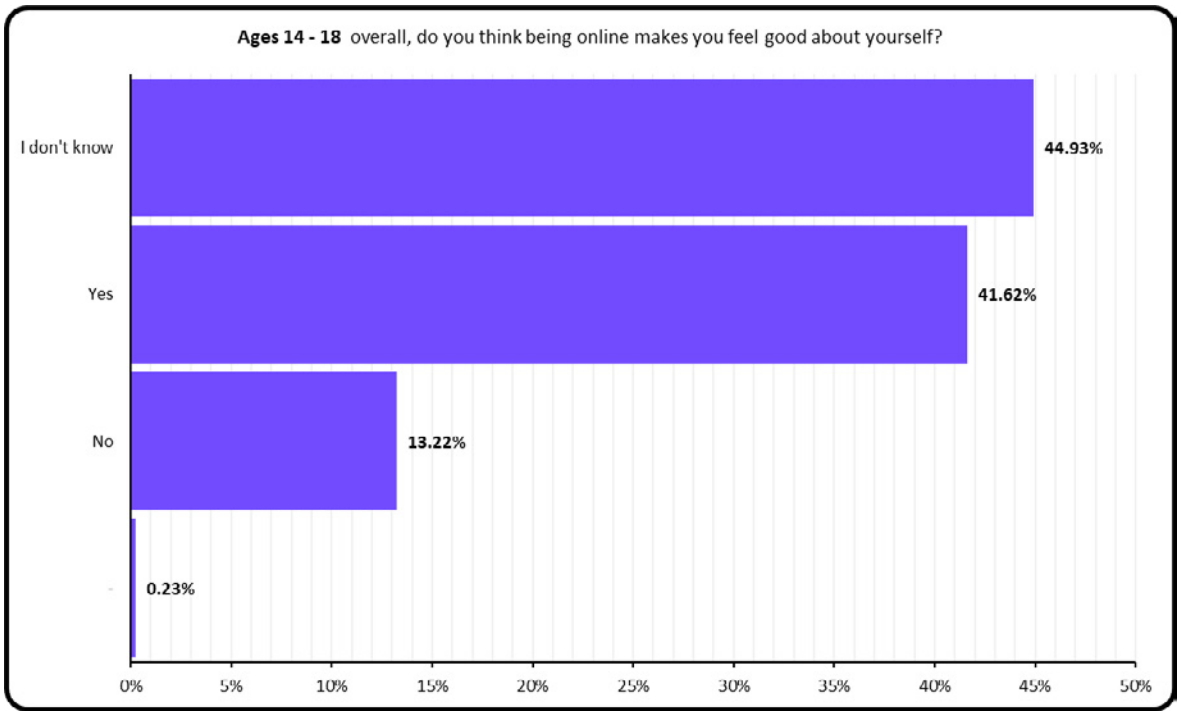


As shown in Table 94 and Figure 94, for ages 14 – 18, 44.93% (n=1193) reported that they didn't know if being online makes them feel good about themselves. 41.62% (n=1105) said that being online does make them feel good about themselves. However, 13.22% (n=351) reported that being online doesn't make them feel good about themselves.

Table 94. Ages 14 - 18 overall, do you think being online makes you feel good about yourself?

Ages 14 - 18 overall, do you think being online makes you feel good about yourself?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
-	0.23%	n = 6
No	13.22%	n = 351
Yes	41.62%	n = 1105
I don't know	44.93%	n = 1193
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 94. Ages 14 - 18 overall, do you think being online makes you feel good about yourself?



4.12 Experience of and Views About Online Safety Training

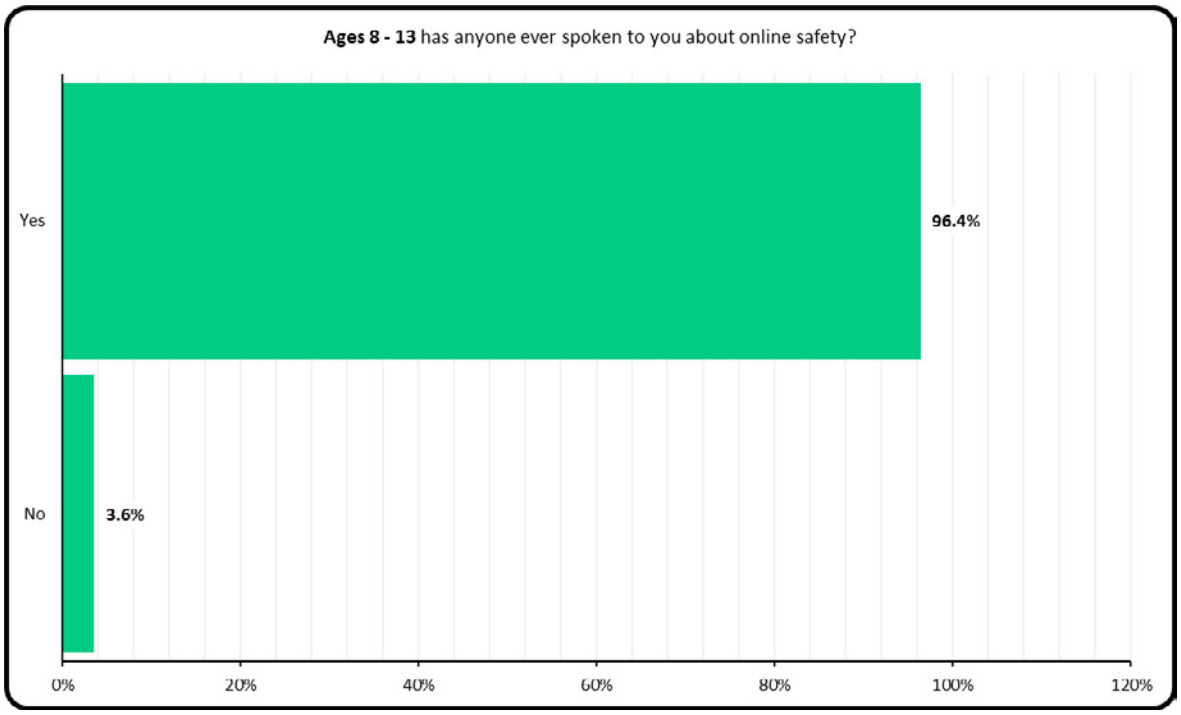
People who have spoken about online safety (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 95 and Figure 95, for ages 8 – 13, the vast majority (93%, n=3688) reported that someone has spoken to them about online safety.

Table 95. Ages 8 - 13 has anyone ever spoken to you about online safety?

Ages 8 - 13 has anyone ever spoken to you about online safety?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
No	3.61%	n = 138
Yes	96.39%	n = 3688
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826

Figure 95. Ages 8 - 13 has anyone ever spoken to you about online safety?

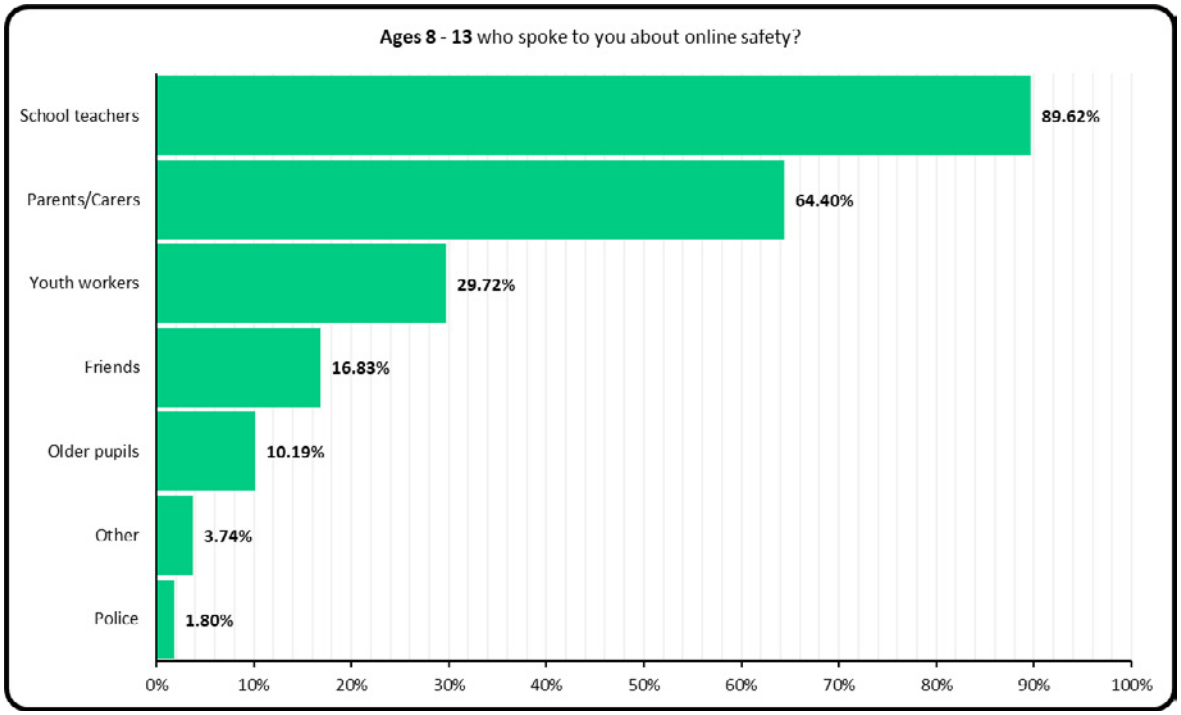


As shown in Table 96 and Figure 96, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response to who spoke about online safety was school teachers (89.62%).

Table 96. Ages 8 - 10 who spoke to you about online safety?

Ages 8 - 10 who spoke to you about online safety?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Police	1.80%
Other	3.74%
Older pupils	10.19%
Friends	16.83%
Youth workers	29.72%
Parents/Carers	64.40%
School teachers	89.62%

Figure 96. Ages 8 - 10 who spoke to you about online safety?

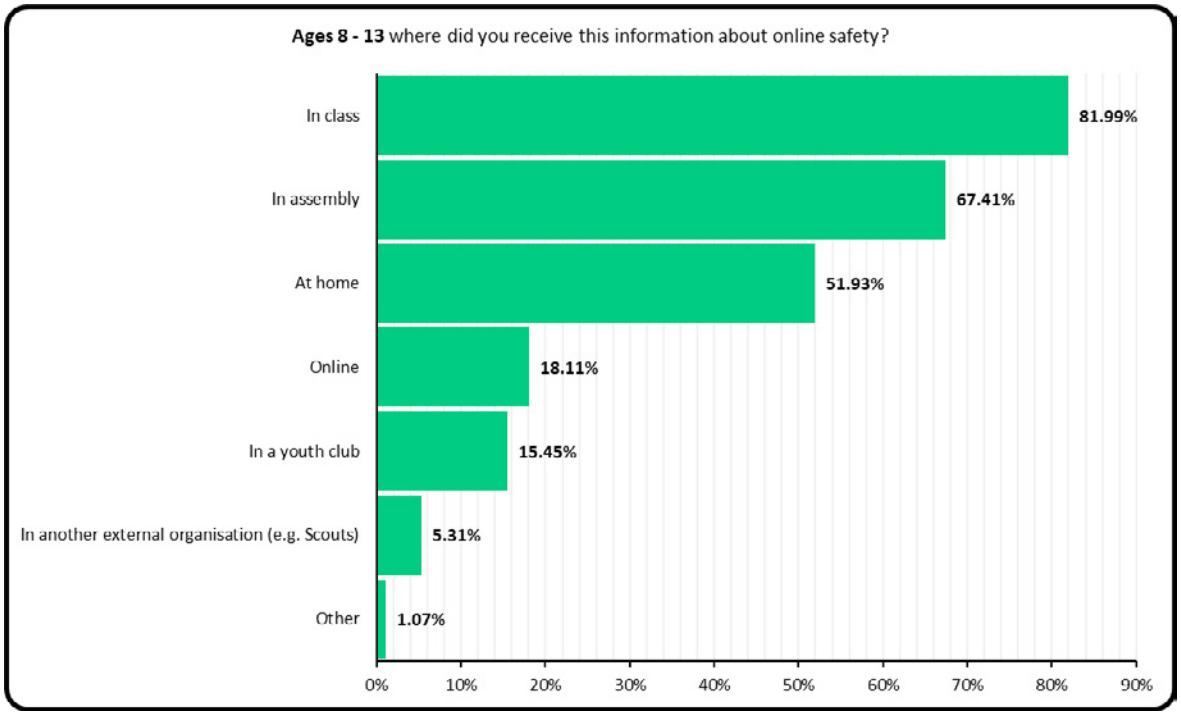


As shown in Table 97 and Figure 97, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response to where they received information on online safety was in class (81.99%).

Table 97. Ages 8 - 13 where did you receive this information about online safety?

Ages 8 - 13 where did you receive this information about online safety?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Other	1.07%
In another external organisation (e.g., Scouts)	5.31%
In a youth club	15.45%
Online	18.11%
At home	51.93%
In assembly	67.41%
In class	81.99%

Figure 97. Ages 8 - 13 where did you receive this information about online safety?

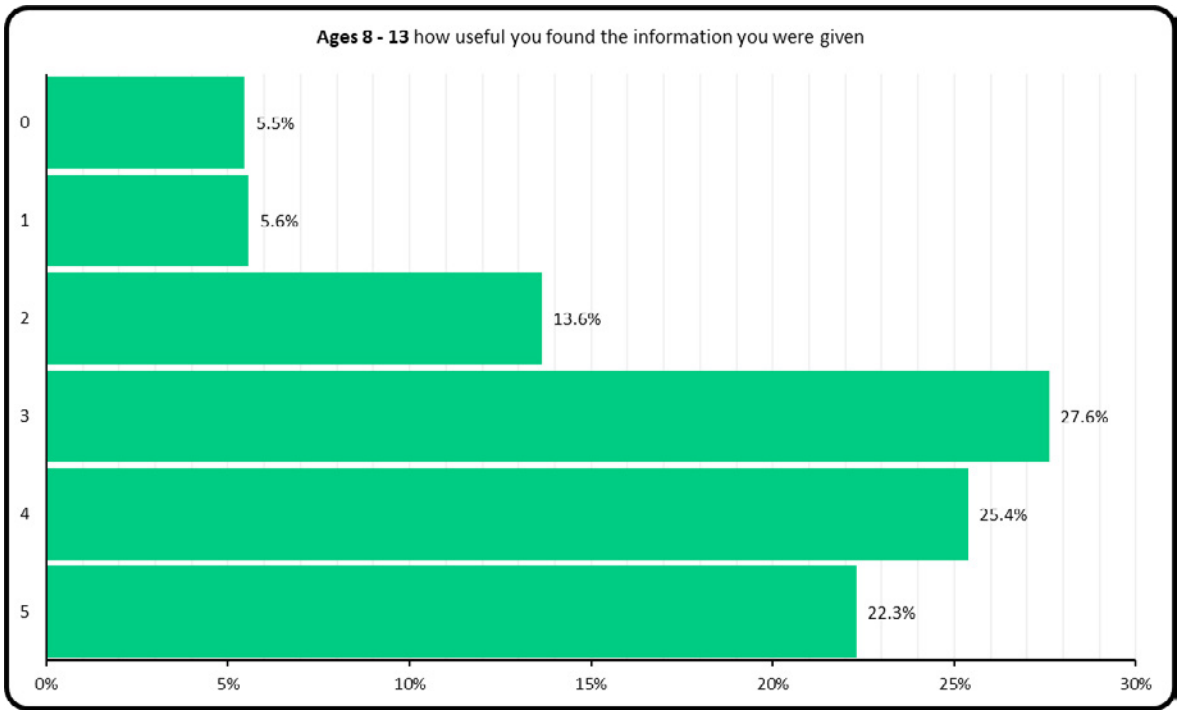


As shown in Table 98 and Figure 98, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response to how useful they found the information was a 3 (27.63%, n=1057) on a scale of 1 (not very useful) – 5 (very useful). Closely followed by a 4 (25.38%, n=971), and 5 (22.32%, n=854) respectively.

Table 98. Ages 8 - 13 how useful you found the information you were given

Ages 8 - 13 how useful you found the information you were given		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826
5	22.32%	n = 854
4	25.38%	n = 971
3	27.63%	n = 1057
2	13.64%	n = 522
1	5.57%	n = 213
0	5.46%	n = 209

Figure 98. Ages 8 - 13 how useful you found the information you were given

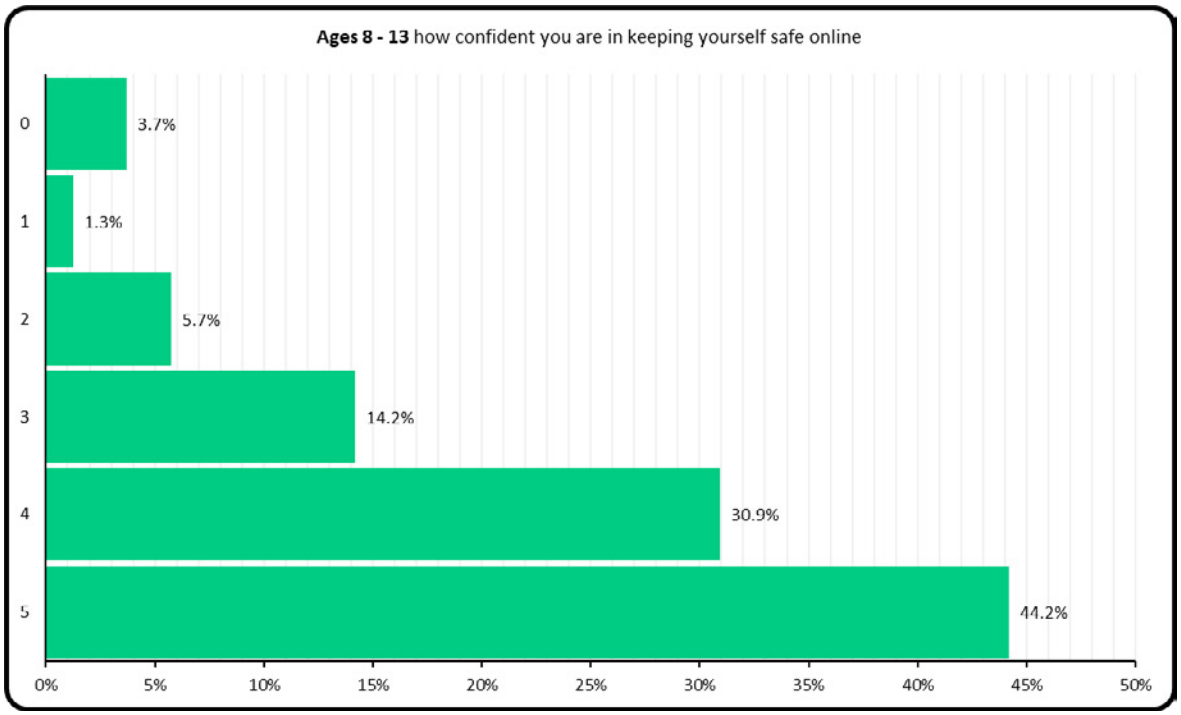


As shown in Table 99 and Figure 99, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response to how confident they are in keeping safe online was a 5 (44.2%, n=1691) on a scale of 1 (not very confident) – 5 (very confident).

Table 99. Ages 8 - 13 how confident you are in keeping yourself safe online

Ages 8 - 13 how confident you are in keeping yourself safe online		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 3826
5	44.20%	n = 1691
4	30.92%	n = 1183
3	14.19%	n = 543
2	5.72%	n = 219
1	1.25%	n = 48
0	3.71%	n = 142

Figure 99. Ages 8 - 13 how confident you are in keeping yourself safe online

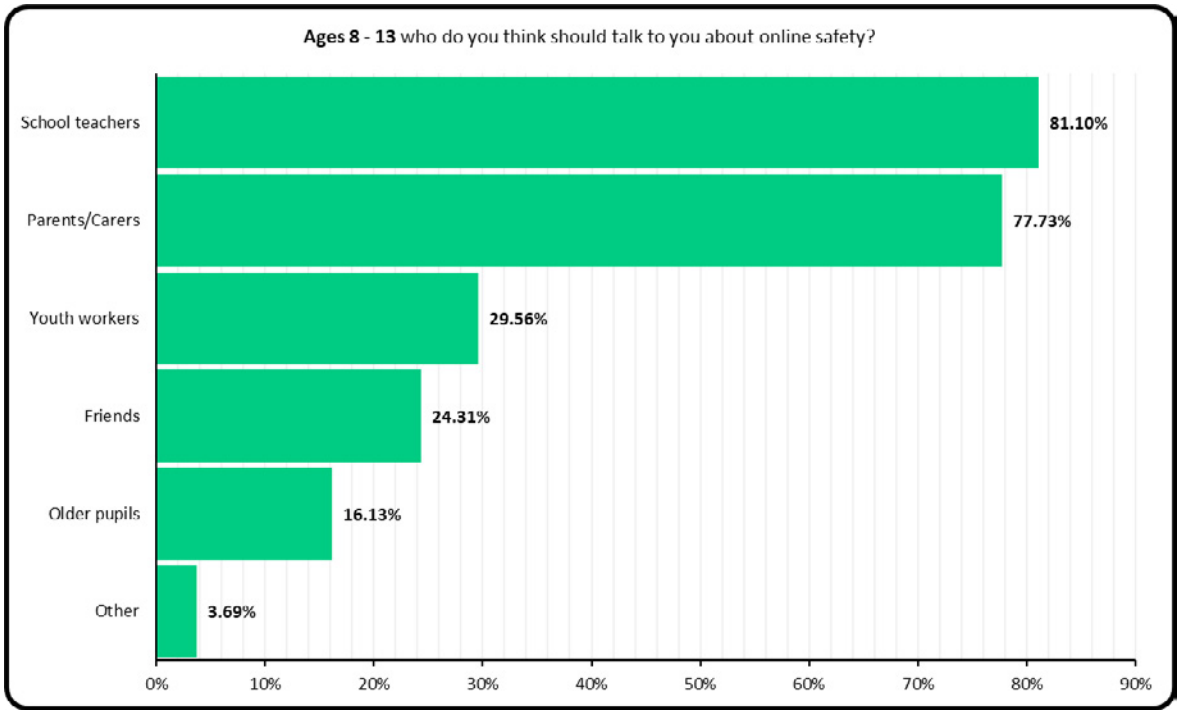


As shown in Table 100 and Figure 100, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response to who they think should talk to them about online safety was school teachers (81.10%). However, 77% also said that parents/carers should talk to them about online safety.

Table 100. Ages 8 - 13 who do you think should talk to you about online safety?

Ages 8 - 13 who do you think should talk to you about online safety?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Other	3.69%
Older pupils	16.13%
Friends	24.31%
Youth workers	29.56%
Parents/Carers	77.73%
School teachers	81.10%

Figure 100. Ages 8 - 13 who do you think should talk to you about online safety?

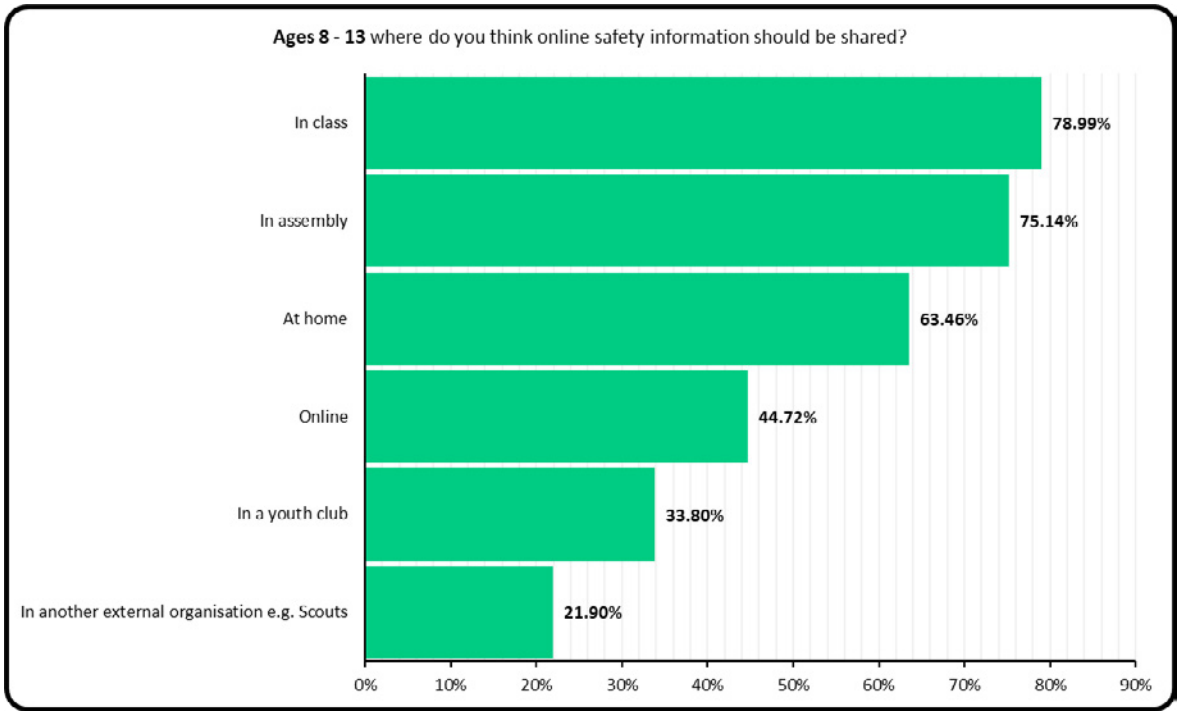


As shown in Table 101 and Figure 101, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response to where they think online safety information should be shared was in class (78.99%), followed closely by in assembly (75.14%), and at home (63.46%).

Table 101. Ages 8 - 13 where do you think online safety information should be shared?

Ages 8 - 13 where do you think online safety information should be shared?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
In another external organisation e.g., Scouts	21.90%
In a youth club	33.80%
Online	44.72%
At home	63.46%
In assembly	75.14%
In class	78.99%

Figure 101. Ages 8 - 13 where do you think online safety information should be shared?

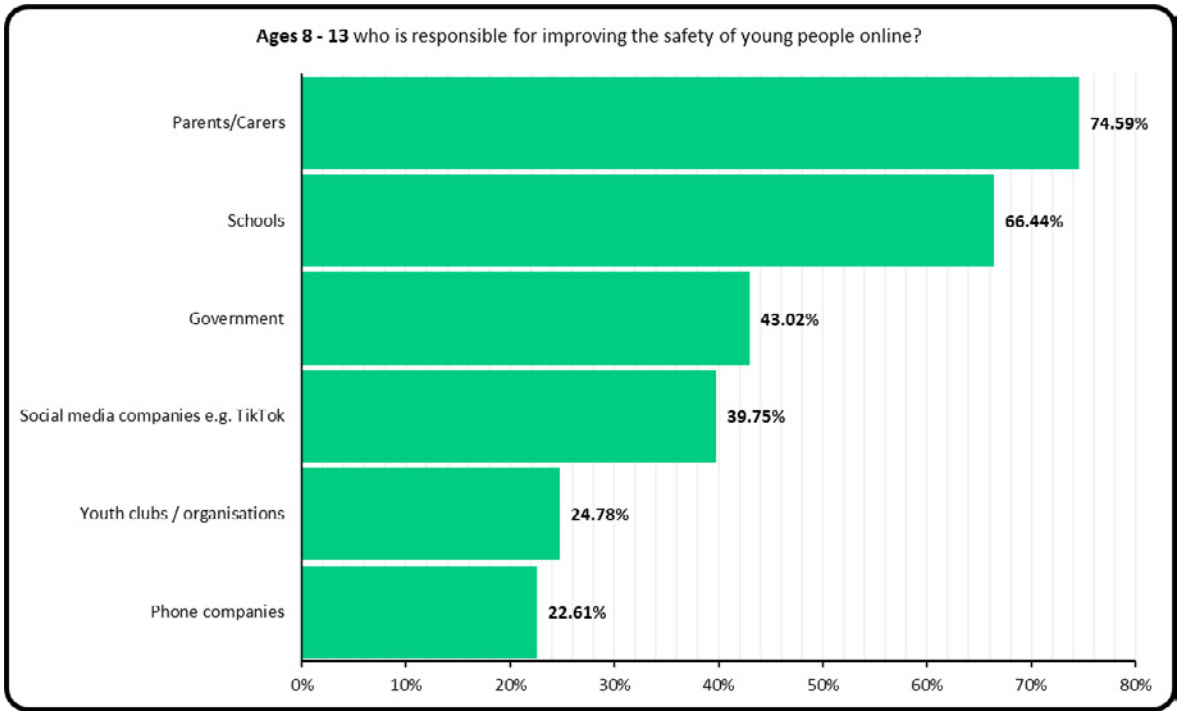


As shown in Table 102 and Figure 102, for ages 8 – 13, the most common response to who is responsible for improving the safety of young people online was parents/carers (74.59%), followed closely by schools (66.44%).

Table 102. Ages 8 - 13 who is responsible for improving the safety of young people online?

Ages 8 - 13 who is responsible for improving the safety of young people online?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Phone companies	22.61%
Youth clubs / organisations	24.78%
Social media companies e.g., TikTok	39.75%
Government	43.02%
Schools	66.44%
Parents/Carers	74.59%

Figure 102. Ages 8 - 13 who is responsible for improving the safety of young people online?



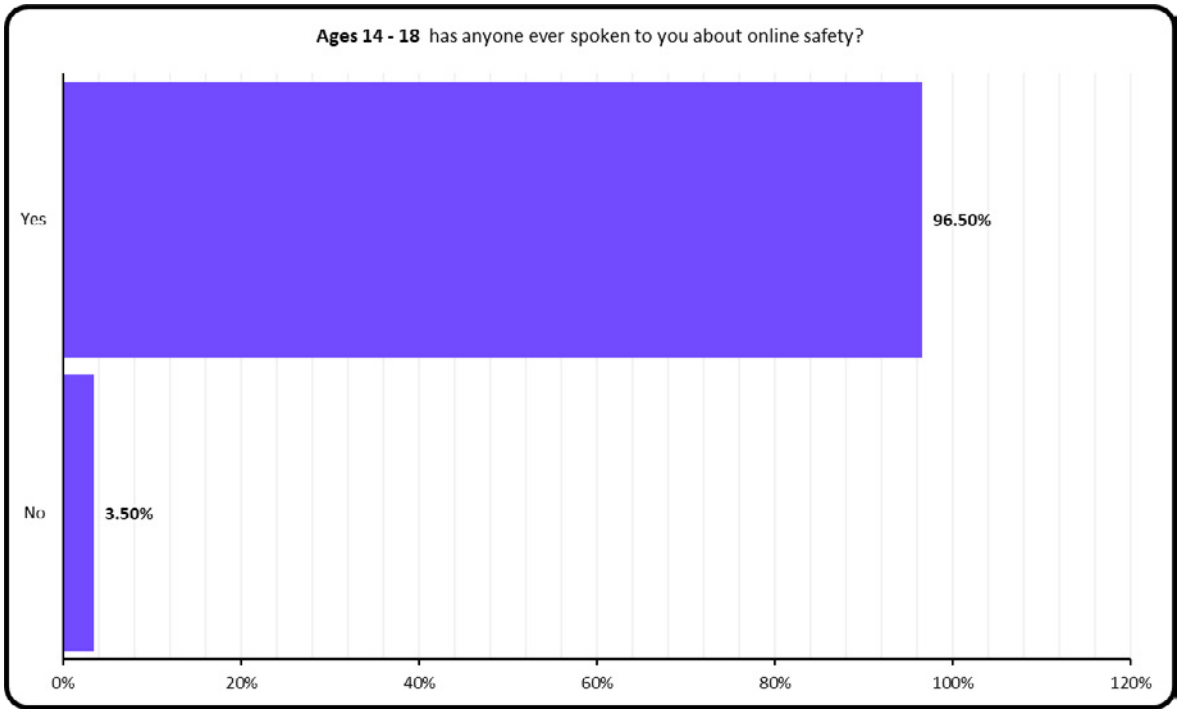
People who have spoken about online safety (ages 14 -18):

As shown in Table 103 and Figure 103, for ages 14 – 18, by far the most common response to has anyone ever spoken to them about online safety was Yes (96.50%, n=2562).

Table 103. Ages 14 - 18 has anyone ever spoken to you about online safety?

Ages 14 - 18 has anyone ever spoken to you about online safety?		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
No	3.50%	n = 93
Yes	96.50%	n = 2562
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655

Figure 103. Ages 14 - 18 has anyone ever spoken to you about online safety?

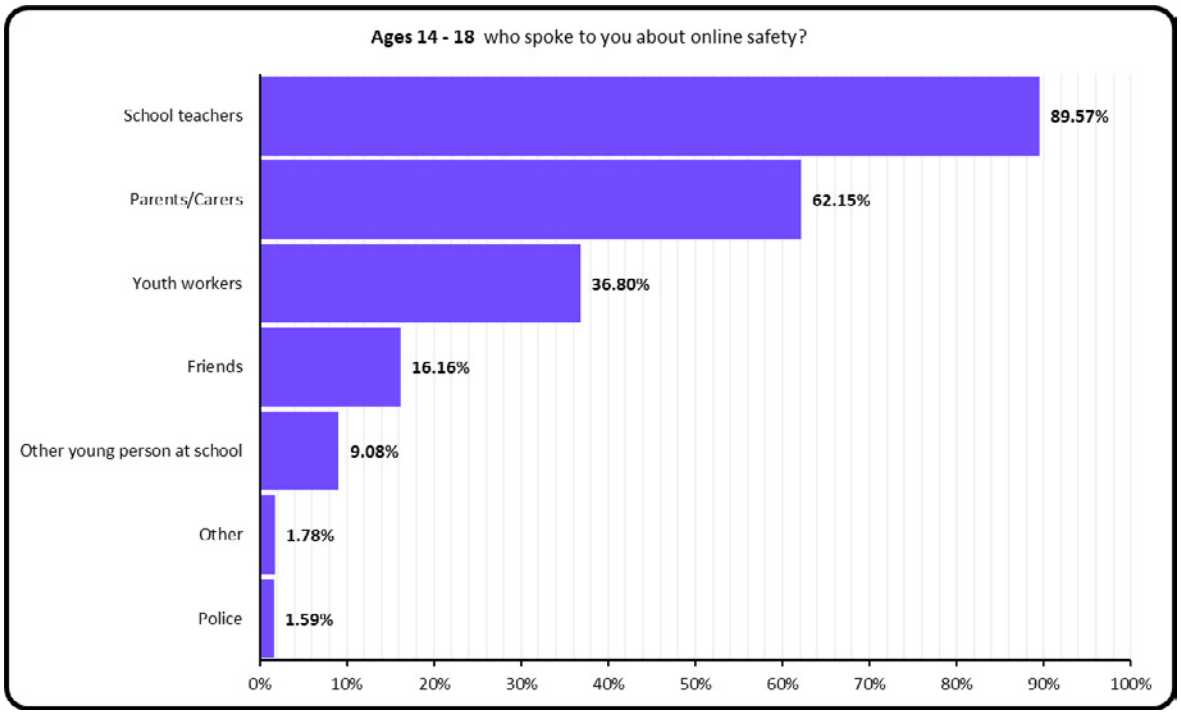


As shown in Table 104 and Figure 104, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response to who has spoken to them about online safety was school teachers (89.57%), followed by parents/carers (62.15%).

Table 104. Ages 14 - 18 who spoke to you about online safety?

Ages 14 - 18 who spoke to you about online safety?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Police	1.59%
Other	1.78%
Other young person at school	9.08%
Friends	16.16%
Youth workers	36.80%
Parents/Carers	62.15%
School teachers	89.57%

Figure 104. Ages 14 - 18 who spoke to you about online safety?

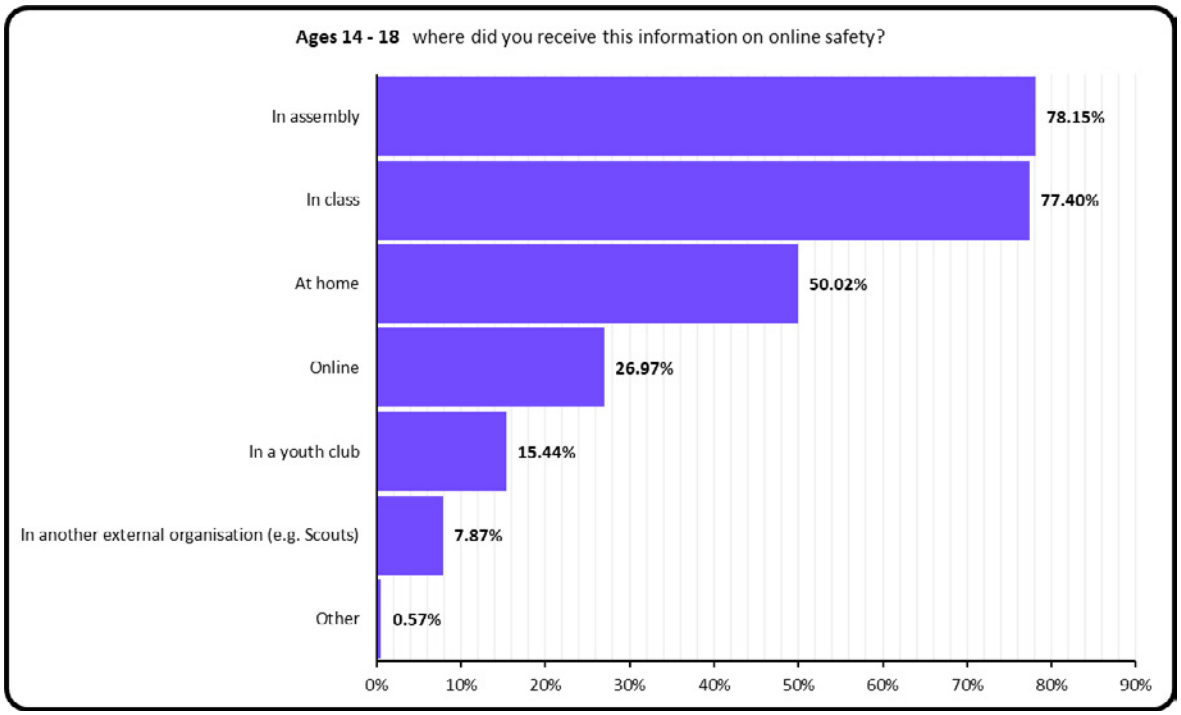


As shown in Table 105 and Figure 105, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response to where they received this information on online safety was in assembly (78.15%), followed closely by in class (77.40%), and then at home (50.02%).

Table 105. Ages 14 - 18 where did you receive this information on online safety?

Ages 14 - 18 where did you receive this information on online safety?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Other	0.57%
In another external organisation (e.g., Scouts)	7.87%
In a youth club	15.44%
Online	26.97%
At home	50.02%
In class	77.40%
In assembly	78.15%

Figure 105. Ages 14 - 18 where did you receive this information on online safety?

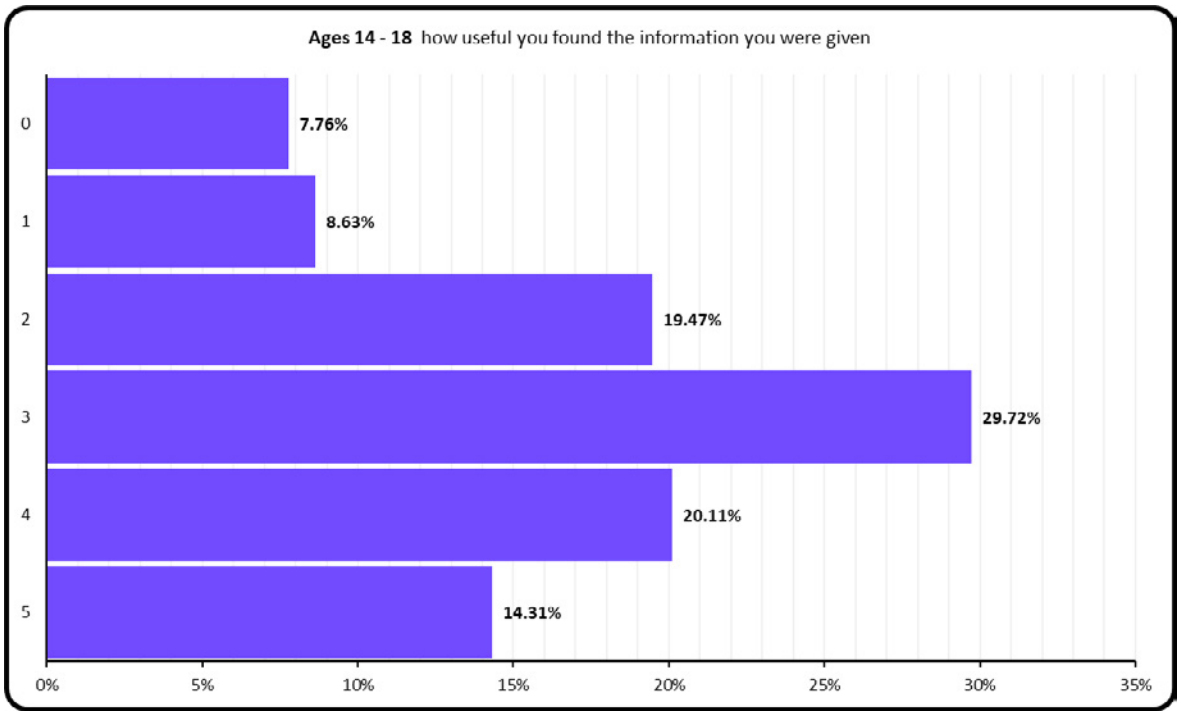


As shown in Table 106 and Figure 106, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response to how useful they found the information was a 3 (29.72%, n=789) on a scale of 1 (not very useful) to 5 (very useful).

Table 106. Ages 14 - 18 how useful you found the information you were given

Ages 14 - 18 how useful you found the information you were given		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655
5	14.31%	n = 380
4	20.11%	n = 534
3	29.72%	n = 789
2	19.47%	n = 517
1	8.63%	n = 229
0	7.76%	n = 206

Figure 106. Ages 14 - 18 how useful you found the information you were given

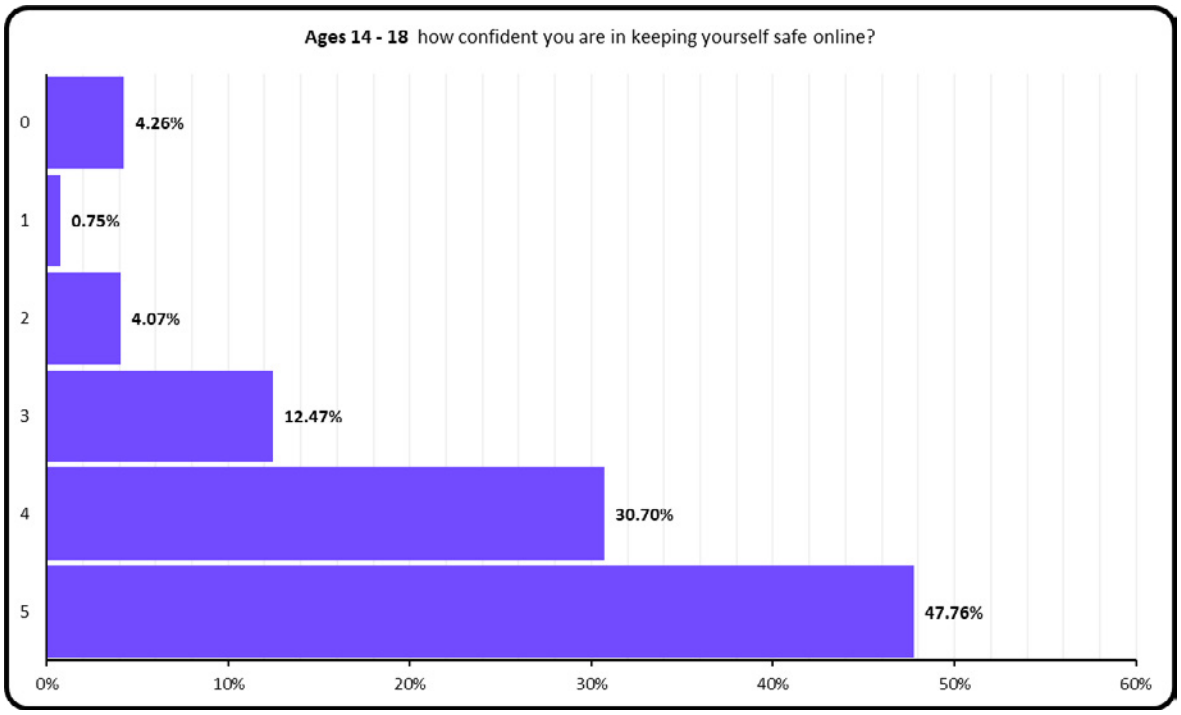


As shown in Table 107 and Figure 107, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response to how confident they are in keeping themselves safe online was a 5 (47.76%, n=1268) on a scale of 1 (not very confident) to 5 (very confident).

Table 107. Ages 14 - 18 how confident you are in keeping yourself safe online

Ages 14 - 18 how confident you are in keeping yourself safe online		
	Percentage of Grand Total	Frequency
Grand Total	100.00%	n = 2655
5	47.76%	n = 1268
4	30.70%	n = 815
3	12.47%	n = 331
2	4.07%	n = 108
1	0.75%	n = 20
0	4.26%	n = 113

Figure 107. Ages 14 - 18 how confident you are in keeping yourself safe online

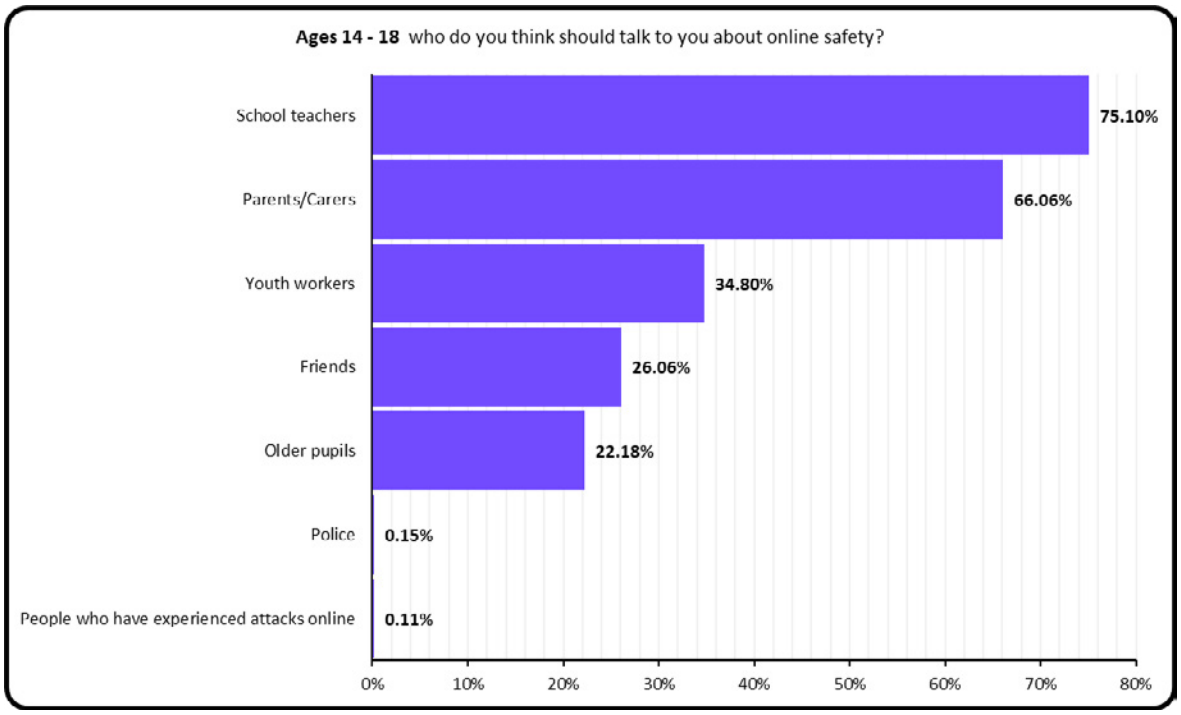


As shown in Table 108 and Figure 108, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response to who they think should talk to them about online safety was school teachers (75.10%), followed by, for example, parents/carers (66.06%).

Table 108. Ages 14 - 18 who do you think should talk to you about online safety?

Ages 14 - 18 who do you think should talk to you about online safety?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
People who have experienced attacks online	0.11%
Police	0.15%
Older pupils	22.18%
Friends	26.06%
Youth workers	34.80%
Parents/Carers	66.06%
School teachers	75.10%

Figure 108. Ages 14 - 18 who do you think should talk to you about online safety?

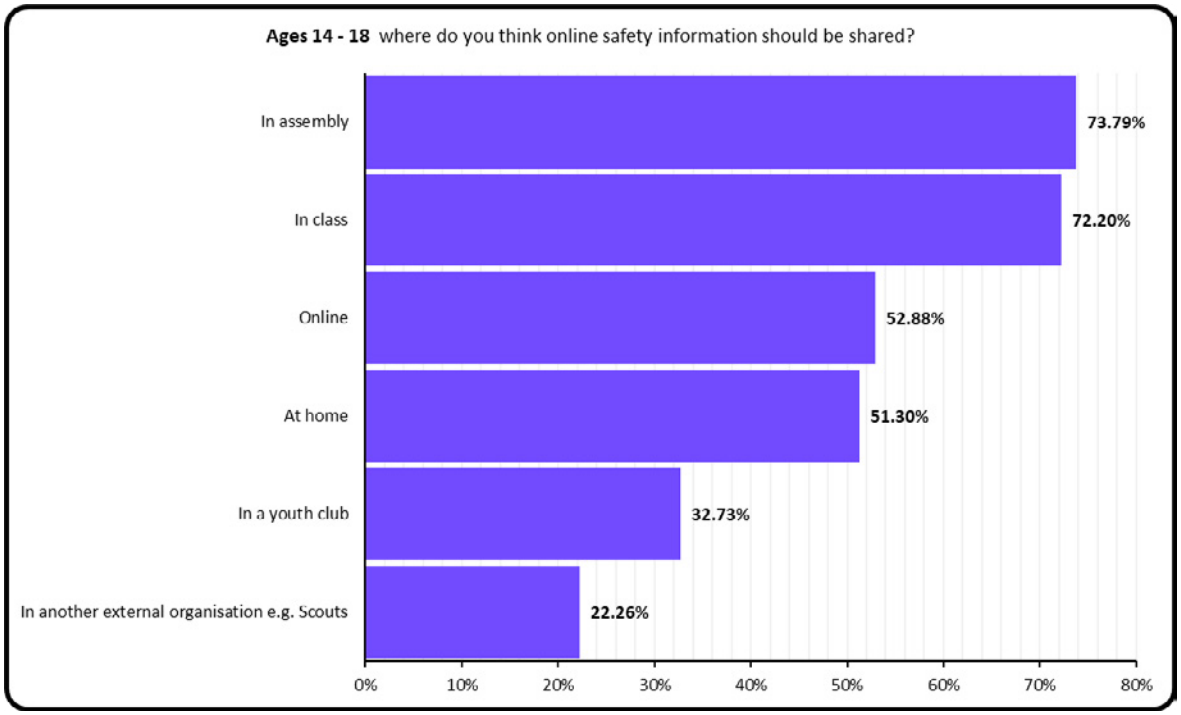


As shown in Table 109 and Figure 109, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response to where they think online safety information should be shared was in assembly (73.79%), followed closely by in class (72.20%), and then online (52.88%).

Table 109. Ages 14 - 18 where do you think online safety information should be shared?

Ages 14 - 18 where do you think online safety information should be shared?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
In another external organisation e.g., Scouts	22.26%
In a youth club	32.73%
At home	51.30%
Online	52.88%
In class	72.20%
In assembly	73.79%

Figure 109. Ages 14 - 18 where do you think online safety information should be shared?

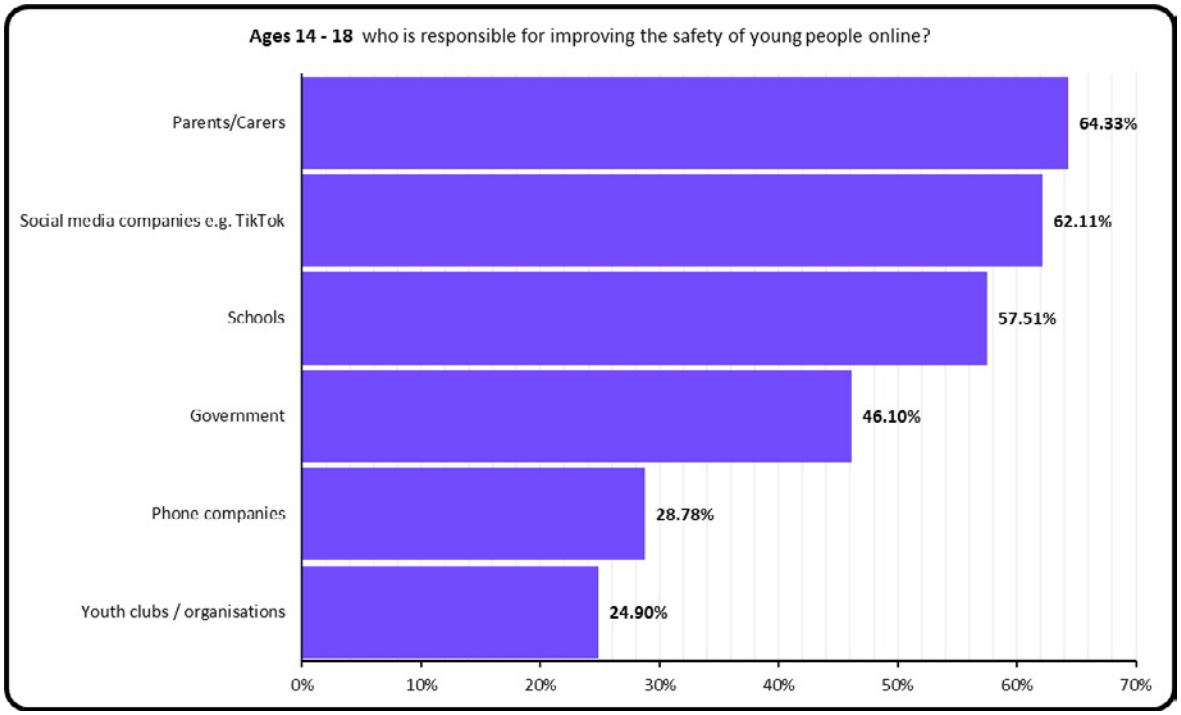


As shown in Table 110 and Figure 110, for ages 14 – 18, the most common response to who is responsible for improving the safety of young people online was parents/carers (64.33%), followed by social media companies (62.11%), and schools (57.51%).

Table 110. Ages 14 - 18 who is responsible for improving the safety of young people online?

Ages 14 - 18 who is responsible for improving the safety of young people online?	
	Percentage of Grand Total
Youth clubs / organisations	24.90%
Phone companies	28.78%
Government	46.10%
Schools	57.51%
Social media companies e.g., TikTok	62.11%
Parents/Carers	64.33%

Figure 110. Ages 14 - 18 who is responsible for improving the safety of young people online?



4.13 Bi-variate Analysis

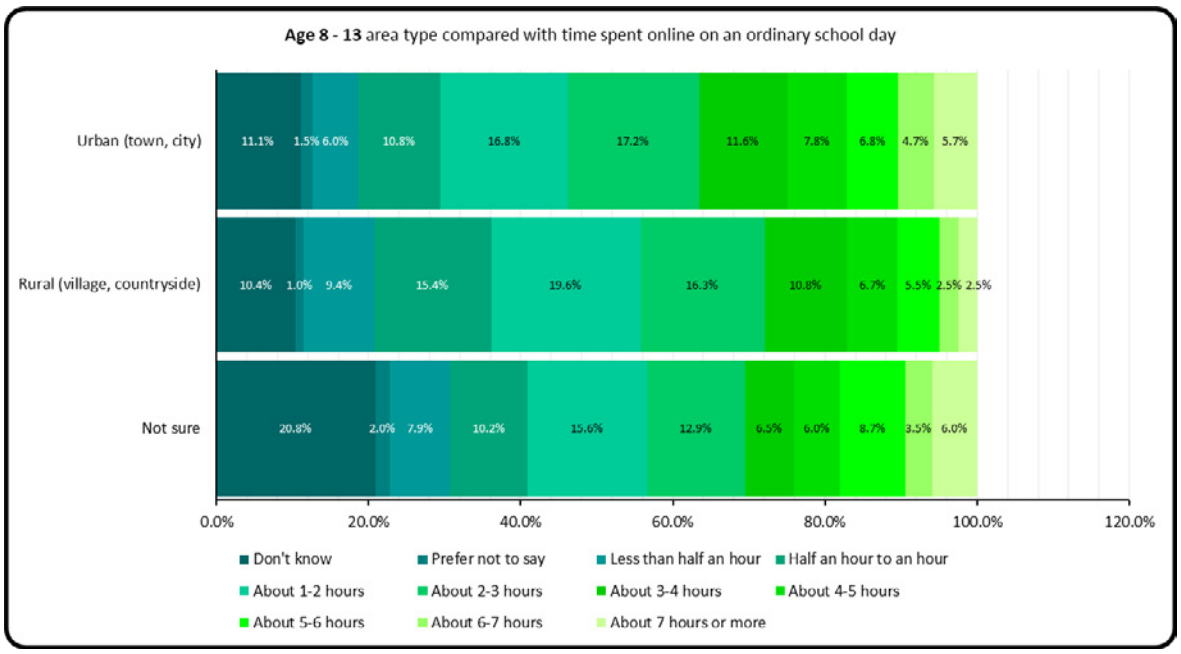
Area type compared with time spent online on an ordinary school day (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 111 and Figure 111, for ages 8 – 13, comparing area type with time spent online on an ordinary school day, reveals a difference with respect to area type. Those from urban areas appear to be spending slightly longer amounts of time online on an ordinary school day. This may be related to more limited broadband access in rural areas.

Table 111. Area type compared with time spent online on an ordinary school day (ages 8 – 13).

Age 8 - 13 area type compared with time spent online on an ordinary school day												
Time	Don't know	Prefer not to say	Less than half an hour	Half an hour to an hour	About 1-2 hours	About 2-3 hours	About 3-4 hours	About 4-5 hours	About 5-6 hours	About 6-7 hours	About 7 hours or more	Grand Total
Not sure	20.8%	2.0%	7.9%	10.2%	15.6%	12.9%	6.5%	6.0%	8.7%	3.5%	6.0%	100.0%
Rural (village, countryside)	10.4%	1.0%	9.4%	15.4%	19.6%	16.3%	10.8%	6.7%	5.5%	2.5%	2.5%	100.0%
Urban (town, city)	11.1%	1.5%	6.0%	10.8%	16.8%	17.2%	11.6%	7.8%	6.8%	4.7%	5.7%	100.0%
Grand Total	11.8%	1.4%	7.5%	12.5%	17.8%	16.4%	10.7%	7.2%	6.5%	3.7%	4.5%	100.0%

Figure 111. Area type compared with time spent online on an ordinary school day (ages 8 – 13).



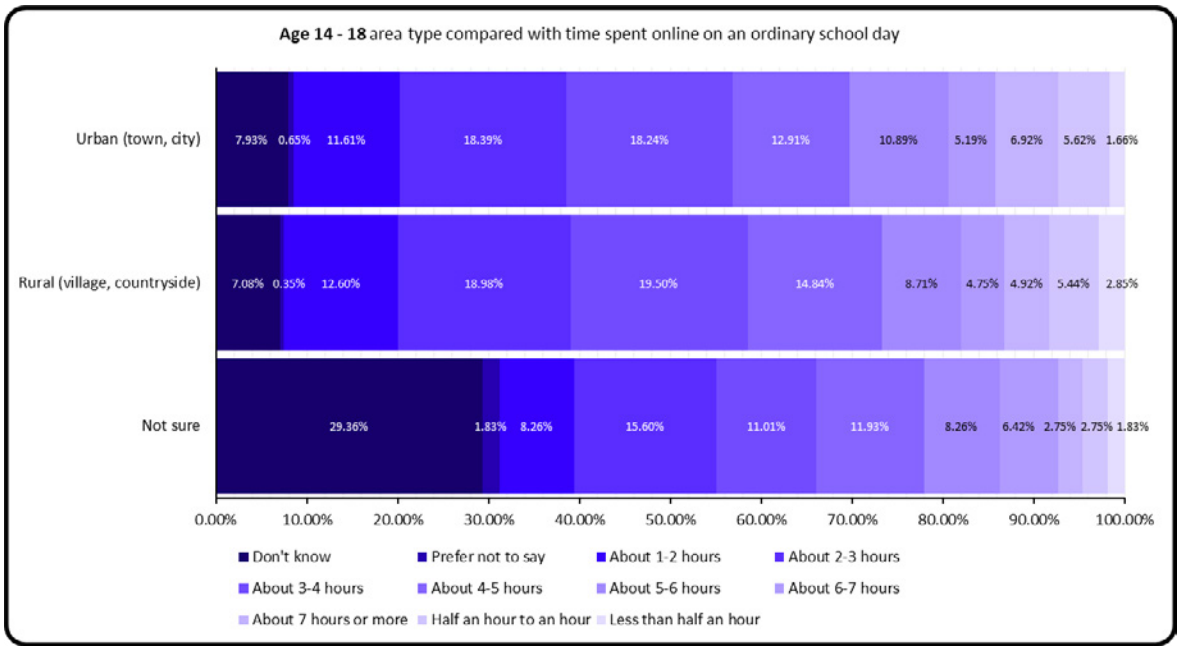
Area type compared with time spent online on an ordinary school day (ages 14 – 18):

As shown in Table 112 and Figure 112, for ages 14 – 18, comparing area type with time spent online on an ordinary school day, reveals a difference with respect to area type. Those from urban areas appear to be spending slightly longer amounts of time online on an ordinary school day. This may be related to more limited broadband access in rural areas.

Table 112. Area type compared with time spent online on an ordinary school day (ages 14 – 18).

Age 14 - 18 area type compared with time spent online on an ordinary school day												
Time	Don't know	Prefer not to say	About 1-2 hours	About 2-3 hours	About 3-4 hours	About 4-5 hours	About 5-6 hours	About 6-7 hours	About 7 hours or more	Half an hour to an hour	Less than half an hour	Grand Total
Not sure	29.36%	1.83%	8.26%	15.60%	11.01%	11.93%	8.26%	6.42%	2.75%	2.75%	1.83%	100.00%
Rural (village, countryside)	7.08%	0.35%	12.60%	18.98%	19.50%	14.84%	8.71%	4.75%	4.92%	5.44%	2.85%	100.00%
Urban (town, city)	7.93%	0.65%	11.61%	18.39%	18.24%	12.91%	10.89%	5.19%	6.92%	5.62%	1.66%	100.00%
Grand Total	8.44%	0.56%	11.90%	18.53%	18.49%	13.71%	9.83%	5.05%	5.88%	5.42%	2.18%	100.00%

Figure 112. Area type compared with time spent online on an ordinary school day (ages 14 – 18).



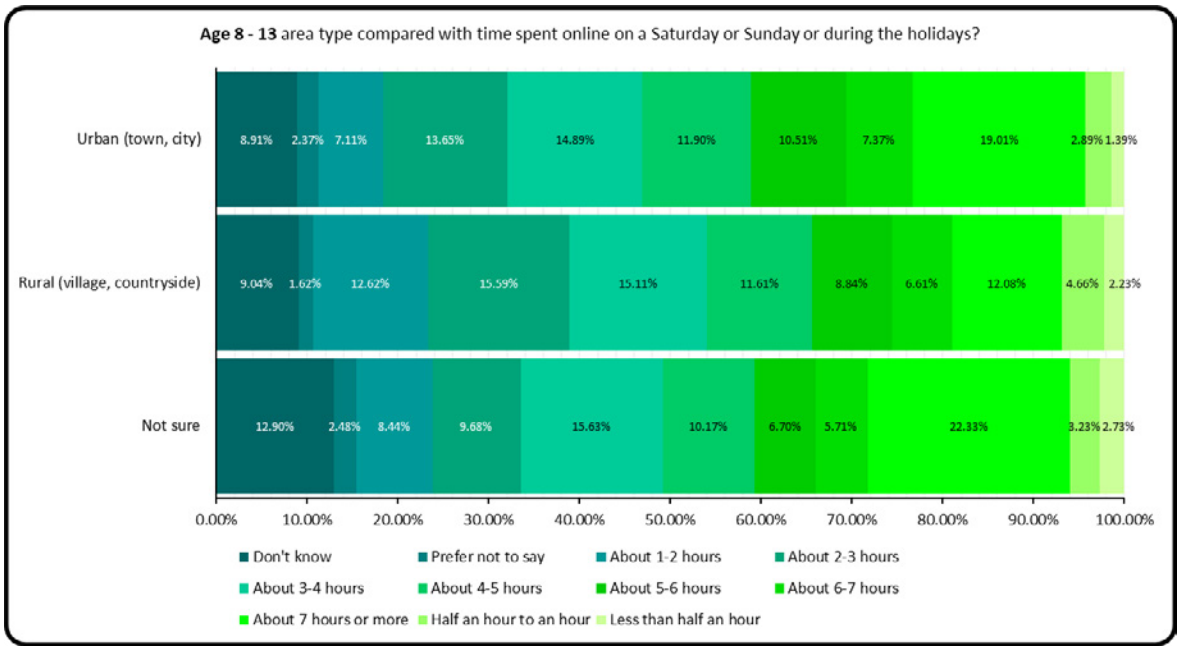
Area type compared with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 113 and Figure 113, for ages 8 – 13, comparing area type with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays, reveals a difference with respect to area type. Those from urban areas appear to be spending slightly longer amounts of time online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays. This may be related to more limited broadband access in rural areas.

Table 113. Area type compared with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays (ages 8 – 13).

Ages 8 - 13 area type compared with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays?												
Time	Don't know	Prefer not to say	About 1-2 hours	About 2-3 hours	About 3-4 hours	About 4-5 hours	About 5-6 hours	About 6-7 hours	About 7 hours or more	Half an hour to an hour	Less than half an hour	Grand Total
Not sure	12.90%	2.48%	8.44%	9.68%	15.63%	10.17%	6.70%	5.71%	22.33%	3.23%	2.73%	100.00%
Rural (village, countryside)	9.04%	1.62%	12.62%	15.59%	15.11%	11.61%	8.84%	6.61%	12.08%	4.66%	2.23%	100.00%
Urban (town, city)	8.91%	2.37%	7.11%	13.65%	14.89%	11.90%	10.51%	7.37%	19.01%	2.89%	1.39%	100.00%
Grand Total	9.38%	2.09%	9.38%	13.98%	15.05%	11.60%	9.46%	6.90%	16.68%	3.61%	1.86%	100.00%

Figure 113. Area type compared with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays (ages 8 – 13).



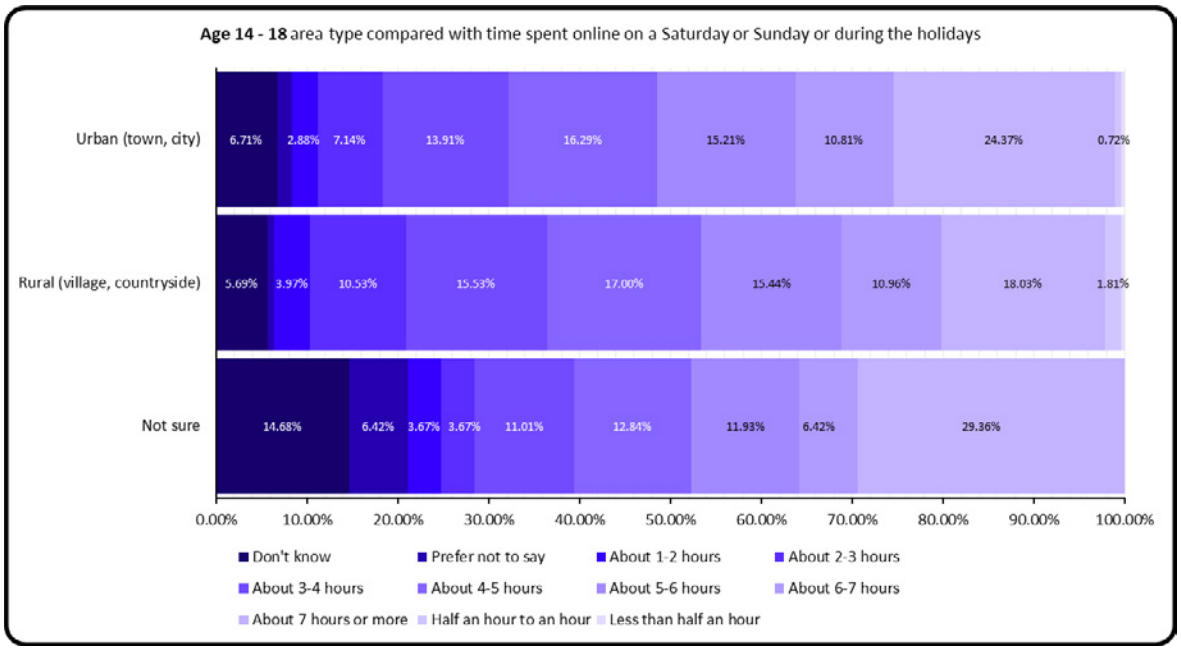
Area type compared with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays (ages 14 – 18):

As shown in Table 114 and Figure 114, for ages 14 – 18, comparing area type with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays, reveals a difference with respect to area type. Those from urban areas appear to be spending slightly longer amounts of time online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays. This may be related to more limited broadband access in rural areas.

Table 114. Area type compared with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays (ages 14 – 18).

Age 14 - 18 area type compared with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays												
Time	Don't know	Prefer not to say	About 1-2 hours	About 2-3 hours	About 3-4 hours	About 4-5 hours	About 5-6 hours	About 6-7 hours	About 7 hours or more	Half an hour to an hour	Less than half an hour	Grand Total
Not sure	14.68%	6.42%	3.67%	3.67%	11.01%	12.84%	11.93%	6.42%	29.36%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
Rural (village, countryside)	5.69%	0.69%	3.97%	10.53%	15.53%	17.00%	15.44%	10.96%	18.03%	1.81%	0.35%	100.00%
Urban (town, city)	6.71%	1.59%	2.88%	7.14%	13.91%	16.29%	15.21%	10.81%	24.37%	0.72%	0.36%	100.00%
Grand Total	6.59%	1.39%	3.39%	8.47%	14.50%	16.46%	15.18%	10.70%	21.81%	1.17%	0.34%	100.00%

Figure 114. Area type compared with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays (ages 14 – 18).



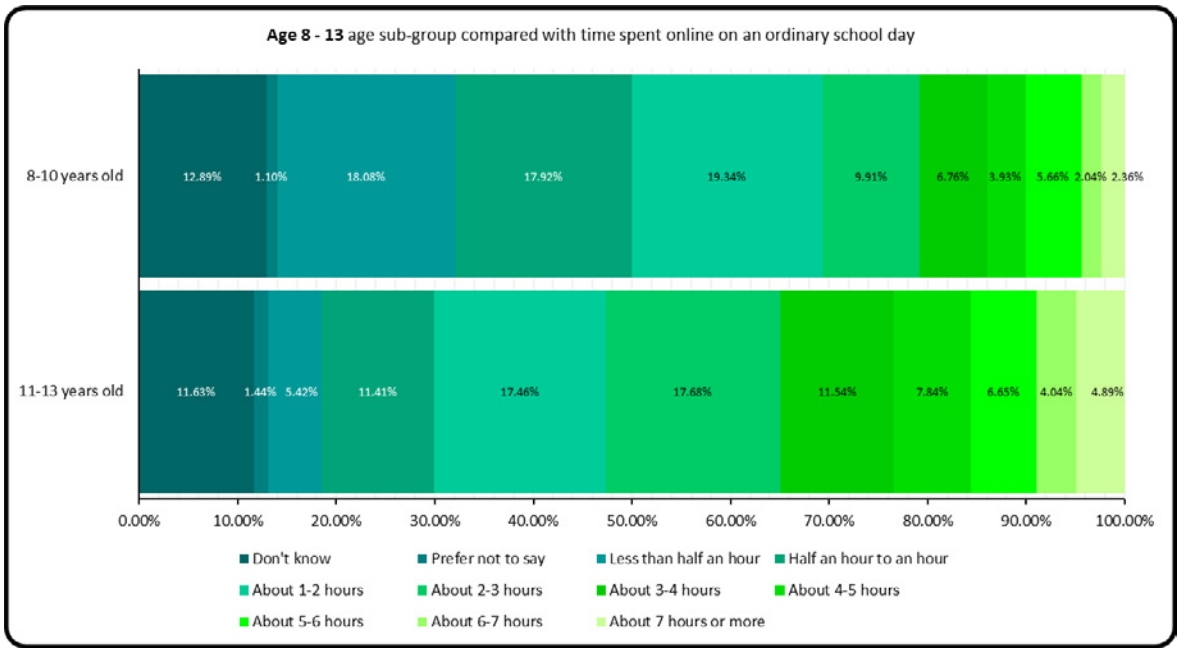
Age sub-group compared with time spent online on an ordinary school day (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 115 and Figure 115, for ages 8 – 13, comparing age sub-group with time spent online on an ordinary school day, shows that 8 – 10-year-olds are spending slightly less time online compared with 11 – 13-year-olds.

Table 115. Age sub-group compared with time spent online on an ordinary school day (ages 8 – 13).

Ages 8 - 13 age sub-group compared with time spent online on an ordinary school day												
Time	Don't know	Prefer not to say	Less than half an hour	Half an hour to an hour	About 1-2 hours	About 2-3 hours	About 3-4 hours	About 4-5 hours	About 5-6 hours	About 6-7 hours	About 7 hours or more	Grand Total
11-13 years old	11.63%	1.44%	5.42%	11.41%	17.46%	17.68%	11.54%	7.84%	6.65%	4.04%	4.89%	100.00%
8-10 years old	12.89%	1.10%	18.08%	17.92%	19.34%	9.91%	6.76%	3.93%	5.66%	2.04%	2.36%	100.00%
Grand Total	11.84%	1.39%	7.53%	12.49%	17.77%	16.39%	10.74%	7.19%	6.48%	3.71%	4.47%	100.00%

Figure 115. Age sub-group compared with time spent online on an ordinary school day (ages 8 – 13).



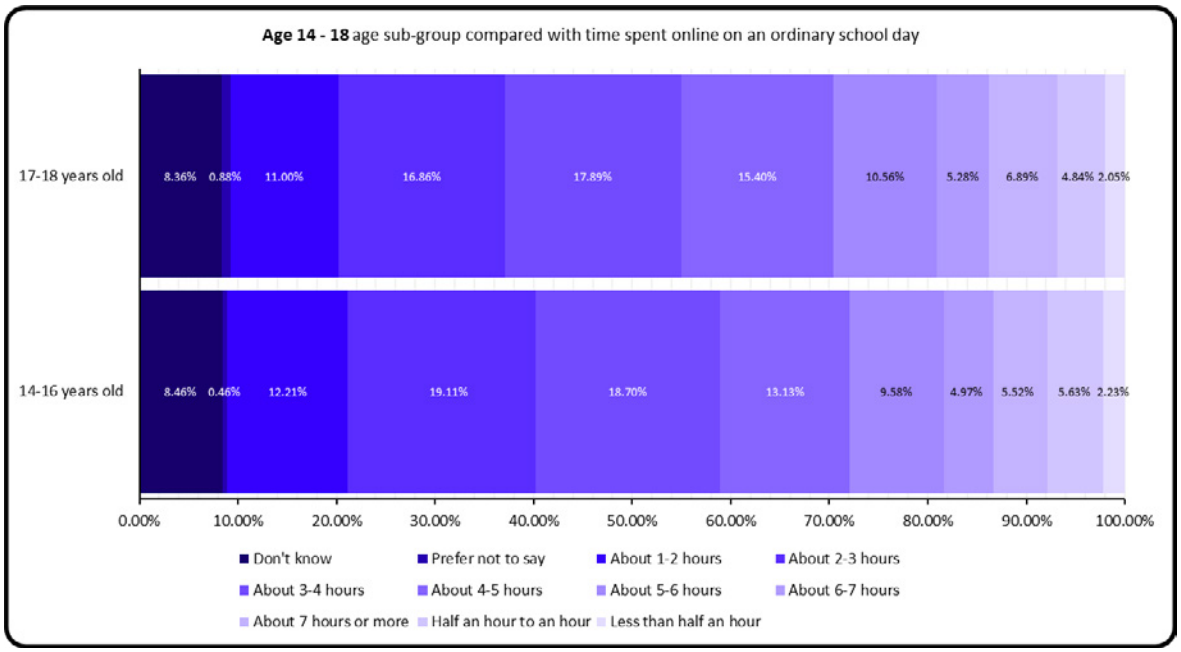
Age sub-group compared with time spent online on an ordinary school day (ages 14 – 18):

As shown in Table 116 and Figure 116, for ages 14 – 18, comparing age sub-group with time spent online on an ordinary school day, shows that 14 – 16-year-olds are spending slightly less time online compared with 17 – 18-year-olds. Thus, as age increases, including when considering the younger 8 – 13 age group, children are spending increasingly longer amounts of time online.

Table 116. Age sub-group compared with time spent online on an ordinary school day (ages 14 – 18).

Age 14 - 18 age sub-group compared with time spent online on an ordinary school day												
Time	Don't know	Prefer not to say	About 1-2 hours	About 2-3 hours	About 3-4 hours	About 4-5 hours	About 5-6 hours	About 6-7 hours	About 7 hours or more	Half an hour to an hour	Less than half an hour	Grand Total
14-16 years old	8.46%	0.46%	12.21%	19.11%	18.70%	13.13%	9.58%	4.97%	5.52%	5.63%	2.23%	100.00%
17-18 years old	8.36%	0.88%	11.00%	16.86%	17.89%	15.40%	10.56%	5.28%	6.89%	4.84%	2.05%	100.00%
Grand Total	8.44%	0.56%	11.90%	18.53%	18.49%	13.71%	9.83%	5.05%	5.88%	5.42%	2.18%	100.00%

Figure 116. Age sub-group compared with time spent online on an ordinary school day (ages 14 – 18).



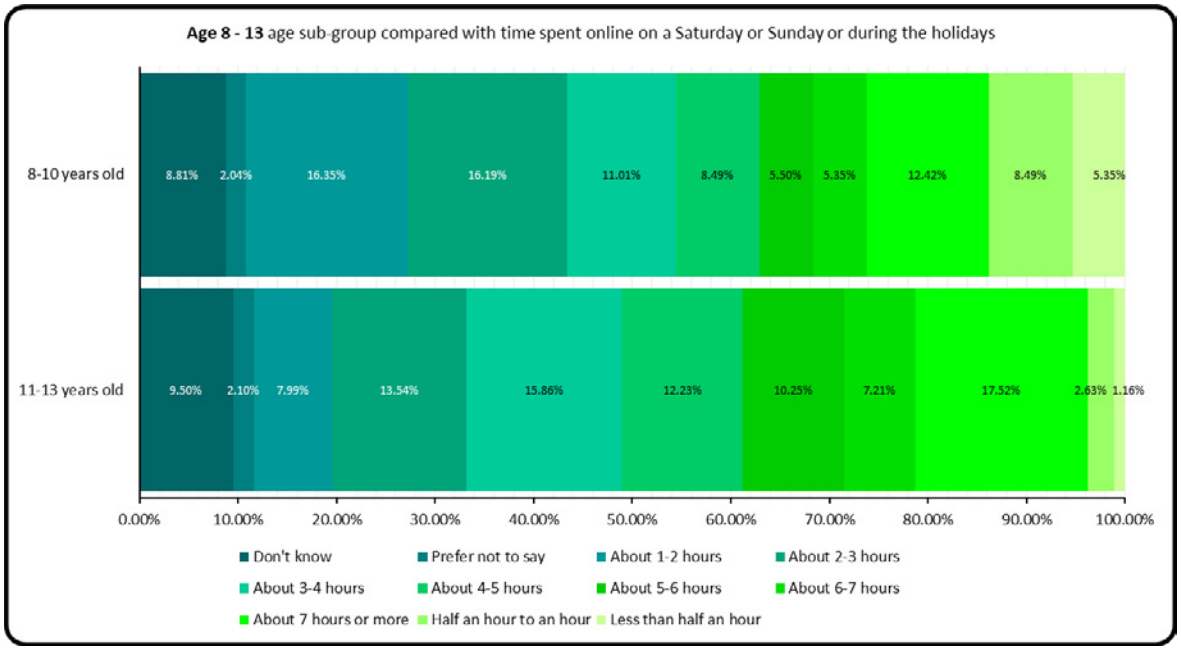
Age sub-group compared with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 117 and Figure 117, for ages 8 – 13, comparing age sub-group with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays, shows that 8 – 10-year-olds are spending slightly less time online at the lower end of hours online, compared with 11 – 13-year-olds, however, at the higher end of hours spent online, the opposite is true.

Table 117. Age sub-group compared with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays (ages 8 – 13).

Age 8 - 13 age sub-group compared with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays												
Time	Don't know	Prefer not to say	About 1-2 hours	About 2-3 hours	About 3-4 hours	About 4-5 hours	About 5-6 hours	About 6-7 hours	About 7 hours or more	Half an hour to an hour	Less than half an hour	Grand Total
11-13 years old	9.50%	2.10%	7.99%	13.54%	15.86%	12.23%	10.25%	7.21%	17.52%	2.63%	1.16%	100.00%
8-10 years old	8.81%	2.04%	16.35%	16.19%	11.01%	8.49%	5.50%	5.35%	12.42%	8.49%	5.35%	100.00%
Grand Total	9.38%	2.09%	9.38%	13.98%	15.05%	11.60%	9.46%	6.90%	16.68%	3.61%	1.86%	100.00%

Figure 117. Age sub-group compared with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays (ages 8 – 13).



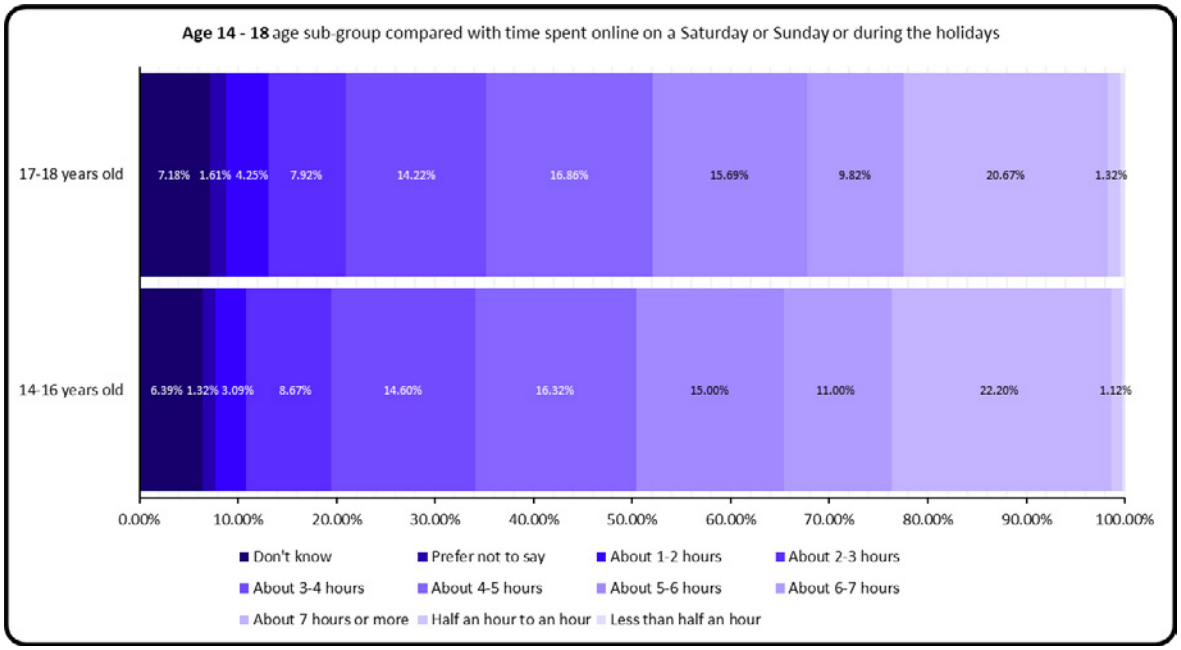
Age sub-group compared with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays (ages 14 – 18):

As shown in Table 118 and Figure 118, for ages 14 – 18, comparing age sub-group with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays, shows that 14 – 16-year-olds are spending very slightly more time online compared with 17 – 18-year-olds.

Table 118. Age sub-group compared with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays (ages 14 – 18).

Age 14 - 18 age sub-group compared with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays												
Time	Don't know	Prefer not to say	About 1-2 hours	About 2-3 hours	About 3-4 hours	About 4-5 hours	About 5-6 hours	About 6-7 hours	About 7 hours or more	Half an hour to an hour	Less than half an hour	Grand Total
14-16 years old	6.39%	1.32%	3.09%	8.67%	14.60%	16.32%	15.00%	11.00%	22.20%	1.12%	0.30%	100.00%
17-18 years old	7.18%	1.61%	4.25%	7.92%	14.22%	16.86%	15.69%	9.82%	20.67%	1.32%	0.44%	100.00%
Grand Total	6.59%	1.39%	3.39%	8.47%	14.50%	16.46%	15.18%	10.70%	21.81%	1.17%	0.34%	100.00%

Figure 118. Age sub-group compared with time spent online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays (ages 14 – 18).



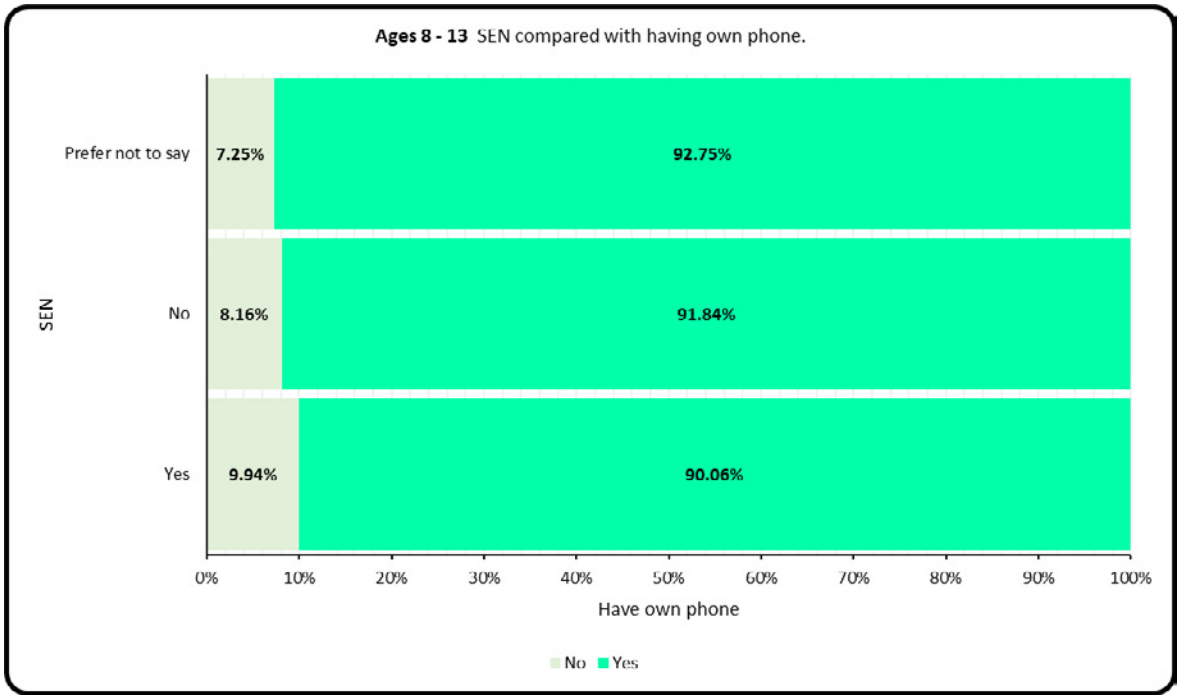
SEN compared with having own phone (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 119 and Figure 119, for ages 8 – 13, comparing SEN with having own phone, showed that those with SEN are slightly less likely to have their own phone (90.06%) compared with those with no SEN (91.84%).

Table 119. SEN compared with having own phone (ages 8 – 13).

Age 8 - 13 Do you have your own phone?			
SEN	**No**	**Yes**	**Grand Total**
Yes	9.94%	90.06%	100.00%
No	8.16%	91.84%	100.00%
Prefer not to say	7.25%	92.75%	100.00%
Grand Total	8.26%	91.74%	100.00%

Figure 119. SEN compared with having own phone (ages 8 – 13).



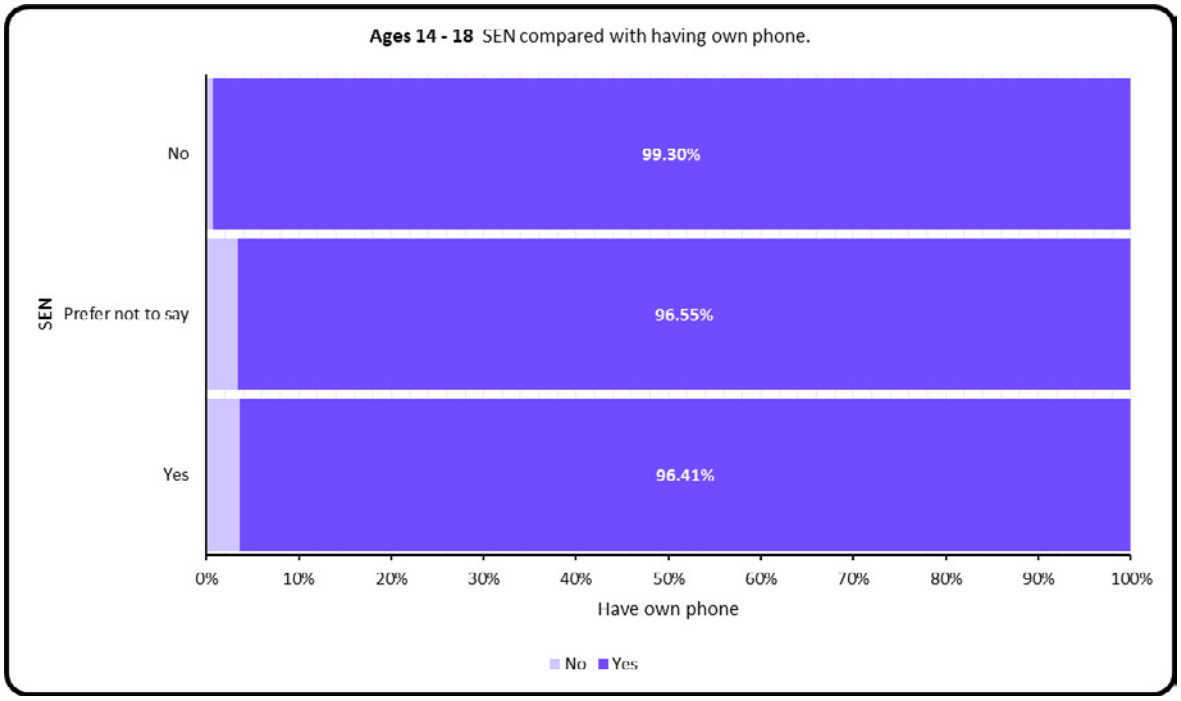
SEN compared with having own phone (ages 14 – 18):

As shown in Table 120 and Figure 120, for ages 14 – 18, comparing SEN with having own phone, showed that those with SEN are once again slightly less likely to have their own phone (96.41%) compared with those with no SEN (99.30%).

Table 120. SEN compared with having own phone (ages 14 – 18).

Age 14 - 18 Do you have your own phone?			
SEN	**No**	**Yes**	**Grand Total**
Yes	3.59%	96.41%	100.00%
Prefer not to say	3.45%	96.55%	100.00%
No	0.70%	99.30%	100.00%
Grand Total	1.10%	98.90%	100.00%

Figure 120. SEN compared with having own phone (ages 14 – 18).



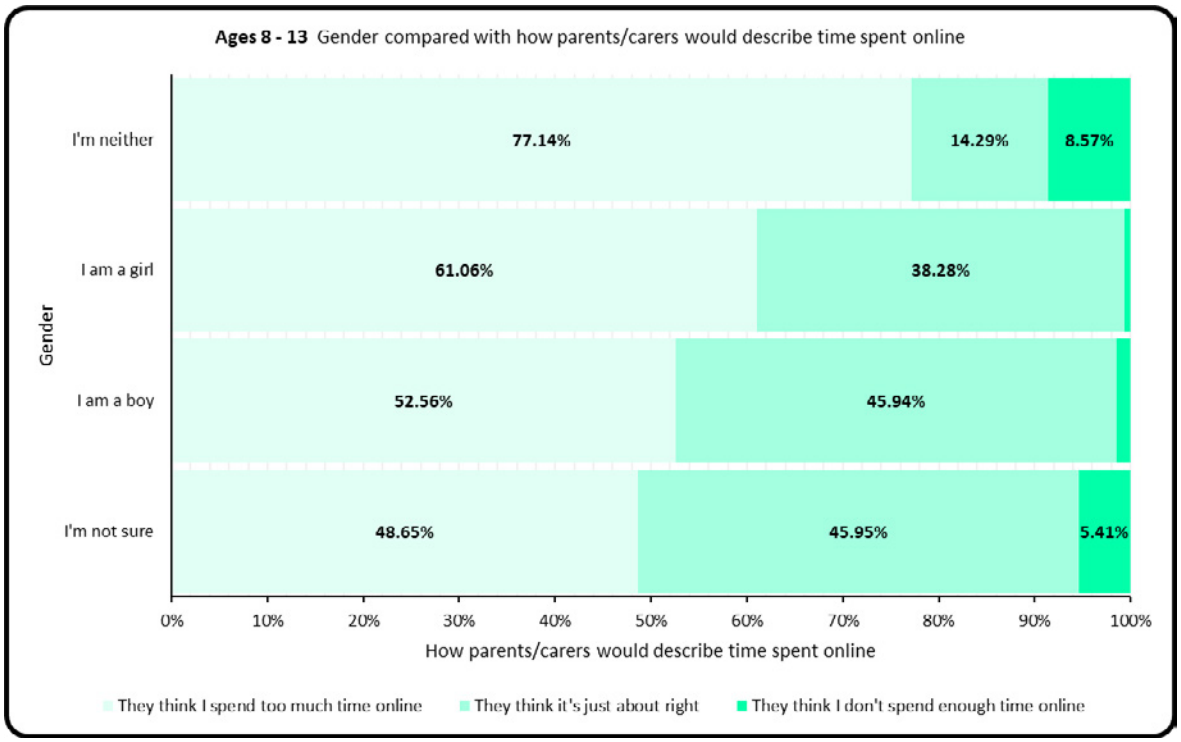
Gender compared with how parents/carers would describe time spent online (ages 8 -13):

As shown in Table 121 and Figure 121, for ages 8 – 13, comparing gender with how parents/carers would describe time spent online, revealed that girls are most likely to say that their parents think they spend too much time online (61.06%).

Table 121. Gender compared with how parents/carers would describe time spent online (ages 8 -13).

Age 8 - 13 How would your parents/carers describe the amount of time you spend online?				
Gender	**They think I spend too much time online**	**They think it's just about right**	**They think I don't spend enough time online**	**Grand Total**
I'm not sure	48.65%	45.95%	5.41%	100.00%
I am a boy	52.56%	45.94%	1.50%	100.00%
I am a girl	61.06%	38.28%	0.66%	100.00%
I'm neither	77.14%	14.29%	8.57%	100.00%
Grand Total	56.79%	42.01%	1.20%	100.00%

Figure 121. Gender compared with how parents/carers would describe time spent online (ages 8 -13).



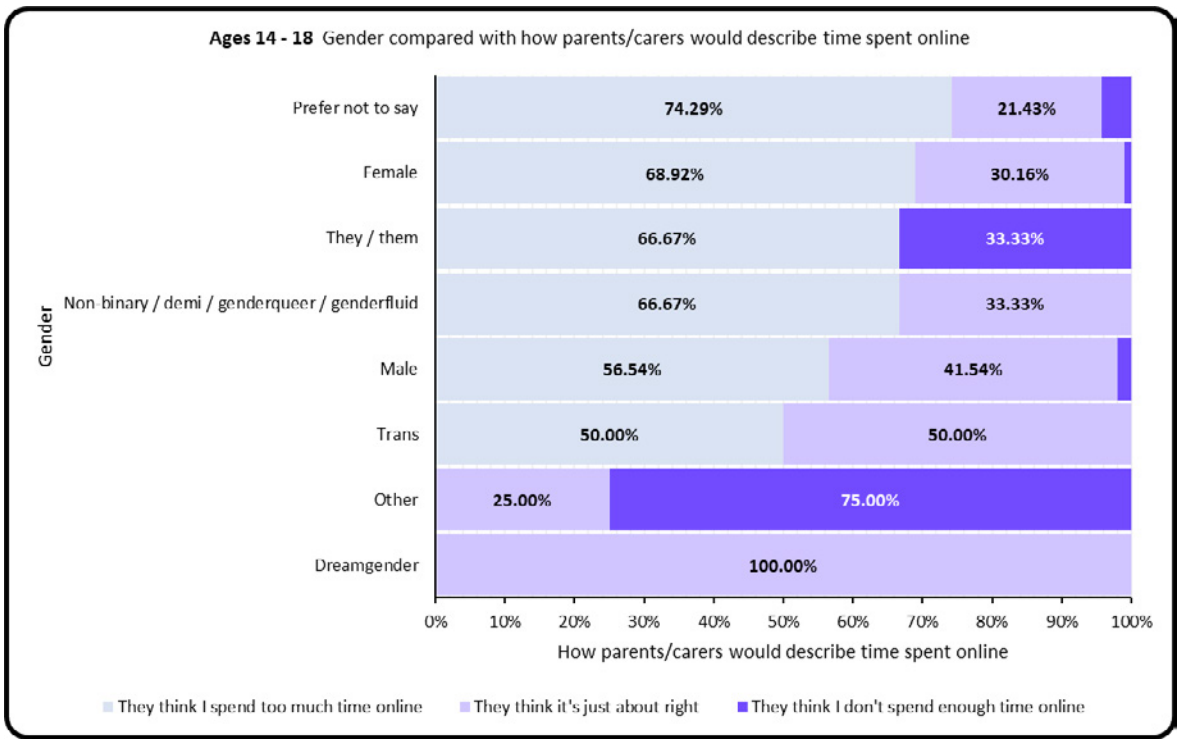
Gender compared with how parents/carers would describe time spent online (ages 14 -18):

As shown in Table 122 and Figure 122, for ages 14 – 18, comparing gender with how parents/carers would describe time spent online, revealed that females are most likely to say that their parents think they spend too much time online (68.92%).

Table 122. Gender compared with how parents/carers would describe time spent online (ages 14 -18).

Age 14 - 18 How would your parents/carers describe the amount of time you spend online?				
Gender	**They think I spend too much time online**	**They think it's just about right**	**They think I don't spend enough time online**	**Grand Total**
Dreamgender	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	100.00%
Other	0.00%	25.00%	75.00%	100.00%
Trans	50.00%	50.00%	0.00%	100.00%
Male	56.54%	41.54%	1.92%	100.00%
Non-binary / demi / genderqueer / genderfluid	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	100.00%
They / them	66.67%	0.00%	33.33%	100.00%
Female	68.92%	30.16%	0.92%	100.00%
Prefer not to say	74.29%	21.43%	4.29%	100.00%
Grand Total	62.58%	35.76%	1.66%	100.00%

Figure 122. Gender compared with how parents/carers would describe time spent online (ages 14 -18).



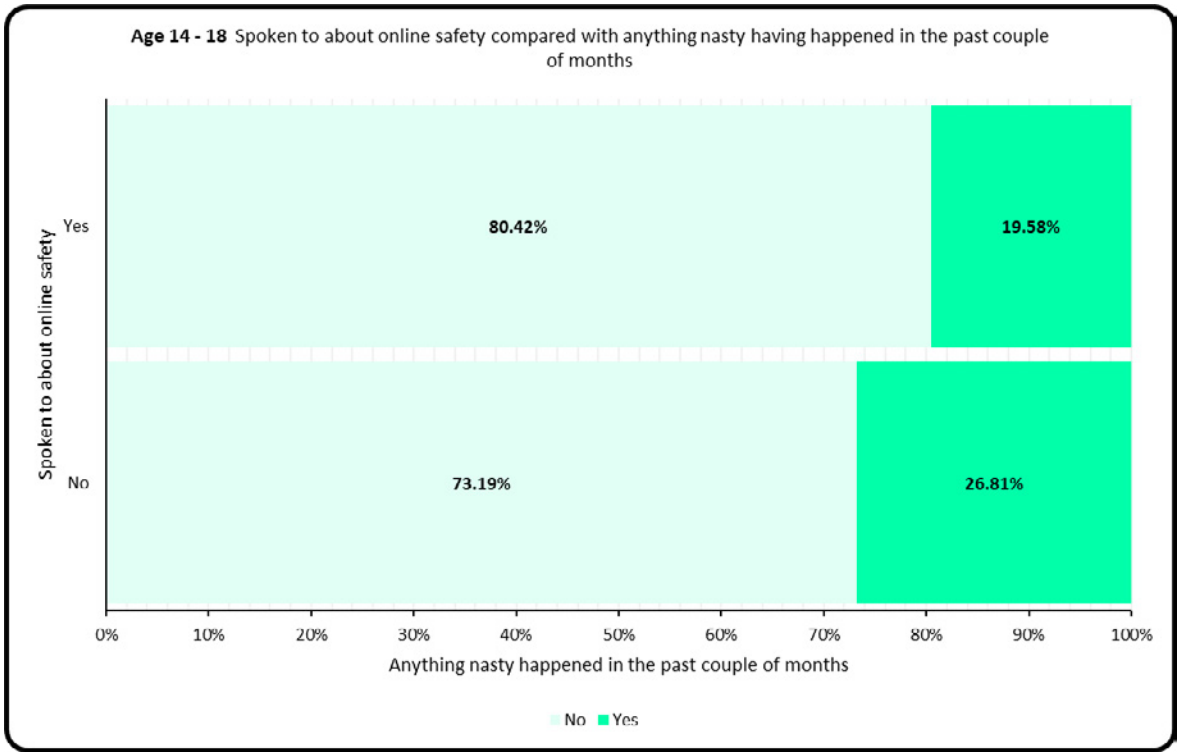
Spoken to about online safety compared with anything nasty having happened in the past couple of months (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 123 and Figure 123, for ages 8 – 13, comparing having been spoken to about online safety with anything nasty having happened online, shows that those who were spoken to about online safety, are less likely to have a nasty experience (19.58%), in contrast to those not spoken to (26.81%).

Table 123. Spoken to about online safety compared with anything nasty having happened in the past couple of months (ages 8 – 13).

Age 8 - 13 In the past couple of months, has anything nasty or unpleasant happened to you online?			
Spoken to about online safety	**No**	**Yes**	**Grand Total**
No	73.19%	26.81%	100.00%
Yes	80.42%	19.58%	100.00%
Grand Total	80.16%	19.84%	100.00%

Figure 123. Spoken to about online safety compared with anything nasty having happened in the past couple of months (ages 8 – 13).



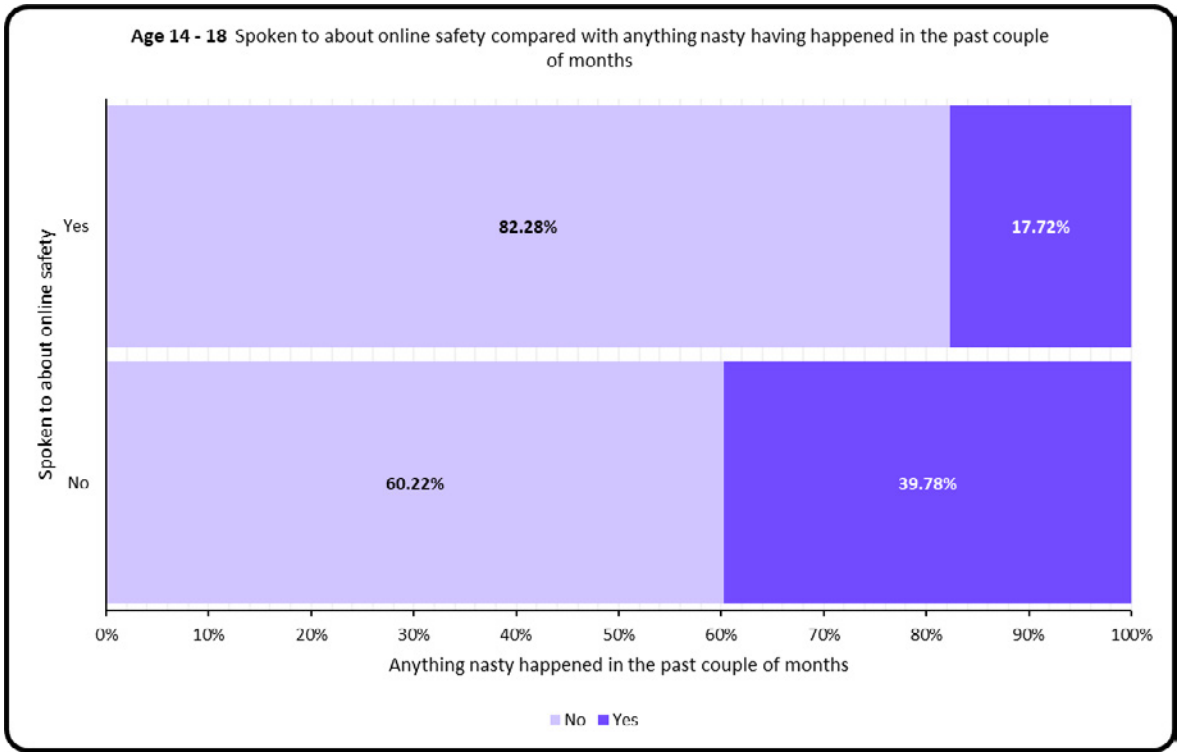
Spoken to about online safety compared with anything nasty having happened in the past couple of months (ages 14 – 18):

As shown in Table 124 and Figure 124, for ages 14 – 18, comparing having been spoken to about online safety with anything nasty having happened online, shows that those who were spoken to about online safety, are less likely to have a nasty experience (17.72%), in contrast to those not spoken to (39.78%). This is a much wider percentage gap than for the younger, 8 – 13 age group (more than twice likely if not spoken to about online safety).

Table 124. Spoken to about online safety compared with anything nasty having happened in the past couple of months (ages 14 – 18).

Age 14 - 18 In the past couple of months, has anything nasty or unpleasant happened to you online?			
Spoken to about online safety	**No**	**Yes**	**Grand Total**
No	60.22%	39.78%	100.00%
Yes	82.28%	17.72%	100.00%
Grand Total	81.51%	18.49%	100.00%

Figure 124. Spoken to about online safety compared with anything nasty having happened in the past couple of months (ages 14 – 18).



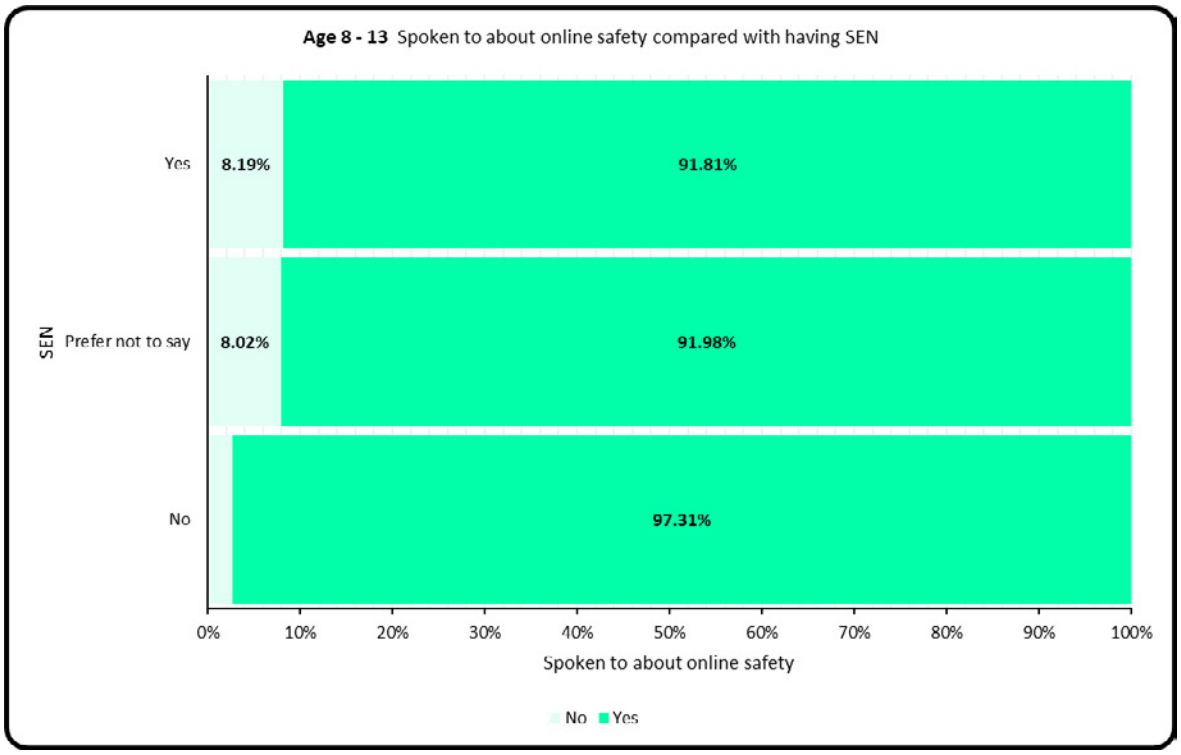
Spoken to about online safety compared with having SEN (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 125 and Figure 125, for ages 8 – 13, comparing having been spoken to about online safety, and having SEN, revealed that those with SEN were slightly less likely to have been spoken to about online safety (91.81%), compared with those with no SEN (97.31%).

Table 125. Spoken to about online safety compared with having SEN (ages 8 – 13).

	Age 14 - 18 Do you have special educational needs?			
Spoken to about online safety	**No**	**Prefer not to say**	**Yes**	**Grand Total**
No	2.69%	8.02%	8.19%	3.55%
Yes	97.31%	91.98%	91.81%	96.45%
Grand Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Figure 125. Spoken to about online safety compared with having SEN (ages 8 – 13).



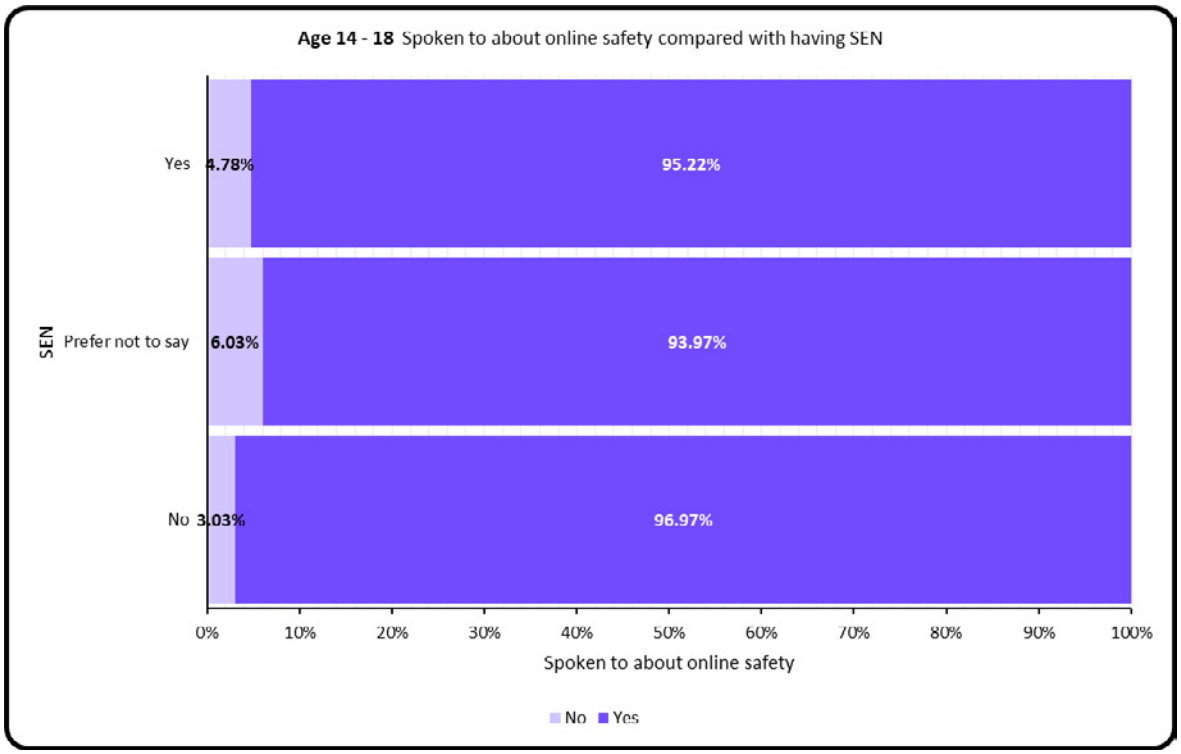
Spoken to about online safety compared with having SEN (ages 14 – 18):

As shown in Table 126 and Figure 126, for ages 14 – 18, comparing having been spoken to about online safety, and having SEN, revealed that those with SEN were very slightly less likely to have been spoken to about online safety (95.22%), compared with those with no SEN (96.97%). This gap is narrower than for the younger, 8 – 13 age group.

Table 126. Spoken to about online safety compared with having SEN (ages 14 – 18).

	Age 14 - 18 Do you have special educational needs?			
Spoken to about online safety	**No**	**Prefer not to say**	**Yes**	**Grand Total**
No	3.03%	6.03%	4.78%	3.33%
Yes	96.97%	93.97%	95.22%	96.67%
Grand Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Figure 126. Spoken to about online safety compared with having SEN (ages 14 – 18).



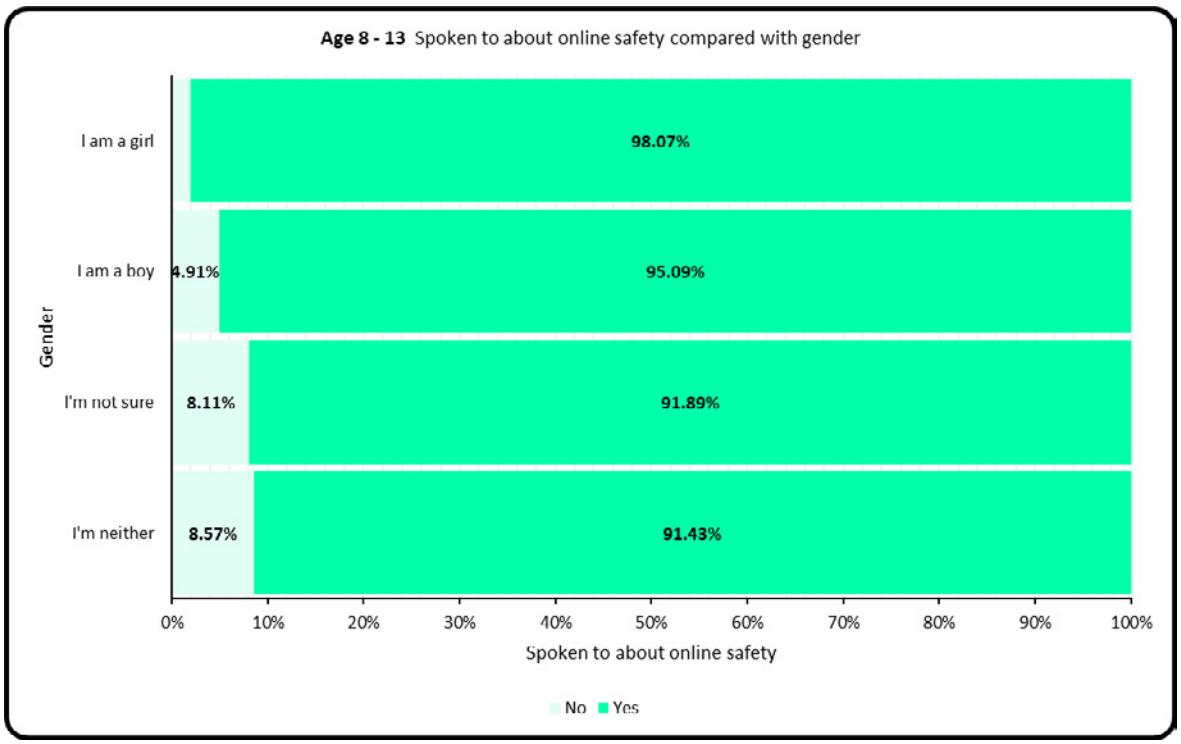
Spoken to about online safety compared with gender (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 127 and Figure 127, for ages 8 – 13, comparing gender with having been spoken to about online safety, showed that girls are slightly more likely to have been spoken to (98.07%), compared with, for example, boys (95.09%).

Table 127. Spoken to about online safety compared with gender (ages 8 – 13).

Age 8 - 13 How would you describe yourself?					
Spoken to about online safety	I'm neither	I'm not sure	I am a boy	I am a girl	Grand Total
No	8.57%	8.11%	4.91%	1.93%	3.56%
Yes	91.43%	91.89%	95.09%	98.07%	96.44%
Grand Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Figure 127. Spoken to about online safety compared with gender (ages 8 – 13).



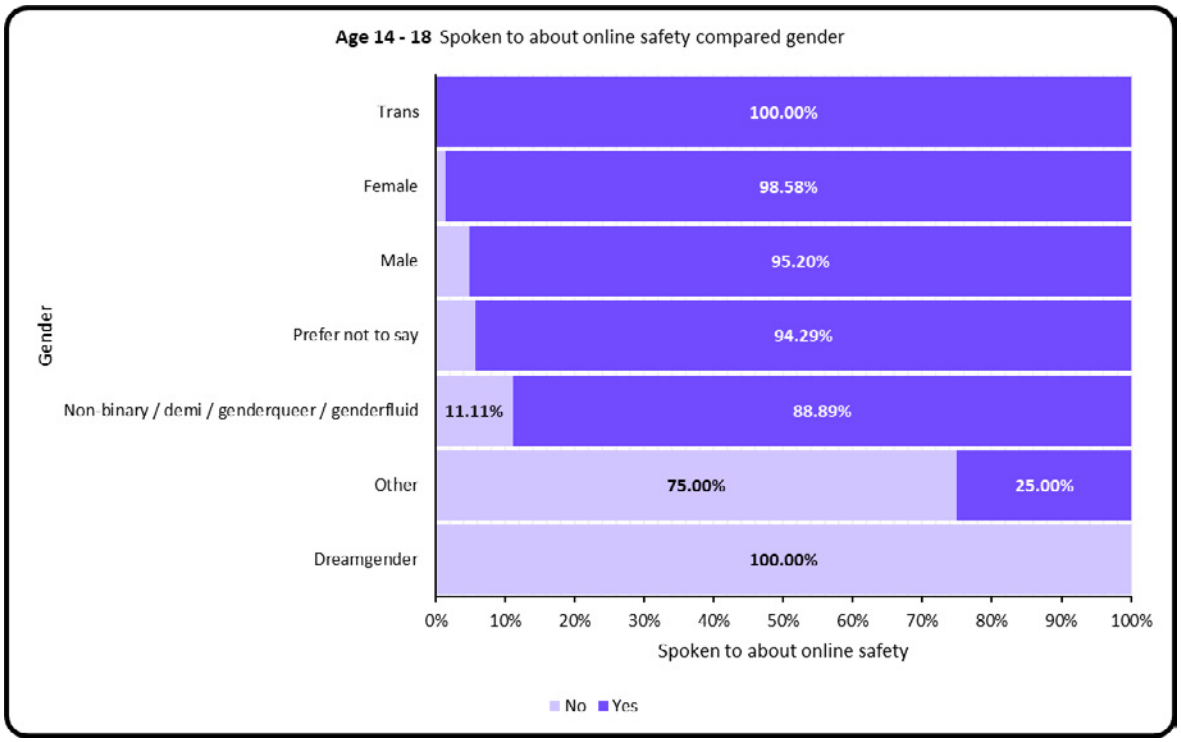
Spoken to about online safety compared with gender (ages 14 – 18):

As shown in Table 128 and Figure 128, for ages 14 – 18, comparing gender with having been spoken to about online safety, showed that those identifying as trans are most likely to have been spoken to (100%, although small numbers represented), followed closely by female (98.58%), and then male (95.20%). Non-binary/demi/genderqueer/genderfluid and dreamgender (although very small numbers) appear to be least likely to be spoken to about online safety (88.89%, and 0% respectively).

Table 128. Spoken to about online safety compared with gender (ages 14 – 18).

Age 14 - 18 What is your gender?									
Spoken to about online safety	Dreamgender	Other	Non-binary / demi / genderqueer / genderfluid	Prefer not to say	Male	Female	Trans	They / them	Grand Total
No	100.00%	75.00%	11.11%	5.71%	4.80%	1.42%	0.00%	0.00%	3.47%
Yes	0.00%	25.00%	88.89%	94.29%	95.20%	98.58%	100.00%	100.00%	96.53%
Grand Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Figure 128. Spoken to about online safety compared with gender (ages 14 – 18).



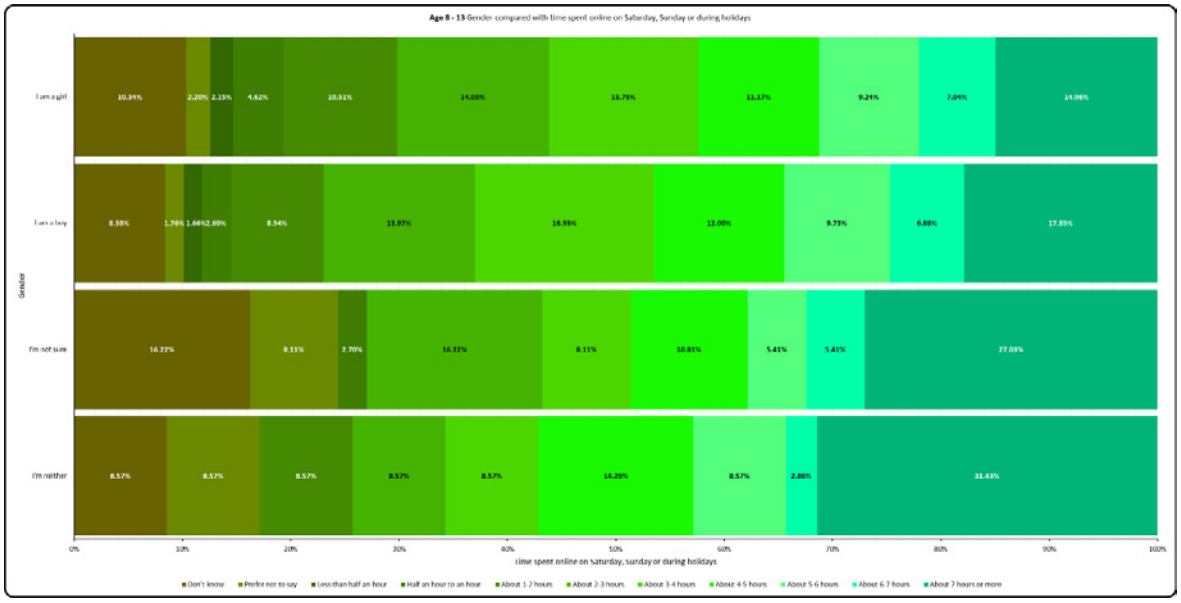
Gender compared with time spent online on Saturday, Sunday or during holidays (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 129 and Figure 129, for ages 8 – 13, comparing gender with time spent online on a Saturday, Sunday or during holidays, reveals that boys are spending on average, longer amounts of time online, compared with, for example, girls.

Table 129. Gender compared with time spent online on Saturday, Sunday or during holidays (ages 8 – 13).

Age 14 - 18 How long do you spend online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays?												
Gender	Don't know	Prefer not to say	Less than half an hour	Half an hour to an hour	About 1-2 hours	About 2-3 hours	About 3-4 hours	About 4-5 hours	About 5-6 hours	About 6-7 hours	About 7 hours or more	Grand Total
I'm neither	8.57%	8.57%	0.00%	0.00%	8.57%	8.57%	8.57%	14.29%	8.57%	2.86%	31.43%	100.00%
I'm not sure	16.22%	8.11%	0.00%	2.70%	0.00%	16.22%	8.11%	10.81%	5.41%	5.41%	27.03%	100.00%
I am a boy	8.38%	1.76%	1.66%	2.69%	8.54%	13.97%	16.55%	12.00%	9.73%	6.88%	17.85%	100.00%
I am a girl	10.34%	2.20%	2.15%	4.62%	10.51%	14.03%	13.75%	11.17%	9.24%	7.04%	14.96%	100.00%
Grand Total	9.39%	2.09%	1.86%	3.58%	9.39%	13.97%	15.07%	11.61%	9.44%	6.91%	16.69%	100.00%

Figure 129. Gender compared with time spent online on Saturday, Sunday or during holidays (ages 8 – 13).



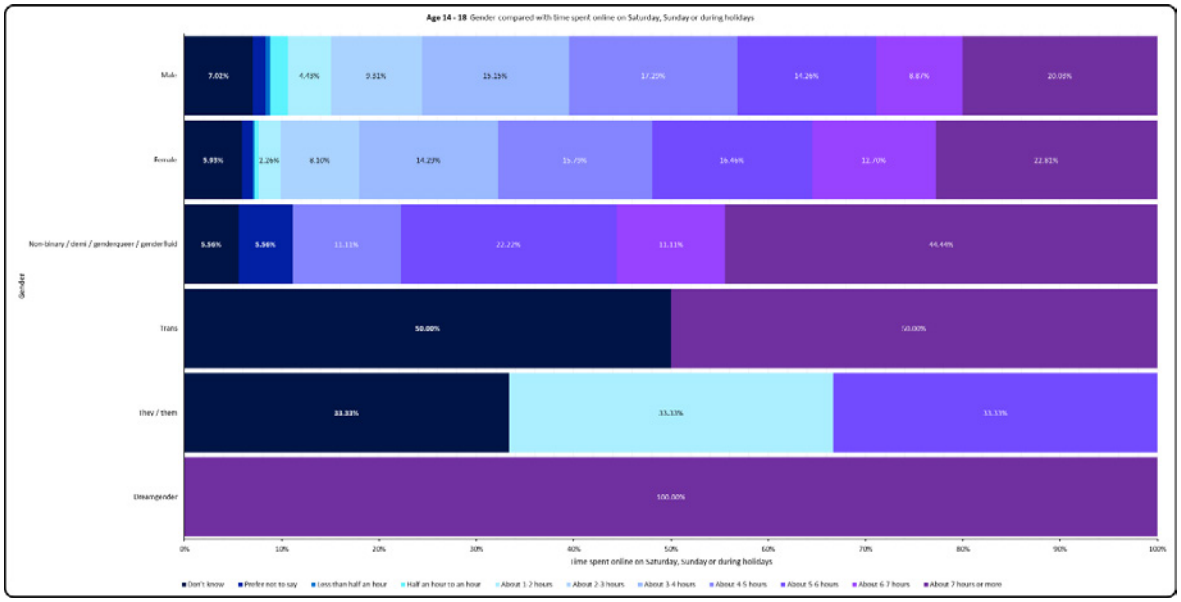
Gender compared with time spent online on Saturday, Sunday or during holidays (ages 14 – 18):

As shown in Table 130 and Figure 130, for ages 14 – 18, comparing gender with time spent online on a Saturday, Sunday or during holidays, reveals that dreamgender and non-binary/ demi/genderqueer/genderfluid are spending on average, longer amounts of time online. Females are spending more time online, on average, compared with males.

Table 130. Gender compared with time spent online on Saturday, Sunday or during holidays (ages 14 – 18).

Age 14 - 18 How long do you spend online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays?												
Gender	Don't know	Prefer not to say	Less than half an hour	Half an hour to an hour	About 1-2 hours	About 2-3 hours	About 3-4 hours	About 4-5 hours	About 5-6 hours	About 6-7 hours	About 7 hours or more	Grand Total
Dreamgender	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Other	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	25.00%	0.00%	75.00%	100.00%
Prefer not to say	8.57%	7.14%	0.00%	1.43%	2.86%	2.86%	11.43%	17.14%	8.57%	11.43%	28.57%	100.00%
They / them	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
Trans	50.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	50.00%	100.00%
Non-binary / demi / genderqueer / genderfluid	5.56%	5.56%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	11.11%	22.22%	11.11%	44.44%	100.00%
Female	5.93%	1.09%	0.17%	0.42%	2.26%	8.10%	14.29%	15.79%	16.46%	12.70%	22.81%	100.00%
Male	7.02%	1.33%	0.44%	1.85%	4.43%	9.31%	15.15%	17.29%	14.26%	8.87%	20.03%	100.00%
Grand Total	6.61%	1.40%	0.30%	1.17%	3.40%	8.50%	14.50%	16.50%	15.18%	10.65%	21.79%	100.00%

Figure 130. Gender compared with time spent online on Saturday, Sunday or during holidays (ages 14 – 18).



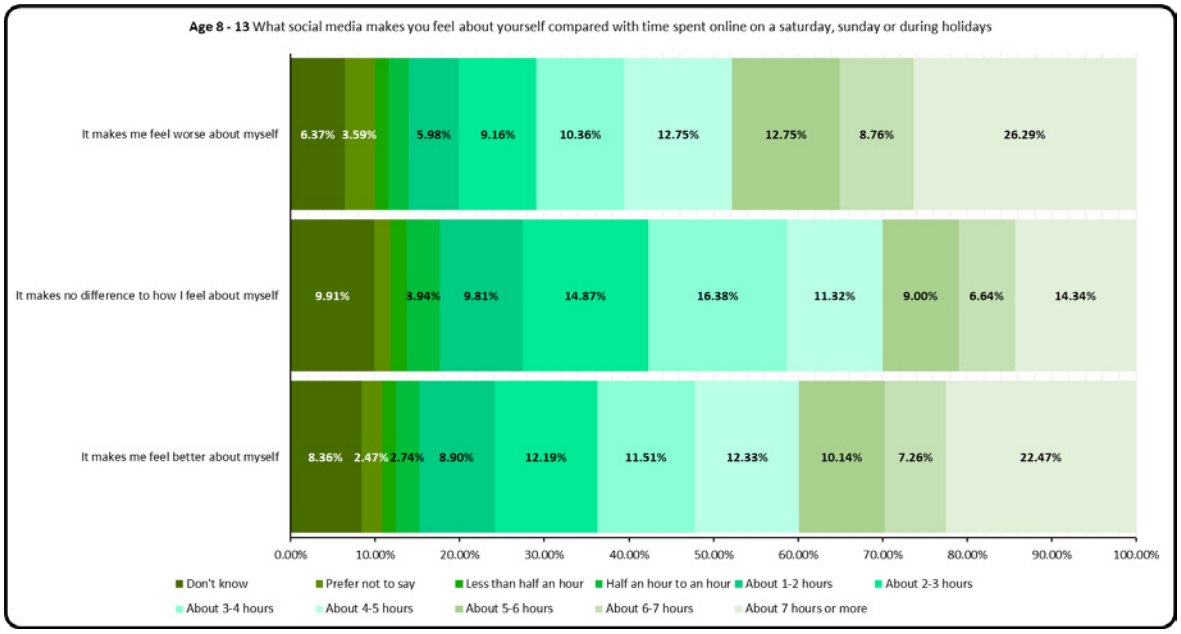
What social media makes you feel about yourself compared with time spent online on a Saturday, Sunday or during holidays (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 131 and Figure 131, for ages 8 – 13, comparing what social media makes you feel about yourself with time spent online on a Saturday, Sunday or during the holidays, shows that those of the opinion that it makes no difference to how they feel, are spending less time online on average. Those who are of the opinion that it makes them feel worse about themselves are spending the most time online on average.

Table 131. What social media makes you feel about yourself compared with time spent online on a saturday, sunday or during holidays (ages 8 – 13).

Ages 8 - 13 How long do you spend online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays?												
What does social media make you feel about yourself?	Don't know	Prefer not to say	Less than half an hour	Half an hour to an hour	About 1-2 hours	About 2-3 hours	About 3-4 hours	About 4-5 hours	About 5-6 hours	About 6-7 hours	About 7 hours or more	Grand Total
It makes me feel better about myself	8.36%	2.47%	1.64%	2.74%	8.90%	12.19%	11.51%	12.33%	10.14%	7.26%	22.47%	100.00%
It makes no difference to how I feel about myself	9.91%	1.86%	1.93%	3.94%	9.81%	14.87%	16.38%	11.32%	9.00%	6.64%	14.34%	100.00%
It makes me feel worse about myself	6.37%	3.59%	1.59%	2.39%	5.98%	9.16%	10.36%	12.75%	12.75%	8.76%	26.29%	100.00%
Grand Total	9.38%	2.09%	1.86%	3.61%	9.38%	13.98%	15.05%	11.60%	9.46%	6.90%	16.68%	100.00%

Figure 131. What social media makes you feel about yourself compared with time spent online on a saturday, sunday or during holidays (ages 8 – 13).



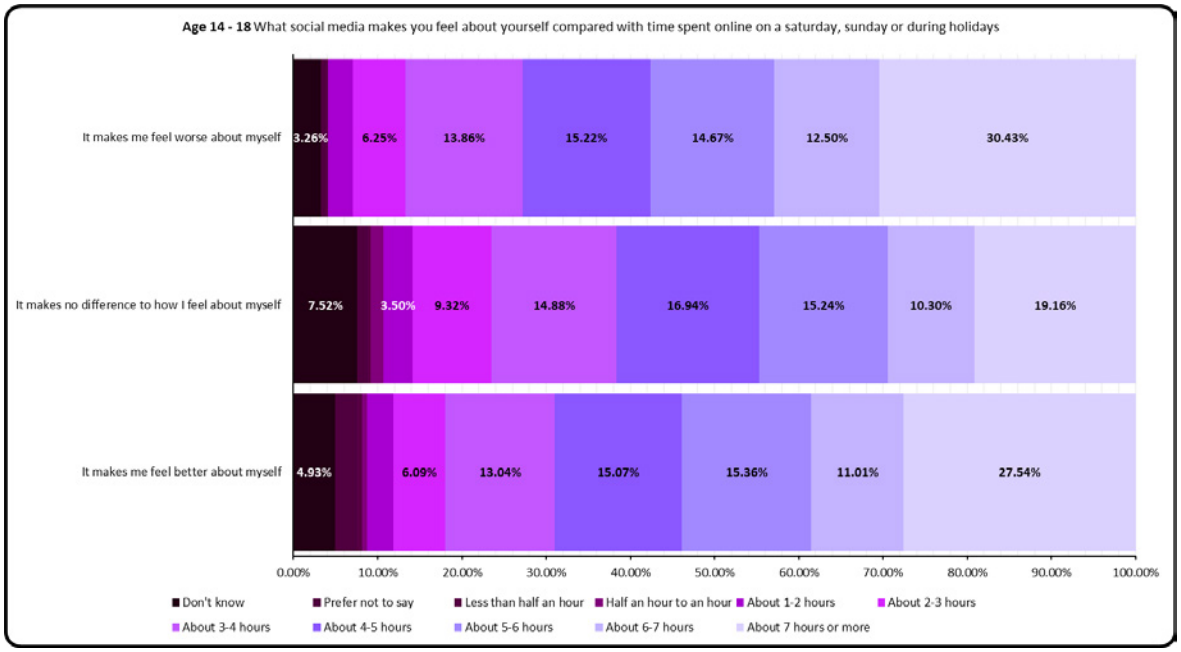
What social media makes you feel about yourself compared with time spent online on a Saturday, Sunday or during holidays (ages 14 – 18):

As shown in Table 132 and Figure 132, for ages 14 – 18, comparing what social media makes you feel about yourself with time spent online on a Saturday, Sunday or during the holidays, shows that those of the opinion that it makes no difference to how they feel, are spending less time online on average. Those who are of the opinion that it makes them feel worse about themselves are spending the most time online on average.

Table 132. What social media makes you feel about yourself compared with time spent online on a Saturday, Sunday or during holidays (ages 14 – 18).

Age 14 - 18 How long do you spend online on a Saturday or Sunday or during the holidays?												
What does social media make you feel about yourself?	Don't know	Prefer not to say	Less than half an hour	Half an hour to an hour	About 1-2 hours	About 2-3 hours	About 3-4 hours	About 4-5 hours	About 5-6 hours	About 6-7 hours	About 7 hours or more	Grand Total
It makes me feel better about myself	4.93%	2.61%	0.58%	0.58%	3.19%	6.09%	13.04%	15.07%	15.36%	11.01%	27.54%	100.00%
It makes no difference to how I feel about myself	7.52%	1.34%	0.31%	1.49%	3.50%	9.32%	14.88%	16.94%	15.24%	10.30%	19.16%	100.00%
It makes me feel worse about myself	3.26%	0.54%	0.27%	0.00%	2.99%	6.25%	13.86%	15.22%	14.67%	12.50%	30.43%	100.00%
Grand Total	6.59%	1.39%	0.34%	1.17%	3.39%	8.47%	14.50%	16.46%	15.18%	10.70%	21.81%	100.00%

Figure 132. What social media makes you feel about yourself compared with time spent online on a saturday, sunday or during holidays (ages 14 – 18).



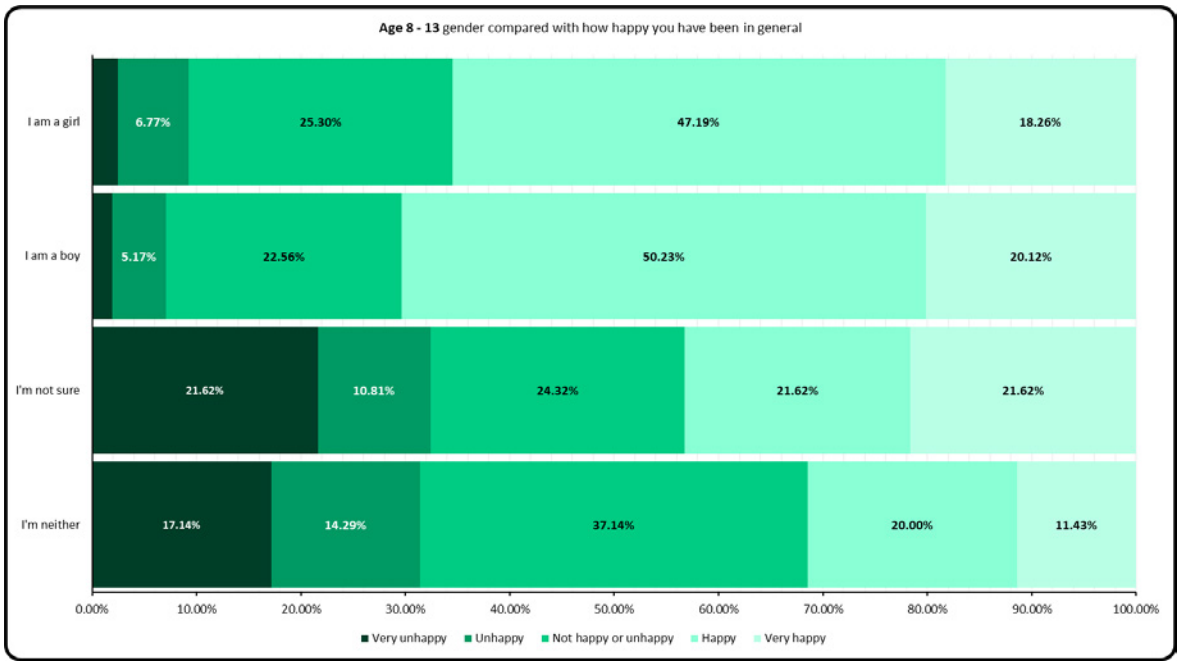
Gender compared with how happy you have been in general (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 133 and Figure 133, for ages 8 – 13, comparing gender with how happy they have been in general, shows that girls are less likely to be happy on average than boys.

Table 133. Gender compared with how happy you have been in general (ages 8 – 13).

Ages 8 - 13 Thinking back over the last week or so, how happy have you been in general?						
Gender	**Very unhappy**	**Unhappy**	**Not happy or unhappy**	**Happy**	**Very happy**	**Grand Total**
I'm neither	17.14%	14.29%	37.14%	20.00%	11.43%	100.00%
I'm not sure	21.62%	10.81%	24.32%	21.62%	21.62%	100.00%
I am a boy	1.91%	5.17%	22.56%	50.23%	20.12%	100.00%
I am a girl	2.48%	6.77%	25.30%	47.19%	18.26%	100.00%
Grand Total	2.51%	6.07%	24.01%	48.23%	19.17%	100.00%

Figure 133. Gender compared with how happy you have been in general (ages 8 – 13).



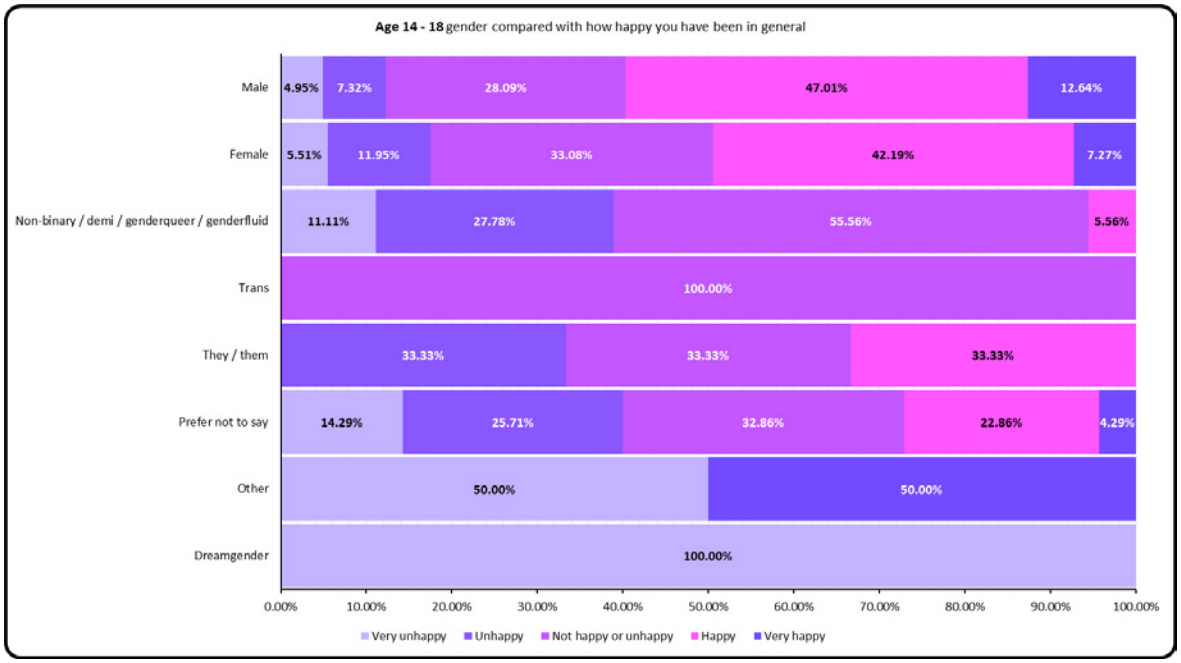
Gender compared with how happy you have been in general (ages 14 – 18):

As shown in Table 134 and Figure 134, for ages 14 – 18, comparing gender with how happy they have been in general, shows that dreamgender, they/them, trans, and non-binary/ demi/genderqueer/genderfluid are less likely to be happy on average. Females are less likely to be happy than males.

Table 134. Gender compared with how happy you have been in general (ages 14 – 18).

Gender	Very unhappy	Unhappy	Not happy or unhappy	Happy	Very happy	Grand Total
Dreamgender	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
Other	50.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	50.00%	100.00%
Prefer not to say	14.29%	25.71%	32.86%	22.86%	4.29%	100.00%
They / them	0.00%	33.33%	33.33%	33.33%	0.00%	100.00%
Trans	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
Non-binary / demi / genderqueer / genderfluid	11.11%	27.78%	55.56%	5.56%	0.00%	100.00%
Female	5.51%	11.95%	33.08%	42.19%	7.27%	100.00%
Male	4.95%	7.32%	28.09%	47.01%	12.64%	100.00%
Grand Total	5.59%	10.05%	30.66%	43.77%	9.93%	100.00%

Figure 134. Gender compared with how happy you have been in general (ages 14 – 18).



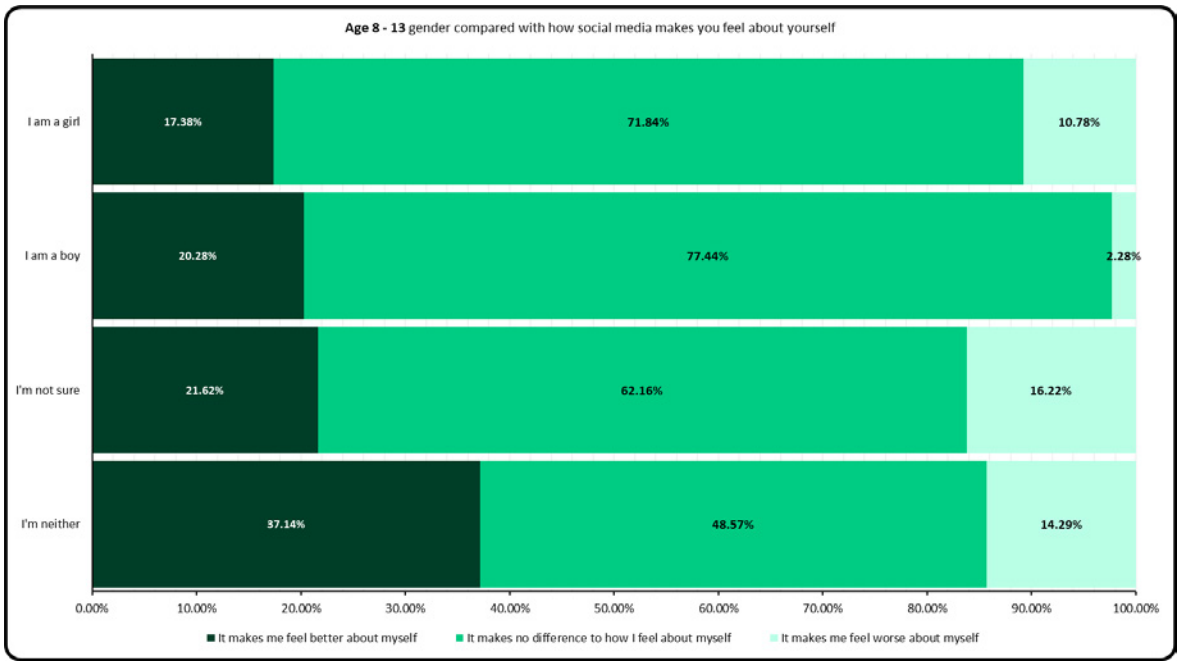
Gender compared with how social media makes you feel about yourself (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 135 and Figure 135, for ages 8 – 13, comparing gender with how social media makes children feel about themselves, shows that girls are slightly more likely to feel worse about themselves, compared with boys.

Table 135. Gender compared with how social media makes you feel about yourself (ages 8 – 13).

Ages 8 - 13 Overall, what does social media make you feel about yourself?				
Gender	**It makes me feel better about myself**	**It makes no difference to how I feel about myself**	**It makes me feel worse about myself**	**Grand Total**
I'm neither	37.14%	48.57%	14.29%	100.00%
I'm not sure	21.62%	62.16%	16.22%	100.00%
I am a boy	20.28%	77.44%	2.28%	100.00%
I am a girl	17.38%	71.84%	10.78%	100.00%
Grand Total	19.07%	74.37%	6.57%	100.00%

Figure 135. Gender compared with how social media makes you feel about yourself (ages 8 – 13).



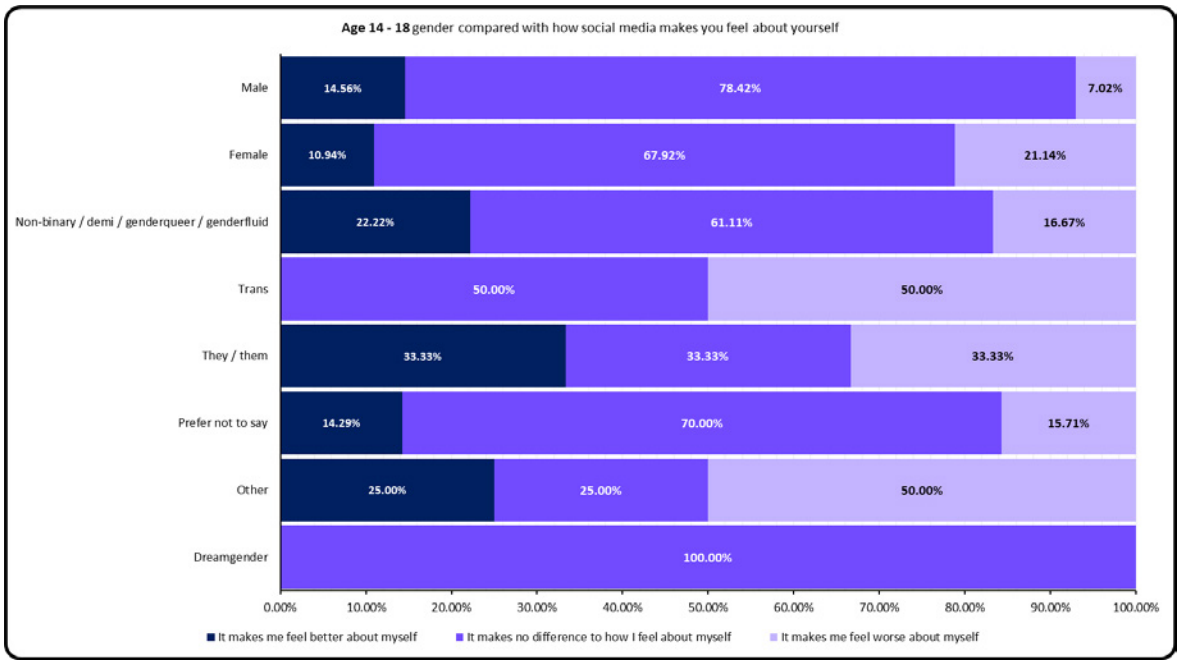
Gender compared with how social media makes you feel about yourself (ages 10 – 14):

As shown in Table 136 and Figure 136, for ages 14 – 18, comparing gender with how social media makes children feel about themselves, shows that females are more likely to feel worse about themselves than males. Non-binary/demi/genderqueer/genderfluid, trans, they/them are also more likely to feel worse about themselves than males.

Table 136. Gender compared with how social media makes you feel about yourself (ages 10 – 14).

Ages 14 - 18 Overall, what does social media make you feel about yourself?				
Gender	**It makes me feel better about myself**	**It makes no difference to how I feel about myself**	**It makes me feel worse about myself**	**Grand Total**
Dreamgender	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	100.00%
Other	25.00%	25.00%	50.00%	100.00%
Prefer not to say	14.29%	70.00%	15.71%	100.00%
They / them	33.33%	33.33%	33.33%	100.00%
Trans	0.00%	50.00%	50.00%	100.00%
Non-binary / demi / genderqueer / genderfluid	22.22%	61.11%	16.67%	100.00%
Female	10.94%	67.92%	21.14%	100.00%
Male	14.56%	78.42%	7.02%	100.00%
Grand Total	12.99%	73.19%	13.82%	100.00%

Figure 136. Gender compared with how social media makes you feel about yourself (ages 10 – 14).



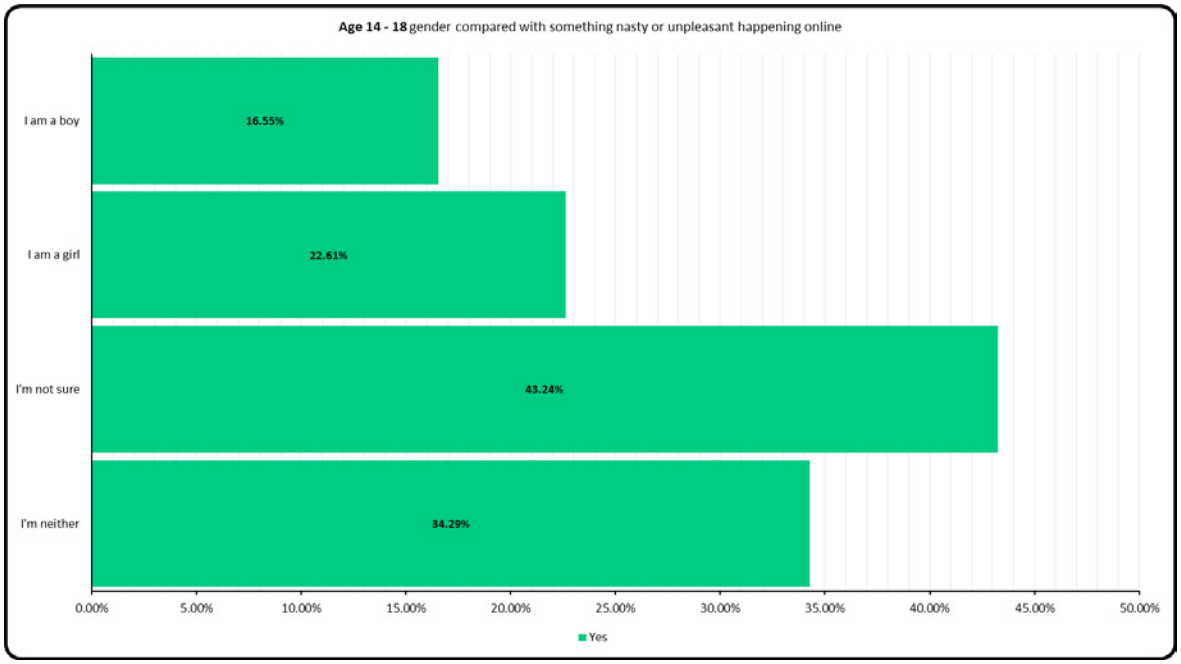
Gender compared with something nasty or unpleasant happening online (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 137 and Figure 137, for ages 8 – 13, comparing gender with something nasty or unpleasant happening online, shows that girls are more likely to experience something nasty or unpleasant (22.61%), than boys (16.55%).

Table 137. Gender compared with something nasty or unpleasant happening online (ages 8 – 13).

Ages 8 - 13 In the past couple of months, has anything nasty or unpleasant happened to you online?			
Gender	**No**	**Yes**	**Grand Total**
I'm neither	65.71%	34.29%	100.00%
I'm not sure	56.76%	43.24%	100.00%
I am a girl	77.39%	22.61%	100.00%
I am a boy	83.45%	16.55%	100.00%
Grand Total	80.15%	19.85%	100.00%

Figure 137. Gender compared with something nasty or unpleasant happening online (ages 8 – 13).



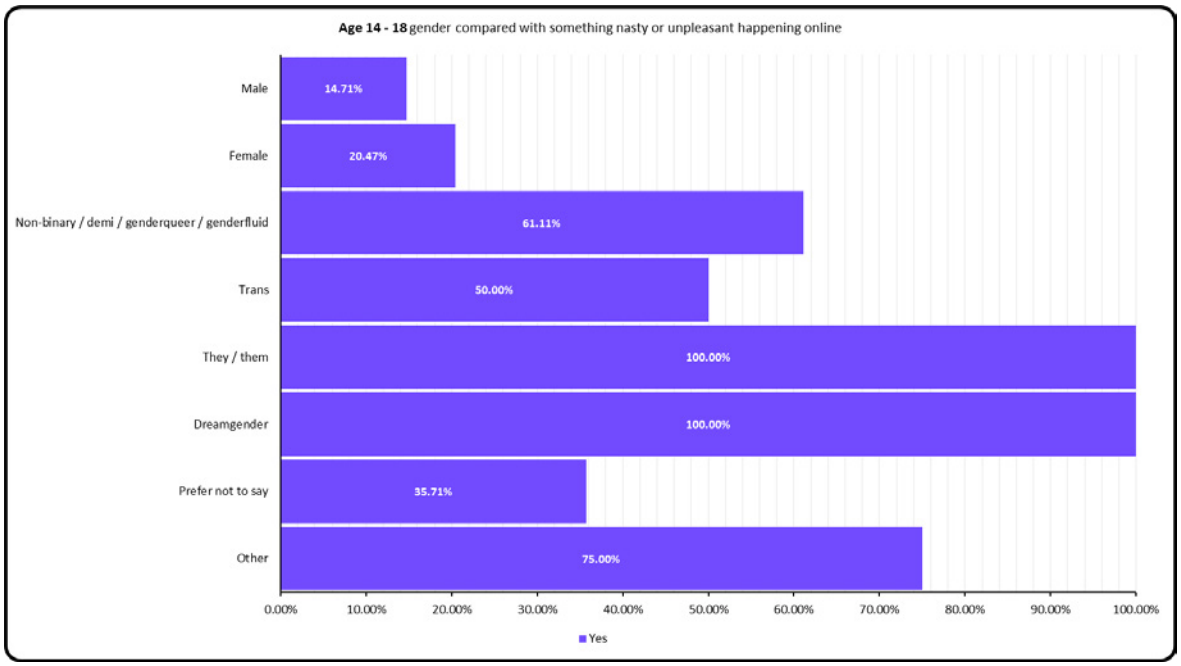
Gender compared with something nasty or unpleasant happening online (ages 14 – 18):

As shown in Table 138 and Figure 138, for ages 14 – 18, comparing gender with something nasty or unpleasant happening online, shows that females are more likely to experience something nasty or unpleasant (20.47%), than males (14.71%). Trans, dreamgender, they/them and non-binary/demi/genderqueer/genderfluid are significantly more likely to report having experienced something nasty or unpleasant happening online.

Table 138. Gender compared with something nasty or unpleasant happening online (ages 14 – 18).

Ages 14 - 18 In the past couple of months, has anything nasty or unpleasant happened to you online?			
Gender	**No**	**Yes**	**Grand Total**
Other	25.00%	75.00%	100.00%
Prefer not to say	64.29%	35.71%	100.00%
Dreamgender	0.00%	100.00%	100.00%
They / them	0.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Trans	50.00%	50.00%	100.00%
Non-binary / demi / genderqueer / genderfluid	38.89%	61.11%	100.00%
Female	79.53%	20.47%	100.00%
Male	85.29%	14.71%	100.00%
Grand Total	81.57%	18.43%	100.00%

Figure 138. Gender compared with something nasty or unpleasant happening online (ages 14 – 18).



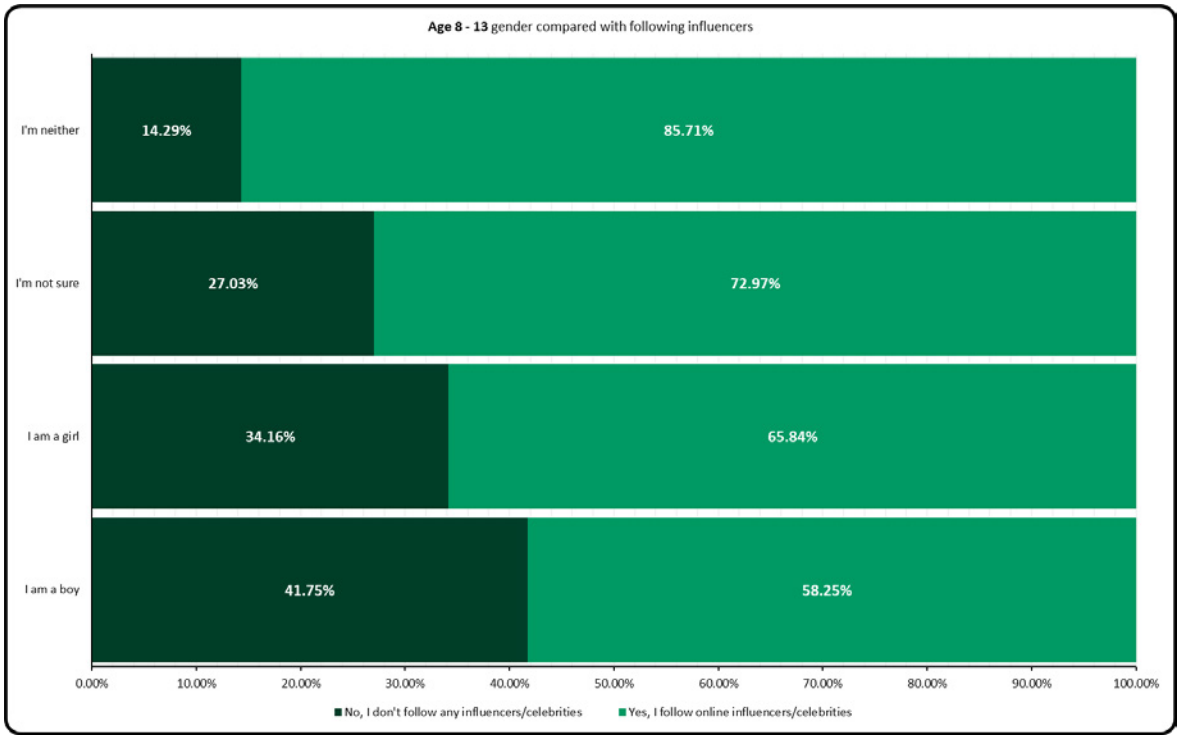
Gender compared with following online influencers/celebrities (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 139 and Figure 139, for ages 8 – 13, comparing gender with following online influencers/celebrities shows that girls are more likely to follow (65.84%), than boys (58.25%). Children who responded that they are neither gender or not sure of their gender are most likely to follow influences/celebrities (85.71% and 72.97%, respectively).

Table 139. Gender compared with following online influencers/celebrities (ages 8 – 13).

Ages 8 - 13 do you follow online influencers/celebrities?			
Gender	**No, I don't follow any influencers/ celebrities**	**Yes, I follow online influencers/ celebrities**	**Grand Total**
I am a boy	41.75%	58.25%	100.00%
I am a girl	34.16%	65.84%	100.00%
I'm not sure	27.03%	72.97%	100.00%
I'm neither	14.29%	85.71%	100.00%
Grand Total	37.75%	62.25%	100.00%

Figure 139. Gender compared with following online influencers/celebrities (ages 8 – 13).



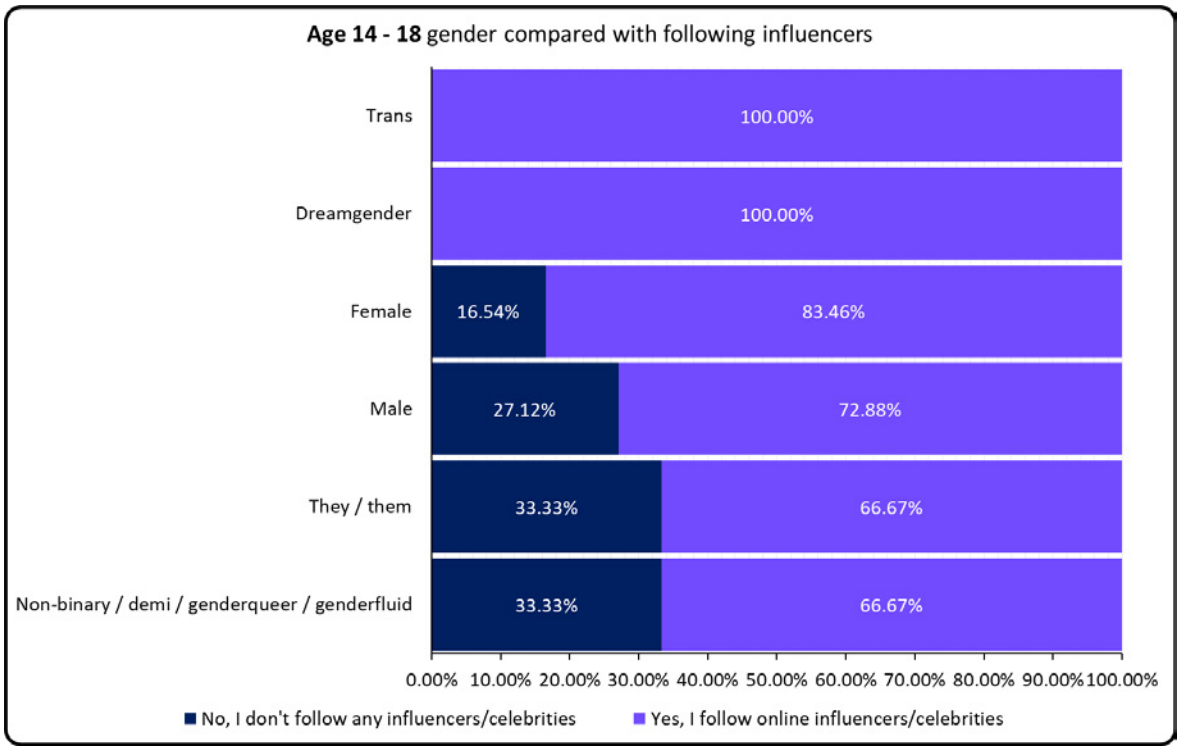
Gender compared with following online influencers/celebrities (ages 14 – 18):

As shown in Table 140 and Figure 140, for ages 14 – 18, comparing gender with following online influencers/celebrities shows that females are more likely to follow (83.46%), than boys (72.88%).

Table 140. Gender compared with following online influencers/celebrities (ages 14 – 18).

Ages 14 - 18 do you follow online influencers/celebrities?			
Gender	**No, I don't follow any influencers/ celebrities**	**Yes, I follow online influencers/ celebrities**	**Grand Total**
Other	75.00%	25.00%	100.00%
Prefer not to say	40.00%	60.00%	100.00%
Non-binary / demi / genderqueer / genderfluid	33.33%	66.67%	100.00%
They / them	33.33%	66.67%	100.00%
Male	27.12%	72.88%	100.00%
Female	16.54%	83.46%	100.00%
Dreamgender	0.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Trans	0.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Grand Total	22.77%	77.23%	100.00%

Figure 140. Gender compared with following online influencers/celebrities (ages 14 – 18).



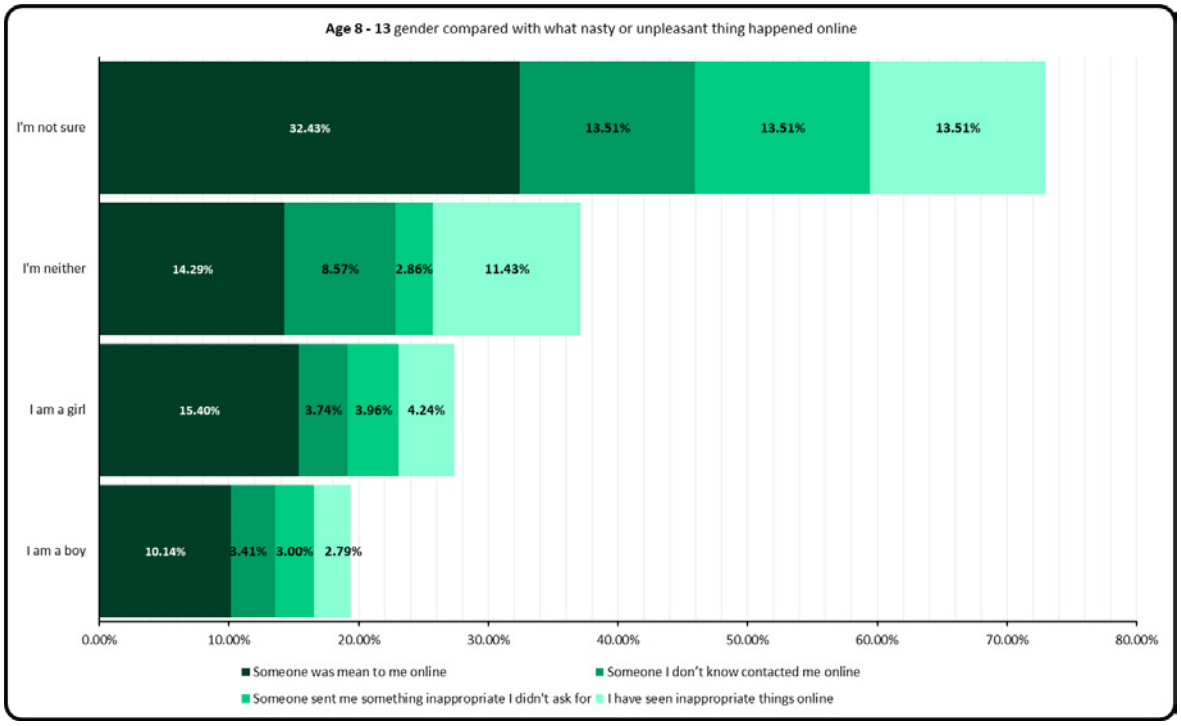
Gender compared with what nasty or unpleasant thing happened online (ages 8 – 13):

As shown in Table 141 and Figure 141, for ages 8 – 13, comparing gender with what nasty or unpleasant thing happened to them online, shows that girls are experiencing higher percentages than boys across the board. However, those who responded as neither gender or not sure of their gender, are showing, generally, the highest percentages of children experiencing each nasty or unpleasant thing listed.

Table 141. Gender compared with what nasty or unpleasant thing happened online (ages 8 – 13).

Age 8 - 13 gender compared with what nasty or unpleasant thing happened online				
Gender	**Someone was mean to me online**	**Someone I don't know contacted me online**	**Someone sent me something inappropriate I didn't ask for**	**I have seen inappropriate things online**
I am a boy	10.14%	3.41%	3.00%	2.79%
I am a girl	15.40%	3.74%	3.96%	4.24%
I'm neither	14.29%	8.57%	2.86%	11.43%
I'm not sure	32.43%	13.51%	13.51%	13.51%
Grand Total	12.90%	3.71%	3.56%	3.66%

Figure 141. Gender compared with what nasty or unpleasant thing happened online (ages 8 – 13).



Gender compared with what nasty or unpleasant thing happened online (ages 14 – 18):

As shown in Table 142 and Figure 142, for ages 14 – 18, comparing gender with what nasty or unpleasant thing happened to them online, shows that there are higher percentages of females, than males, experiencing each nasty or unpleasant thing listed, across the board. However, those who responded as non-binary/demi/genderqueer/genderfluid, for example, are showing very high percentages for four particular things including mean or nasty comments, argument or fights.

Table 142. Gender compared with what nasty or unpleasant thing happened online (ages 14 – 18).

Gender	Mean or nasty comments were made about me or sent to me	I was involved in an argument or fight	Lies or rumours were told about me	I was excluded from an online group
Male	7.10%	6.21%	5.10%	2.22%
Female	11.78%	10.78%	9.44%	4.51%
Prefer not to say	22.86%	20.00%	7.14%	5.71%
Non-binary / demi / genderqueer / genderfluid	38.89%	22.22%	16.67%	22.22%
Other	50.00%	50.00%	50.00%	25.00%
Trans	50.00%	0.00%	50.00%	0.00%
They / them	66.67%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Dreamgender	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Grand Total	10.05%	8.84%	7.33%	3.55%

Gender	Personal information was shared about me without my permission	Embarrassing photos or videos of me were edited, posted, tagged or shared without my permission	I was asked to send nude photos/videos of myself or to expose myself	I was threatened
Male	2.14%	3.55%	1.70%	3.99%
Female	2.92%	5.43%	5.43%	2.92%
Prefer not to say	4.29%	5.71%	7.14%	7.14%
Non-binary / demi / genderqueer / genderfluid	11.11%	16.67%	33.33%	16.67%
Other	50.00%	25.00%	50.00%	50.00%
Trans	50.00%	50.00%	50.00%	50.00%
They / them	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Dreamgender	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Grand Total	2.76%	4.65%	3.89%	3.81%

Gender	Someone tried to blackmail me	My personal account was hacked	I saw or was sent content promoting violence	I saw or was sent content promoting self-harm
Male	2.37%	1.92%	2.44%	2.22%
Female	2.67%	1.09%	2.84%	3.34%
Prefer not to say	4.29%	2.86%	5.71%	11.43%
Non-binary / demi / genderqueer / genderfluid	22.22%	11.11%	27.78%	33.33%
Other	50.00%	25.00%	50.00%	50.00%
Trans	50.00%	0.00%	50.00%	50.00%
They / them	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Dreamgender	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Grand Total	2.83%	1.70%	3.02%	3.32%

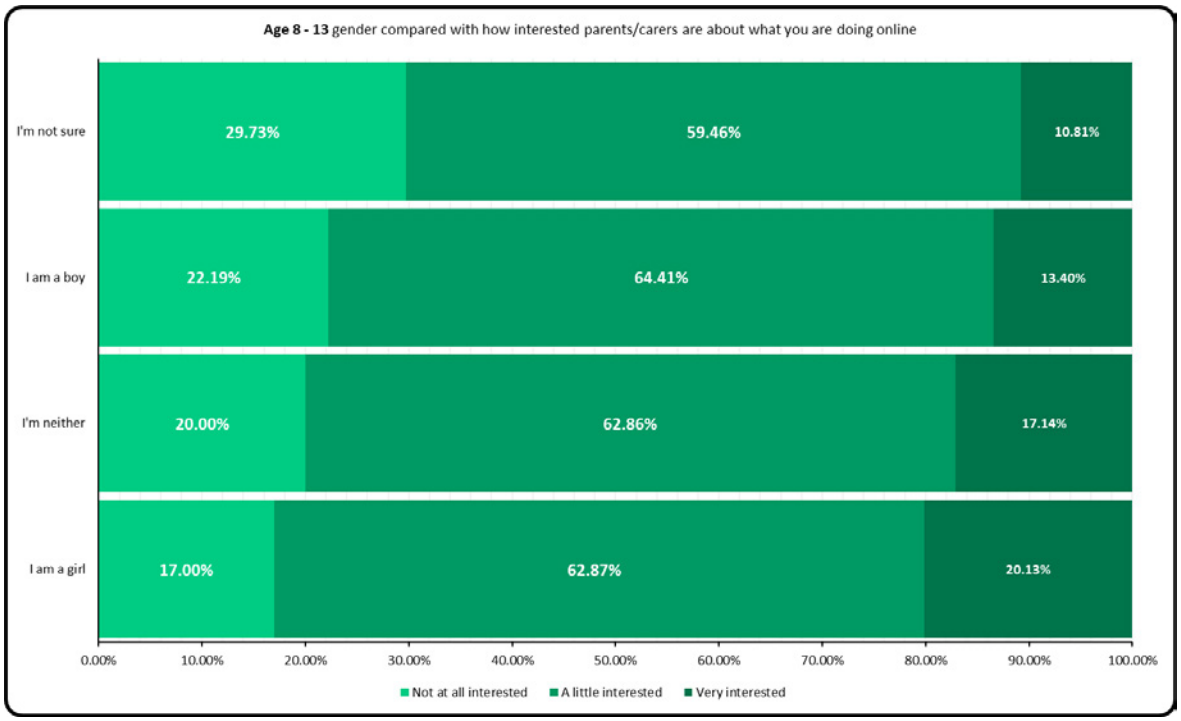
Gender	I saw or was sent content promoting eating disorders	I saw or was sent content promoting suicide	I saw or was sent inappropriate photos I didn't ask for	I saw or was sent pornography
Male	1.55%	2.96%	3.03%	3.03%
Female	4.09%	3.59%	6.93%	5.60%
Prefer not to say	10.00%	11.43%	10.00%	5.71%
Non-binary / demi / genderqueer / genderfluid	16.67%	33.33%	44.44%	33.33%
Other	25.00%	50.00%	25.00%	50.00%
Trans	50.00%	50.00%	50.00%	50.00%
They / them	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Dreamgender	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Grand Total	3.13%	3.81%	5.36%	4.61%

As shown in Table 143 and Figure 143, for ages 8-13, comparing gender with how interested they perceive their parents to be, shows that there are higher percentages of females, than males, who feel that their parents are 'a little' or 'very interested' in what they are doing online.

Table 143. Gender compared with how interested parents are in what they are doing online (ages 8-13).

Ages 8 - 13 how interested are your parents/carers about what you are doing online?				
Gender	Not at all interested	A little interested	Very interested	Grand Total
I am a girl	17.00%	62.87%	20.13%	100.00%
I'm neither	20.00%	62.86%	17.14%	100.00%
I am a boy	22.19%	64.41%	13.40%	100.00%
I'm not sure	29.73%	59.46%	10.81%	100.00%
Grand Total	19.78%	63.61%	16.61%	100.00%

Figure 142. Gender compared with how interested parents are in what they are doing online (ages 8-13).

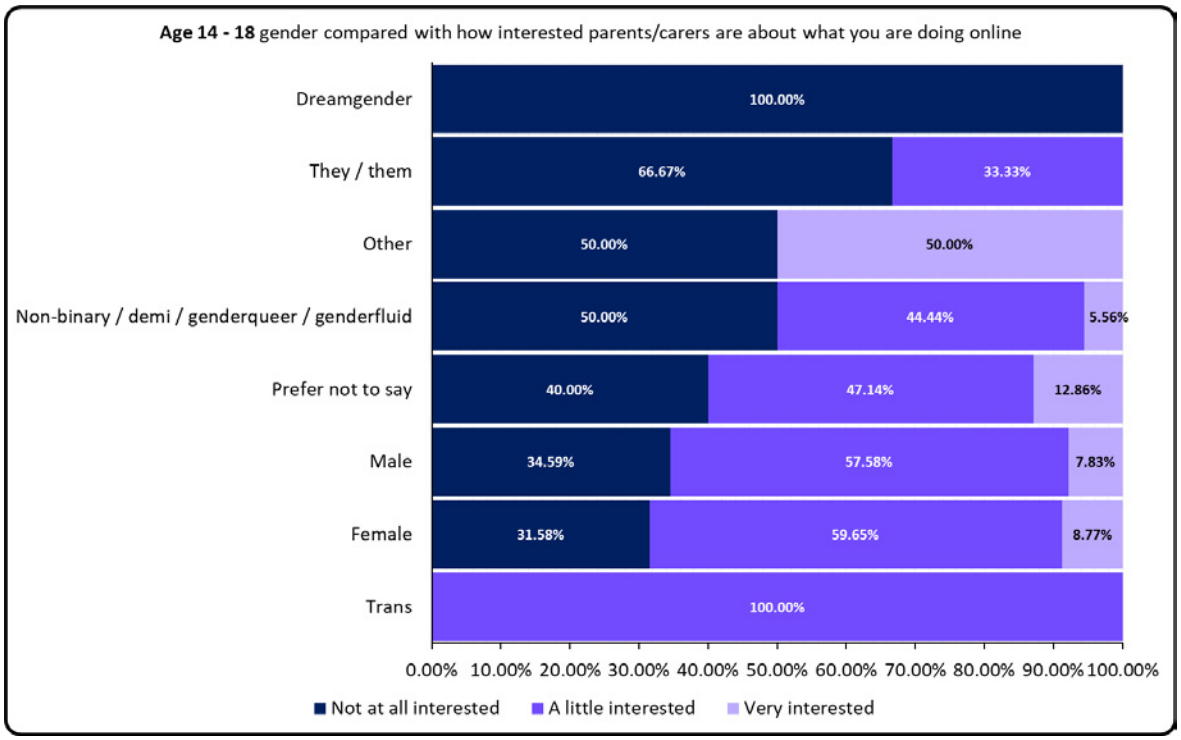


As shown in Table 144 and Figure 144, for ages 14-18, comparing gender with how interested they perceive their parents to be, shows that there are higher percentages of females, than males, who feel that their parents are 'a little' or 'very interested' in what they are doing online.

Table 144. Gender compared with how interested parents are in what they are doing online (ages 14-18).

Ages 14 - 18 how interested are your parents/carers about what you are doing online?				
Gender	**Not at all interested**	**A little interested**	**Very interested**	**Grand Total**
Trans	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	100.00%
Female	31.58%	59.65%	8.77%	100.00%
Male	34.59%	57.58%	7.83%	100.00%
Prefer not to say	40.00%	47.14%	12.86%	100.00%
Non-binary / demi / genderqueer / genderfluid	50.00%	44.44%	5.56%	100.00%
Other	50.00%	0.00%	50.00%	100.00%
They / them	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	100.00%
Dreamgender	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
Grand Total	33.53%	58.04%	8.42%	100.00%

Figure 143. Gender compared with how interested parents are in what they are doing online (ages 14-18).



CHAPTER 5
Qualitative Results

5.1 Mainstream Post-Primary (MPP) Focus Groups

A total of three focus groups were held in mainstream post-primary schools: one co-educational, non-selective Catholic Maintained school (School MPP1), one co-educational Voluntary Grammar school (MPP2) and one co-educational non-selective Irish Medium school (MPP3). Each focus group comprised a mixture of boys and girls from a single year group as follows: School MPP1 (year 11: 4 boys, 3 girls), School MPP2 (year 10: 4 boys, 4 girls), School MPP3 (year 11: 4 boys, 4 girls).

Each focus group followed the same semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix 1) comprising four main sections: a facilitated discussion around internet usage; a group activity followed by feedback using large sheets of paper and pens in response to the headings/prompts 'What I like doing online' and 'Online dangers'; group discussion of three short scenarios, all focusing on the sharing of inappropriate personal images; and, finally, a second group activity following by feedback using large sheets of paper and pens in response to the headings/prompts 'Internet Safety – What do you already know?' and 'Internet safety – What would make you feel safer online?'.

Following audio transcription and thematic analysis of the qualitative data, several key themes emerged from the data as follows:

Theme 1: Internet Usage Among Post-Primary Pupils

Participants were first asked to estimate their average screen time on schooldays and at weekends or during school holidays. In terms of schooldays, responses from focus group participants ranged from as little as two hours per day to eight hours per day, mostly on mobile phones but including other devices such as laptops, tablets and games consoles. When not at school, there was greater divergence with one girl estimating that she spent "way more" around " seven hours or more" (girl, MPP2), and another girl suggesting that she spent 11 hours per day online (girl, MPP3). Internet usage for some young people depended on their other weekend activities, with some girls noting that sporting activities or shopping "would put it off for a while" (girl, MPP2), while one of the boys also noted that gym, hurling, football and work commitments at the weekend reduced his available screen time:

> *"You know, I'd be working the guts of eight hours at the weekends, 10 hours or so on the weekend, so you're not on your phone all that time" (boy, MPP1).*

The young people were then asked about late night internet usage, and all admitted that this had become very common among their peer group. Responses again varied with some reporting that they didn't stay up late themselves ("So probably about half ten I turn my stuff off" – boy, MPP2), one boy explaining that his parents didn't allow him to have his phone in his bedroom at night (boy, MPP3), and another admitting that "the phone, I've got to admit, can distract you a lot from getting sleep" (boy, MPP1). Interestingly, one boy claimed that parents "have given up trying" (boy, MPP3) to prevent their children from being online at night.

Many of the young people in all groups claimed that they knew of others in their year group who did stay up as late as "half two" and "possibly the whole night" (boy, MPP1). Another boy expressed it in the following terms, referring to how some of his friends stayed online into the early hours of the morning: "School nights probably one or two, but at weekends, God knows, three or four" (boy, MPP3). The young people also noted the impact that this nocturnal internet usage had on their peers, with one girl noting that their friends who had been online late at night struggled to concentrate and "they can be kind of moody" (girl, MPP3). There was a longer discussion of this behaviour in one of the focus groups in particular, highlighting the negative impact on the young people's ability to learn in school:

> *Interviewer: "…and those people who are on it to one or two o'clock in the morning when they come into school the next day what sort of shape are they in?*
>
> *Girl: In a complete state. Yeah.*
>
> *Boy: Wrecked*
>
> *Interviewer: And do you notice that?*
>
> *Girl: Yeah you can see it in their eyes, they are all like red, and see, they're on the phone up late.*
>
> *Boy: I personally think some people now are like used to it, so they don't get affected as much so they're used to like a short period of sleep. So now that's just a normal part of their their, you know sleep less than eight hours and then come to school, have work, not as much work that you do, because they don't have like enough energy so their capabilities are limited.*
>
> *Interviewer: So do you see them looking tired, you know, yawning in class or what? What does that, what does that look like?*
>
> *Male: A lot of them have their heads down and you'd know, randomly, you'd look over and they're sitting there with their heads down and they're sleeping but it's like, it's getting more and more with like the younger ones, like obviously the year 8s and all." (MPP1)*

Theme 2: Favourite Online Activities

When asked about their favourite online activities, the responses (ideas noted on the large sheets of paper) revealed a wide range of entertainment pursuits including: social media, listening to music, gaming, shopping, watching funny videos, movies and sports and messaging friends. It was clear that being online was an overwhelmingly positive experience, as one boy explained "I like to play with my friends, get my mind out of school, just have fun" (boy, MPP2). As one boy summarised:

> *For me personally, like I'd be on the Xbox some days, X Box, see when you have free time, and you know, you have nothing to do around the house and you've nowhere to go, you go on the Xbox. And a couple of your friends would be on it. That's just, that is probably some of the best craic you'll ever have. When you're just sitting there and you're talking, and you're laughing away and you don't even realise you're playing the game. You're just, you're just talking away. I think it's just, I like it a lot. (boy, MPP1)*

Another boy recounted how he enjoyed listening to music online through a range of apps (Sound cloud, Spotify, YouTube etc.) and when asked where he would be without the internet, replied "God knows!" (boy, MPP1). There was a gender split around some of the activities, with girls being more likely to mention shopping and boys more likely to refer to gaming consoles. There was just two mentions of the educational benefits of the internet.

In the Irish Medium school pupils spoke of the availability of some materials in Irish on the CCEA website and on BBC Bitesize, and referred to news websites in Irish and watching some programmes in Irish on RTE or TG4. The young people admitted that most of their online activity was in English but, as one boy explained, "It would help if they could do more translations of already existing things into Irish" (boy, MPP3).

Theme 3: Dangers of the Internet

When asked about the dangers of the internet, once again there was a wide variety of response both in the written responses on the large sheets of paper and in the subsequent verbal feedback. Responses included the danger posed by predators, scammers, hackers, viruses, catfishing, bullying, groomers, trolls, stalkers, explicit content and 'dangerous trends'. There was particular mention of impersonation ("people pretending to be someone else… they comment on your videos" – girl, MPP1). This was followed by the discussion of the 3 sexting scenarios, which elicited very clear and appropriate responses from focus group participants, who all recommended going to report what had happened to a "trusted adult" (female, MPP1) who could be parents, teachers, friends, older brothers and sisters, counsellors or youth workers. The young people did not recount personal experiences of being asked to share inappropriate images, but when asked, the year 11 focus group participants all agreed that this was not uncommon among young people their age in their local area, and that it could impact on both boys and girls:

I think it's like a lot more common in the younger generation, I think just because of how easy it is to use social media nowadays, because back before social media it wasn't happening. (boy, MPP3)

There was discussion of influencers in two of the three groups, and in particular there was divided opinion by gender about social media influencer Andrew Tate, who was very familiar to all the young people. Several boys in two of the groups expressed positive opinions about him, as one explained:

"I think he's good. He's conservative. He's not into the whole progressive thing, and all these new ideas… there's a lot of new cults in recent years and a lot of stuff that I don't agree with. I'd say I'm more conservative." (boy, MPP3)

Without exception the girls held negative opinions about Andrew Tate, with comments such as "I think he's full of himself", "Isn't he in jail?", "He's sexist, because he says that women shouldn't get a job and should stay in the kitchen" (girls, MPP3).

Theme 4: Internet Safety

The young people were asked to write down on the large sheets of paper what they already knew about internet safety. Here, there was clear evidence of a high degree of maturity and understanding among the young people, who had received internet safety messages and training over several years, primarily from school but also from their parents. These messages related to the importance of not sharing personal information, bank details or passwords; keeping their accounts/profiles private; not talking to strangers; not clicking on unfamiliar or "sketchy" links or websites; and blocking or reporting inappropriate activity, as well as "showing respect" and "spreading positivity".

When asked what more could be done to make them feel safer online, several key suggestions emerged from the written responses. For instance, many noted the importance of raising awareness of the dangers of the internet, knowing the difference between "what's real and what's fake" (girl, MPP3), clearer warnings, faster responses by social media companies to block or remove inappropriate content, and there was almost universal agreement that more needed to be done in terms of age verification to access particular apps.

This subtheme of age verification was developed further in all three focus group discussions. All seemed to think that "it's normal" to pretend to be older to gain access to certain social media apps and websites and that "nobody's too worried" (girl, MPP1) and "it's very easy to pass through the restrictions" (boy, MPP3). In response, the young people made valuable suggestions such as "You should have to like upload like a photo or like a form of ID or something" (boy, MPP2) or "something as simple as like you have to link an email to get them to like get an account" (boy, MPP2), while another participant suggested that users should "show your ID or your birth certificate" (boy, MPP1).

There was also a level of awareness expressed in the focus groups that young people had an individual responsibility to behave responsibly and to keep themselves safe, as one girl explained: "If you want respect back, you have to give, you have to do to other people. Give it out" (girl, MPP1).

Another young person was aware that there was a strong likelihood of encountering strangers online and that this was not necessarily dangerous, however there was an awareness of the importance of maintaining privacy around their personal information:

> *You can talk to them, talk to them, you know, say online, we can play with them. You can talk to them. Don't trust them. Don't talk about personal stuff… Don't give them anything that they don't need to know. If you know what I mean, only close friends need to know that stuff (boy, MPP1).*

Participants in two of the focus groups referred to the importance of "common sense", with one boy (in line with the *digital Goldilocks hypothesis* – see section 2.2 above) suggesting that a degree of protection, wisdom and caution came with a moderate rather than low or high level of online experience:

> *Interviewer: So how have you learnt this…?*
>
> *Boy: Like personal like experiences, because the more you're online, the more you learn about it. So the safer you can be and more cautious. (MPP1)*

In response to the same question, a girl from a different focus group in another school also referred to "common sense and then you get warned all through primary school and secondary school" (girl, MPP2).

It was very clear from the focus groups that the young people had received clear and consistent internet safety messages through their schools, often through assemblies or guest speakers but also through 'Learning for Life and Work', ICT class and personal development lessons and that these year 10 and 11 pupils felt that the awareness raising needed to start with younger children, certainly as young as year 8 pupils (aged 11-12) and even younger, while the pupils in the Irish Medium school called for more materials in Irish (MPP3). There was a major focus on Safer Internet Day in all three schools. Some felt that their school was already doing all they could to teach pupils how to keep themselves safe online ("No, I think the school's very good. Like, telling you everything you need to know" girl, MPP2) while a pupil in another school stressed that "You could never have enough of that. More assemblies, more, you know, personal development lessons…especially for the younger ones" (boy, MPP1).

Finally, the young people also acknowledged the key role to be played by their parents in terms of online safety. In response to the sexting scenarios, one of the boys in particular spoke with considerable maturity about the role of parents in instilling moral values in their children, which would serve them well in such circumstances:

> ***It's also like how you're brought up, if you know what I mean, like if you're brought up right, as a boy, you wouldn't ask for anything off a girl, and I think that's, I never would, ever, because that's what you're brought up to do, that's what your parents have said to you. But just some people haven't been said that, they don't know if it's right or wrong. (boy, MPP1)***

In another group, attention also focused on the education and training necessary for some parents "that haven't grew up with technology" and who "won't know a lot about it" (boy, MPP2). In such cases, the suggestion was made that parents too need to be taught simple internet safety messages to keep themselves safe.

5.2 Interview with LGBTQI+ Young People

One focus group was held in a mainstream post-primary school with pupils in their LGBTQI+ club. The group consisted of seven students: boys, girls, and students who identified as non-binary. Participants represented a range of school year groups, from Year 9 to Upper Sixth Form. The focus group followed a semi-structured interview schedule, which can be found in Appendix 1. Following audio transcription and thematic analysis of the qualitative data, several key themes emerged from the data as follows:

Theme 1: Internet Usage Among Post-Primary Pupils Identifying as LGBTQI+

All participants in this focus group claimed that most of their waking lives were spent online:

> ***"We're teenagers. We spend most of our day on the internet." (Boy)***

"The internet is basically taking over everything" (Boy)

"Phones are basically consuming our lives nowadays" (Boy)

"If I was getting the bus to school and I forgot my phone I swear I would get off that bus and run back home… I can't be without my phone." (Girl)

The group concluded that approximately 90% of their day was spent online, including time spent at school. In their school, students were permitted to use phones during independent study classes, as well as during lunch, break times, and in between classes. Participants said their class would generally be on their phones for the majority of the school day:

"Every child just walks around school like this [mimes texting and walking] and like standing outside classes when they are just queuing, they are like [mimes swiping a phone screen] and it's always social media like nobody's ever on the news or anything." (Girl)

Participants were asked to check their screen usage in the settings on their phones. This is a setting which monitors how long phones are used during the day. The participants' phone screen time ranged from 13 to 19 hours each day, with one participant having spent over 12 hours on Twitter the previous day and another spending 10 hours on TikTok:

Interviewer: So if 19 hours of your 24 hours of a day are spent online, that means you only spend five hours a day-

Non-binary: That's the hours when I'm sleeping.

Boy: That's some school and a bit of sleep in there.

Interviewer: So basically your entire day is online?

All: Yeah.

Participants seemed unsurprised by their high screen times and suggested that this was to be expected given their ages. They hypothesised that their classmates' screen times would be similar:

Interviewer: And is this the same would you say as in your class?

Boy: Yeah.

Non-binary: My whole year group yeah.

Boy: Most of the year groups in school would probably be on their phone most of the day.

Non-binary: Over the last two days my screentime is 43 hours.

Interviewer: And is that is that normal? Like compared to your peers would that be normal?

Boy: That's normal.

The young people were quick to qualify that their phone screen time only include time spent on accounts linked using iCloud, meaning that time spent on gaming consoles such as Xbox and PlayStation were excluded from the total screen time. For instance, one participant had 14 hours on his phone screen time, but said he was regularly "up 'til like five in the morning" playing on his gaming console, which wasn't included in his screen time total. He therefore felt that his screen time was likely closer to 20 hours per day, with only 2-3 hours of sleep per night:

> ***Interviewer: So you're getting like two hours sleep a night?***
>
> ***Boy: Yeah.***
>
> ***Girl: Yeah, that's all I need for the whole day.***
>
> ***Boy: I got like one hour of sleep last night and look at me, I'm perfectly fine.***

At one point the interviewer asked the young people to distinguish between their phone and the internet: would it be possible, for instance, to use their phones and not go online? The young people felt this was unlikely: "you need the internet for everything on my phone… Online is like a common term for it" (Girl). Phones were highlighted as the most common devices for accessing the internet, but laptops, computers, tablets, and games consoles were also mentioned repeatedly.

Theme 2: Favourite Online Activities

TikTok and Twitter were mentioned as being one of the most popular online activities, as well as YouTube and other music streaming services such as Spotify and Apple Music:

> *"I use my phone a lot for music because I don't like anybody in my class… I'll use headphones but I use the music for comfort because of my social anxiety." (Boy)*

When discussing social media specifically, participants could list numerous sites they visited regularly: Reddit, Snapchat, Facebook, Yubo, Instagram, and Omegle were the most frequently mentioned after TikTok and Twitter. However, these sites were mentioned as serving different functions: some were for entertainment, some for shopping, and some for 'friend-making.' For example, Facebook was mentioned solely as a tool for shopping and businesses, because of its use of advertising and the Facebook Marketplace. Participants said the main reason they would use Facebook was for shopping. Participants felt that TikTok's primary function was entertainment, whilst Yubo and Omegle were referred to as 'friend-making sites,' because they provided the opportunity to connect with strangers online. The young people felt that they were isolated due to living in Northern Ireland, and so these platforms enabled them to befriend people their age with similar interests:

> *Girl: Due to us living here you're most likely to find people online you have in common with.*
>
> *Interviewer: Because there's more people to choose from?*
>
> *Girl: Because the tags so the way tags work you put on tags and it basically scans to see if anyone has the same tags as you.*
>
> *Boy: Basically it generates it to find people who share those likes with you and you can add those people as friends.*

Participants all claimed they had made 'real' friends over the internet, using sites like Yubo, Omegle, Twitter, and Instagram:

Girl: Most of my best friends I've met online.

Interviewer: And what's the benefit of meeting people online rather than say in your school?

Boy: I don't like people in this school.

Boy: I mean most of the kids in this school are absolute dickheads.

Girl: If we meet people online who are being dickheads you can block remove bye!

Boy: It's easier to bypass online than with a real person.

Other activities including reading books on a Kindle and gaming, using devices such as Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo Switch, and PC. However, the young people highlighted that gaming was an expensive pastime: one participant mentioned he had recently spent around £250 on virtual items in a game.

Theme 3: Benefits of the Internet

Participants discussed at length the benefits of using the internet to improve their mental health. One activity mentioned was using the internet to post 'hyper-fixation rants':

Girl: That's when you get hyper focused on something that you know and you rant about it… Like paragraphs and paragraphs and then post it on Twitter. Some people will just rant about things… They will get it as like for wanting to rant about something.

Non-Binary: With hyper-fixation it really has to be online but you can do it in person.

Interviewer: I was gonna ask about this, so what's the benefit of doing it online versus in person?

Girl: It's anonymous online and also if you do it in person it's likely to annoy someone by just like speed talking to them.

Boy: But if you say it online someone can read at their own pace.

Another benefit mentioned by the participants was the ability to have "internet comfort people" and "online safe spaces." These people and virtual spaces provided the opportunity for the young people to share their concerns and anxieties with someone who understands and can help.

Boy: I'm someone's comfort person online… It's someone you go to if you really need to talk to someone.

Boy: You can have an online safe space too.

Girl: Some people would have a comfort person and a safe person. Some people would have those as the same thing. But like a comfort person is someone who can like calm you down and a safe person is someone who you like generally feel safe with.

Although possible to have 'in-person' comfort people, participants said they preferred having an online comfort person, because there was a constant line of direct access. Participants talked about using their comfort person in different ways, from discussing their feelings to 'venting':

Boy: Sometimes my mental health goes so bad to the point where I actually feel like cursing someone out so I'll go to [person] to see if someone will start a fight with me so that I can curse them out.

Interviewer: And does that help?

Boy: It helps so much!

Boy: 'Cos sometimes you can use them to like vent your emotions.

Although usually this venting took place with a regular contact, sometimes participants would visit Omegle or Yubo to vent to a stranger. The benefits of this included anonymity, and the possibility of saying whatever they felt like without consequence or repercussion.

Interviewer: So people will actually let you vent everything and just curse them out and then at the end of the conversation is that it you never speak to them again?

Boy: You might.

Girl: You can exchange details.

Boy: Like other social medias and what not.

Interviewer: But could it be some randomer pretending to be someone that's really helpful and then you exchange?

Boy: Yeah that's how it can go sometimes.

Theme 4: Dangers of the Internet

Following from the conversation about befriending strangers online as 'comfort people,' participants discussed the general dangers associated with the internet. They were aware that befriending strangers online could be potentially dangerous and mentioned that one of the issues with using 'friending sites' was the potential for strangers to send unsolicited pictures.

> *Non-binary: On Omegle you can choose like a video option or a text option and me and my mate were messing about when on the video option but it was literally penises out everywhere.*
>
> *Interviewer: What do you do in that situation?*
>
> *Boy: You just hit skip.*
>
> *Interviewer: But does that mean they get matched with somebody else?*
>
> *All: Yeah.*
>
> *Boy: So it just keeps going on an endless loop. It's horrible.*
>
> *Girl: And you can get the same person multiple times.*

Participants were also nervous about not knowing who the person on the other end of the screen was but accepted this as an unavoidable risk.

> *Boy: Sometimes you can get predators online. You can get people acting. It's called catfishing, and it happens.*
>
> *Girl: But then most of my best friends I've met on Omegle.*
>
> *Girl: A lot of my friends I've met on TikTok.*
>
> *Boy: If you find something good, good. If you find something bad-*
>
> *Boy: Run away!*

Despite this risk, half the participants in the group had met up in person with a stranger they had met online. They mentioned a number of criteria they would require the stranger to meet in order to minimise the danger:

Boy: If you're ever going to meet up with them, that's why you want to get confirmation that they are who they say they are.

Interviewer: What would that look like?

Girl: A video call.

Boy: ID if they're old enough.

Boy: Like, putting their hand up to their face if it's a video call so you know it's them in real-time.

Girl: Or like get them to send a photo or something like with something that's difficult to find on google.

Girl: If I get sent someone's face like from Twitter or something I'll like just photo search to see it's not something from google.

The participants highlighted several other online risks they considered to be more dangerous than befriending strangers on the internet. Twitter was frequently highlighted as being the vessel used for online dangers:

Boy: Don't go to the bad side of Twitter.

Interviewer: There's a bad side of Twitter?

Boy: Yeah, you don't want to go there.

Non-Binary: The bad side of Twitter is full of racism, homophobia, offensive stuff and oh aye the adult content.

Boy: It is extreme adult content.

Interviewer: Do you guys all know about the bad side of Twitter?

All: Yeah!

Participants advised avoiding content with particular tags in order to bypass Twitter's 'bad side.' They mentioned 'self-harm,' 'suicide,' and 'animal abuse' tags specifically:

Girl: Don't click on a suicide tag.

Boy: People do what you call trigger warnings online.

Girl: In the summer I came across a post on my Twitter feed with someone's self-harm cuts and I had a panic attack.

Boy: This is all out there. This is people, there are people like this on the internet.

Participants also highlighted Twitter as being a site prone to hosting 'Fake news,' and suggested young people needed to ensure they 'fact checked' information they read online. They also claimed to 'smash report' fake news when it appeared in their newsfeed, which is where posts are reported in bulk as soon as they are uploaded with the intention of trying to force it to be removed by the site managers.

Although smash reporting could be used in a beneficial capacity, participants said it was sometimes used as a tool by internet 'trolls' to cause havoc online: by mass reporting someone's account, they could cause a person's profile to be removed without reason. 'Trolls,' according to this focus group, are people who 'just want to ruin stuff.' Participants claimed trolling was a form of online bullying, with 'random people who feel like making jokes to make your life hell.' 'Trolling' ranged from harmless humour to aggressive bullying:

Boy: There are subsections of trolling. There's funny trolling and then there's like racist and homophobic trolling.

Boy: There are probably thousands out there.

Girl: And transphobic stuff. And then there's also trolls about mental health as well.

Boy: I've been the target for the mental health one. I've gotten told to slit my wrists before.

Girl: I've been told to kill myself.

Girl: I've been called the N word.

Boy: A lot of times that happens online yeah.

Often trolls acted anonymously, using 'smurf' or 'fake' accounts to ensure they couldn't be traced. The young people felt this is where the trolls' power came from: "it makes them feel powerful because they can be anonymous when they're online."

Despite the dangers associated with the internet, all participants felt that the benefits of the internet outweighed the risks. One participant summarised that you needed to 'put up with' the 'bad side' of the internet in order to benefit from its 'good side':

> ***"The world online is a great, amazing place to be and also it's a hell hole. At the same time." (Boy)***

Theme 5: Internet Safety

A scenario was presented to the focus group in which a young person has sent an explicit picture to her boyfriend, who subsequently uploads the picture to snapchat after they breakup. The group had heard of similar instances occurring in their school, and said it was the police's responsibility to get involved if photos are uploaded without consent, and the school's responsibility to confiscate the phone immediately if it happened on school property. One participant said a boy in his class had to leave his phone in the office every day because he had been accused of sending explicit pictures of girls over Facebook Messenger without their consent. Participants collectively condemned the boy's alleged behaviour, and were clear that such actions were 'criminal', 'illegal,' and 'a form of harassment.' When asked where they learnt about online safety, participants' responses were vague:

Boy: See in town like sometimes they have these like wee pop up stands - it's like in Castlecourt, Victoria Square, anywhere. Basically, they just have a wee pop up stands - you get free stuff and also talk to people.

Boy: I think I seen an advert online.

Boy: Childline one like they have like say Twitter Instagram and stuff like that – and they will tell you corporations like that will go contact such and such if such and such happens.

Finally, participants were asked if there were any changes which could be made to make them feel safer online. All participants said that social media platforms' reporting processes needed to be more effective:

Boy: At the moment if you report something it's not necessarily a person reviewing it, it might be an AI or a bot or something so if you don't use the right key terms or whatever then it won't do anything.

Girl: You'd also need an extreme amount of evidence.

Boy: Yeah the people in charge of the people in charge of reports and most social medias just act like they don't care. They just don't care.

Boy: Unless you're underage. Then they ban you in 2.5 seconds.

Participants said that most social media sites had age restrictions, usually around 13 years or above. Although all participants said they had fabricated their date of birth at least once in order to bypass age verification, they generally felt that age restrictions were fair. However, participants were concerned that you were more likely to be banned from social medias for being underage than for being a troll or a bully. Participants suggested that having active people reviewing posts rather than robots would mean that bullying and trolling are identified and banned faster, making the internet safer for others. They also suggested that education about online safety and online harm could be improved, and argued that they likely knew more about the dangers of the internet because they were part of the LGBTQI+ community:

> *Interviewer: And why is it you would know more?*
>
> *Girl: Well we're more antisocial but we're like more prone to it, to the harm because we're part of this community.*
>
> *Boy: There's a lot of hate. There's a lot of people who hate on us.*
>
> *Interviewer: Why?*
>
> *Boy: Because we're part of the LGBT community.*

5.3 Interview with Youth Group

One focus group was held with a youth group operating within a disadvantaged community in West Belfast. The focus group consisted of females only (n=12) aged between 12-17 years. As per all focus groups, this discussion followed the same semi-structured format (see Appendix 1). Considering the large size and lively dynamic of this focus group, the facilitator kept to discussion-based activity, rather than using any of the arts-based stimulators for discussion.

Following audio transcription and thematic analysis of the qualitative data, several key themes emerged from the data as follows:

Theme 1: Internet Usage

When asked about their internet usage, daily duration ranged from five hours per day to 15 hours per day or, as one participant stated, they spend *"all day every day"* using the internet. Some participants highlighted that this included their time at school and that they used the internet *"all day in school"* and *"everywhere"*. In terms of the most popular apps used by the group, there was consensus that Snapchat was the most popular online app amongst the group.

Theme 2: Online Dangers

When discussing the dangers that the participants perceive online, much of the conversation centred around unsolicited and unwanted communications from unknown individuals, who the participants categorised as "*Creeps*", "*Paedos*" or as "*catfish*(ers)", i.e., those portraying a false identity. Some examples of such unsolicited interactions include:

> *"People ask to be my sugar daddy but then I just tell them I'm a lesbian and then they go away" (YG).*

> *"When an Indian man FaceTimes you….Yeah there's this wee man and he like adds all of us and we all don't know who he is….we don't know who it is … the next minute we're all in one big group chat with him he's trying to Facetime us!"(YG)*

> *"Grown men come onto your Tik Tok – remember that – there's loads of paedos"* (YG).

Whilst one participant admitted that *"it's so scary"*, on the whole, the participants were quite blasé regarding these encounters, discussing these interactions as almost normalised-type activity. Additional dangers noted by the participants included being asked to send private content and the prevalence of dangerous or threatening challenges:

> *"People would like text them and they would like get their location and all and then be like do this or I'm going to go to your house...get people to carve… into their arm" (YG).*

> *"Momo...asking to send private stuff"(YG).*

Online bullying was also highlighted as a concern, whereby the participants felt that there are things people are willing to say online that they wouldn't be prepared to say face-to-face:

> *"See face-to-face? Like see face-to-face they won't say nothing face to face but they will all say behind the screen" (YG).*

When asked what they have done or would do when faced with a potential danger online, the participants rehearsed a range of potential options, such as: "*tell a trusted adult or guardian"; "see it report it block it"; "see it hear it stop it."* With regards to confiding in someone, the participants stated that they would talk to a friend, a sibling or their youth worker if a dangerous encounter occurred online.

The discussion regarding online dangers was further supplemented by a "sexting scenario", whereby "Ciara" has been asked by "Ben" to send an intimate photo. The participants agreed that this is something that they are aware of happening quite a lot as one participant put it, it's because *"wee boys in this generation are so porned out"*. The participants agreed that Ciara should tell Ben *"no and to piss off"*. They also clarified that *"Ben doesn't deserve Ciara."*

In terms of mitigating such dangers online, the young people provided several suggestions, such as: the applications of *"age restrictions"*; further education regarding the dangers online *("people need to get taught it more….(at)school")*; telling adults when something dangerous happens; *"stay(ing) off social media"*; publicly posting to social media any inappropriate requests, as a "name and shame" type technique *("screenshot what he says, whack it up on your story and then everybody can see); "turn your location off";* and finally, the recommendation to "*keep accounts private*"

Theme 3: Benefits of Online

Finally, the discussion ended with some reflections on what they young people find beneficial about using the internet. A range of different beneficial factors were raised, such as: *"it calms you down"; "being famous making money"; "I use it to find stuff out"; "Stalk yer mates…stalk your boyfriend. Stalk his new bird"; "posting things about like your family and stuff like birthdays";* and *"having fun with your friends".*

5.4 Special School (SS) Focus Group

Two focus groups were held in one post-primary special school, one with KS3 pupils (SSY, n=5), the other with KS4 pupils (SSO, n=4). The groups, as is reflective of the composition of pupil enrolment, were mainly male with one female in the older group.

The groups took part in a short group interview which mostly followed the same themes as those in mainstream secondary focus groups in terms of the questions asked (see Appendix 1). There were however no follow-up group written activities, nor participation in the more complex scenarios that had taken place with the mainstream groups, since it was agreed that these activities would have been too challenging for the pupils in terms of cognitive ability and levels of literacy.

The school provided a senior member of staff to sit in with the researchers and she was at liberty to help support the asking of questions in language that was helpful to the pupils. In addition, she had provided visual prompts to help with the communication difficulties that presented in the children in the group. One non-verbal child chose to communicate their answers using an iPad (boy, SSO).

Following audio transcriptions and thematic analysis of the qualitative data, several key themes emerged from the data as follows:

Theme 1: Internet Usage Amongst the Special School Pupils

Participants were first asked to choose which device they liked to use best from the pictures on the table. Responses from the groups showed that four pupils had access to a phone (2 boys, SSO; 2 boys SSY), one had access to a computer (1 girl, SSO) and two had access to a tablet (2 boys, SSO). In the younger group, three had consoles: two had an X-box (2 boys, SSY), while one had a Nintendo Switch (1 boy, SSY).

In response to questions around what activities the pupils engage in on their devices, once again visual prompts in the form of familiar logos were present on the table. The responses revealed a wide range of entertainment pursuits with apps for music (including Spotify), YouTube and Netflix as well as a variety of social media apps (Instagram, Snapchat, Tik Tok). One participant (boy, SSY) who has his own phone stated:

> *'I have pretty much everything on this list I think. Yep…except for whatever that is BeReal.'*

Nonetheless, this participant ended their interview by demonstrating quite a degree of knowledge about aspects of BeReal:

> *"You gotta notification comes up when you're in the shower you have to get off the shower and fill out what you're doing. It's not right. That's very, very inappropriate."*

However, none of the participants reported posting material themselves. Several participants indicated that they played games including Minecraft, Fifa and Fortnite with one (boy, SSY) signalling that they played Assassin's Creed. One participant (boy, SSY) used the device for research.

> *"I like playing on the iPad researching on it."*

Theme 2: Time Spent on the Internet

Participants were asked to talk about when they spend time on their devices to enable the researchers to have a sense of understanding of how much time they spend online. This method was chosen to mitigate the confusion that may occur because of the potential lack of understanding of the concept of 'time'. Pupils indicated that they did not use their devices in school but some did use them on the (often lengthy) bus journey to and from school. Some stated that they could be on at any time with others differentiating certain times of the day.

> *'I would mostly do the evening or night. I wouldn't really do morning much, not a morning person'* (boy, SSY)

Using the visual prompts, all the participants indicated that they spend time at the weekends. The use of symbols (+/-) enabled participants to indicate whether they felt more time was spent at the weekend as opposed to after school. In agreement with fellow pupils, one participant said.

> *'Just I get more time at the weekend.'* (boy, SSY)

Participants in the younger group discussed their parents and compared the time they spend on their phones:

Interviewer: 'Do you think you spend more time, more time online than your mum and dad or less time? Online?

Boy: I think it's the same as my mum and dad because most of the time my dad or my mum is on their phones on social media. So, I figured roughly the same.'

Theme 3: Internet Safety

This focus group took place during the weeks around *Safer Internet Day 2023* and so in this section of questions the researcher linked this to asking the groups about what they would do if 'something really nasty happens' when the participants are online. In both groups, it was obvious that the preventative curricular work done by staff was remembered by most of the pupils. Participants were able to acknowledge what would constitute something nasty from a given list including a stranger asking to meet them, someone sending a message or photograph, or asking for one in return. Animated responses included:

'For me I will do drastic action, block him, report him and just ignore it.' (boy, SSY)

One participant's comments (boy, SSO) were the closest to suggesting an understanding of the *Report Remove* tool which may have been referred to in information sessions.

'Well, you would go out and to the thing and say and just say just report, just report.'

Another boy (SSY) also showed a high level of understanding of how to block a potential aggressor: *'Yeah I know what to do it you just go into profile, and it will agree an option if there's to block it.'*

However, most participants responded that they would report to their parents or if on the bus, to the driver or escort: *'Mostly escorts could do the stuff than bus drivers.'*

As vulnerable children, it is interesting to note who is informing their online safety practices. In the main, participants reported that their knowledge came from school, several citing school assemblies.

Interviewer: 'Do your parents talk to you about it at home? Does Mummy and Daddy ever tell you how to keep safe?

Boy: No.

Boy: It was mostly our teachers. It's mostly our teachers and the school.'

The issue of modelling and supervision by parents was raised in the younger group of participants. For two of the participants, parental involvement was seen and reported as being something that happened when they were younger but had now changed as they had become more responsible and *'when we started to know about social media stuff'* (boy, SSY), as the following two comments illustrate:

'And now we are in our teens. So that's why we stop getting our notifications from our parents about this safety." (boy, SSY)

'My parents trust me, so they're just happy with what I'm doing.' (boy, SSY)

Theme 4: More Help to Stay Safe Online

The participants were asked finally 'what more can we do to help you to stay safe online?' In response one said, *"I wish that I would just know more… about the internet, I think."* Another commented, *"Never go on it."* This participant (boy, SSO) had previously referred to time spent enjoying the highlights of his favourite football team on YouTube, indicating that whilst participants enjoy aspects of online activity, there is an awareness of danger too.

Participants in the younger age group had a sobering message for their parents.

Interviewer: 'How do we get better at this is. Is there anything? Do you think we could do better? As {name of the school} here, is there anything else that we could do, that your parents could do to help you or you could do?

Boy: Tell them, tell them more what we're doing.

Interviewer: Tell your parents?

Boy: Yeah, what we're, what we're doing more.'

5.5. Mainstream Primary (MP) Focus Groups

Two focus groups were held in mainstream primary schools one with pupils in Key Stage 1 (MP1), and one with pupils in Key Stage 2 (MP2). Each focus group comprised a mixture of boys and girls from different age groups, with 6 participants in each group.

Both focus groups followed the same semi-structured interview schedule, consisting of four main sections (see Appendix 2). First, the children were invited to collaborate on a group activity, using large sheets of paper and pens to document their response to the prompt 'What I like doing online.' Next, they took part in a facilitated discussion around internet usage, such as the amount of time spent online and the devices used. Third, the children explored a short scenario focusing on online bullying. Finally, they participated in another group activity followed by feedback using large sheets of paper and pens in response to the prompts 'What do you already know about online safety' and 'what would help you to feel safer online?'

Following audio transcription and thematic analysis of the qualitative data, four key themes emerged from the data: Internet usage among primary pupils; favourite online activities; dangers of the internet; and internet safety.

Theme 1: Internet Usage Among Primary Pupils

Participants were first asked to estimate their average screen time. The responses from focus group participants ranged from half an hour per day to 6 hours per day, with most responses averaging an hour in Key Stage 1 and three hours in Key Stage 2. Participants suggested that everyone in their school was online at least once per day but would spend longer online at the weekend. They revealed that they rarely used the internet during school hours, and rarely needed to use the internet for homework.

When asked how they got online, participants said they were most likely to use a phone. Participants noted that everyone in their class had a phone, and some children had more than one; one boy (MP1) claimed he had "three phones," so that he had a "back-up" in case one phone lost battery life. The participants felt this was typical for children in their context:

> *Interviewer: "Do you think most kids in your class have their own phones?"*
>
> *Girl: "Yeah unless they're poor." (MP1)*

There were times where the young people had their access to the internet removed, usually in response to "cheeky language" or lack of care given to their devices:

> *"She got her phone taken off her… [Her mum] took it away because she got angry and she threw it" (girl, MP1)*
>
> *"My brothers close to getting his iPhone [taken away]… Cos of his cheeky language" (boy, MP1)*

Although all children were online at least once per day and all participants had their own devices to access the internet, one focus group (MP2) critiqued children in the class who spent "all day" online:

> *Boy: [She] never comes outside no more.*
>
> *Boy: She's always online.*

Participants felt device usage should be limited, but disagreed on how this should look in practice; some children suggested only being allowed to use devices at a certain time of day such as not before bedtime, whereas others argued they should be allowed to use devices at any time but only for a limited timeframe.

Theme 2: Favourite Online Activities

When asked how they spent their time online, the children in Key Stage 1 all admitted that gaming and watching online videos was their primary use of the internet. The only exception to this was presented by a boy (MP1) who revealed he also went online to see photos of his family. In terms of the type of gaming, participants listed Fortnite, Call of Duty, Minecraft, Roblox and FIFA as being particular favourites. Notably, two of these games have age ratings deeming them unsuitable to be played by primary-age children.

Participants in Key Stage 2 presented a variety of online activities, including Google Classroom, Netflix, guitar lessons on Garageband, shopping on Amazon Prime, TikTok, internet searches on Yahoo and Google, Spotify, and gaming. All participants across both focus groups said that the online experience was essential for gameplay; no participants played games on their own. However, playing with their friends online could include playing in the same room. One girl said she would often play games with her friends on their separate devices while all sitting in the same room, and another summarised she would play with other children whilst at her sister's hocky match:

> *"Sometimes I bring my phone when I go to my sister's hockey match if I get bored and then there's always kids there so my friends go and we're all friends on Roblox so we can sit and play games on our phones" (Girl, MP1)*

Theme 3: Dangers of the Internet

All participants were aware of the dangers associated with befriending strangers online. The older group of children used specific terms such as "catfishing," whereas the younger group tended to use general phrases like "random people" and "people you don't know." Both groups talked at length about the various personal details that should be kept private when online. In particular, they mentioned the importance of withholding your address, your phone number, and passwords. To protect themselves, the children said they refrained from adding or accepting invitations from strangers on games.

> *Interviewer: Why might you not want to have somebody on [the game] that you don't know?*
>
> *Boy: In case they ask you where are you where you live*
>
> *Boy: And says where's your what's your number and stuff*
>
> *Boy: They can be dangerous they can be like if you tell them where you live they can come over and like do some bad stuff if you tell them personal stuff lie*
>
> *Boy: And like say you have like if you told them where you keep your money they can go take your money off you*

Scammers and hackers were mentioned frequently as an online danger, but whilst the older group understood that scams could involve real money, the younger group solely assumed it to be a risk regarding virtual possessions:

> *"Scammers are basically like somebody that wants your stuff they want you to give them your stuff" (Girl, MP1)*

> *"They want you to give them your numbers and then they take every single thing in the game and you don't have it" (Boy, MP1)*

> *"[My friend] had like a really rare thing in this game right? And then someone able like someone was able to like control his game and then he died because of it like on the game." (Girl, MP1)*

Participants were also concerned about 'hackers'; specifically, people hacking into their games so that they could hear them. They were worried about people 'spying' on them through their phone's microphone and camera.

Both groups were presented with a scenario about a boy being bullied via social media. The older group of children had heard about similar instances happening with peers in their class, and could offer insights and practical solutions:

> *"That's called cyberbullying when people bully you online… I would just block them." (Girl, MP2)*

> *"He should tell an adult." (Girl, MP2)*

> *"Block and report." (Boy, MP2)*

> *"It happened to my cousin… I said to just leave the app and he deleted it… It was really hurting him and he was sad." (Girl, MP2)*

The younger group of children had no experience with online bullying, and their contributions to the bullying scenario were limited:

> *"Bullying is people making fun of people." (Boy, MP1)*

> *"Just delete them if they're mean." (Girl, MP1)*

> *"I heard about online bullying from Dork Diaries which is a book I read… I don't really remember what it is." (Boy, MP1)*

Another danger mentioned frequently during the Key Stage 2 focus group was children lying about their age to "get onto apps." The group mentioned sites like TikTok and certain games where age restrictions are in place, and said it was dangerous to lie about your age in order to create an account on the site. However, at least half of the children in the focus group confessed to having a fake age on their account. This group were also concerned about "bad language" in games, and suggested websites used tighter controls to filter offensive language in games such as Roblox, where currently the language filter can be turned off.

Theme 4: Internet Safety

When asked who is responsible for keeping them safe online, the participants all responded with various family members: parents, grandparents, and siblings. The children provided a series of examples of times when their family would safeguard their online activities:

> *"If I want to watch a video my dad watches it first before I can or he watches it with me." (Girl, MP1)*
>
> *"My dad has to check the games I want before I download it." (Girl, MP2)*
>
> *"When I was playing a game I was trying to add someone but I accidentally added someone else and I asked my dad to delete the thing." (Girl, MP1)*

Participants in Key Stage 2 had further advice on how to stay safe online, ranging from making strong passwords, keeping accounts private, avoiding apps with a higher age limit, and not responding to strangers. If they ran into an issue online, the children were quick to recommend reporting the problem, but were unsure about the effectiveness of such a strategy:

> *Interviewer: "And if you report, where does it go?*
>
> *Boy: It probably goes to the people who own TikTok*
>
> *Interviewer: And does anything happen with that?*
>
> *Boy: No, they just laugh and don't do anything about it."*

5.6 Roma Traveller Primary School (RTPS) Focus Group

One focus group was held with primary school aged children from the Roma Traveller community (RTPS). The focus group consisted of two children (one boy and one girl) from a Key Stage 2 class. As per all focus groups, this discussion followed the same semi-structured format (see Appendix 2). Drawing activities were used to supplement the focus group and stimulate ideas and discussion.

Following audio transcription and thematic analysis of the qualitative data, three key themes emerged from the data as follows:

Theme 1: Internet Usage

The children interviewed discussed a range of different types of ways in which they use the internet. Most common were the use of video type apps, specifically "*YouTube*" and *"Tik Tok"*, as well as *"Snapchat"* and gaming platforms, e.g., "*Roblox" and "FIFO"*. The latter was described as:

> *"So, it's basically a shooting game. You have you can talk to people, I guess you can wear outfits. You can get new stuff for coins and diamonds" (boy, RTPS).*

With regard to how they access the internet, a range of different devices were highlighted:

> *"I think most people have phones" (boy, RTPS).*

> *"I have iPads" (girl, RTPS).*

> *"I use a laptop" (boy, RTPS).*

Both participants referred to some level of parental monitoring of their online activity. Additionally, the amount of time spent online tended to vary depending on whether it was a school day or the weekend. The female participant reported that during the week they would spend "*like an hour…after school" (girl, RTPS)*, whereas at the weekend, it is more like "*three hours" (girl, RTPS)*. The boy agreed:

> *"Um, I'm used to an hour like her. And when I get my phone taken, I just draw and probably go outside play catch with my friends" (boy, RTPS).*

Theme 2: Online Dangers

Both participants appeared to be very aware of the potential dangers existing online. For example, they were aware of the dangers of adding/friending strangers on apps, such as TikTok:

"You can add other people but it's bad…. Because they could be like, older and …. I dunno, tried to kidnap you my to like meet up and say that they're young" (boy, RTFG).

"Yeah. It's on TikTok. There was a girl like, show me your face and she showed her face, and it was an old man" (boy, RTFG).

"Strangers try to talk to you and say bad things" (girl, RTPS)

Negative online, bullying-type behaviours were also identified. For example, one of the participants highlighted that:

"Yeah, that happened to me a lot…some random people just text me then I just block them…I feel not that worried about it but…. they are probably just like playing around in are more they just don't like me" (boy, RTPS).

Exposure to inappropriate and traumatic content was also highlighted amongst the participants, whereby they reported watching or hearing about instances online involving violence. For example, one reported a TikTok video whereby people *"killed two kittens" (boy, RTPS)*. Another involved a female stabbing victim:

"They can kill you - because there was a girl online. They give this and she had an online boyfriend. They didn't see he didn't see her face yet. And they and she gave their location to her because they her parents were away. When they came to her house it was like three guys and started stabbing her… he got the electric chair" (boy, RTPS).

Theme 3: Mitigating Dangers and Staying Safe Online

With regards to staying safe online and mitigating the perceived dangers, there were a range of different suggestions from the children. For example, by maintaining some level of anonymity:

"Some people on TikTok show their face, they dance but me personally I only do edits. Probably just show some pictures like of Ronaldo or my favourite rappers, stuff like that" (boy, RTPS).

"You can record your own stuff. But I don't show my face on it" (girl, RTPS).

"I have a private account" (girl, RTPS).

Avoiding strangers online was also addressed:

"Not add anyone that you don't know…. not accept texts or files or emails, that you from people you don't know" (boy, RTPS).

If exposed to dangerous content or strangers online, the participants suggested that they would not engage and would tell their parents and/or block them.

> *"I'd blocked them" (boy, RTPS).*

> *"Tell my parents" (girl, RTPS).*

Similarly, when presented with a fictitious scenario, whereby "Billy" received nasty Snapchat messages, the children suggested that Billy should:

> *"Block them. Or tell an adult" (girl, RTPS).*

And finally, in terms of people who help keep them safe online, the children highlighted some of the information they receive at school, as well as the support and safeguarding role that their families play:

> *"(Information received at school): Like to stay away from strange, strangers. And to not give out your personal information" (boy, RTPS).*

> *"(Who keeps you safe online?): My sister and my mummy and daddy" (girl, RTPS).*

> *"Parents…. they probably just like, if it's something very dangerous they will probably call the Police" (boy, RTPS).*

5.7 Interviews with Parents/Carers

Two focus groups were held with parents/Carers, one in-person with a group of primary school parents (P) and one online with a group of secondary/post-primary school parents (PP). The post-primary focus group comprised 5 mothers and 1 father and was held after school hours. The primary group comprised 5 mothers and was held during school hours in the school which their children attended. The children of the secondary parents attended a range of Integrated (n=1), Grammar (n=5) and non-selective/high schools (n=1). Of these, 2 were single sex and 6 were co-educational. Parents were invited to attend, but this mainly female profile is in line with other research of this kind, which finds fathers difficult to recruit.

Each focus group followed the same semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix 3) comprising three main sections: Children's online activities, Children's online harm and Children's online safety. Following audio transcription and thematic analysis of the qualitative data, several key themes emerged from the data as follows.

Theme 1: Benefits of Being Online

Participants were first asked about the benefits of children having access to the internet. Responses varied from being able to research, keeping in touch with family and learning and developing new skills. *"One of my children loves to use the internet to put little songs on and make up fun little dances or little skits and things."(P)* Another stated, *"He's allowed to, he likes to make up videos for his drone…he'll look at other people's YouTube clips of how they've put stuff together."(P)*

Participants also expressed the affective benefits. One participant explained how in using the internet to learn new languages, *"it meets their reward system because it's all the right noises"(P)*. Another participant noted, *"In some ways in the past, we've used it to prepare our children for maybe for the next stage or whatever is coming ahead of them," (P)* going on to mention going on a trip, or an up-coming event and helping with some of the anxieties of something uncertain in the future, *"that can be a benefit at times for them"(P).*

The post-primary parents also referred to research and learning and talked about the benefits of connecting with friends and being online during Covid-19. One father of an only child stated, *"I think it sort of reduced that isolation in learning, you know, that she was able regularly to still link in with her peers at school every day."* Another parent highlighted skills that can be acquired whilst researching, *"I think that in itself can help them develop a skill set really sort of with the management. It's selection of information." (PP)* The same parent highlighted the benefits of the amount of research material now available to every child, as in the past only some had access to specialised books like encyclopaedias *"It speeds up the process as well and… given them access to a lot more than they ever would have done"(PP).*

Theme 2: Amount of Time Spent Online

Parents were asked questions around how long their child spent on online activities and how much time they felt their child spent in relation to others their age. As anticipated, responses varied according to the questions posed around time spent on different activities and this was often related to age. Post-primary parents referred to opportunities for their child to be online as they travelled to school and at school, in addition to the time they allowed them to be online at home. *"I would say [name of child] is on a lot from she gets on the school bus in the morning they're recording themselves doing these TikTok dances and that runs right through to bedtime." (PP)*

Participants' responses showed intentionality of thought in the time they allowed their children to spend from, *"I limit it to an hour a day…and it takes a lot of energy to do that," (PP)* to *"We don't limit the use of the internet because I feel that when you put a control on something, then you're making an example of it."(P)*

Parents were asked if they felt that the amount of time that their children spent online was the same as others of their age. Whilst most felt that it was on a par, one respondent's comments summed up the overall feelings of both groups, that whatever limitation they placed, other children spent more time and as a result put their children

under pressure. *"When I lift the phone in the morning, at seven o'clock, there's 26 snapchats, at seven o'clock already … it's already buzzing, going, it's seven o'clock!"(PP)*

Interestingly, two mothers of boys (PP) pointed to the mitigating effects of being involved in playing sports, as a natural encouragement to spending less time online. Furthermore, this interest also seemed to influence the choice of two of these boys to use their time online for catching up with sporting fixtures as opposed to being on social media. The primary parents also remarked that time spent on family time or when friends came to visit reduced the desire to be online, at this stage in their lives at least.

Theme 3: Relationships and Meaningful Connections

Parents of the secondary children highlighted the subtle effects of spending time online on meaningful relationships. One parent presented a pseudo-physiological analogy, *"But I do feel like that it's an extension of their hand."(PP)* while another parent was critical of the value of online connections:

> *"It's that idea I think of zoning in and connecting, or trying to connect with people… but in fact, you're zoning out, you're zoning out of the present, you're zoning out of what's happening around you…at the same time really, how kind of valuable are those connections?" (PP)*

This was contrasted in the primary group by one parent whose child connects meaningfully whilst playing online with her grandparents.

Theme 4: Children and Young People's Online Harm

In response to questions around online harm, several parents relayed experiences of their children coming to harm online, through what is able to be seen, often despite their careful precautions. One primary parent highlighted an incident on YouTube where inappropriate adult material suddenly appeared in the middle of a much-loved children's programme. A second parent talked of their child sending an inappropriate picture, which required a lot of effort to rectify (PP).

Another parent shared what happened to their daughter, *"My 16 year old, when she was 13, there was an issue on WhatsApp…one of the children's phones it seems to have gotten hacked…. and this person actually started video calling all the girls in the chat and showing themselves to the group."(PP)* This of course required PSNI intervention.

Parents displayed a sense of fear focused around two main areas.

Firstly, parents expressed concern regarding the nature of the information available to children who are not ready for it:

"She's ten, she doesn't understand what she puts out there."(P)

"The amount of information out there is vast, and it's so much, and they don't have that filter, they don't know what they are reading…and it's just so big that this to me is scary."(PP)

"It's, it's, it's terrifying."(P)

Secondly, the permanency of what has been seen or experienced was expressed as a major concern for many of the parents in the focus groups:

"It's that irreversible nature of it is my biggest concern." (P)

"They cannot unsee it, or unknow what they've been told." (P)

"She doesn't understand that once it's there, it's there for ever." (P)

"Once it's out there, once it's seen, once it's done, you can't undo it."(P)

"If my child sees something that's not appropriate they can't erase that from them as much as you can delete it from the screen. They can't delete it from their mind."(P)

Theme 5: Parental Anxiety Caused by an Unwelcome Presence in their Home

This theme emerged towards the start and developed throughout the course of the interviews, weaving its way through different answers. Parents universally talked in terms of an unwelcome presence in their home and the impact on time with family and quality of relationships within the family, resulting from the time that their children spent online. One parent stated:

"They come home from school, but they bring… those relationships home with them on the phone, at an age when historically they weren't able to, and they come home to that family time." (P)

The participants' interjections and nods during the following statement, highlighted the consensus of anxiety.

"Like, it is that idea of inviting strangers into your, your home."(P)

Participants indicated how giving their children access to online provision is counter to their intuitive desire to keep their children safe:

"And that really safe space, that we're now exposing our children, if they have an ability to stay in contact with friends outside of school, that world is entering into our homes, and it can be quite hidden in the device." (P)

Another participant summed up this dichotomy of giving something so potentially harmful as a gift to their child stating:

> *"if it was something else that was addictive, we would run a million miles from it, but it seems with technology that we have…{adding with resignation} but it can still be good."(P)*

It seems that while parents may wish not to expose their child to technology (*"I would quite happily give technology up in a heartbeat"(P))* there is a realisation that it cannot and even should not be avoided.

Furthermore, there was a sense of unhappiness, yet resignation and feeling responsible for the parenting choices in both groups of parents. *"I have to say I'm sort of feeling like a very bad mum here." (PP)* This was echoed in the primary group, *"Okay, I sound like the worst."(P)* Some of this was around the confrontation that it brings:

> *"I'm trying to connect with her…, have a conversation…we're in a space, I'm here, you're here, let's use this opportunity…It's one of those things, you're fighting all the time." (PP)*

For some parents, there was an unspoken feeling that in denying their child, they would become out of step with other parents. One mum talked about putting the *Snapchat* app on her daughter's phone:

> ***"It's the most horrible experience…and you know I wish I'd never put it on her phone…But I bowed to peer pressure… when you see what the kids can look at, it's just horrendous, you think I'm freely giving this to my child."(P)***

One parent quoted information that they had received during a *"Keeping your child safe online"* information course and advised *"do not ban your child from everything, talk to your child because as soon as your child goes outside the gate, and wee Jimmy has a phone, your child will stand beside wee Jimmy and do everything that you said not to do."(P)*

Theme 6: Parents' Online Habits in Response to their Child's

Participants reported a change in their online habits in response to their child's online activities. They talked about adding themselves onto sites, which otherwise would have had no interest for them, to enable them to understand what their child was doing and talking about. The difficulty of the time needed to do this was not just in terms of monitoring their child's activity, but in having to learn things and in feeling insecure and exposed as they did so.

> *"I can go with my limited knowledge, but they can be clever."(P)*

> *"It's also not second nature to us, as we were born into an era when there wasn't that technology." (P).*

One parent admitted to feeling, *"Ill-equipped in some ways, with time and the understanding,"* adding something raised in both groups, *"because it changes so quickly."(PP)* Parents in the primary group supported the view of one parent who seemed to sum up their frustrations in stating:

> *"I wish that I could clone their devices. Can I? Like?"(P)*

> *"What's real time you know and what they can access because they can… delete things."(P)*

Theme 7: Responsibility for Children's Online Safety

The consensus in both groups was that online safety was the responsibility of several stakeholders: parents, schools and ultimately, government. Whilst the excellent work of schools in providing training for online safety was mentioned, parents in the secondary school group expressed their fears around their children being allowed to bring their phones to school and even being asked to use them during class for surveys or information retrieval:

> *"It's a mixed message, you know, because then the phones are on and they're sneaking, sneaking messages and snapchats to each other during class."(PP)*

The role of parent modelling and responsiveness was also highlighted *"I think it's just about the balance for me...it's just about keeping the communication lines open and keeping talking and being aware of what is right and wrong."(PP)*

Collective responsibility was discussed and raised by a parent whose friends' like-minded rules for their children helped to reinforce good practice with her children. The issue of trust was threaded through both interviews:

> *"We have a very good bond, but that's a bond we started when she was very little….so let's keep building this." (P)*

Ultimately, the sense that despite the acknowledged benefits of technology, parents have serious reservations and fears for their children, and yet feel powerless to completely deny them access. Parents in these focus groups appear torn between the desire to facilitate their children's online access (as a means to fit in with their peer group) and a corresponding concern that they are exposing their children to online dangers. For some parents, there was a sense of exasperation and an appeal to government to step in and take more decisive action to limit children's online activity:

> *"But to be honest, I hate technology. I wish that there was a law that said that children under the age of 16, couldn't have technology."(P)*

> *"That should be a government thing that they're stepping in and saying, we have to protect what the kids can see under 16 or under 11…then it's much easier for families…for the parents, much easier for the schools."(P)*

5.8 Interviews with Teachers

One comprehensive focus group took place comprising a selection of teachers from different schools as follows: 3 post-primary schools (1 non-selective controlled; 1 non-selective controlled girls; 1 catholic maintained); 3 primary schools (1 Irish Medium; 1 controlled in a rural setting; 1 controlled in an urban setting) and 1 special school. Additionally, one interview took place with a vice-principal in an Irish Medium post-primary school. Altogether, 2 participants were school principals, 2 were vice-principals and 4 were class teachers.

The focus group followed a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix 4). Following audio transcription and thematic analysis of the qualitative data, several key themes emerged from the data as follows:

Theme 1: Benefits of the Internet for Children and Young People

Participants were first asked what they thought the benefits of the internet were to pupils.

Communication

The teachers talked about how one of the main benefits of the internet for young people is that they can communicate with their friends. One of the primary school teachers commented that they were surprised to see that their pupils were using FaceTime a lot recently to chat to each other. For children who have particular communication barriers to overcome, the internet has been specifically helpful. For example, children and young people who are nonverbal have been able to communicate in ways they never could before. As well as this, children who do not have English as their first language use Google Translate to communicate with their teachers and also with their peers. One teacher commented about Google Translate:

> *"they're able to use those resources to help them even to still make new friendships, which is lovely to see" (teacher, post-primary).*

Learning

Primary school teachers talked about the various educational apps for their pupils such as Mathletics, Accelerated Reader, and Times Table Rockstars that have been hugely beneficial and popular with children. Also, by using google maps and other online resources, children can learn about places around the world that they may not ever get the chance to visit. One teacher commented:

> *"it can kind of bring the world to them" (teacher, primary).*

Post-primary teachers also talked about the educational support the internet can bring through Google Classroom and through apps such as Kahoot which helps to reinforce learning through quizzes.

Entertainment

Participants also talked about the value of the internet in terms of entertainment for children and young people through listening to music. Particularly during lockdown, pupils learned to play instruments, watched make-up tutorials, and learned to paint.

Theme 2: Time Spent Online

Participants were asked how much time on average they think that their pupils spend on the internet on a typical school day. The answers did vary considerably depending on the school's own mobile phone policy. One of the post-primary schools is moving towards a paperless school and depends on mobile phones a lot, whereas in the other post-primary schools and in the primary schools, using phones during the school day is more limited.

At home, the time that children spend online depends on the parents and also access. One of the teachers explained that while it is easy to assume all post-primary pupils have their own mobile device and access to the internet, that is not the case with all the pupils at her school. During school hours, these pupils can have access to chrome books, however they are often embarrassed to be seen to be using them.

Other children seem to have unlimited access online while they are at home and are often up all night gaming or on their devices.

> ***"I've children who are coming in tired, they literally look as white as a ghost in the morning it's because they've been up late with little parent supervision of them" (teacher, primary).***

The answers to the question how many hours the pupils are online varied from 3 hours to 10 or more hours.

Theme 3: Most Popular Online Activities

The most popular apps that children and young people are using, according to the teacher participants, are the following: - Tiktok, Snapchat, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and FaceTime. Fortnite and Minecraft are also very popular with primary school children and children attending special school.

Theme 4: Changes in the Past Five Years

Participants were asked about changes they have noticed in children's online activities over the past five years or even since the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants agreed that children are communicating with each other more now, which can be positive, although it was acknowledged that this certainly has its drawbacks too. The principal from the special school noticed a positive change regarding software advancement during this time, making accessibility to the internet and specifically apps to help the children communicate, hugely beneficial:

"but now that has moved on so much that it has really opened up every single app and website to these young people" (principal, special school).

The teachers agreed that particularly since the lockdowns, there has been an increase in the time spent online and an increased reliance on phones. The teachers reported that children have their phones with them overnight: they're not on silent and they are checking them.

One Vice-Principal explained what happened if phones were taken off the pupils during school:

"they come to me at the end of the day absolutely distraught, and not distraught because mummy and daddy have to come and pick it up or they're going to, you know, get into trouble when they go home. They are distraught because how are they going to send their streaks?" (vice-principal, post-primary).

This increased time using devices has brought with it unrealistic expectations where young people are comparing their appearance to others online. Teachers have also noted a huge increase in pupil anxiety with so many children and young people feeling overwhelmed and finding it difficult to cope in lessons. In one post-primary school, this has resulted in a significant rise in the number of pupils who receive a "time out" pass. However this is not just the case in post-primary schools.

"I have children saying, can I sit out of this because of my anxiety? You know, and I don't know if that's because of all the chat around Covid or if that's linked to technology or not" (teacher, primary).

One teacher talked about the influence of influencers and how that has impacted the aspirations of primary school class. Some influencers are positive, but teachers are dealing with the impact of the negative ones: -

"even at P.6., that kind of term toxic masculinity creeps in. And some of the things that I've had to deal with in class this year, and it's been comments of the boys towards the girls, you know, and behind their back but also to their face" (teacher, primary).

Other changes noted by participants were a lack of perseverance, children giving up too easily as well as poor spelling skills. In both cases, it was suspected that the increase in screen time and reliance on the use of devices has been a factor.

Theme 5: Online Risks Experienced by Children and Young People

Participants were asked about online risks that they think pupils are facing. One online risk discussed was the sexual and explicit content that children and young people are viewing online. Some children do not understand what it means but are accessing it and repeating it in school. One teacher reported that a vulnerable child had posted something inappropriate online not realising what it meant and in that particular situation the PSNI were involved.

Children and young people are saying nasty things to each other, things that they would not say to someone in real life. They are also bullying by exclusion. One of the primary school teachers explained: -

> *"WhatsApp and the girls in my class.. It's really bullying by exclusion, you know, like, one day there's a new WhatsApp group created, which one person has been left out of, the following week that person has been added in and then someone's been excluded, you know?" (teacher, primary).*

Pupils are putting themselves at risk by accepting friend requests from people they don't know. One of the primary principals had this to say about something that happened at a child's party:

> *"And I already said about that Omegle site, two eleven year olds were overheard saying to a man, "we didn't think you would be so old". I mean, they were eleven and they were talking to an adult like! I couldn't believe it when I heard it" (principal, primary).*

While these risks are prevalent for all young people, some are more vulnerable as the teacher from the special school explained: -

> *"in the online world its very scary, the risks for them in terms of grooming, and also you know that they may not understand what to report, and what to tell" (principal, special school).*

Post-primary teachers talked about pupils recording each other without consent: -

> *"if anything happens at all, they're so quick to take out their phone and press record" (teacher, post-primary).*

As well as this, pupils are manipulating images, adding text and graphics and then sending it round to other pupils. This results in fall out and a lot of teacher time is taken up dealing with these issues. In one instance, a vulnerable pupil shared explicit content of themselves unknowingly to another pupil. This content was shared around other pupils in the school, to other schools and then posted openly on TikTok.

> *"she just thought that this person liked her when in actual fact it was just somebody being really cruel. But equally for the person who has done that to think that that's okay to do that and not see then the legal ramifications that are coming on the back of it, it is also equally concerning that they think that a) it's ok to do that and b) the amount of trouble that they're going to get themselves in" (vice-principal, post-primary).*

In the post-primary school where mobile phones are relied on a lot during the school day, one problem has been pupils viewing content they shouldn't be accessing and then sharing it with other pupils through AirDrop. This results in pupils opening files and consequently viewing material they did not choose to view. The pupils are also, on occasion, attempting to AirDrop content to teachers.

Finally, another risk that children are exposed to as viewed by the teachers, is that companies are manipulating young people out of money. For example, children playing online games where they buy extra things to get extra lives etc.

Theme 6: Online Safety

The participants were asked about measures they have taken as a school to address online safety concerns for their pupils.

The teachers talked about monitoring the devices that children use in school. In the special school the staff use a management system for iPads which allows the staff to limit what the devices are enabled to do, tailored to the particular children who are using them. One of the participants talked about the benefits of Securus (school safeguarding software).

One vice-principal in a post-primary school talked about the benefit of a policy they introduced after lockdown which means mobile phones are effectively banned in schools apart from as part of a teacher led lesson. They reported that this policy has reduced the number of incidents in school and has received positive feedback from some pupils because: -

> *"they're actually enjoying not having the pressure of their phones during the day" (vice-principal, post-primary).*

The teachers talked about the efforts and the challenges of communicating with parents in this area. This is done through various ways across the different schools - parents' nights, NSPCC training offered to parents and the Knowsley City Council monthly newsletter accessed through the area learning community. The challenge can be getting parents motivated to attend events. One teacher also expressed that there can also be a challenge communicating with parents as there is a reluctance to bombard them with too much information, as information can get lost. They believe that a whole multi-agency campaign is needed, not just from schools but from the government too.

Online safety is taught as part of the PD (LLW), ICT or PSHE/PDMU programme. It is highlighted through initiatives such as Cyberbullying week and Safer Internet Day. Some of the schools also have digital leaders who participate in online assemblies and in one school, a topic for Key Stage 2 was to design an animation of how to stay safe online.

> ***"we try so hard to teach our children how to be safe, how to be sensible, how to be smart" (teacher, primary).***

Teachers talked about cooperating with outside agencies coming into schools to deliver programmes e.g. Thrive Academy, Allstate, PSNI.

"the girls seem to really get a lot actually from external agencies coming in, because we can tell them till we're blue in the face. But whenever somebody else comes in and tells them, it maybe helps the penny drop a wee bit more" (vice-principal, post-primary).

Theme 7: Training Needs for Teachers

Finally, participants were asked about what needs they have as teachers in the area of online safety, where the gaps are in their training and what they think would be helpful for teachers going forward.

Participants felt that there was a serious lack of resources and training materials in the Irish language and even if people from outside school are coming into Irish Medium schools to talk about internet safety, they don't necessarily have the Irish language skills to do so effectively. If they do have the Irish language skills, they don't necessarily have the expertise in internet safety. So, there is a need for more training on internet safety and resources in the Irish language at both primary and post-primary level.

Participants reported that there is currently a lack of training offered by the Education Authority. Teachers who *are* knowledgeable had undertaken to find out about the online risks presented to children and young people themselves. Weekly emails from INEQE were also received by some teachers to help them keep up to date with current apps and online trends.

The participants thought that information for teachers about what apps children and young people are using and the current social media trends would be helpful. While some staff are aware of what children are doing online, there are knowledge gaps with staff and since what children are doing online changes so frequently, teachers also felt that was hard to keep up to date.

"you can't really stay on top of websites or apps because they change so often. And the children are so much more advanced than the majority of us are, you know, we can do one thing, but they can do three, three things to undo what we've just done" (principal, primary).

5.9 Survey Responses from Professionals

A total of 15 professionals employed by various organisations were invited to complete an online survey consisting of three core open-ended questions (see Appendix 5). The organisations represented are concerned with looking after children and young people in the areas of health and social care, education, regulation of the communications sector, working with survivors of sexual abuse, and providing support to parents, children and young people, and information on various issues. Some of the organisations have conducted or commissioned research focusing on the online safety of children and young people.

Following thematic analysis of the survey responses, four key themes emerged from the data.

Within the overarching area of *Protecting Young People*, four themes were dominant: Online behaviours, the role of parents, education and training, and internet companies.

Theme 1: Online Behaviours

Participants were asked within their professional role what they considered to be the main issues relating to the online activity of children and young people. Six sub themes were predominant.

Cyberbullying and Nasty Comments

The professionals referred to issues around cyberbullying and negative comments and how the online world provides anonymity to users to say things that they would not in real life. One professional referred to recent discussions with young people who were suggesting that nasty comments may occasionally come from strangers but that it is usually from people they know. There appears to be an unspoken rule amongst young people that this was acceptable and that online comments would not be spoken about when interacting with the person in real life:

The young people spoke of this behaviour from people they interact with daily in real life. However, they do not comment on things that have been said online, when interacting with the person face-to-face. There is an expectation to treat them as if they were two separate people. Young people agreed it was acceptable to say things more harshly than they would in person, when commenting online. (Professional 13)

Sexting, Grooming, Sextortion and Porn

Four of the professionals referred to the sharing of self-generated sexual images amongst young people. Professional 3, for example, referred to the potential legal implications of such image distribution. Professional 13 referred to discussions with young people who reported that sexualised messages and images could be from people they have never met in person or from friends, and that receiving such content could happen several times per day. Girls "described it as almost a joke" when speaking about how often they received such material from older men. The issues of grooming and sextortion were also raised when young people share too much information about themselves including intimate images and end up being blackmailed or exploited. Professional 3 commented on the issue of children and young people being able to access sexually inappropriate material on various online platforms: "porn is a huge issue impacting on healthy relationships". Online dating and the potential of young people consequently receiving unwanted sexual activity requests or becoming involved in romance scams was a key issue highlighted by Professional 6.

Radicalisation, Violence and Drugs

Two professionals referred to the risk of young people being exposed to violence, hate speech and propaganda, including paramilitary propaganda with the aim of recruiting young people to their cause. Radicalisation in relation to males was mentioned by Professional 10 who asserted that "radicalisation and influencing males and promoting misogynistic ideas" is an area of concern. One of the professionals raised the issue of drugs being traded on online sites such as "Telegram, Instagram, TikTok" and also "trading sexualised images for drugs or other items" (Professional 6).

Gaming and Gambling

Professionals 8 and 12 raised the issue of gambling and how this can lead to young people getting into debt. Professional 8 also referred to gaming and "repeatedly opening loot boxes within games, also trading/gambling in crypto currencies" as a key issue. An issue that was also highlighted was children and young people being in contact with people they have never met face-to-face, having encountered them only through platforms such as "Roblox and PlayStation games" (Professional 11).

Misinformation / Fake News

Professional 1 discussed the over reliance of young people on Google when searching for information, which makes them vulnerable to misinformation or fake news: "they believe everything they read with little or no discernment. This is evident in their assignments." Professional 1 also referred to websites that write essays for students: "the new AI websites that will write essays for you, poses a new problem. Many young people are no longer inquisitive."

Impact of Online Risks

Two professionals referred to the fact that children and young people are always online. Professional 6 reported that they have a "constant connection, always contactable 24/7, and expectation of 24/7 response." Several negative impacts of the constant online connection were referred to and included sleep issues because of 'blue light' exposure and communication problems with people face-to-face after long periods of time spent online. This was highlighted by Professional 7 who reported that "children lose the physical social interaction as part of their development due to heavy reliance on iPads/phones." Professional 7 also commented on the current advice of limiting screen time and raised the issue of children using devices in school and at home: "the current advice is around limiting screen time, however, children at school are using screens as part of their education and then having screen time at home which is concerning." Two professionals also referred to advertising content that children and young people can be exposed to online. Professional 6 suggested that "targeted advertising around weight and beauty products" can result in body shaming. The negative impact on friendships after information or images (including intimate images) have been shared online or with peers was also mentioned as an issue of concern.

Theme 2: The Role of Parents and Carers

When considering the main issues relating to the online activity of children and young people, one of the professionals discussed the role of parents and carers.

Professional 7 referred to parents as role models and how children will model their behaviour on what they see from their parents:

> *Children are initially learning from experience, i.e., watching parents/caregivers on their own phone scrolling or online socialising and therefore the children will want to be on the phone just like their adults.*

Professional 7 also raised concerns about children from younger ages accessing devices without supervision:

> *This is not to judge parents as they themselves are under increasing societal and financial pressures. The lack of supervision could be seen as negligent and/or as a consequence of poor parental support/health where the parent is 'happy' to get 5 minutes peace. The lack of supervision has also not been overseen as there is often an assumption that the children are doing something educational as a result of Covid implementation procedures in education.*

Theme 3: Education and Training

The professionals were asked about what their organisations were doing to address the issues identified in *Theme 1* and what changes they thought were required to help children and young people be safer online. Four sub themes were predominant.

Several of the professionals concurred that some children and young people do not have adequate knowledge about how to keep safe whilst online and have a "low level of understanding of the risks of interactions between others and the long-term impact on future career and education of what they post" (Professional 5).

Curriculum

Professional 2 referred to teachers needing guidance about what content should be included for each of the Key Stages (of the Northern Ireland curriculum). Consequently, their organisation has produced and made available to teachers online safety resources as part of the curricular area of RSE. Professional 2 also reported that: "we have also developed resources on risks and damaging effects of pornography on self-esteem and relationships." This work will, according to Professional 2, continue if "DE [Department for Education] provide funding."

Professional 5 also referred to the curriculum and reported that young people tell them they have online safety classes in school but that "there's nothing new or fresh". Similarly, Professional 13, based on discussions with young people, highlighted the importance of relevant up-to-date online safety education in schools:

The number of apps used for communicating with other people far outnumber the number of common apps (like TikTok, WhatsApp etc) that adults talk to them about during online safety classes in school or other settings. The young people advised that adults do not know the half of it, and it is impossible to follow the safety advice in all of them. Young people advised that online safety classes in school are always the same, they are outdated and are taught too late. Although the apps are designed for older young people, almost everyone has access in primary schools - they put in a fake age to avoid parental controls.

In the same discussion with young people, Professional 13 reported that young people were aware that things needed to change about 'how things are online' but none of the young people felt that "the adults designated to give them information on the topic had enough experience or grasp of the problem to help."

The link between online safety and the wellbeing of children and young people was highlighted by Professional 13: "the Online Strategy for NI 2020-2025 is highlighted as a key text with the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework in Schools document." As a result, Professional 13 reported that they will "continue to highlight programmes, key research and resources that can address the concerns around online safety as they arise."

The curriculum was referred to when considering what needs to be done in order to better equip children and young people to engage safely in the online world. It was suggested by the professionals that more topics regarding online safety and behaviours needs to be integrated into the curriculum, as there "seems to be a lack of awareness of any social etiquette" (Professional 1). A number of the professionals also discussed how online safety should focus on the benefits of the internet but that these discussions need also to provide children and young people with knowledge of the risks and to equip them with the skills on how to stay safe. This includes children and young people being "better educated around how to report to service providers and what the process is" (Professional 5).

Professional 3 suggested that there could be some way of formally testing online safety knowledge in schools: "recognition that online is the new normal so train young people to use it appropriately – test knowledge formally through schools?"

Educating young people on issues such as hate speech in the online world and real life should, according to Professional 6, not only focus on the dangers of posting such content, but also "challenge the perceptions that have led to the young people using hate speech in any sphere." The problem of misinformation and children and young people believing everything they read online is an area that requires change, as Professional 10 explained:

> ***Children and young people need to be supported and educated on how to evaluate the information being presented and balance it against other narratives and the impact of content being put out there. Everyone needs to be better at assessing information and accessing other arguments or views.***

Professionals 6 and 7 referred to the importance of having a strong RSE curriculum which includes elements of online safety with a focus on healthy relationships (including sexual relationships) both in the virtual world and real life. The need to link online safety to other strategies such as suicide prevention and mental health was identified by Professional 3 "to make sure that issues that are often fuelled by online activity such as suicidal ideation and eating disorders are recognised in the round."

The topic of mindfulness was discussed by Professional 15 who advocates that children and young people should be equipped with the skills to feel positive and motivated and that this could have an affirmative impact on how long they spend online:

> *Empower with mindfulness, awareness of the developing brain. Empower them to feel strong and then they can feel motivated, positive about their future and not need to spend as much time online.*

Involvement of Children and Young People in Online Safety Education Planning

Professional 7 described the importance of involving children and young people when planning online safety education:

> *Young people need to contribute to what they want to learn about. We have to understand and be able to identify the window of opportunity for them wanting to learn about online activities. Giving young people the opportunity to share what they wish they knew at a younger age can help inform future online safety learning on a professional and personal level.*

Similarly, the importance of involving young people was highlighted by Professional 13, who, after discussions with young people, reported that current online safety resources are insufficient:

> *I would advocate for updated online safety training, that is designed with input from young people to ensure that all risks, and the prevalence of those risks are realised. This training should be provided to all parents, and any professional working with children. It is vital that the information is updated regularly to adapt to the advances within technology.*

Education for Children and Young People

Several of the professionals discussed their work with children and young people, which mainly consisted of workshops with schools and youth clubs. Topics addressed in such workshops include healthy relationships, consent, grooming, risks of sexting, gambling, and from whom to seek help. Professional 1 referred to organising workshops for students within their setting. These would sometimes have internal speakers from their safeguarding team and would also use external speakers who cover online safety topics. Professional 13 referred to discussions with young people who spoke about lessons they had received from the PSNI, particularly in relation to sexting. The young people believed that although such workshops did "make them think before sending an image on, it doesn't stop them receiving them."

Professional 9, whose organisation is involved with the regulation of online platforms and services in the UK through the Online Safety Act, referred specifically to online safety education for vulnerable children and young people. They are working with a local learning difficulties charity to deliver online safety training for children and young people. Professional 9 also described work that their organisation is doing on improving media literacy in disadvantaged areas:

> *We recently completed a tendering process, targeting media literacy interventions into the risk of online harms in under-served groups and communities, prioritising areas with affordability issues. One of the cohorts for this were children aged 10-14, and in Northern Ireland we identified Belfast; Newry, Mourne and Down; Causeway Coast and Glens; Derry City and Strabane; and Fermanagh and Omagh as areas of additional financial need.*

Increased media literacy, including support for professionals and parents, was highlighted by Professional 9 as being necessary for keeping children and young people safe online. Professional 9 also reported that regulation of online platforms was essential:

> *Effective regulation will also make a difference, as will law enforcement and safeguarding increasing their understanding of both the scale and effects of the issue and the pathways to support redress for victims.*

Training for Professionals and Parents

The professionals also referred to the support they give to adults who work with children and young people, including teachers, youth workers, and sports coaches. Professional 3 discussed how their organisation had created a digital safeguarding group consisting of individuals from different agencies who have run workshops for adults working with children and young people, The aim is to "upskill them, increasing awareness of issues and ensuring that anything new and emerging is highlighted." Similarly, Professional 7's organisation provides online training for their staff and encourages staff "to keep up to date with the latest trends such as apps, language young people use online."

Some of the professionals also provide workshops for parents, including foster carers, with the aim of developing parental understanding of what their children are doing online. When referring to what changes are required, Professional 1 reported that banning children and young people from connecting to the online world is unrealistic and "will solely drive it underground." There is, therefore, a need for parents and professionals to be aware of the benefits the online world presents but "also be provided with realistic information about the risks" (Professional 10). The way in which this can be best carried out was referred to by Professional 7, who advocates a more "conversational approach" rather than formal training which may "increase their awareness of things to watch out for, in particular, regarding online bullying or abuse." Regular up to date training for professionals was deemed necessary because often "they are the last to know about a worrying new trend or app and as such are acting from a reactive place rather than a protective place" (Professional 7).

Training for teachers was highlighted as an area requiring improvement to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to "identify the signs of children who are being stressed by social media – emotional intelligence" (Professional 1). This was also an area referred to by Professional 2 who acknowledged the importance of training and support for teachers to enable them to "grow confidence and competence." According to Professional 5, schools require better support with regards to "ongoing issues and trends and how to talk to young people without discouraging them from online usage."

The issue of sharenting was identified by Professional 3 as an area that needs to be included in training for parents:

> *Schools need to be empowered to work effectively with families and advise them appropriately. Issues like sharenting need to be addressed – children no longer have any privacy and have their information shared online often from pre-birth putting them at increased risk.*

Theme 4: Internet Companies

Three professionals discussed how there needs to be a consistent reporting system across all online platforms: "one cohesive alert system, like CEOP needs to be on every site – where young people can refer 'bad' or 'dangerous' [material]. It needs to be consistent for all social media sites, and search engines" (Professional 1). Similarly, Professional 6 referred to the need for internet companies to work faster when content is reported to them:

> *All users have a role to play in finding and reporting inappropriate online material, but concern was raised that platforms are not acting, or not acting quickly enough, to have it removed and blocked.*

There is, according to Professional 5, a consensus amongst many young people that there is "no point" in reporting breaches of guidelines to internet companies "as nothing gets done". Consequently, there is a need to make the reporting process more accessible, transparent and child friendly:

> ***Social media providers need more clarity in simplified language for young people around how to report, what happens when they report and better communication when reports are made. (Professional 5)***

The responsibilities of online companies were also referred to by Professional 3 who reported that such companies "must be held to account re safety/duty of care" and also referred to the need for "solid links with the UK Online Safety Bill/local government buy-in."

In conclusion, the online world plays an important role in the lives of children and young people, and it brings with it many benefits alongside risks and the challenge is in keeping them safe. This is aptly summed up by Professional 13 who states that:

> *The online environment has become embedded into the daily lives of children in our region. They value the connection it provides to their peer group and the ease of access to information. Online access is required for academic participation, and regarded as essential for acceptance among peer groups, as discussed in our recent engagement events. The online environment was not created for young people, but it can certainly be used to exploit them and expose them to harm. It is a herculean task to safeguard young people online, but it is an essential one.*

CHAPTER 6
Discussion

6.1 The Emergence, Nature and Impact of Online Risks

This unique mixed-methods research has, for the first time, provided a comprehensive evidence base which provides an insight into the nature and extent of online activity by children and young people in Northern Ireland. In the following section, the main findings (as presented in detail in Chapters 4 and 5) will be summarised and discussed in relation to existing local, national and (where available) international research.

Positive uses of the internet

The first important message to emerge strongly from the research (confirming earlier findings by Spears et al., 2012; UNICEF, 2019; Ofcom, 2023) is that on the whole children and young people enjoy a very wide range of positive experiences online, using a variety of internet-capable devices, especially mobile phones but also including games consoles, laptops/PCs, tablets/iPads, watches, televisions and virtual reality devices. An overwhelming majority of the survey respondents owned their own phone: 99% of 14-18 years olds, and 92% of 8-13 year olds.

Based on the survey responses, the top 5 favourite online activities for the younger cohort (8-13) were (in descending order of popularity): gaming, staying in touch with friends on social media, watching video clips, listening to music, and watching sports/checking sports results. Among the older cohort (14-18) the top 5 favourite online activities were very similar though with social media emerging as the most commonly cited favourite activity. The results were (in descending order of popularity): staying in touch with friends on social media, listening to music, gaming, watching video clips, and watching sports/checking sports results.

Social media usage was high among all age groups, with more than three-quarters of 14-18 year olds using (in descending order of popularity) Snapchat, YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok and Instagram in particular. Usage was on average lower among the younger children (8-13): here the highest usage was (again in descending order of popularity) YouTube, WhatsApp, Snapchat, TikTok and Instagram.

The focus group interviews with the children provided clear evidence that children and young people enjoy and can see real benefits from being online. The range of activities cited was very broad and included: social media, listening to music, gaming, shopping, watching funny videos, movies and sports and messaging friends.

Some (though not many) mentioned the educational use of the internet for researching homework or for accessing work on, for instance, Google Classroom. For most, however, the internet represented primarily a space for entertainment and fun. It was clear that, while not denying the dangers, being online was an overwhelmingly positive experience, as one post-primary boy explained "I like to play with my friends, get my mind out of school, just have fun". Another post-primary boy explained that playing Xbox games with his friends was "probably some of the best craic you'll ever have."

The study also highlighted the importance to many children and young people of an online community of like-minded friends and peers. While this was mentioned by many children and young people, parents and teachers, the LGBTQI+ group of young people in particular expressed how important it was for them to have online 'safe spaces', where they could befriend, spend time with and seek 'comfort' and support from other LGBTQI+ young people, often from outside Northern Ireland. There was a strong sense that while "there's a lot of people who hate us" in the physical world of school and wider society because of their sexuality, the internet could provide much-needed security, reassurance and genuine friendship. This may also help explain the higher than average internet use by those young people not identifying as boy/male or girl/female, as evidenced in the online survey responses.

In the online survey, respondents were asked to describe how social media use makes them feel about themselves. Among the younger cohort (8-13), 19% reported that social media made them feel better about themselves, 74% reported no difference and 7% said that it made them feel worse about themselves. Among the older cohort (14-18) the figures were less positive: 13% reported that social media made them feel better about themselves, 73% reported no difference and 14% said that it made them feel worse about themselves. When these results were analysed further by gender, there were stark differences: among the younger cohort (8-13), 11% of girls reported that social media use made them feel worse about themselves compared with just 2% of boys. Among the older cohort (14-18) this pattern was replicated though with higher prevalence: 21% of girls reported that social media made them feel worse about themselves, compared to 7% of boys. 50% of those 14-18 year olds identifying as transgender reported that social media use made them feel worse about themselves.

The research also explored the extent to which children and young people followed celebrities and influencers online. This was explored in a number of online survey questions and also in the focus groups. In the survey, children and young people were asked whether they followed celebrities or influencers online. The results show that 62% of 8-13 year olds and 77% of 14-18 year olds follow online celebrities and influencers, and the vast majority believe that their influence is positive. Interestingly, and in line with the Ofcom (2013) findings, the older cohort reported lower levels of influence over their behaviour by celebrities or influencers than the young cohort, suggesting higher levels of critical judgement and discernment among the older respondents.

When this was analysed further by gender, it was clear that girls (in both age cohorts) were more likely to follow celebrities and influencers than were boys (e.g. 66% of girls vs 58% of boys aged 8-13; 83% of girls vs 73% of boys aged 14-18). In the focus group interviews there was also some discussion around celebrities and influencers, with many of the young people reporting that they followed pop stars and sportsmen and women in particular. There was also much debate around Andrew Tate in particular, and in these discussions it emerged that boys were much more likely to be supportive of his views (e.g. "I think he's good. He's conservative. He's not into the whole progressive thing and all these news ideas…I'd say I'm more conservative") while girls expressed very negative opinions (e.g. "I think he's full of himself", "Isn't he in jail?"). The impact of celebrities and influencers was raised by one of the primary teachers who reported, alarmingly, that 'toxic masculinity', often associated with influencers such as Andrew Tate, was now being reflected in some of the comments made by boys towards girls, both behind their backs and to their faces.

Extent of Internet use

The second key finding relates to the extent of internet use by children and young people. This research has for the first time revealed the high levels of reported internet use by children and young people in Northern Ireland. The results showed variation (as expected) according to whether it was a school day or a weekend/holiday with much greater internet use during non-school days. By way of example, on a typical school day, children in the younger cohort (8-13) most commonly reported spending under 3 hours online, but 22% spent 4 hours or more online. At weekends or during the holidays, internet use rose considerably with 45% reporting that they spent 4 hours or more online. Among the older respondents (aged 14-18), internet use was higher. On a typical school day, the most common usage was 2-3 hours or 3-4 hours, but just over a third (34%) reported spending 4 hours or more online. At weekends or during the holidays, again this rose considerably: 64% reported that they spent 4 hours or more online, with 22% reporting more than 7 hours per day.

These statistics were reinforced by the children and young people in their focus group interviews, particularly in the post-primary, youth club and LGBTQI+ interviews. While there were some instances of young people reporting that they switched off before bedtime or were forced to do so by their parents, there was also frequent mention of pupils staying online (on their phones) late into the night and then struggling to stay awake and concentrate next day in class. These pupils were described by their peers as appearing "wrecked", "in a complete state" and it was noted that "you can see it in their eyes, they are all like red" so that "A lot of them have their heads down…and they're sleeping" in class the next day. The LGBTQI+ focus group participants were the most open about their own high internet usage and dependence on their phones: "If I was getting the bus to school and I forgot my phone I swear I would get off that bus and run back home… I can't be without my phone".

They also revealed their screen time (using their mobile phones) which revealed a range between 13 and 19 hours per day (excluding games console use), with one pupil claiming that he had had just one hour of sleep the previous night since he had been gaming through the night: "I got like one hour of sleep last night and look at me, I'm perfectly fine.". There was a strong message from all groups in particular that this pattern of behaviour was becoming increasingly normal among their peer group, and that young people were getting accustomed to having less sleep. Several focus group participants nonetheless referred to the fact that their internet use at weekends could be lower than during the week as a result of their participation in school or community sports and part-time jobs, and this distraction from phone use was also welcomed by some parents in their focus group.

The research has also highlighted the impact of children and young people's online activity at night, often limiting their sleep and with inevitable consequences in terms of their ability to concentrate the next day in school. This was reported by both the children and young people (in the online survey and in the focus groups), and also by their parents and teachers. The online survey, for instance, asked children and young people what impact their online activity had on their sleep. Among the younger cohort (8-13), 19% reported that they were often tired the next day as a result of being online late at night. Among the older cohort (14-18) this had risen to 27% who reported feeling tired the next day.

Teachers too reported that they were witnessing the impact of this nocturnal online activity and reported that they were seeing children "coming in tired, they literally look as white as a ghost in the morning" and referred to the lack of parental supervision as a contributory factor.

Further bivariate analysis of the results revealed that among both cohorts (8-13 and 14-18), there was a correlation between those who spent most time online and a feeling that their social media use made them feel worse about themselves. For example, among the older cohort (14-18) of those who reported that social media use makes them feel worse about themselves, 43% spend 6 hours or more online at weekends/holiday times. By contrast of those who report that social media makes no difference to how they feel about themselves, only 29% spend 6 hours or more online.

Caution is recommended however in interpreting these results and in necessarily drawing causal links (unsubstantiated in the research) between screen time and wellbeing (see UK Chief Medical Officers, 2019; Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2019; Livingstone, 2021). Livingstone (2021) in particular has noted that the current binary debate, which assumes that screen time is inherently negative and often pits parents against their children, can be unhelpful and has led scientists, policy makers and the public down a "blind alley" (p.90) wasting energy that would have been better expended on supporting children's wellbeing "in a mediated world".

Parental interest, concern and supervision

This research has revealed a number of new insights into children and young people's perceptions of their parents' attitudes towards their internet activity. In the online survey, the respondents were asked to describe how their parents describe the amount of time they spent online. Here the results suggest that parents in general are disapproving of how much time their children spend online. A total of 57% of the younger cohort (8-13) and 63% of the older cohort (14-18) reported that their parents think they spend too much time online, although it must be noted that the children and young people themselves often agreed (38% of 8-13 year olds and 50% of 14-18 year olds felt that they spent too much time online).

When analysed further by gender, the findings show that girls (8-13 and 14-18) rather than boys are more likely to report that their parents think they spend too much time online. For instance, 61% of girls vs 53% of boys in the 8-13 cohort, and 69% of girls vs 57% of boys in the 14-18 cohort reported that their parents think they spend too much time online.

Parental levels of interest were also explored. Survey respondents were asked how interested their parents were in what they were doing online. Results revealed low levels of parental interest, especially among the older cohort (14-18) and especially as reported by boys. For instance, only 17% of 8-13 year olds reported that their parents were 'very interested' in what they were doing online (64% were 'a little interested' and 20% were 'not at all interested'). By contrast, even fewer 14-18 year olds reported parental interest: 8% claimed that their parents were 'very interested', 58% 'a little interested' and over a third (34%) 'not at all interested' in their online activity. When analysed further by gender, interestingly, it emerged that girls in both age cohorts report higher levels of parental interest in what they are doing online compared to boys. For instance, among 8-13 year olds, 83% of girls vs 70% of boys reported that their parents were 'a little' or 'very' interested in what they were doing online, while among 14-18 year olds the findings show that 68% of girls vs 65% of boys reported that their parents were 'a little' or 'very' interested in what they were doing online.

This perceived low level of parental interest stands in sharp contrast to the views expressed by the parents who volunteered to participate in the two parental focus groups, where there was a strong feeling of concern voiced in relation to their children's online activity. While those parents did appreciate the benefits of their children being online, there was evidence of time limits being set by the parents of primary-aged children and a high level of awareness of what their children were doing online, again especially among the parents of primary-aged children.

The focus group interviews highlighted how parents felt conflicted between the 'peer pressure' to conform by buying phones or other internet devices for their children, and an accompanying anxiety around the dangers to which they were thereby exposing their children.

Some parents of primary-aged children spoke of their unease with the notion of 'inviting strangers into your home' by virtue of their children interacting online with people they hadn't met in person. For others, there was a feeling of guilt ("I have to say I'm sort of feeling like a very bad mum here" or "I wish I'd never put it on her phone…But I bowed to peer pressure…when you see that the kids can look at, it's just horrendous. You think, I'm freely giving this to my child").

Others still were concerned that their children were losing out on interpersonal skills in terms of face-to-face communication, and that they were struggling to distract their children from their phones to engage with them meaningfully ("I'm trying to connect with her…have a conversation…we're in a space. I'm here, you're here. Let's use this opportunity…it's one of those things. You're fighting all the time").

Finally, parents reported feeling powerless against the pressure to conform to giving their children online access, and also powerless against the dangers to which their children were inevitably exposed. Two parents called for government to act, introducing firmer regulations and restrictions to help protect their children.

Online risk and harm – individual experiences

The negative online experiences of children and young people were explored through the online survey which focused first on their own negative experiences (victimisation), then on their experiences as online witnesses or bystanders to negative experiences among their friends, and then finally, in terms of what they themselves had done to others (perpetration). Results showed that 20% of 8-13 year olds and 18% of 14-18 year olds reported that something nasty or unpleasant had happened to them online in the past couple of months.

By way of comparison (although the sample was more focused on urban disadvantaged contexts), the EU-funded Blurred Lives project found that 25% (NI:22%) of 14-16 year olds reported something nasty or unpleasant happening to them online in the previous couple of months. Furthermore, Ofcom (2023) found that 20% of 8-11 year olds, 35% of 12-15 year olds and 37% of 16-17 year olds across the UK had experienced a person being nasty or hurtful to them via communication technology (though no time frame was given in the Ofcom study).

This would suggest that, notwithstanding methodological dissimilarities between the studies, the level of online negative experiences in this study compares favourably with these two other recent UK/EU studies, with slightly lower levels of incidence reported in this most recent Northern Ireland study. Some encouragement can be taken from this.

Among the younger cohort (8-13) from the limited range of options given, the most commonly reported negative experience was "someone was mean to me online" (13%), followed by "someone I don't know contacted me online" (3.7%), "I have seen inappropriate things" (3.7%) and "someone sent me something inappropriate I didn't ask for" (3.6%).

Incidents were most likely to occur via social media, and, where known, were most commonly the result of a fallout with friends or because of how they look. The actions were carried out most commonly by a friend or someone they knew (10%), followed by someone they didn't know (9%), and the experience left the children feeling (most commonly) upset, angry, confused, anxious and disgusted. Alarmingly, only 45% of the respondents reported what had happened, and where they did so, they reported it to a friend (9%), a parent/adult in the family (8%), a sibling (3%) or a teacher (2%). More than a quarter (27%) felt that the matter was not dealt with well at all.

Among the older cohort (14-18), there were many more categories of online negative experience to choose from. As with the younger children, the most commonly reported type of behaviour was 'mean or nasty comments made about me or sent to me' (10%), and this was closely followed by 'involvement in an argument or fight" (9%) and "lies or rumours were spread about me" (7%). Once again the experiences were most likely to occur on social media, and, where known, were most commonly as a result of how they look (5%) or a fallout with friends (5%). The actions were carried out most commonly by someone they didn't know (10%) or a friend or someone they knew (9%). As with the young children, the experience left the victims feeling upset, angry, confused, disgusted and anxious. Reporting levels among the older cohort were even lower than among their younger peers: just 30% reported the experience, most commonly to a friend (9%), a parent/adult in the family (4%), on the social media platform (2%), to a sibling (2%) or to a teacher (1%). Almost half (46%) felt that the matter was not dealt with well at all.

When analysed further by gender, we see a clear pattern that girls are more likely to experience something nasty or unpleasant online, both among the younger cohort (23% girls vs 17% boys) and the older cohort (20% girls vs 15% boys). Among the older cohort 61% of those identifying as non-binary and 50% of trans respondents reported something nasty or unpleasant happening to them online in the previous couple of months.

When we look even more closely at the nature of the negative online experience by gender, we see further important distinctions. For instance, among the younger cohort (8-13), 4% of girls compared to 3% of boys reported that they had been sent something inappropriate that they hadn't asked for, while 4.2% of girls compared to 2.8% of boys reported that they had seen in appropriate things online. Among the older cohort (8-14) there are large differences in most of the categories of online harm, with higher incidence consistently reported by girls. For instance, girls (5.4%) were 3 times more likely than boys (1.7%) to be asked to send nude photos/videos of themselves, girls (6.9%) were more than twice as likely as boys (3%) to be sent inappropriate photos they didn't ask for, and twice as likely to see or be sent pornography (girls: 5.6% vs boys 3.0%). Girls were also more likely to see or be sent content promoting self-harm (girls: 3.3% vs boys 2.2%), eating disorders (girls: 4.1% vs boys 1.6%) or suicide (girls: 3.6% vs boys 3.0%).

There was also some discussion around individual negative online experiences in the pupil focus groups, with some reports (verbally and in the written group exercise) of dangers posed by predators, scammers, hackers, viruses, catfishing, bullying, groomers, trolls, stalkers, explicit content and 'dangerous trends'. As might be expected, there was more detail provided by the post-primary, youth club and LGBTQI+ participants than by the primary and special school participants, but in all groups there was evidence of an awareness of risk and in some cases reports of negative experiences, including sexting which many post-primary pupils acknowledged as commonplace. Among the post-primary LGBTQI+ group (mixed) and also the Youth Club group (all girls), there was a strong sense that a certain level of online danger was normal and almost to be expected. This normalisation and acceptability of risk stand in sharp contrast to the responses given by teachers, parents and the professionals who completed the qualitative survey. LGBTQI+ participants noted that, for instance, "Twitter is full of racism, homophobia, offensive stuff and oh aye the adult content" while others referred to "suicide tags" and images of self-harm. As one boy concluded: "The world online is a great, amazing place to be and also it's a hell hole. At the same time." When asked how they respond, the answer was given "You just hit skip", suggesting that this was not something to be particularly concerned about. Similarly, the young women in the youth club setting also referred to as "Creeps", "Paedos" or as "catfish(ers)" and being asked to "send private stuff". They also admitted that situations such as the sexting scenario that was used as a stimulus, were common, with one girl attributing the problem to the fact that "wee boys in this generation are so porned out". In all cases, while the young people were aware of the dangers and had personal experience of potentially dangerous situations, they were still very willing to remain online.

Experiences as online witnesses or bystanders

From the survey responses, 24% of 8-13 year olds and 27% of 14-18 year olds had seen or heard something nasty or unpleasant happening to one of their friends online. This is much lower than the 33% of 14-16 year olds who reported witnessing such behaviour in the EU-wide Blurred Lives project.

As with their own experiences, this was most typically via social media, and related to a fallout with friends or how they look. The perpetrator was reported to be most commonly someone unknown to them, or a friend/someone they know. Among the older cohort, the range of experiences was very broad, including mean or nasty comments (14%), involvement in a fight (12%), lies or rumours being spread about them (11%), but also experiences around embarrassing photos being shared without permission (6%), being excluded from a group (6%), having their account hacked (5%) or being asked to send nude photos of themselves or to expose themselves (5%).

Experiences as perpetrators of negative online behaviours

When asked in the online survey if they had deliberately done anything nasty or unpleasant to anyone else online, just 6% of 8-13 year olds and 7.5% of 14-18 year olds said 'yes'. Again this is much lower than the 11% of young people aged 14-16 reported in the Blurred Lives Project.

The most commonly cited reason for the behaviour was a 'fallout with friends', followed by 'how they look', and it was most commonly directed at a friend or someone they knew. This negative online behaviour was (among both cohorts) most commonly being 'mean to someone online' and was carried out most often on social media. Among the older cohort, the range of options was much greater and there were also less common reports of starting an argument or fight, threatening someone, excluding someone from a group, trying to blackmail someone, posting or sharing pornography and asking others to send nude photos.

6.2 Internet Safety: Current Awareness and Future Directions

The theme of internet safety pervaded every element of the research study. From the answers to the online survey, the vast majority of children and young people in both age cohorts (8-13 year olds: 96.4%; 14-18 year olds 96.5%) reported that they had received training on online safety, most commonly (for both age cohorts) from school teachers, parents/carers and youth workers in classrooms, assemblies and at home. When analysed further, there is evidence that children with special educational needs (SEN) were slightly less likely to have received online safety training across both age cohorts (8-13 year olds: non-SEN 97% vs SEN 92%; 14-18 year olds: non-SEN 97% vs non-SEN 95%). In terms of gender there were also small differences: girls were more likely than boys to have received online safety training across both age cohorts (8-13 year olds: girls 98% vs boys 95%; 14-18 year olds: girls 99% vs boys 95%).

Respondents were also asked how useful they had found the online safety information they had received. The feedback was generally positive. On a scale of 1-5 (where 1=not very useful and 5=very useful), the majority of children and young people in both age cohorts rated the information highly, giving a score of 3-5 out of a maximum of 5, though the scoring was markedly lower among the older cohort (8-13 year olds: 75.3%; 14-18 year olds 64.1%).

When analysed further and considered in relation to whether they had experienced anything nasty or unpleasant happening to them in the past couple of months, the research shows clearly across both age cohorts that those children who had received online training were less likely to report negative online experiences. For instance, among the younger cohort, only 20% of those who had received online safety training reported negative online experiences compared to 27% of those who had received no online safety training. Among the older cohort, the difference was even greater: only 18% of those who had received online safety training reported negative online experiences compared to 40% of those who had received no online safety training. This would seem to confirm the value of children and young people receiving online safety training, perhaps encouraging them to take necessary online safety precautions which serve to protect them more effectively from potential harm.

The survey also highlighted high levels of confidence expressed by the children and young people in terms of keeping themselves safe online. Again using a scale of 1-5 (where 1=not very confident and 5=very confident), 75.1% of 8-13 year olds and 78.5% of 14-18 year olds gave a score of 4 or 5 out of a maximum of 5. These high confidence levels were reflected in the focus group interviews with the children and young people. Although there were understandable differences in levels of understanding between very young children and those with learning difficulties compared to the post-primary young people interviewed, there was evidence in every case that the children and young people had received online safety training (most commonly through school) and that they were positive about that training. The comments of the young people reflected that, often noting that the schools were doing their best and that they had received training from the teachers themselves but also from outside agencies, as one post-primary girl commented: "No, I think the school's very good. Like, telling you everything you need to know".

Several post-primary pupils commented that there could never be enough online safety training and that the training should start even younger, as one boy remarked: "You could never have enough of that. More assemblies, more, you know, personal development lessons…especially for the younger ones". Those pupils in the Irish Medium post-primary school (along with their vice-principal) expressed a desire for more of that training and more resources to be available in Irish. Across every group, and commensurate with their age and ability, there is reassurance that the children and young people expressed confidence that they knew what to do if something nasty or unpleasant did happen to them online.

When asked in the survey who should talk to them about online safety, the most commonly reported answers across both age cohorts were school teachers and parents/carers, and there were high levels of support for online safety information to be shared with them in class or in assembly in particular.

When asked in the survey who was responsible for improving the safety of young people online, the most popular responses were parents/carers, schools, government and social media companies. In the focus groups, this was supplemented by several young people who acknowledged that they too had a responsibility to act respectfully at all times online and to demonstrate a level of "common sense."

This was developed further by one year 11 boy in particular, who, in response to the sexting scenario, expressed a considerable degree of maturity, reflecting on the role of parents in instilling moral values in their children (in this case their sons in particular) which would serve them well in potentially difficult online situations such as the sexting scenario discussed, where a boy had asked for a nude photo from a girl:

> "It's also like how you're brought up, if you know what I mean, like if you're brought up right, as a boy, you wouldn't ask for anything off a girl, and I think that's, I never would, ever, because that's what you're brought up to do, that's what your parents have said to you. But just some people haven't been said that, they don't know if it's right or wrong."

In terms of suggestions for improvement, in the focus groups, there was a lot of discussion around age verification in particular, with many of the post-primary and some of the primary children admitting openly that they had falsified their year of birth in order to access popular social media apps and websites. In response there were useful suggestions from the young people in terms of social media companies being required to ask for a form of ID or birth certificate in order to gain access to certain apps.

Comments from the adults were (as would be expected) more developed, comprehensive and nuanced. Teachers and parents acknowledged the benefits of online technology including educational benefits in the form of learning apps and Virtual Learning Environments, communication with friends and family, the positive role it played during the Covid-19 pandemic and the increasing accessibility of online materials for children with special educational needs. However, it was clear that practice in schools varies between settings: for instance, some schools appear to have banned pupil use of mobile phones entirely (except perhaps as part of a teacher-led lesson) while others adopted a more tolerant approach. Approaches to teaching online safety also varies between schools, though most seemed to include this as part of the PDMU/PSHE (primary) or LLW (post-primary) curriculum or through discrete ICT lessons (both primary and post-primary), and there was frequent mention of a particular focus in assembly and in class around Safer Internet Day each year. There was no mention by teachers of tackling online safety issues (e.g. healthy online relationships) through RSE lessons, although the importance of this was raised by several of the professionals.

Teacher confidence and competence in delivering online safety training emerged as a potential challenge for some. In their focus groups the post-primary pupils had mentioned that training was provided by school staff but also by outside agencies and the PSNI. Given that teachers voiced concern about the lack of available training and resources through the Education Authority (in English and Irish) and in terms of how they could possibly "stay on top of websites or apps because they change so often", it would appear that schools feel the need to supplement their own competences by enlisting external support.

As discussed above, the online safety training delivered to young people was judged (in the online survey) to be useful or very useful by a majority of pupils (though the older cohort gave lower ratings than the younger cohort). In the qualitative survey responses by the professional group, there were some reports that young people felt there was "nothing new or fresh" in the training they were receiving in schools, and some reports of a low level of understanding of online risks and long-term consequences of online activity among some pupils. There were calls from several of the professionals for more appropriate, relevant content to be included within the Northern Ireland Curriculum, and

that this should include a focus on the positive benefits of the internet as well as teaching children and young people how to stay safe. Here there was mention too of the importance of the RSE curriculum as a vehicle to teach children about the importance of developing healthy relationships (including sexual relationships) both on- and offline. Involving children themselves in providing ideas and feedback on potential curriculum and lesson content was also seen as valuable. The professionals acknowledged the challenges faced by educators in trying to keep up to date with online risks and so advocated regular, relevant training and support for teachers and parents to become a priority. Finally, the professionals (echoing the opinions of parents and children and young people) felt that internet / social media companies needed to do more and/or should be forced to do more by government in order to protect users, especially children and young people, from any form of online harm.

CHAPTER 7
Conclusion

7.1 Limitations of the Research

This timely research has provided new insights into the online lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland. As with any research, the limitations must be acknowledged, and these include the sample size. While the survey attracted almost 6,500 responses from children and young people (representing around 2% of the total school population of around 330,000), we cannot claim that this was truly representative of all children and young people in Northern Ireland. For instance, we recognise that younger children (under 8) were excluded from the survey, as it was felt that it was too long and challenging in terms of the content of the questions for this younger age-group. Similarly, we acknowledge that the survey would have been viewed as too challenging for many children with learning difficulties, especially those with severe (SLD) or profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD). Finally, the survey was available in English only, and we acknowledge that this may have discouraged some Irish Medium schools from engaging with it.

Nonetheless, the research team endeavoured to compensate for this as much as possible through including a focus group for Key Stage 1 children (under 8 years old), a focus group in an Irish Medium post-primary school (8 year 11 pupils) as well as the perspectives of a primary principal and post-primary pastoral vice-principal from the Irish medium sector, and two focus groups with children with severe learning difficulties in a special school. These additions, alongside the inclusion of interviews with Roma Traveller children, a post-primary LGBTQI+ group and young people from a Youth Club in a disadvantaged urban context, all represented attempts to extend the scope of the research beyond traditional mainstream settings. We believe that this was one of the strengths of the research design.

Finally, we recognise that this research was conducted within a very short time-frame and during a period when many schools were working under the additional pressures of industrial action, including Action Short of Strike and at least one half-day of strike action. We are therefore grateful to school leaders and teachers for facilitating this important research activity in challenging circumstances.

7.2 Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the evidence gathered from this research project, the following conclusions and recommendations are offered:

1. Children and young people in Northern Ireland reported a wide range of positive online experiences. They use a range of online devices (predominantly phones) which allow them to enjoy listening to music, watching videos, playing games, messaging friends and family, shopping, sharing photos, following celebrities/influencers, learning and much more. For children and young people, being online is not a bolt-on to their lives; it is absolutely integral to how they live almost every aspect of their lives today. As one young person commented: "We're teenagers. We spend most of our day on the internet." For many children and young people and particularly for some young people at risk of exclusion (e.g. LGBTQI+ young people) being online represents an important source of 'comfort', support and genuine friendship. Such positive messages are an important and timely reminder to adults (parents, teachers, professionals, policy makers) who are prone to adopting an exclusively negative discourse when discussing children and young people's online lives.

2. This study has also provided evidence that children and young people are spending many hours online each day, on school days but especially at weekends and during holidays. While most internet use is within reasonable limits (2-4 hours per school day), there is evidence that many children and young people are spending much greater amounts of time online e.g. 34% of 14-18 years olds reported spending 4 hours or more online on a school day, while at weekends and during the holidays 64% reported that they spent 4 hours or more online, with 22% reporting more than 7 hours per day. Several young people in the focus groups reported even higher internet use, with up to 23 hours per day cited by one young person. The impact of this high usage, as reported by the young people and confirmed by their teachers, was a growing trend for pupils to come in to school "wrecked" or "in a complete state" or with their "heads down… sleeping" in class. All post-primary focus groups confirmed that this was commonplace and becoming more common, while 27% of the survey respondents (aged 14-18) reported feeling tired the next day as a result of their online activity at night. While we would resist a simplistic binary association between screen time and wellbeing, we feel that there are nonetheless grounds for concern and would recommend that attention is given to this through meaningful dialogue with children and young people themselves in schools and in the home. We would therefore recommend and endorse the "precautionary approach" proposed by the UK Chief Medical Officers (2019), noting their concern that excessive screen time can "displace" (p.6) health-promoting activities by children such as physical activity, healthy diet, regular sleep and quality time spent with families. Moreover we would urge families to "try to find a healthy balance" (p.6), agreeing boundaries for screen use and with parents themselves being careful to model moderate screen use in front of their children.

3. A further conclusion relates to the role played by parents (and/or carers) in supporting their children to grow up safe online. The findings of this study found a disparity between children and young people's perceptions of their parents' (often low) level of interest in what they were doing online, and the genuine fears and concerns expressed by the primary and post-primary parents who volunteered for the focus groups. For instance, only 17% of 8-13 year olds and just 8% of 14-18 year olds reported that their parents were 'very interested' in what they were doing online, while 20% of 8-13 year olds and 34% of 14-18 year olds felt that their parents were 'not at all interested' in their online activities. By contrast, in the focus groups, parents seemed extremely interested in what their children were doing online. Indeed, they often expressed feelings of guilt, fear, powerlessness and exasperation as they sought to strike a balance between, on the one hand, the pressure to 'bow to peer pressure' by making it possible for their children to be online (by buying phones or downloading apps), and on the other hand, their very real concerns about what their children were being exposed to online and the impact that screen time was having on family relationships and their ability to communicate face-to-face. There is consequently a need for further research into parental experiences, perceptions and behaviours in relation to supporting their children's online lives, but also an urgent need for more training and resources to build confidence and competence among parents. Only through relevant and accessible training and support for parents, can we address the perception among too many children and young people that their parents are simply not interested in what they are doing online. The challenge in doing so is to develop an appropriate model to communicate effectively with busy parents, and to do so in a way that is informative, supportive and non-judgemental.

4. This study has found clear evidence that around 1 in 5 children and young people in Northern Ireland (20% of 8-13 year olds and 18% of 14-18 year olds) have experienced something nasty or unpleasant happening to them online over the past couple of months, most commonly on social media apps. While this compares favourably with two other recent studies (Ofcom, 2023 and Blurred Lives Project, 2023 in press), this still represents an issue of significant concern for policy makers and educators. This research has highlighted the wide range of online risks experienced by children and young people in Northern Ireland, especially 14-18 year olds. The results have also shown (as in other previous studies) that girls are much more likely to experience something nasty or unpleasant online, both among the younger cohort (23% girls vs 17% boys) and the older cohort (20% girls vs 15% boys). For instance, among the older cohort (14-18 years old), girls (5.4%) were 3 times more likely than boys (1.7%) to be asked to send nude photos/videos of themselves, girls (6.9%) were more than twice as likely as boys (3%) to be sent inappropriate photos they didn't ask for, and twice as likely to see or be sent pornography (girls: 5.6% vs boys 3.0%). Girls were also more likely to see or be sent content promoting self-harm (girls: 3.3% vs boys 2.2%), eating disorders (girls: 4.1% vs boys 1.6%) or suicide (girls: 3.6% vs boys 3.0%).

Levels of reporting were low for boys and girls (45% among 8-13 year olds and 30% among 14-18 year olds), and in both cases children and young people were most likely to report to friends and family. In terms of the outcome of reporting, over a quarter (27%) of 8-13 year olds and almost half (46%) of 14-18 year olds felt that the matter was not dealt with well at all.

Once again, this highlights the need for further research, particularly into the negative experiences of girls online, but already from this research it is clear that more needs to be done to protect girls in particular from online risk or harm through education, and a joined up approach which promotes healthy relationships both on- and offline for both boys and girls. Such an approach must involve schools, parents, youth workers and professionals working together with children and young people to address the targeting of girls online. A currently underexploited opportunity is offered by Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in the Northern Ireland Curriculum which has the potential to address these sensitive issues. It is recommended that content relating to healthy online relationships should become mandatory, not least given the growing prevalence (as evidenced in this report) of toxic masculinity and online pornography, and the negative impact this is having on boys' attitudes, language and behaviour towards girls.

The clear evidence presented through this study of the online (sexual) victimisation of girls in particular in Northern Ireland also serves to justify and inform the ongoing work of the Northern Ireland Executive Office to develop a much needed Ending Violence against Women and Girls Strategy.

5. While there were high levels of confidence in keeping themselves safe online among more than three-quarters of the children and young people, there is evidently a strong need to provide relevant, up-to-date, age-appropriate, supportive and engaging training and resources (in English and Irish) for children and young people, but also for parents and teachers/educators. This research has highlighted the benefits of children receiving online training, revealing that (across both age cohorts) children who had been trained were less likely to report recent negative online experiences happening to them than those children and young people who had not received any training. This evidence should serve as an encouragement to those currently providing such training: clearly online safety training is helping to protect more of our children and young people from harm. However, there were clear messages from children and young people, parents, teachers and professionals that we need to do more, and that there are genuine challenges in keeping up with the constant evolution, proliferation and diversification of online apps and the associated risks. From the data gathered and also the review of current training and resources undertaken, we would recommend that action is taken as a priority to provide a central, managed resource hub where children and young people, parents and teachers could easily find resources and training designed specifically for them.

This would provide much-needed coherence and quality assurance to the training and resources currently available, where too often schools and parents are left to their own devices to source training and support, without the time or understanding to assess whether it is truly fit for purpose. We would also recommend that, where possible, children and young people themselves are involved in a participatory process of co-construction of future resources and training to help ensure relevance and appropriateness of content and mode of delivery.

6. Finally, we would recommend that there is greater regulation of social media companies by government to help ensure: closer monitoring of online material that is potentially offensive or harmful to children and young people; more transparent, consistent and child-friendly online reporting mechanisms; the timely removal of offensive material; and stricter enforcement of age restrictions on certain apps or sites, where currently it is much too easy for children to enter a false date of birth.

In conclusion, this has been a large, multi-method, participatory study which has yielded important new insights into the lived online experiences of a broad spectrum of children and young people in Northern Ireland. It is our sincere hope that its findings and recommendations will help to inform the delivery of the actions associated with the Northern Ireland Executive's *Keeping Children and Young People Safe: An Online Safety Strategy 2020-2025*, and so contribute to our children and young people growing up safe online.

References

Agnew, E. (2021) 'Sexting among Young People: Towards a Gender Sensitive Approach'. *The International Journal or Children's Rights*. 29, pp.3-30.

Aiken, M. (2017) *The Cyber Effect: A Pioneering Cyberpsychologist Explains How Human Behaviour Changes Online*. London: John Murray.

Albury, K., Crawford, K., Byron, P. and Mathews, B. (2013) *Young People and Sexting in Australia: Ethics, Representation and the Law*, available at https://www.eprints.qut.edu.au/109550/1/Young_People_And_Sexting_Final.pdf (accessed 20.05.23).

Barrense-Dias, Y., Berchtold, A, Surís, J.C. and Akre, C. (2017) 'Sexting and the Definition Issue', *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 61 (5), pp. 544-554, doi: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.05.009

Beckett, H. (2011) *'Not a world away' The sexual exploitation of children and young people in Northern Ireland. Belfast:* Barnardo's. Available at https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-12/13932_not_a_world_away_full_report.pdf (accessed 21.08.2023).

Belfast Youth Forum (2019) *Any Use? Young people's opinions on Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Belfast*, available at https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/documents/youth-forum/any-use-report (accessed 09.03.23).

Burnette, C. B., Kwitowski, M. A. and Mazzeo, S. E. (2017) '"I don't need people to tell me I'm pretty on social media:" A qualitative study of social media and body image in early adolescent girls', *Body Image*, 23, pp. 114–125. doi: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2017.09.001.

Bunting, L., McCartan, C., Davidson, G., Grant, A., McBride, O., Mulholland, C., Murphy, J., Schubotz, D., Cameron, J. and Shevlin, M. (2020) *The Mental Health of Children and Parents in Northern Ireland. Results of the Youth Wellbeing Prevalence Survey.* Available at: https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/219940525/Youth_Wellbeing_FINAL.pdf

Children's Commissioner (2023a) 'A lot of it is actually just abuse' Young people and pornography (January 2023 – Dame Rachel de Souza) Available at: https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/02/cc-a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography-updated.pdf

Children's Commissioner (2023b) Evidence on pornography's influence on harmful sexual behaviour among children (May 2023 – Dame Rachel de Souza) Available at: https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/05/Evidence-on-pornographys-influence-on-harmful-sexual-behaviour-among-children.pdf

Childnet International (2021) *Sexting*, available at https://www.childnet.com/help-and-advice/sexting/ (accessed 20.05.23).

Choo, K.K.R. (2009) 'Online child grooming: A literature review on the misuse of social networking sites for grooming children for sexual offences'.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment [CCEA] (2023a) *Using ICT*, available at https://ccea.org.uk/key-stages-1-2/curriculum/using-ict (accessed 06.03.23).

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment [CCEA] (2023b) *Relationships and Sexuality Education Progression Framework*, available at https://ccea.org.uk/learning-resources/relationships-and-sexuality-education-rse/relationships-and-sexuality-education (accessed 03.03.23).

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment [CCEA] (2023c) *About Relationships and Sexuality Education*, available at https://ccea.org.uk/learning-resources/relationships-and-sexuality-education-rse/about-relationships-and-sexuality (accessed 06.03.23).

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment [CCEA] (2022) *Relationships and Sexuality Education Progression Framework*, available at https://ccea.org.uk/downloads/docs/ccea-asset/Resources/RSE%20Progression%20Framework_1.pdf (accessed 20.0.23).

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment [CCEA] (2017) *CCEA GCSE Specification in Learning for Life and Work*, available at https://ccea.org.uk/downloads/docs/Specifications/GCSE/GCSE%20Learning%20for%20Life%20and%20Work%20%282017%29/GCSE%20Learning%20for%20Life%20and%20Work%20%282017%29-specification-Standard.pdf (accessed 11.03.23).

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment [CCEA] (2015a) *Relationships and Sexuality Education Guidance: An Update for Primary Schools*, available at https://ccea.org.uk/downloads/docs/ccea-asset/Curriculum/Relationships%20and%20Sexuality%20Education%20Guidance%20An%20Update%20for%20Primary%20Schools.pdf (accessed 11.03.23)

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment [CCEA] (2015b) *Relationships and Sexuality Education Guidance: An Update for Post-Primary Schools*, available at https://ccea.org.uk/downloads/docs/ccea-asset/Curriculum/Relationships%20and%20Sexuality%20Education%20Guidance%20An%20Update%20for%20Post-Primary%20Schools.pdf (accessed 03.03.23).

Dubicka and Theodosia (2020) *Technology use and the mental health of children and young people*. Available at: https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/improving-care/better-mh-policy/college-reports/college-report-cr225.pdf (Accessed: 28 March 2023).

Criminal Justice Inspection (CJI) Northern Ireland (2020) Child Sexual Exploitation in Northern Ireland – An Inspection of the Criminal Justice System's Response. Available at https://www.cjini.org/TheInspections/Inspection-Reports/2020/April-June/Child-Sexual-Exploitation-in-Northern-Ireland (11.06.2023)

Davidson, J. (2014) *Sexting: Gender and Teens*, Rotterdam, Sense.

DfE (2017) Child Sexual Exploitation – Definition and a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers. Available at: https://www.psni.police.uk/safety-and-support/keeping-safe/child-sexual-exploitation (11.06.2023)

Department of Education (2011) *The nature and extent of pupil bullying in schools in the North of Ireland. Bangor: Department of Education.* Available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/research-reports-2011-nature-and-extent-pupil-bullying-schools-north-ireland

Department of Education (2016) *Online Safety Circular 2016/27*. Available at https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/DE%20Circular%202016.27%20Online%20Safety.pdf (accessed 26.05.23).

Department of Health (2017) *Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Department of Health. Available at https://www.rqia.org.uk/RQIA/media/RQIA/Resources/Providers%20Training%20Guidance/Co-operating-to-Safeguard-Children-and-Young-People-in-Northern-Ireland,-2017.pdf (accessed 23.05.23).

Department of Health (2019) *Protect Life 2 – Suicide Prevention Strategy 2019-2024.* Belfast: Department of Health. Available at https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/protectlife2 (accessed 01.06.2023)

Department of Health (2021) *Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031* Belfast: Department of Health. Available at https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-mhs-strategy-2021-2031.pdf (accessed 01.06.2023)

Department of Justice (2021) *Victim and Witness Strategy 2021-2024*. Belfast: Department of Justice. Available at https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/victim-and-witness-strategy-2021-2024 (accessed 01.06.2023)

Department of Justice (2022) Youth Justice Agency Performance Impact Report 2021-2022. Belfast: Department of Justice. Available at https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/yja-pir%202021-2022.pdf (accessed 04.06.2023).

Department of Justice (2023) *Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy*. Belfast: Department of Justice. Available at https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/consultations/domestic-and-sexual-abuse-strategy-2023-2030-0#:~:text=The%20strategy%20is%20designed%20around,over%20the%20next%20seven%20years. (accessed 01.06.2023)

Donelan, M. (2022) *Read the Secretary of State's open letter to parents, carers and guardians,* available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/michelle-donelan-writes-to-parents-setting-out-how-the-online-safety-bill-will-keep-children-safe/read-the-secretary-of-states-open-letter-to-parents-carers-and-guardians (accessed 26.05.23).

Döring, N. (2014) *Consensual sexting amongst adolescents: Risk prevention through abstinence education or safer sexting?*, available at https://cyberpsychology.eu/article/view/4303/3352 (accessed 20.05.23).

Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) *The Preventative Curriculum in Schools and Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) Centres*. Available online at: https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/the-preventative-curriculum-in-schools-and-education-other-than-at-school-eotas-centres_0.pdf

Executive Office (2022) *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls: Experiences and Attitudes of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland.* Belfast: The Executive Office. Available online at: https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/1evawg-experiences-attitudes-of-16-year-olds-ni-ni-report.pdf

Foster, J. M. (2017) 'Engaging Parents and Caregivers in the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse', *Journal of Trauma & Treatment*, 6. doi:10.4172/2167-1222.1000367

Gambling Commission (2022) *Young People and Gambling 2022*. Available at: https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/report/young-people-and-gambling-2022 (accessed 14.06.2023).

Gray, A.M., Coyle, L., Powell, R. and Harding S. (2020) *Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report*, available at https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-gender-expert-advisory-panel-report.pdf (accessed 10.03.23).

Guardian (2017) 'Blackmailer whose plot led to suicide of 17-year-old jailed in Romania'. Available online at https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/aug/29/blackmailer-plot-led-to-suicide-17-year-old-jailed-romania

Guggisberg, M. (2020) 'Sexually explicit video games and online pornography–The promotion of sexual violence: A critical commentary', *Aggression and violent behavior*, *53*, p.101432.

Hamilton, J., Purdy, N., Willems, R., Smith, P.K., Culbert, C., Brighi, A., Fiedler, N., Guarini, A., Mameli, C., Menin, D., Scheithauer, H., Völlink, T. (2020) 'Using the Quality Circle approach to empower disadvantaged youth in addressing cyberbullying among adolescents: An exploration across five European countries', Pastoral Care in Education (Special Issue), vol.38, issue 3, pp. 254-272. https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2020.1788127

Hinduja, S. and Patchin, J.W. (2012) *School Climate 2.0*, London, Corwin.

Holoyda, B., Landess, J., Sorrentino, R. and Hatters Friendman, S. (2018) 'Trouble at teens' fingertips: Youth sexting and the law', *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, 36 (2), pp. 170-181, doi: 10.1002/bsl.2335

Hooft Graafland, J. (2018) "New technologies and 21st century children: Recent trends and outcomes", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 179, OECD Publishing, Paris. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/e071a505-en

Internet Watch Foundation (2022) *Annual Report*, available at https://www.iwf.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are/annual-report-2022/ (accessed 21.08.2023)

Jørgensen, C.R., Weckesser, A., Turner, J. and Wade A. (2019) 'Young people's views on sexting education and support needs: findings and recommendations from a UK-based study', *Sex Education*, 19 (1), pp. 25-40, doi: 10.1080/14681811.2018.1475283

Lenhart, A. (2009) *Teens and Sexting,* available at https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2009/12/PIP_Teens_and_Sexting.pdf (accessed 20.05.23).

Lee, M., Crofts, T., McGovern, A. and Milivojevic, S. (2015) *Sexting among young people: Perceptions and practices*, available at https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/tandi508.pdf (accessed 20.05.23).

Leonard M., Hughes S., and Sheppard D. (2020) *An Evaluation of how Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland member agencies are effectively responding to and managing Child Sexual Exploitation within Northern Ireland.* SBNI, Belfast. Available at: https://www.safeguardingni.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/SBNI%20CSE%20Report%20PDF_0.pdf (accessed 21.08.2023)

Lippman, J.R. and Campbell, S.W. (2014) 'Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't … If You're a Girl: Relational and Normative Contexts of Adolescent Sexting in the United States', *Journal of Children and Media*, 8 (4), pp. 371-386, doi: 10.1080/17482798.2014.923009

Livingstone, S. (2021) 'The Rise and Fall of Screen Time' in V. C. Strasburger (Ed.) *Masters of Media: Controversies and Solutions, Volume 1*, London: Rowman and Littelfield. [ch.5 pp.89-103].

Livingstone, S., Davidson, J., Bryce, J., Batool, S. (2017) *Children's online activities, risks and safety. A literature review by the UKCCIS Evidence Group.* London: UKCCIS. Available online: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-online-activities-risks-and-safety-a-literature-review-by-the-ukccis-evidence-group

Livingstone, S., and Stoilova, M. (2021) 'The 4Cs: Classifying Online Risk to Children. (CO:RE Short Report Series on Key Topics)'. Hamburg: Leibniz-Institut für Medienforschung | Hans-Bredow-Institut (HBI); CO:RE - Children Online: Research and Evidence. https://doi.org/10.21241/ssoar.71817

Lounsbury, K., Mitchell, K.J. and Finkelhor, D. (2011) *The True Prevalence of "Sexting"*, available at https://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1063&context=ccrc (accessed 20.05.23).

Madigan, S., Ly, A., Rash, C.L., Van Ouytsel, J. and Temple, J.R. (2018) 'Prevalence of Multiple Forms of Sexting Behavior Among Youth', *JAMA Pediatrics*, 172 (4), pp. 327-335, doi: 10.1001/jamapediatrics.2017.5314

Mameli, C., Menabò, L., Brighi, A., Menin, D., Culbert, C., Hamilton, J., Scheithauer, H., Smith, P.K., Völlink, T., Willems, R.A., Purdy, N., Guarini, A. (2022) 'Stay safe and strong: Characteristics, roles and emotions of student-produced comics related to cyberbullying'. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. 19(14): 8776 https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9324025/

Marshall, K. (2014) *The Marshall Report – Child Sexual Exploitation in Northern Ireland. Report of the Independent Inquiry*. Available at: https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/marshall-report (11.06.2023)

Martellozzo, E., Monaghan, A., Adler, J.R., Davidson, J., Leyva, R., & Horvath, M.A.H. (2017). *'…I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it…': A quantitative and qualitative examination of the impact of online pornography on the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of children and young people*. London: Children's Commissioner and NSPCC. Retrieved from www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/MDX%20NSPCC%20OCC%20pornography%20report%20June%202016.pdf .

Miller, R. (2021) *Relationships and Sexuality Education should be standardised, comprehensive, more inclusive – and mandatory*, available at https://scopeni.nicva.org/article/relationships-and-sexuality-education-should-be-standardised-comprehensive-more-inclusive (accessed 09.03.23).

Milmo, D. (2023) *Age checks, trolls and deepfakes: what's in the online safety bill?*, available at https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/jan/17/age-checks-trolls-and-deepfakes-whats-in-the-online-safety-bill (accessed 26.05.23)

Milmo, D. (2022) *Social media firms face big UK fines if they fail to stop sexist and racist content*, available at https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/nov/28/social-media-firms-face-big-uk-fines-if-they-fail-to-stop-sexist-and-racist-content (accessed 26.05.23).

NICCY (2018) Reflections on Government Child Sexual Exploitation Progress Reports (Third and Fourth Composite Reports). Belfast: NICCY. Available at: https://www.niccy.org/wp-content/uploads/media/3203/niccy-2018-review-of-cse-progress-reports-14-dec-18.pdf (11.06.2023).

Northern Ireland Curriculum (2011) *Personal Development Guidance for Key Stage 4*, available at https://ccea.org.uk/downloads/docs/ccea-asset/Resource/Personal%20Development%20Guidance%20for%20Key%20Stage%204.pdf (accessed 10.03.23).

Northern Ireland Executive (2019) "Keeping Children and Young People Safe: An Online E-Safety Strategy and Three Year Action Plan for Northern Ireland 2019-2022' Consultation Document. Available online at https://hscbusiness.hscni.net/pdf/E-safety%20Strategy%20Consultation%20Document%20Feb%202019.pdf

Northern Ireland Executive (2021a) *Keeping children and young people safe: an Online Strategy for Northern Ireland 2020-2025*, available at https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/online-safety-strategy.pdf (accessed 23.05.23).

Northern Ireland Executive (2021b) *Online Safety Strategy 3-Year Action Plan*, available at https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/online-safety-action-plan.pdf (accessed 26.05.23).

Northern Ireland Executive (2021c) *Programme for Government*. Available at https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/programme-government-pfg-2021 (accessed 23.05.23).

NSPCC (2021) *Protecting Children from Sexual Exploitation*. NSPCC website. Available at: https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation (11.06.2023)

Ofcom (2018) Children and parents: Media use and attitudes report. Available online at https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0024/134907/Children-and-Parents-Media-Use-and-Attitudes-2018.pdf

Ofcom (2020) *Children and parents: Media use and attitudes report 2019*. UK: Ofcom. Available at: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0023/190616/children-media-use-attitudes-2019-report.pdf (Accessed: 28 March 2023).

Ofcom (2023) Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report 2023. Available online at: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2023

Ofsted (2021) *Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges*. UK: OFSTED. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges (Accessed 28 March 2023).

Olweus, D. (1999) 'Sweden'. In P.K. Smith, Y. Morita, J. Junger-Tas, D. Olweus, R. Catalano and P. Slee (Eds.) *The Nature of School Bullying: A Cross-National Perspective* (pp.7-27). London and New York: Routledge.

Paat, Y.F. and Markham, C. (2021) 'Digital crime, trauma, and abuse: Internet safety and cyber risks for adolescents and emerging adults in the 21st century', *Social Work in Mental Health*, *19*(1), pp.18-40

Parenting NI (2020) Big parenting survey 2019 findings. Northern Ireland: Parenting NI. Available at: https://www.parentingni.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/BPS-2019-Findings-Final-online.pdf (Accessed: 28 March 2023).

Parentzone (2019) The Rip-Off Games - How the new business model of online gaming exploits children. Available at: https://parentzone.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-12/PZ_The_Rip-off_Games_2019.pdf (accessed: 14.06.2023)

Patchin, J. (2018) 'Are Gamers more likely to be Bullies?' Blogpost. Available at: https://cyberbullying.org/are-gamers-more-likely-to-be-bullies (accessed 04.06.2023).

Patchin, J.W. and Hinduja, S. (2019) 'The nature and extent of sexting among a national sample of middle and high school students in the US', *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *48*, pp.2333-2343.

Peter, J., and Valkenburg, P. M. (2016). Adolescents and pornography: A review of 20 years of research. *The Journal of Sex Research, 53*(4–5), 509-31. doi:10.1080/00224499.2016.1143441

Phippen, A. (2012) *Sexting: An Exploration of Practices, Attitudes and Influences*, available at http://www.channel4.com/media/c4-news/pdf/11NSPCCresearch2.pdf (accessed 20.05.23).

Pinkerton, J., Bunting, L., Hayes, D. and Lazenblatt, A. (2015) *Getting Focused and Staying Focused. Looked After Children, Going Missing and Child Sexual Exploitation.* Belfast: SBNI/QUB. Available at: https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dhssps/getting-focused-staying-focused-1.pdf (accessed 21.08.2023).

Police Service of Northern Ireland PSNI (2023a) Child Sexual Exploitation. Available at: https://www.psni.police.uk/safety-and-support/keeping-safe/child-sexual-exploitation (accessed 11.06.2023).

Police Service of Northern Ireland PSNI (2023b) Recorded Crime in Northern Ireland 1998-99 to 2022-23. Data disclosed to SBNI in advance of publication.

Przybylski, A.K. (2019) 'Exploring Adolescent Cyber Victimization in Mobile Games: Preliminary evidence from a British cohort'. *Cyberpsychol Behav Soc Netw.* 22(3):227-231. doi: 10.1089/cyber.2018.0318.

Przybylski A.K. and Weinstein N. (2017) 'A large-scale test of the Goldilocks Hypothesis'. *Psychological Science*. 28 (2) pp. 204–215. doi: 10.1177/0956797616678438.

Purdy, N., Hamilton, J., Smith, P.K., Culbert, C., Scheithauer, H., Fiedler, N., Brighi, A., Mameli, C., Guarini, A-L., Menin, D., Völlink, T., Willems, R. (2021) 'Using focus groups and quality circles to enable pupil voice in European teenagers from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds' [book chapter] in L. Schiamberg and M. Wright (Eds.) Child and Adolescent Exposure to Online Risks, Elsevier.

Purdy, N. and McGuckin, C. (2015) 'Cyberbullying, Schools and the Law: A comparative study in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland'. *Educational Research*, 57, 4, 420-436.

Reeves, J., Soutar, E., Green, S. and Crowther, T. (2018) 'Children and young people's vulnerabilities to grooming', *Contemporary Perspective on Child Psychology and Education* (2018): 119.

Ringrose, J., Gill, R., Livingstone, S. and Harvey, L. (2012) *A Qualitative Study of Children and Young People and 'Sexting'*, available at https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1511514/1/sexting_research_report_wdf89269.pdf (accessed 21.05.23).

Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2019) *The health impacts of screen time: a guide for clinicians and parents*. London: RCPCH. Available online at https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2018-12/rcpch_screen_time_guide_-_final.pdf

Royal College of Psychiatrists (2019) *Psychiatrists should consider impact of social media on all children they assess, leading medical body says for first time*. UK: RC PSYCH. Available at: https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/news-and-features/latest-news/detail/2019/03/30/psychiatrists-should-consider-impact-of-social-media-on-all-children-they-assess-leading-medical-body-says-for-first-time (Accessed 28 March 2023).

Rudolph, J. and Zimmer-Gembeck, M.J. (2018) 'Parents as protectors: A qualitative study of parents' views on child sexual abuse prevention', *Child abuse & neglect*, *85*, pp.28-38.

Safeguarding and Child Protection Association [SACPA] (2022) *Sex education in Northern Irish schools 'inadequate', says commissioner*, available at https://www.sacpa.org.uk/2022/01/31/sex-education-in-northern-irish-schools-inadequate-says-commissioner/ (accessed 10.03.23).

Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland [SBNI] (2014) Child Sexual Exploitation: Definition and Guidance. Available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/child-sexual-exploitation-definition-and-guidance.pdf (accessed 14.06.2023)

Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland [SBNI] (2022) *Strategic Plan 2022-2026*, available at https://www.safeguardingni.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/SBNI%20Strategic%20Plan%202022-2026%20Final%20v1.0.pdf (accessed 24.05.23).

Safer Schools NI (2022) *Your Guide to the Online Safety Bill*, available at https://saferschoolsni.co.uk/guide-to-online-safety-bill/ (accessed 26.05.23).

Schubotz, D. (2012) *Messed Up? Sexual Lifestyles of 16-year olds in Northern Ireland*, available at https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2018-08/update80.pdf (accessed 10.03.23).

Setty, E. (2019) 'A Right-Based Approach to Youth Sexting: Challenging Risk, Shame and the Denial of Rights to Bodily and Sexual Expression Within Youth Digital Sexual Culture', *International Journal of Bullying Prevention*, 1, pp. 298-311, doi: 10.1007/s42380-019-00050-6

Shin, W. and Lwin MO. (2017) 'How does "talking about the internet with others" affect teenagers' experience of online risks? The role of active mediation by parents, peers, and school teachers', New Media & Society 19(7): 1109–1126.

Slee, P.T., Campbell, M., and Spears, B. (2012) Child, adolescent and family development (3rd edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Smahel, D., Machackova, H., Mascheroni, G., Dedkova, L., Staksrud, E., Ólafsson, K., Livingstone, S., and Hasebrink, U. (2020). *EU Kids Online 2020: Survey results from 19 countries.* EU Kids Online. Available at: https://doi.org/10.21953/lse.47fdeqj01ofo (Accessed 28 March 2023).

Smith, P.K., Mahdavi, J., Carvalho, M., Fisher, S., Russell, S. and Tippett, N. "Cyberbullying: Its nature and impact in secondary school pupils." *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry* 49, no. 4 (2008): 376-385.

Spears, B., Kofoed, J., Giuseppina, B., Palermiti, A.L. and Costabile, A. (2012) 'Positive Uses of Social Networking Sites' in A. Costabile and B. Spears (eds.) *The impact of technology on relationships in educational settings.* London: Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group.

Spears, B. and Kofoed, J. (2013) 'Transgressing research binaries: youth as knowledge brokers in cyberbullying research' in P.K. Smith and G. Steffgen (Eds.) Cyberbullying through the new media. London: Psychology Press.

Stoilova, M., Livingstone, S., and Khazbak, R. (2021) Investigating Risks and Opportunities for Children in a Digital World: A rapid review of the evidence on children's internet use and outcomes. Innocenti Discussion Paper 2020-03. UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence.

UK Chief Medical Officers (2019) *Commentary on 'Screen-based activities and children and young people's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing: a systematic map of reviews'.* Available online at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/777026/UK_CMO_commentary_on_screentime_and_social_media_map_of_reviews.pdf

UK Council for Internet Safety (2020) Sharing nudes and semi-nudes, available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1008443/UKCIS_sharing_nudes_and_semi_nudes_advice_for_education_settings__Web_accessible_.pdf (accessed 21.08.2023)

U.K. Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) Education Group (2022) *Online safety in schools and colleges: Questions from the Governing Board (2022)*. UK: UKCCIS. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1105569/Online_safety_in_schools_and_colleges.Questions_from_the_Governing_Board__2022_.pdf (Accessed 28.03.2023).

UNICEF (2019) *Growing up in a connected World*. Available online at: https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/GKO%20Summary%20Report.pdf (accessed 04.06.2023)

United Kingdom Parliament (2023) *Online Safety Bill – Explanatory Notes*, available at https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/49377/documents/2735 (accessed 21.08.2023)

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF] (1989) *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, available at https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_united_nations_convention_on_the_rights_of_the_child.pdf?_ga=2.177003429.1672798792.1586292225-1598934805.1586292225 (accessed 12.03.23).

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF] (2021) *General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment*, available https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2FPPRiCAqhKb7yhsqIkirKQZLK2M58RF%2F5F0vEG%2BcAAx34gC78FwvnmZXGFUl9nJBDpKR1dfKekJxW2w9nNryRsgArkTJgKelqeZwK9WXzMkZRZd37nLN1bFc2t (accessed 24.05.23).

Van Ouytsel, J., Lu, Y., Ponnet, K., Walrave, M. and Temple, J.R. (2019) 'Longitudinal associations between sexting, cyberbullying, and bullying among adolescents: Cross-lagged panel analysis', *Journal of adolescence*, *73*, pp.36-41.

Weare, K. (2015) *What works in promoting social and emotional well-being and responding to mental health problems in schools.* Available at: https://ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/Health_wellbeing_docs/ncb_framework_for_promoting_well-being_and_responding_to_mental_health_in_schools.pdf (Accessed: 28 March 2023)

Webster, D. (2021) 'An exploration of the online and offline social networks of post primary school pupils in Northern Ireland and their relationship with subjective wellbeing', Ph.D. thesis, Queen's University Belfast.

Webster, D., Dunne, L. and Hunter, R. (2021) 'Association between social networks and subjective well-being in adolescents: A systematic review', *Youth & Society*, *53*(2), pp.175-210.

Wingate, V. S., Minney, J.A. and Guadagno, R.E.. "Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will always hurt you: A review of cyberbullying." *Social Influence* 8, no. 2-3 (2013): 87-106.

York, L., MacKenzie, A. and Purdy N. (2021) 'Sexting and institutional discourses of child protection: The views of young people and providers of relationship and sex education', *British Educational Research Journal*, 47 (6), pp. 1717-1734, DOI: 10.1002/berj.3751

York L. (2019) *Attitudes to sexting amongst post-primary pupils in Northern Ireland: A liberal feminist approach*, Ph.D. thesis, Queen's University Belfast.

Zendle, D., Cairns, P. (2019) 'Video game loot boxes are linked to problem gambling: Results of a large-scale survey'. PLOS ONE 14(3): e0214167. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0214167

Zhu, C., Huang, S., Evans, R. and Zhang, W. (2021). "Cyberbullying among adolescents and children: a comprehensive review of the global situation, risk factors, and preventive measures." *Frontiers in public health* 9: 634909.

APPENDIX 1:

Older Children's Focus Group Interview Schedule

1.0 Introduction + Warm Up – Uses of the Internet

- How much time do you normally spend online each day? Can you estimate?
- When do you spend most time online? Evenings? Weekends? In bed?
- Do you think this is similar to other people? e.g. your best friend, brother/sister, parents/ other people
- What device(s) do you use (most)? e.g. phone, tablet etc. How do you get online? What devices do you use? Do you have a computer? A phone? A tablet?

2.0 Individual/Group Activity (Using post-its or large sheets)

Write down all the things you like to do online.

- *Prompt: What about Games? Tiktok? Following influencers? Shopping?*

Write down the dangers that you are aware of online?

- *Prompt: having your account hacked, online bullying, grooming*

Discussion – as a group, and based on the previous activity:

- what do you *most* like doing online?
- what would you say are the *greatest* dangers facing young people your age?

3.0 Problems with the internet - Scenario

Read through 3 short scenarios (Ciara, Zak and Rebekah):

Ciara: Ciara has been going out with Ben for a few months. One evening Ben asks her to send him a naked photo of herself. She is unsure what to do and, Ben tells her that if she loves him, she would want to send him a photo

Zak: Many of the boys in Zak's class want to show him semi-nude pictures on their mobile phones of girls who attend their school. Zak feels very uncomfortable about this and thinks it is wrong. However, he doesn't want to tell this to his friends in case they think he is gay.

Rebecca: Rebecca is going out with Gary and sent him a naked picture of herself but a few days later they had an argument and broke up. Gary is very keen to go out with her again, but Rebecca is not so sure, Gary has told her that if she doesn't become his girlfriend again, he will send the picture to other people. She refuses to be Gary's girlfriend and he puts it on SnapChat.

- What should Ciara / Zak / Rebecca do?
- Have you ever heard of anything like this happening online to one of your friends?
- What do you think can be done to help young people deal with issues such as sharing nude pictures online? Whose responsibility is it? Schools? Parents?

4.0 Keeping yourself safe online – Suggestions box

Using the large piece of paper and the marker pens:

Heading 1: *What you already know*
How have you learnt about online safety? Have you learnt about this at school? At home? From your friends?

Heading 2: *What would help you feel safer online*
Do you have any suggestions for how we can make being online safer for children and young people? What more can be done? By whom?

5.0 Concluding comments

Is there anything else you'd like to share that you haven't had a chance to do so already?

APPENDIX 2:

Younger Children's Focus Group Interview Schedule

1.0 Introduction + Warm Up - Post-it activity

Write down what you like to do online (e.g. Tiktok, YouTube)

2.0 Uses of the internet - Questions

How much time do you normally spend online each day? Do you think this is similar to your friends, or more/less? Do you think this is similar to other people your age?

How do you get online? What devices do you use? Do you have a computer? A phone? A tablet? When can you go online? Are there any times when you wouldn't be allowed to go online?

3.0 Problems with the internet - Scenario

Use a scenario of a child experiencing online. What should the child do? Have you ever heard of anything like this happening online to one of your friends?

4.0 Keeping yourself safe online – Suggestions box

Using the large piece of paper and the marker pens:

Heading 1: *What you already know*
Does anyone or anything help make sure you're safe when you're online? Who? What do they do to make sure you're safe? Have you learnt about this at school? At home?

Heading 2: *What would help you feel safer online*
Do you have any suggestions for how we can make being online safer for children?

5.0 Concluding comments

Is there anything else you'd like to share that you haven't had a chance to do so already?

APPENDIX 3:

Parents' Focus Group Interview Schedule

1.0 Introductions

Tell me about your children

2.0 Children's online activities

What do you understand to be the benefits of children having access to the internet?

Consider the different uses for the internet. How much time, on average, do you think 'children' [/your children] spend on the internet each day? What do they use it for predominately?

How do you think your children compare in terms of their online activities with their friends? How do they compare with other children their age?

How do you think children's online activities has changed over the last five years? What impact did the pandemic have?

3.0 Children's online harm

Do you have any concerns about your children's online activities? What risks do you think children face when they go online?

Have your children experienced anything nasty or unpleasant online?

How were you able to deal with that? How confident did you feel as parents?

4.0 Children's online safety

How aware are you of what your children are doing online? How challenging is that as parents?

What safeguards are in place to keep your child safe when they're online? How do you manage the risk of going online against the benefits?

Whose responsibility is it to teach children about online safety? Have you had any support from community organisations or the school? What more can be done? By whom?

What would help most to keep your children safe online?

5.0 Concluding comments

Is there anything else you'd like to share that you haven't had a chance to do so already?

APPENDIX 4:

Teachers' Focus Group Interview Schedule

1.0 Introductions

What age group do you teach and what is your role within the school?

2.0 Children's online activities

What do you understand to be the benefits of children having access to the internet?

Do the children in your class use the internet for their schoolwork? What for? How is it beneficial for supporting their learning?

How much time, on average, do you think 'children' spend on the internet each day? How does this differ depending on age? What do they use the internet to do?

How do you think children's online activities has changed over the last five years (and as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic)?

3.0 Children's online harm

Do you have any concerns about children's online activities? What risks do you think children face when they go online?

What sorts of incidents are you having to deal with in school?

How does the type of incident change as children get older?

Who do you think is most susceptible to online harm? Why?

4.0 Children's online safety

What do you do in school to educate pupils about online safety? How is that delivered? When? By whom?

To what extent do you feel that the responsibility lies with parents?

What online safety training are you able to access yourself? How confident do you feel in dealing with these issues?

Do you have any suggestions on how children's online safety can be improved?

5.0 Concluding comments

Is there anything else you'd like to share that you haven't had a chance to do so already?

APPENDIX 5:

Other Professionals' Qualitative Survey Questions

1. Please enter your name

2. Please enter the name of your organisation

3. In your professional capacity, what do you think are the key issues today relating to children and young people's online activity?

4. What, if anything, is your organisation doing to address these key issues identified?

5. In your opinion, what needs to happen/ change in order to better equip children and young people to engage safely with online activities?

6. Is there anything else you would like to add?

STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE | 100

Shaping education since 1922

Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement

SBNI

Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland