

YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence During COVID-19



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Executive Summary

In this mixed-methods study, we explore the specific forms of technology-facilitated gender-based violence that young people in England, aged 13-18, experienced during COVID-19 lockdowns and beyond. This report provides data on the harms experienced by young people, and how this differs across gender (girls, boys, gender non-conforming), sexuality (LGBTQ+), and other intersecting identities (e.g. race).


Concerns about young people and the various harms they encounter online, including sexual harassment and image-based sexual abuse, have steadily grown in recent years. These worries further increased during lockdown for COVID-19, when the WHO, Interpol, NSPCC, CEOP and other children's agencies, warned that increased screen time during periods of quarantine made young people more susceptible to online sexual exploitation, grooming, and abuse.

Our study found that rates of harm were high, but unevenly spread amongst participants, and were often higher for girls, sexuality, and gender diverse youths (see also Dunn, 2020). Following Storr et. al, we use the term “sexuality and gender diverse” here to foreground that young people have diverse identifications and positionalities, which shape their experiences of technology and platforms (Storr et. al, 2022). While the central aim of the study is to amplify the voices of young people, we point to the importance of including teachers and parents in the conversation. A key objective is to broker better forms of communication between these groups about the closely interlinked harms and benefits of digital media. The report concludes with a set of recommendations for schools, parents, government, and tech companies on what is needed to better protect young people, including ways to report online sexual harassment and how to seek help.



Key Findings:

1. We are now in a *postdigital* society where online and offline experiences of harms are not easily separated. Researchers, policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders need to recognize this reality in their policies and messaging. Directives to young people to “just turn off your devices” or “it happened online and isn’t part of real life” are not fit for purpose. Sexual harassment, for example, often occurs online but can also move across to offline spaces, and vice versa.
2. Online harm is rife for young people and encompasses a wide range of practices. 78% of all participants in our study experienced at least one type of digitally facilitated harm such as body shaming, harassing comments, public outing of their sexuality, and image based sexual abuse. For almost all participants (98.5%), these harms *increased* during COVID-19.
3. Sexual and gender minorities experience much higher rates of online harm compared to cisgendered and heterosexual teens. Researchers must pay attention to how identity characteristics impact young people’s experiences, and tailor resources and support accordingly. In other words, it is imperative for researchers and educational practitioners to explore different categories of experience, and to break down different forms of harm, so as not to homogenize young people’s experiences of technology-facilitated gender-based violence.



4. While girls and gender and sexual minorities face higher rates of online harm, there are significant findings around boys that need to be addressed. Boys were often targeted via gaming platforms, porn bots, and other fake accounts. They also received unsolicited sexual images and pressure to send nudes. While boys are often reticent to talk about their experiences as either perpetrators or victims of these practices, engaging boys in these conversations is crucial if we are to challenge gender-based violence (Keddie et. al 2022).

5. In line with other research, most young people do not report experiences of online harm, but try to deal with it themselves, or discuss it with friends. Most don't report because they felt that reporting would not help. Only one in five young people reported harms to their parents, a barrier being a fear their parents wouldn't understand or would overreact. In comparison, only 3% reported to schools, telling us they don't because of a sense of sexist and victim-blaming cultures. Finally, they don't report to social media sites because they are either unaware of reporting mechanisms or are disillusioned with the platforms' ability to take action.

6. Teachers and parents are struggling to address online harms and need more guidance. They are worried about young people and their technology use, but they lack the knowledge and resources to support them. Teachers want better training to address tech-facilitated harms and learn about platform affordances, and parents also want more information and support, including on how to talk to their children about issues that arise in relation to their social media usage.



The Project

1. Online Surveys

We administered an online survey to 551 teens of all genders (aged 13-18), 72 parents/carers, and 47 teachers, safeguarding leads and/or school staff across schools in England. These surveys were disseminated between May and September 2021 by our charitable partner, the School of Sexuality Education (SSE).

The survey for teens asked participants about their experiences of online sexual and gendered risk and harm during COVID-19, and the survey for parents/carers asked participants about their understanding of social media platforms (e.g. TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.), and awareness of their children's experiences of online sexual and gendered risk and harm online during COVID-19. The survey for teachers asked questions around their students' experiences with a range of digital harassment and abuse (including technology-facilitated gender-based violence), any training they received, and if their schools have policies dealing with these issues.

See Appendix A for survey participants' demographic information.

2. Focus Groups and Interviews

Enacting a rigorous mixed methodology we used a combination of focus groups and individual interviews with teens, school staff/safeguards, and parents/carers from May-July 2021 immediately following three major UK lockdowns. We conducted 17 focus groups with 65 teens and 29 individual follow-up interviews with this sample in five comprehensive secondary schools across England (see Table 1). The youth focus groups were arranged according to year group and self-identified gender and included two to six participants. Most groups were either all girls or all boys with one mixed gender group aligning to a pre-existing friendship group.

Table 1 – Snapshot of youth focus group and interview data

| Name | Type | Location | Focus Group | Year | Participants | Gender | Interviews |
|--------------|----------------------------|-----------------|-------------|------|--------------|------------|------------|
| School 1 | Mixed state secondary | South East | 14 | 10 | 3 | Boys | 3 |
| | | | 15 | 10 | 2 | Girls | 2 |
| | | | | | 1 | Non-binary | 1 |
| | | | 16 | 11 | 3 | Boys | 1 |
| | | | 17 | 11 | 2 | Girls | 2 |
| School 2 | Mixed state secondary | South West | 2 | 9 | 4 | Girls | 3 |
| | | | 3 | 9 | 2 | Boys | 1 |
| | | | 4 | 10 | 6 | Girls | 3 |
| | | | 5 | 10 | 2 | Boys | 1 |
| School 3 | Mixed state secondary | East of England | 6 | 12 | 6 | Girls | 3 |
| | | | 7 | 12 | 4 | Boys | 1 |
| | | | 8 | 10 | 5 | Girls | 2 |
| | | | 9 | 10 | 4 | Boys | 2 |
| | | | 10 | 9 | 4 | Girls | 2 |
| | | | 11 | 9 | 3 | Boys | 0 |
| School 4 | Single-sex state secondary | London Suburb | 12 | 9 | 6 | Boys | 3 |
| | | | 13 | 9 | 5 | Boys | 2 |
| School 5 | Mixed state secondary | Yorkshire | 1 | 9 | 1 | Girl | 0 |
| | | | | | 2 | Boys | 0 |
| Total | | | | | 65 | | 29 |

Focus groups used arts-based methodologies and began with an ice-breaker activity where participants were asked to write down or draw something positive and negative about social media (including gaming platforms), using templates we provided (Figure 1). Template options included blank display screens of Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Yubo, WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter, and PS5. After 5 to 10 minutes, participants took turns

describing to the group what they wrote down. The researchers then used a focus group guide to ask questions, covering topics related to teens’ online experiences of risk and harm during COVID-19, as well as the gendered dynamics of these experiences. Following the focus groups, we provided teens with the opportunity to participate in follow-up individual interviews, where we elicited more detailed accounts of topics discussed in the focus groups.

In addition, we conducted a total of 17 interviews with teachers, safeguarding leads and/or school staff in the five research schools. Interviews were designed to inform policy guidance for teachers and education associations on how to improve safety procedures and reporting practices for young people.

Figure 1: Selection of Social Media Templates

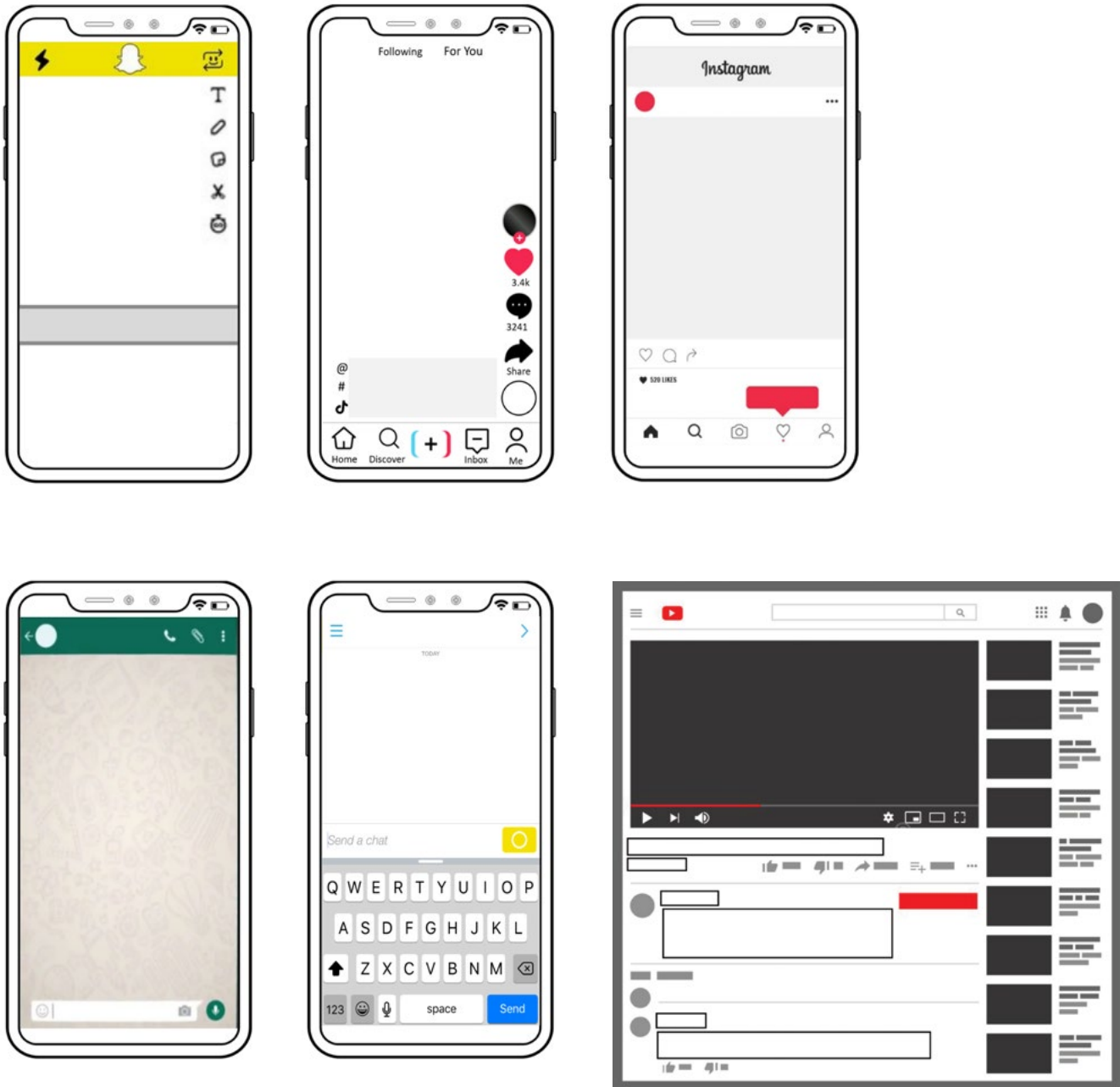


Table 2 – Snapshot of teacher interview data

| Name | Type | Location | Interview | Gender |
|----------|----------------------------|-----------------|-----------|--------|
| School 1 | Mixed state secondary | South East | 1 | Woman |
| | | | 2 | Woman |
| | | | 3 | Woman |
| School 2 | Mixed state secondary | South West | 4 | Woman |
| | | | 5 | Woman |
| | | | 6 | Woman |
| | | | 7 | Woman |
| School 3 | Mixed state secondary | East of England | 8 | Woman |
| | | | 9 | Man |
| | | | 10 | Woman |
| | | | 11 | Man |
| | | | 12 | Woman |
| | | | 13 | Woman |
| | | | 14 | Man |
| | | | 15 | Woman |
| School 4 | Single-sex state secondary | London Suburb | 16 | Woman |
| | | | 17 | Woman |

We also conducted four online focus groups with parents/carers, with a total of nine parents/carers using a convenience sample. They were not parents of children from the schools in our study. Focus groups explored parents/carers’ knowledge and awareness of social media platforms, and the extent to which parents/carers felt equipped to support their children around sexually abusive or threatening online experiences they may have had on these popular platforms.

After obtaining informed consent, discussions and interviews with students, teachers, and parents/carers were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure confidentiality, participants used pseudonyms, and transcripts were anonymized.

See Appendix B for information on focus group and interview participants.

Table 3: Terminology

| Demographic Categories | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|---|--|---|---|
| Gender minorities | non-binary, other, trans <i>*excluding "I don't know"</i> | | | | | | |
| Sexual minorities | asexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, other, pansexual, queer, questioning <i>*excluding "I don't know"</i> | | | | | | |
| Categories of Experiences | | | | | | | |
| Harassment | <p>Offensive or mean comments/messages Being made fun of or humiliated (e.g. 'lad banter')</p> <p>Receiving threats of physical harm</p> <p>Had embarrassing details shared about you</p> <p>Being cancelled</p> <p>Being ganged up on (swarming, organized trolling or flaming)</p> <p>Gaslighting (being made to question your experiences and emotions)</p> <p>Having an account hacked</p> <p>Doxing (leaking of personal details such as addresses)</p> | | | | | | |
| Technology-Facilitated Sexual and Gender-based Violence (TFSGBV) | <table border="1"> <tr> <td>Gender stereotyping, shaming & misogyny</td> <td> <p>Body shaming</p> <p>Offensive and/or degrading messages, comments, or "jokes" about their gender</p> <p>Sexual shaming</p> <p>Rumours, gossip and/or lies spread about their sexual behaviours</p> <p>Being called a "slut" or "player"</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td>LGBTQ+ discrimination & hate</td> <td> <p>Being "outed"</p> <p>Offensive and/or degrading messages, comments, or "jokes", about their sexual orientation</p> <p>Offensive and/or degrading messages, comments, or "jokes" about their gender identity</p> </td> </tr> </table> | Gender stereotyping, shaming & misogyny | <p>Body shaming</p> <p>Offensive and/or degrading messages, comments, or "jokes" about their gender</p> <p>Sexual shaming</p> <p>Rumours, gossip and/or lies spread about their sexual behaviours</p> <p>Being called a "slut" or "player"</p> | LGBTQ+ discrimination & hate | <p>Being "outed"</p> <p>Offensive and/or degrading messages, comments, or "jokes", about their sexual orientation</p> <p>Offensive and/or degrading messages, comments, or "jokes" about their gender identity</p> | | |
| | Gender stereotyping, shaming & misogyny | <p>Body shaming</p> <p>Offensive and/or degrading messages, comments, or "jokes" about their gender</p> <p>Sexual shaming</p> <p>Rumours, gossip and/or lies spread about their sexual behaviours</p> <p>Being called a "slut" or "player"</p> | | | | | |
| | LGBTQ+ discrimination & hate | <p>Being "outed"</p> <p>Offensive and/or degrading messages, comments, or "jokes", about their sexual orientation</p> <p>Offensive and/or degrading messages, comments, or "jokes" about their gender identity</p> | | | | | |
| | Tech-Facilitated Sexual Violence (TFSV) | <table border="1"> <tr> <td>Unwanted contact and sexualisation</td> <td> <p>Cyberstalking (repeated, unwanted contact online)</p> <p>Sexualised comments on social media posts (e.g. Instagram photos, TikTok videos)</p> <p>Unwanted sexual messages online (e.g. Instagram DMs, Snapchat messages)</p> <p>Sexual "jokes" about you or to you (e.g. lad banter)</p> <p>Being rated on attractiveness/sexual activity</p> <p>Someone altering an image of you to make it sexual</p> <p>Someone describing or visually representing an unwanted sexual act against you</p> <p>Someone describing or visually representing an unwanted sexual act against your avatar or game character</p> <p>Being sent flattering messages (e.g., about your looks, maturity, sexuality) by an adult stranger</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td>Sexual Exploitation, Coercion & Threats</td> <td> <p>Online threats of a sexual nature (e.g., rape threats)</p> <p>Being blackmailed/coerced into engaging in online/offline sexual acts (sextortion)</p> <p>Someone attempting to lure you to give money or details to be sextorted (honey trapping)</p> <p>Manipulation or deception by an adult stranger (e.g. catfishing)</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td>Image-Based Sexual Harassment & Abuse (IBSHA)</td> <td> <p>Receiving unwanted sexual images/videos</p> <p>Being asked to send sexual photos or videos</p> <p>Image-Based Sexual Abuse i.e., having a sexual image shared non-consensually</p> </td> </tr> </table> | Unwanted contact and sexualisation | <p>Cyberstalking (repeated, unwanted contact online)</p> <p>Sexualised comments on social media posts (e.g. Instagram photos, TikTok videos)</p> <p>Unwanted sexual messages online (e.g. Instagram DMs, Snapchat messages)</p> <p>Sexual "jokes" about you or to you (e.g. lad banter)</p> <p>Being rated on attractiveness/sexual activity</p> <p>Someone altering an image of you to make it sexual</p> <p>Someone describing or visually representing an unwanted sexual act against you</p> <p>Someone describing or visually representing an unwanted sexual act against your avatar or game character</p> <p>Being sent flattering messages (e.g., about your looks, maturity, sexuality) by an adult stranger</p> | Sexual Exploitation, Coercion & Threats | <p>Online threats of a sexual nature (e.g., rape threats)</p> <p>Being blackmailed/coerced into engaging in online/offline sexual acts (sextortion)</p> <p>Someone attempting to lure you to give money or details to be sextorted (honey trapping)</p> <p>Manipulation or deception by an adult stranger (e.g. catfishing)</p> | Image-Based Sexual Harassment & Abuse (IBSHA) |
| Unwanted contact and sexualisation | <p>Cyberstalking (repeated, unwanted contact online)</p> <p>Sexualised comments on social media posts (e.g. Instagram photos, TikTok videos)</p> <p>Unwanted sexual messages online (e.g. Instagram DMs, Snapchat messages)</p> <p>Sexual "jokes" about you or to you (e.g. lad banter)</p> <p>Being rated on attractiveness/sexual activity</p> <p>Someone altering an image of you to make it sexual</p> <p>Someone describing or visually representing an unwanted sexual act against you</p> <p>Someone describing or visually representing an unwanted sexual act against your avatar or game character</p> <p>Being sent flattering messages (e.g., about your looks, maturity, sexuality) by an adult stranger</p> | | | | | | |
| Sexual Exploitation, Coercion & Threats | <p>Online threats of a sexual nature (e.g., rape threats)</p> <p>Being blackmailed/coerced into engaging in online/offline sexual acts (sextortion)</p> <p>Someone attempting to lure you to give money or details to be sextorted (honey trapping)</p> <p>Manipulation or deception by an adult stranger (e.g. catfishing)</p> | | | | | | |
| Image-Based Sexual Harassment & Abuse (IBSHA) | <p>Receiving unwanted sexual images/videos</p> <p>Being asked to send sexual photos or videos</p> <p>Image-Based Sexual Abuse i.e., having a sexual image shared non-consensually</p> | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |



Findings

Postdigital Teens

Referred to as a generation of ‘digital natives’ (Prensky 2001), young people’s mastery of and reliance on digital media surpasses that of any past generation. However, as many scholars have pointed out, broad brushing young people as digital natives is problematic for its assumption that (all) youth are technological wizards, who ‘can get on perfectly well by themselves’ without social supports (Livingstone 2010, 9). As Sonia Livingstone and Amanda Third suggest, ‘we need to move beyond the idea that children’s digital practices constitute a specialized set of activities cleaved off from the so-called “real world”’ (2017, 667), or that having digital skills will safeguard them from harm. To capture the networked nature of young people’s lives, we use the concept of the ‘postdigital teen’. In a postdigital world, digital practices are thoroughly enmeshed with everyday life, especially for young people who are navigating relationships – both online and at school – and for whom the digital mediation of their lives is particularly acute. Our study data casts important light into what it is like to be a teen in an era in which digital technologies play such an important role in their lives, and critically examines how they experience, navigate, and challenge the violence, harassment, and abuse facilitated by these technologies.

From our survey findings, we found that teens are avid media users:

- 88.8% of respondents had at least one type of social media account, with 83.4% on Instagram, 71.9% on Snapchat, and 64.7% on TikTok.
- 96.2% of teens (98.9% of girls, 93.3% of boys, 95.7% of gender minorities) responded that they spent increasing time online during COVID-19.

During the lockdown periods, everyone in the UK was required to stay home and avoid social contact outside their home or ‘bubble.’ Unsurprisingly, 53.3% of respondents (57.6% of girls, 56.2% of boys, 62.5% of gender minorities) reported that concerns about loneliness and isolation had impacted their mental health during the pandemic. Some interview participants similarly described the negative impact of this lack of socialising on their own and peers’ mental wellbeing. For example, Molly (School 2) stated that: “I definitely was not as happy as I was before COVID” because she “wasn’t able to enjoy things [she] liked to do”.

Like the rest of the world, teens turned to digital technologies in the form of social media, messaging and group chats, and online gaming to communicate with peers when face-to-face contact was limited.

- 66% of young people increased their time spent on live video platforms (e.g., Facetime), 45.1% increased their time on Snapchat, 52.8% on Instagram and 31.3% on WhatsApp.

For many young people, social media platforms and apps provided much needed social sustenance, often acting as a “lifeline” to peers, family, and friends (Figure 2). In our interviews, teens described using social media, group chats, and online gaming to communicate and connect with their peers. While it’s easy to mark this increased screen time as inherently harmful or bad, young people told us how they often experienced this increased communication online as positive for their relationships with peers and personal wellbeing:

“It just felt like in lockdown everyone got closer in our friendship group . . . We all stuck by each other . . . It’s like a little bubble, really.” (Beth, School 2)

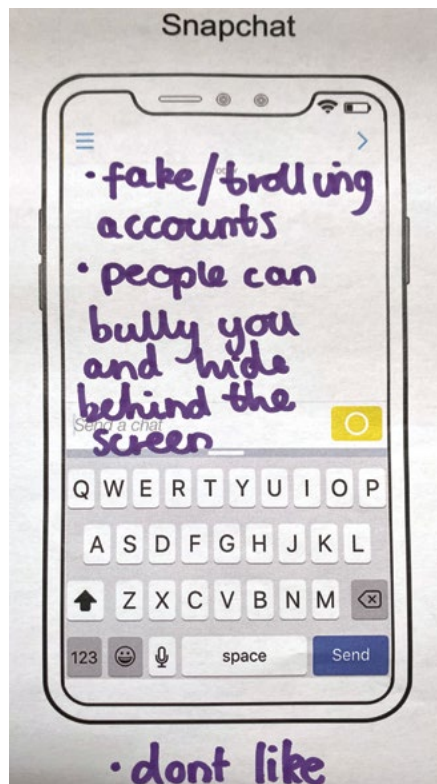
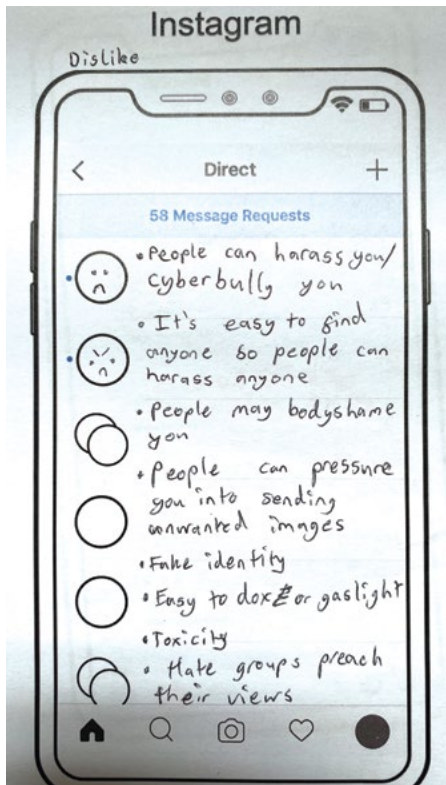
In addition to communicating with their close friends, young people used digital platforms to connect with the larger year group or friendship circles throughout lockdown periods. These conversations often occurred in group chats on WhatsApp, Instagram, or Snapchat, where they discussed a variety of topics including homework, making plans to meet up, and sending each other photos. While beneficial in many ways, some participants also discussed how these group chats could simultaneously be overwhelming and

“tiring” as they would receive countless notifications throughout the day and would feel a pressure to regularly check their phones to remain up to date socially. As such, while teens told us of the important and enriching role social media played, they also disclosed many harms (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Pros of Social Media



Figure 3: Cons of Social Media



A. ONLINE HARASSMENT

- 45.8% of young people who responded to our survey experienced at least one type of online harassment.
- Girls were slightly more likely to experience harassment, with 47.9% of girls compared to 45.6% of boys and 42.1% of gender minorities.
- Sexual minorities were also slightly more likely to experience harassment, with 50% of sexual minorities, and 44.5% of heterosexual young people experiencing this harassment.

The most common platform that this harassment occurred on was Instagram.

The table below displays the various forms of harassment, ranked in order of the most commonly to the least commonly experienced, across all genders.

Table 4: Forms of Harassment

| Experience | Girls | Boys | Gender Minorities | Total | % increased during COVID-19 | Most common platform(s) |
|--|-------|-------|-------------------|-------|-----------------------------|--|
| Being made fun of or humiliated (e.g. 'lad banter') | 27.6% | 25.5% | 21.1% | 26% | 22.5% | Social gaming platforms (42.2%) |
| Offensive or mean comments/messages | 26.6% | 22.7% | 36.8% | 24.7% | 31.1% | Snapchat (26.5%) |
| Gaslighting (being made to question your experiences and emotions) | 15% | 13% | 21.1% | 13.8% | 23.3% | Snapchat (36.8%) |
| Having an account hacked | 12.7% | 13.5% | 5.3% | 12.6% | 15.1% | Instagram (35%) |
| Had embarrassing details shared about you | 10.7% | 8.3% | 10.5% | 9.5% | 7.2% | Snapchat (60%) |
| Receiving threats of physical harm | 9.6% | 4.8% | 15.8% | 7.6% | 8.6% | No response |
| Being ganged up on (swarming, organised trolling or flaming) | 6.6% | 6.1% | 10.5% | 6.3% | 9.5% | Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter (each 33.33%) |
| Doxing (leaking of personal details such as addresses) | 3.5% | 4.4% | 0% | 3.6% | 7.1% | Discord (50%) |
| Being cancelled | 2.7% | 6% | 0% | 4% | 7.8% | Facebook, Other, Reddit, Snapchat, TikTok (each 20%) |

In our qualitative data, participants also detailed a range of harassing experiences online. The PEW (2021) Research Centre report, *The State of Online Harassment* notes that in the US context, “Online harassment is a particularly common feature of online life for younger adults, and they are especially prone to facing harassing behaviors that are more serious.” We found the categorisation of online harassment often encompassed a wide range of aggressive behaviours, with participants using different terminology to describe similar experiences. Several participants described “people being mean,” name-calling, and sending

offensive messages in group chats and on gaming platforms such as Xbox. They also discussed experiencing or witnessing peer “drama” or “misunderstandings” online, noting how these experiences had increased during COVID-19. As with Alice Marwick and danah boyd’s study into American teens (2014, 1190), UK teens tended to define the slippery notion of “drama” through examples. This drama or peer-to-peer conflict was often sparked by young people feeling excluded from social gatherings (particularly during lockdown periods), the spreading of “rumours” or “gossip”, and “jokes” or “banter” that were described as “misinterpreted”, or “taken

out of context”. However, while teens used a variety of terms to describe these experiences, they often do not have the background information to understand these as forms of gendered harassment, abuse and harm. Since these experiences often involved the targeting and singling out of individuals, whether directly or indirectly, and the use of hurtful comments or messages, we therefore categorize them as harassment, harm and abuse.

B. ACTIVISM AGAINST DISCRIMINATION

FEMINISM, MISOGYNY, AND GENDER-BASED HARASSMENT

In our focus groups and interviews, young people spoke of ways in which they resisted forms of gender discrimination and challenged the prevalence of sexual harassment and violence through digital feminist activism. At the time of our research in 2021, the murder of Sarah Everard by police officer Wayne Couzens had received mass media coverage and instigated an awareness raising movement around violence against women and girls in the UK (Elks 2021). Young people recounted viewing videos and posts on TikTok and Instagram of the UN Women UK statistic that 97% of girls and women had experienced sexual harassment in the UK (APPG, 2021). This statistic went viral on TikTok and Instagram, and young people told us how it “raised a lot of awareness about what can be classed as sexual harassment”. Young people

also told us how they learned about “[Everyone’s Invited](#)”, an Instagram page and website dedicated to documenting young people’s experiences of rape culture in UK secondary schools. Together, these experiences helped young people develop a critical awareness of sexual violence, as well as motivate some participants to engage in social activism.

Unfortunately, these positive opportunities for learning and feminist activism online came hand in hand with increased access to misinformation, harmful perspectives towards activist causes, and gender-based harassment on social media. According to Powell and Henry (2018), gender- and sexuality-based harassment includes (but is not limited to) “gender-based hate speech, rape threats, reputation harming lies, impersonation, false accusations of sexual violence, and virtual rape” (p. 199-200). This was particularly true for online discussions surrounding the murder of Sarah Everard and the prevalence of sexual violence in the UK. For example, Olive (School 2, Year 10) explained that boys would make jokes on TikTok that “a boy touching a girl’s hand would be part of that 97%”. Participants also described boys negating the 97% statistic as inaccurate; and as a way to deny violence against women and girls. She further stated that “there’s a lot of false information about what is and what isn’t harassment on especially TikTok, and people generally spreading negative stigma around it.” Many girls noted that this backlash often carried over into their experiences in school. For example,

Elizabeth (school 2) explained how young people would make sexist jokes at school, which would spiral into people “joking about rape” and making comments about how sexual harassment does not exist. In another focus group, boys discussed their worries of ‘false rape’ accusations, saying women spread false rape accusations, and how this can “ruin somebody’s life”, as well as the problem with spreading the stigma that all men are perpetrators, when “you’ve got like a select few, not even more than 1000 probably rapists” (School 4, year 9). Some boys then actually believe false rape misinformation as discussed at length by several of the girls.

BLACK LIVES MATTER & RACISM

The young people in our study also described engaging with activist content around racial injustices during lockdown due to the increased awareness surrounding the murder of George Floyd on May 25th, 2020, and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and protests. For example, Elizabeth explained how she learned about the BLM movement from verified Instagram accounts during lockdown (School 2). Similarly, a year 9 boy noted how social media played a pivotal role in creating a global awareness around BLM and the murder of George Floyd. He explained how the increased time on social media during the pandemic allowed the world to “open its eyes more” to pervasive racial inequalities (School 5). Unfortunately, as was the case with the feminist and LGBTQ+ activism, this increased social

awareness was also met with resistance and increased discriminatory content online. For example, a year 10 girl (School 1) explained how users responded to the BLM movement as “their excuse for their racism online”, where they would comment “All Lives Matter” and describe BLM as “destructive”.

Many students also spoke of racist incidents online. As one year 9 boy (School 4) stated: “On Instagram it’s like some person will say a horrible thing . . . it just spirals out loads of replies to it all agreeing with a racist comment or something like that.” Similarly, a year 10 boy stated: “I dislike some of the hateful language used in the comments towards like different race and LGBTQ on stuff like TikTok and Instagram” (School 1). He later explains that these comments were on videos that went viral. Another participant shared: “I’ve had videos of white people using the N word on my view page” (School 2). Discriminatory messages from unknown users in the group chat function of gaming platforms was another form of hate several participants witnessed. For example, a year 9 boy described seeing “racism in the chat from other people, saying the n-word and stuff” on games like ‘Rocket League’ (School 3). Another boy described how in the ‘party chat’ of ‘Call of Duty’ on PlayStation, “a guy was doing an Indian accent, and something I heard on there, which I had never heard, was a guy told him to go back to his country”.

While these experiences were not targeted at the young people directly, witnessing racial hatred in commenting and interactions on posts had an impact on young people's participation online, including creating fear and anxiety around making personal posts. For example, a year 10 girl (School 1) describes feeling angry about sexist and racist comments online, explaining that it scares her to post TikTok videos because "as a person of colour, you are going to be very worried about the comments."

C. TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER-BASED AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

This study uses the term "technology-facilitated gender-based and sexual violence" (TFGBSV), building off work developed by Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell (2014) to describe a range of sexually aggressive behaviours using digital technologies. According to Henry and Powell (2014; 2018), there are various overlapping categories, including: online sexual harassment, unwanted sexual attention online, gender- and sexuality-based hate speech, image-based harassment (e.g. sending 'dick pics') and image-based sexual abuse, including the non-consensual creation, distribution, and threat to distribute, nude or sexual images (Henry & Powell, 2018, p. 198). TFGBSV explicitly acknowledges the forms of gender-based violence that are not necessarily sexual in nature,

including misogyny, body shaming, and LGBTQ+ discrimination. As Suzie Dunn has noted in her report on "Technology-facilitated gender-based violence as a worldwide phenomenon" (2020), "Whether it be intimate partner violence, gender-based harassment, hate campaigns or misinformation campaigns, technology is now being used by abusers to further these harms (European Institute for Gender Equality 2017)" (page). Dunn also notes how "systemic sexism" is being "reinforced online" with communities developing "on messaging fora, group messaging apps and social media websites, where people actively share and amplify sexist, hateful and violent ideas about women, girls and transgender people" (Baele, Brace and Coan 2019). Our findings bear out Dunn's observation that girls, women, and sexual and gender minorities including trans and non-binary individuals are most at risk of TFGBSV.

In our survey **58.6% of respondents experienced at least one form of TFGBV**. The subsequent sections will outline the various forms of violence that fit under this category, incorporating quantitative and qualitative findings of young people's experiences.

GENDER STEREOTYPING, SHAMING, AND MISOGYNY

- 39.8% of participants experienced at least one form of gender stereotyping, shaming and misogyny.
- Of those who experienced a form of gender stereotyping, shaming and misogyny, 92.6% claimed that at least one of these experiences increased during COVID-19.

Within this category we included: body shaming, offensive and/or degrading messages, comments or ‘jokes’ about gender, and sexual shaming (see Table 5 and Figure 4). The table below displays the various experiences, ranked in order of the most commonly to the least commonly experienced, across all genders.

Figure 4: Unwanted Messages, Body Shaming & Sexualized Imagery



Table 5: Gender stereotyping, shaming, and misogyny

| Experience | Girls | Boys | Gender Minorities | Total | % increased during COVID-19 | Most common platform(s) |
|---|-------|-------|-------------------|-------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Offensive and/or degrading messages, comments, or 'jokes' about their gender | 30.4% | 23.4% | 27.3% | 27.2% | 23.6% | TikTok (40%) |
| Body shaming | 26.6% | 22.7% | 36.8% | 24.7% | 31.1% | Snapchat (26.5%) |
| Sexual shaming (Rumours, gossip and/or lies spread about their sexual behaviours) | 20.5% | 4.2% | 19.1% | 13.4% | 79.7% | Snapchat (52.9%) |
| Being called a 'slut' or 'player') | | | | | | |

These trends were mirrored in our qualitative data, where we found that girls were more likely than boys to experience degrading messages, comments, sexual shaming, and sexual double standards. In one common example across several school contexts, teens described the trend of girls being shamed for having too high of a Snapchat score. According to Alison in Year 12, “if you’ve got a high Snapchat score people are like, ‘Oh, you’re a slag” (School 3). Likewise, Jacob in Year 9 (School 4) described how girls are seen as “sluts” if that have a really high Snapchat score, and that this notion is promoted on TikTok where boys post videos that claim “if she’s got a high Snap score, be wary, she could be like messaging 10 boys at the same time.” In addition to their use of Snapchat, girls were also shamed for the images and videos they posted online. For example, Year 9 girls (School 2) explained that when girls post images that are “more risky” or in a bikini, people would then talk about it the next day in school and judge the

girl for posting the image. Year 10 student Raven (School 1) also described an instance where someone slut-shamed her in a direct message on Instagram, after she posted a photo of herself in a summer dress. She described that it made her “feel awful” and she took the photo down shortly after.

- 13% of boys, 22.7% of gender minorities, and 23.6% of girls experienced body shaming or mean comments online about the way they looked.
- Of those respondents, 54.6% said that the body shaming had increased during the pandemic.
- The most common platform that this shaming occurred on was Snapchat with 35.3% of experiences.

Several participants described instances where they or their peers were targeted by body shaming. Girls, specifically, experienced this digital harassment, with participants describing instances of girls being told they have “got a flat arse”, or were told they were “fat” or an “ugly cow” over Snapchat and Instagram, if they did not fit the “ideal body type”. Many boys also described instances where they were body-shamed online by their peers. Paul (School 1, Year 11) described receiving routine comments in group chats and direct messages about his weight and Adrian told us that a common retort he would receive from friends was: “Aw, shut up ‘Fatty’”. Adrian claimed: “it wasn’t nice, because these people you would consider to be your friends”, but that he decided to “do something about it” and lose weight in response. Here, changing one’s appearance and losing weight was deemed to be easier than challenging cruel or offensive comments.

LGBTQ+ DISCRIMINATION AND HATE

Teens reported personally experiencing discrimination based on their sexual orientation and gender identity.

- 40% of sexual minorities (compared to 8.4% of heterosexual youth) experienced sexuality-based harassment, which included offensive and/or degrading messages, comments and/or “jokes” about their sexual orientation or being “outed”.
- 60% of lesbian youth, 53.1% of bisexual youth, 50% of “other”, 40% of queer youth, 33.3% of pansexual youth, and 25% of gay youth experienced sexuality-based hate and discrimination.
- Of these respondents, 70.21% reported that at least one form of this hate increased during COVID-19.
- 27.3% of gender minorities were discriminated against (17.65% of non-binary, 50% of “other” and 66.7% of trans youth), experiencing offensive and/or degrading messages, comments or “jokes” about their gender.
- Overall, one in three gender minorities (50% for “other”, 29.41% of non-binary, and 66.67% of trans youth) experienced sexuality-based hate.

Young people in our qualitative data described LGBTQ+ discrimination as pervasive and normalised within their postdigital peer cultures. In addition to personally experiencing this discrimination, young people described witnessing LGBTQ+ hate online. While teens recounted positive awareness raising online surrounding Pride month and celebrating sexual and gender diversity, they also noted a backlash against Pride. Participants also witnessed homophobia online in the form of comments on other people's posts on Instagram and TikTok, where being LGBTQ+ was treated as an insult. Kate, a Year 10 girl, (School 2) stated: "I've seen videos on TikTok, I think, of a boy, and there was one where he had make-up on and wearing a dress. And there were a lot of supportive comments, which were really nice, and then there were some just saying, like, I think there was someone saying, like, is this your coming out?" and "this isn't really a man."

In our qualitative data, participants also described experiencing homophobia and transphobia online. A girl in year 10 (School 3) described how during lockdown, she disclosed to a peer that she was gay, and that peer proceeded to send her messages saying "you're going to burn in hell, this is wrong" and other "horrible" comments. Even though she blocked the person, she described how it really hurt and that it "sucks" that people still think like that. Another participant recounted a time during lockdown, where one of their friends encountered similar homophobia when she "came out" online:

*"She did a TikTok about being bisexual, and people were like saving it and putting it on their Stories, and everyone found out. Everyone was putting it on their Stories, so then she did a live video that day, kind of explaining, and on her live video she was getting so much hate, like huge amounts. It was unbelievable."
(Year 10 girls, School 5)*

She later explained that when her friend came back to school, she received homophobic remarks from a specific group of boys in her year. Olive similarly describes the ways in which this homophobia online can transfer into their day-to-day experiences at school:

"I'm comfortable coming into school. But for someone I guess that's directly had homophobia targeted towards them I guess they wouldn't be very confident at all. Especially if you face that in every lesson, or if people were murmuring behind your back, you just wouldn't feel comfortable, even at lunch. Yes, I know one person that's also bisexual she doesn't go into school a lot anymore, only about two or three times a week, because of how people treat her."

In addition to this experience of homophobia in response to someone disclosing their sexual identity, there were also a few cases where LGBTQ+ youth were 'outed' online by their peers without their consent and received homophobic comments in the process. In a focus

group with year 11 boys, they brought up an incident in their school, where a boy pretended to be gay and asked another boy in the school for a nude photo. The boy then sent him a 'dick pic'. The participants further described the intent of the request: "there's a lot of homophobia in the school, so they were probably doing this as a joke at first, and then realized, 'Oh, we've got a gay guy's dick'" and proceeded to share the image around the school. The boys in the focus group described how this sharing of the nude was combined with homophobic remarks, which they described as commonplace in their school. For example, one participant stated:

"I think a lot about sexuality is that people don't like difference, and when someone is gay, or when someone's a member of the LGBTQ+ community or whatever, people are afraid of difference . . . And then the only way that they can fathom it in their mind is to take the mick out of it, to – how do I describe it? – to shame it."

In other cases, participants described how LGBTQ+ discrimination mixed with racial hatred (see Figure 5) .

Figure 5: LGBTQ+ Discrimination Online



UNWANTED CONTACT AND SEXUALISATION

- 43.1% of respondents experienced at least one form of unwanted contact and sexualisation.
- A greater portion of girls (51.4%) and gender minorities (56.5%) experienced this unwanted contact and sexualisation, compared to 28.2% of boys.
- Sexual minorities were also more likely to experience this, with 62.6% of sexual minorities compared to 36.12% of heterosexual.
- 70.35% of respondents claimed that at least one of these experiences increased since the start of COVID-19.
- The most common platform this unwanted sexual contact and sexualisation occurred on was Instagram (46.6%).

The table below displays the various experiences that we have categorised as 'unwanted contact and sexualisation', ranked in order of the most commonly to the least commonly experienced, across all genders.



Table 6 - Unwanted Contact and Sexualisation

| Types of Experiences | Girls | Boys | Gender Minorities | Hetero-sexual | Sexual Minorities | Total | % increased during COVID-19 | Top platform |
|---|--------|--------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------|--------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Cyberstalking | 17.74% | 6.09% | 21.74% | 11.49% | 16.67% | 12.48% | 48.39% | Instagram (50%) |
| Sexualised comments on social media posts (e.g. Instagram photos, TikTok videos) | 14.17% | 4.41% | 9.52% | 7.71% | 17.71% | 9.55% | 50% | Instagram (36.36%) |
| Unwanted sexual messages online (e.g. Instagram DMs, Snapchat messages) | 38.28% | 13% | 47.62% | 23.85% | 43.75% | 27.40% | 54.01% | Instagram (55.17%) |
| Sexual 'jokes' about you or to you (e.g. lad banter) | 17.97% | 14.22% | 22.73% | 13.33% | 30.61% | 16.34% | 47.78% | Instagram (31.58%) |
| Being rated on attractiveness/sexual activity | 23.8% | 9.7% | 19.05% | 14.32% | 30.21% | 17.51% | 42.05% | Instagram (31.58%) |
| Someone altering an image of you to make it sexual | 1.96% | 2.22% | 0% | 2.67% | 2.08% | 2.34% | 34.78% | Social Gaming Platforms (100%) |
| Someone describing or visually representing an unwanted sexual act against you | 9.77% | 2.67% | 14.29% | 5.87% | 11.34% | 6.77% | 44.19% | Instagram (100%) |
| Someone describing or visually representing an unwanted sexual act against your avatar or game character. | 3.14% | 4.87% | 9.52% | 4% | 6.19% | 4.29% | 53.33% | Social Gaming Platforms (100%) |
| Being sent flattering messages (e.g., about your looks, maturity, sexuality) by an adult stranger | 26.09% | 4.8% | 27.27% | 13.33% | 30.30% | 16.67% | 55.06% | Instagram (53.66%) |

In our qualitative research, several participants, particularly girls, described receiving increased unwanted sexual messages and comments from adult men during lockdown. This unwanted contact often came in the form of messages and/or message requests, “likes” and comments on Instagram from adult men, which girls

described as “creepy” and “weird”. Teens described feeling specifically targeted because of their age by these adult men. Nolan in year 9 (School 5) described how during lockdown, adult men targeted young boys (including his peers) on gaming platforms by searching for younger voices in the game’s voice chat option.

He described how adult men targeted younger users because “they’re more vulnerable” (School 5). Likewise, Audrey in Year 10 (School 1) described how she felt targeted because of her age with a “ton of old men trying to follow [her]” and sending her messages during lockdown (School 1). Messages often led to requests for images and/or the sending of non-consensual nude images (discussed in the IBSHA section).

Although not a criminal offence, young people, particularly girls, also described receiving unwanted sexual attention from people their age, in the form of comments and messages. Participants stated that it was more common to receive these unwanted comments and messages from young people in their wider digital network, rather than from friends or classmates. For example, Miranda (Year 12, School 3) discussed how a friend of a friend followed her on Instagram, and said “oh you’re so, so pretty. I love your hair. Would you want to start talking?”, which she described as “weird” and “creepy” because she did not know the person. She further stated: “it’s not a dating profile. It’s not like you’re inviting them to make a comment about how you look.”

Another trend we observed was the ways in which these unwanted sexual comments were often tied to the images that girls were posting. For example, Mia in Year 10 (School 3) recounted an experience where a friend’s older brother started persistently commenting on her body and requesting to

“hook up” after she had posted an image on Instagram in a bikini. She described feeling “grossed out” and “trashy” and “slutty” for posting the image, which she later deleted. Another participant recalled an instance where she was sent a voice note from a “really distant mutual” friend of him moaning, making sounds as though he was masturbating, saying “I’m doing this to your Instagram”. She further described it as feeling “awful” and “assaulted”, but equally, feeling that it was her own fault for posting the image in the first place. Both examples demonstrate the ways in which girls internalise the sexual shaming attached to their social media presence. They internalise victim-blaming norms, by blaming their social media presence for their own harassment. These experiences align with traditional sexual assault narratives, whereby society places blame on women and girls for their clothing or appearance when they are harassed or assaulted in-person (Mendes et al., 2019). Finally, while most participants describing these examples of unwanted sexual messaging from peers were girls, one boy noted how a teenage girl added him on Snapchat and offered him a “blowjob”. He said that he felt “quite awkward” and blocked her immediately.

IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ABUSE (IBSHA)

Image-based sexual harassment and abuse describes a set of non-consensual and harmful online behaviours that constitute digital sexual violence and require immediate intervention: (1) Image-based sexual harassment (IBSH) and (2) Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA). As outlined in our previous work (Ringrose, Regher & Milne, 2021), IBSH describes two forms of digital sexual violence: (a) unwanted sexual images (e.g. cyberflashing or unsolicited dick pics), and (b) unwanted solicitation for sexual images (McGlynn and Johnson, 2020). Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), as defined by Clare McGlynn and Erica Rackley (2017) refers to the non-consensual recording, distribution, and/or threat of distribution of nude or sexual images. We combine these experiences, which are often interlinked, in the term IBSHA. “Images” broadly encompasses all forms of visual content, such as photographs, videos, live videos, and chats.

- 27.1% of respondents experienced at least one type of IBSHA.
- Gender minorities were the most likely to experience this violence with 40% of gender minorities (33.33% non-binary, 50% other, 66.67% trans), followed by 34.8% of girls and 17.67% boys.
- Sexual minorities were also more likely to experience IBSHA with 41.2% of sexual minorities, compared to 24.41% of heterosexual youth.
- Of those respondents who experienced at least one form of IBSHA, 100% claimed that at least one of their experiences increased during COVID-19.

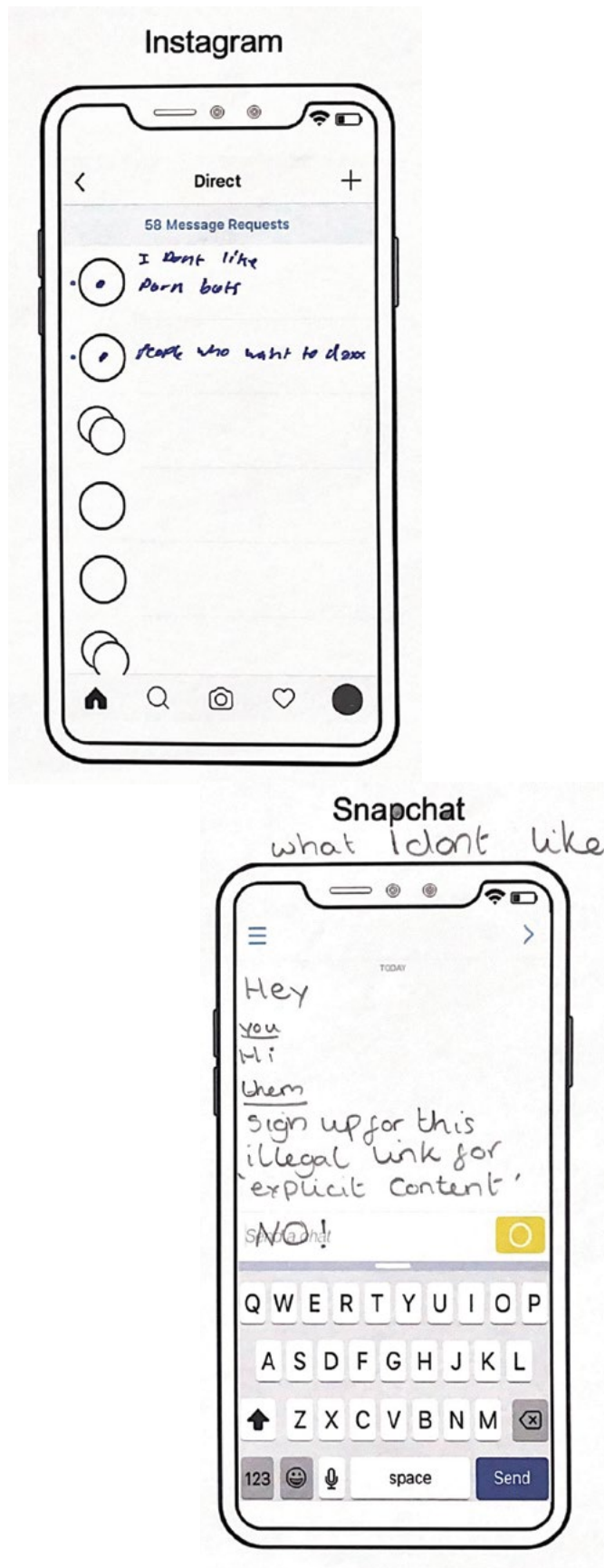
A. UNWANTED SEXUAL IMAGES

- 23% of young people (23.2% of girls, 35% of gender minorities, and 22.4% of boys) received a sexual photo or video online that they did not want since COVID-19 started.
- 29.9% of sexual minorities and 22.81% of heterosexual participants received these images.
- According to the recipients, 65.8% of the images were male genitals, 27.5% of the images were female breasts and 18.3% of the images were female genitals.
- These images were most often received on Snapchat (53.4%), followed by Instagram (33.83%).
- In approximately half of these incidents (49.1%) the sender asked for a photo in return. When asked the gender of the sender, 65.5% of respondents claimed that the images were sent by boys/men, 22.1% were sent by girls/women, 2.7% were from someone who was non-binary, and 9.7% were unsure of the gender identity of the sender.

- 83.2% of recipients of unsolicited sexual images claimed that their experiences increased with COVID-19.

In our qualitative research, many participants discussed receiving unwanted sexual images/videos or knowing someone who had received them. Most of the girls' focus groups discussed receiving unwanted images in the form of unsolicited dick pics from boys and men, and the boys' focus groups discussed receiving unwanted images from 'porn bots' (see Figure 6) or 'fake accounts.' Participants described receiving "loads of dick pics" during lockdown, because the senders were "bored".

Figure 6: Porn Bots



While these images most often came from people they did not know, participants described how the age of the sender could range drastically. For example, Ellen in Year 9 (School 3) stated: “they could be probably 16 up to 60, like they could be quite a wide range”. This range in age aligns with the survey findings with 53.6% of the images being sent by someone 18 or over, followed by 25.6% under 18, and 20.5% unsure of the age. The age of the sender, however, had implications for how teens experienced and made sense of the harassment. For example, Lola (Year 9, School 2) explained that adult men send sexually explicit images to girls because they are seen as “easy prey for grooming” and can be more readily manipulated into sending images in return “because it’s easier to manipulate a child than it is an adult”.

While the majority of senders were from strangers, 12.1% of young people responded that unwanted sexual image or videos were sent by a friend, 8.6% were sent by a ‘friend of a friend’ and 4.3% were sent by a romantic or sexual partner.

Furthermore, 22.6% reported knowing the sender in person. This connection to the sender creates unique challenges for the recipient, as Carly in Year 9 (School 5) states:

“If it’s someone that I actually know sending or asking me for something . . . that puts me in a really awkward position, like do I block them, but then again I might see them the next day at school,

and it’s like, what do I do in this situation. And it can be people you call friends . . . it’s just such an uncomfortable situation.”

Finally, our findings did not always fit with the pattern of men/boys sending girls images. A few boys discussed receiving non-consensual images from girls; Year 9 student Jimmy (School 4) discussed how he was having a “normal conversation” on Snapchat with a girl who was a friend of friend, and then all of a sudden the girl sent a nude picture. She then immediately deleted the image and claimed that she had sent it by accident. He said he was very “confused”, and unsure what to make of this experience. Jack in Year 10 (School 2), who identified as gay, described how he would receive unsolicited dick pics from other boys on Snapchat. These images were often combined with messages saying, “I’m curious,” or that they wanted to “explore” to show that they wanted a dick pic in return. Interestingly, he described how the senders would often identify as “straight” and would be openly homophobic in school and in front of their peers, which he understood as them displaying internalised homophobia and shame about their own sexual preferences. This is important as we can see that the dick pic being sent non-consensually is a trend beyond heterosexual cultures (see also Dietzel 2022). However, further research is needed to specifically explore the nuances and particularities of LGBTQ+ youth’s experiences of this form of IBSHA.

B. UNWANTED SOLICITATION FOR SEXUAL IMAGES

- 23% of young people (23.2% of girls, 35% of gender minorities, and 22.4% of boys) received a sexual photo or video online that they did not want since COVID-19 started.
- Sexual minorities were more likely to receive these requests, with 22.7% of sexual minorities compared to 14.1% of heterosexual youth. These requests were most often received on Snapchat.
- 89.29% claimed that their experiences increased during COVID-19.

Interestingly, while our survey data found that a significant number of boys received requests for nude images, young people in our focus groups and interviews predominantly discussed the trend of girls receiving these requests.

- 77% of the requests were from a boy/man, 17.6% were from a girl/woman, 4% were unsure of their gender, and 1.4% were from someone who was non-binary.
- Similar to the senders of unsolicited sexual images, the age of the requesters ranged, with 54.9% 18 or over, 40.9% under 18, 4.2% responded 'unsure'.

- Furthermore, respondents received these requests from people they only knew online (58%) and people they knew in person (42%).
- In addition, 36.5% were asked by a stranger, 23% were asked by their romantic or sexual partner, 17.6% were asked by their friend, 10.8% were asked by a friend of a friend, 5.4% were unsure how they knew them and 2.7% responded 'other'.

The age of senders was consistent in the qualitative data, where young people described receiving requests from “older men”, as well as boys their own age. For example, Alexa in Year 10 (School 1) describes how a “ton of old men” and “weirdos” would ask her for “pics”, when her social media account clearly states she was 13 years old. Girls also equally discussed receiving requests from boys their own age—ranging from boys they only knew online to romantic and sexual partners. Compared to the sending of unsolicited sexual images, more young people described frequently experiencing unwanted requests from known people, including friends, partners, or boys from their school or neighbouring schools.

Despite ranging in age and their relationship to the recipient, these unwanted requests often described as involving pressure. Among those who had received requests for nude photos:

- 61.3% of respondents experienced pressure, with 63% of girl respondents, 75% gender minorities and 56.25% boys.

Girl participants described several instances where they received requests for nude images from boys they only knew online, where boys would add girls on social media, and would pressure them to send nudes by wearing down their boundaries through repeated requests. This pressure also came from boys who were friends and peers. Year 12 girls discussed how boys they knew would “love to joke” by saying to them: “please anything, send me anything, send me something old, I don’t care. Send me just a picture of your bra” (School 3). This pressure also sometimes came from romantic and sexual partners. For example, Billie in Year 10 described how when she was 12 years-old her boyfriend asked her to send him photos of her in her gymnastics uniform, and she broke up with him because the request “made [her] feel immensely uncomfortable” (School 3). Furthermore, some participants described instances where they or their peers felt compelled to send a nude image, because of the perceived injunctive norm that dictates that sending sexts will lead to desirable relationships, and that not sending sexts will lead to negative evaluation from their partner, a finding that has been paralleled in previous research (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ouytsel et al., 2017).

C. IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL ABUSE (IBSA)

As previously mentioned, (IBSA) refers to the non-consensual recording, distribution, and/or threat of distribution of nude or sexual images. In our survey, we asked young people whether they ever had their nude image shared or witnessed the sharing of someone else’s nude online without the permission of the original sender. We use “sharing” to broadly include: (1) forwarding nudes over text-messages, Whatsapp and other apps (e.g. in group chats or private messages); (2) physically showing the nudes (e.g. on your phones) even if they are not shared electronically; and (3) posting nudes publicly to a social networking site or other general website.

- Since COVID began 1.6% of respondents (n=8) had a sexual photo or image of themselves shared.
- Of these eight participants, 4 were girls and 4 were boys. These photos were mostly shared on Snapchat (87.5% of all images), followed next by Instagram (50%), and then in person (25%).
- Since COVID-19, 11.1% of our sample (n=57) witnessed someone sharing sexual photos or videos of someone else without their permission.
- Of this 11.1%, 48.2% were girls vs 41.1% of boys. Most of the images were shared in person (41.5%), then in a group chat (26.4%), and then in a private message (15.1%).

While no one in our interviews or focus groups disclosed experiencing IBSA directly themselves, several participants had either witnessed or heard of sexually explicit images being shared non-consensually in their peer groups at school. In some cases, the images were shown in person on someone's phone, in other cases these images were shared online in group chats or (rarely) on social media profiles. Robbie in Year 9 (School 4) described an experience where he saw one of his peers showing a nude image of a girl on his phone on the playground. While some of the peers "cheered it on", other peers "said it was really wrong." In particular, one of Robbie's friends told the boy that it was wrong to be sharing the nude and took his phone from him, ran away from him, and deleted the image. According to Robbie, this friend was good friends with the girl. This is a good example of a boy choosing to take action against IBSA and the sexist culture that it contributes to. In another case, Alison in year 12 (School 3) described how her friend sent nudes to a boy, and "he got so annoyed at her for not sending more that he posted them on his main public Snapchat story". This example demonstrates a direct intent to harm the victim-survivor.

While most examples focused on girls' images being shared, a few participants described instances when nude or explicit images of boys were non-consensually shared online. For example, the Year 11 boys described how a boy's "dick pic" was sent around, and everyone was laughing

and teasing him for it. According to this group, this example of IBSA was deemed as funny because the victim-survivor had been "go[ing] round saying his penis was big", and "then his genitalia has been leaked, and then it sort of shows that he's not as big as he's been portraying" (School 5). Another boy mentioned how there was a rumour that a boy left their school because his "dick pic" had been shared around. While previous research has shown that boys face fewer consequences when their nude images are shared (Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019), these examples demonstrate the harms that boys can experience, and their relation to masculine body image ideals.

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND COERCION

- 10.8% of participants experienced sexual exploitation and coercion, which included: online threats of a sexual nature (e.g. rape threats), being blackmailed/coerced into engaging in online/offline sexual acts (sextortion), someone attempting to lure you to give money or details to be sextorted (honey trapping), and or manipulation or deception by an adult stranger (e.g. catfishing).
- Gender minorities were most likely to experience this with 21.7% of gender minorities, followed by 12.25% of girls, and 7.62% of boys.

- Sexual minorities were also more likely to have this experience, with 16.3% of sexual minorities, followed by 9.43% of heterosexual participants. Of note, while these prevalence rates are comparatively low, the degree of harm and severity of these experiences is arguably much higher.
- 70% of respondents claimed that at least one of these experiences increased since the start of COVID-19.

Teens described their fears surrounding catfishing on Snapchat, due to the particular affordances of the platform. In addition to experiencing catfishing from adult strangers, several young people described being catfished by peers or people their own age. For example, Tasha (Year 10, School 1) described how a boy in her tutor group made fake accounts on Instagram and would “message all the girls in our year, saying really, really creepy stuff”.

REPORTING

When asked what, if anything, young people do when experiencing various forms of online risk or harm, the figures are worrying. A minority of participants responded that they sought support from adults when faced with these online harms. In line with our previous research (Ringrose, Regher, Milne, 2020), which found very low rates of reporting, only 3% of young people reported these experiences of harm to their school. When recounting times when individuals did go to their schools or teachers about these instances of online harms, participants

explained that these institutions were not helpful, and did not effectively handle the situations or in some cases made things worse. Specifically, students indicate that, in these situations, schools seemingly either did not take the issue seriously, or blew issues out of proportion. But fundamentally, there was an overall lack of trust in the school’s ability to respond.

Comparatively more participants (21.64%) described reporting the incident to their parents. This sometimes occurred in serious situations, or in those cases where they felt close enough with their parents to feel comfortable “telling them everything”. However, other times, students reported being afraid to tell their parents because they believed it would worry their parents for no reason and they would overreact:

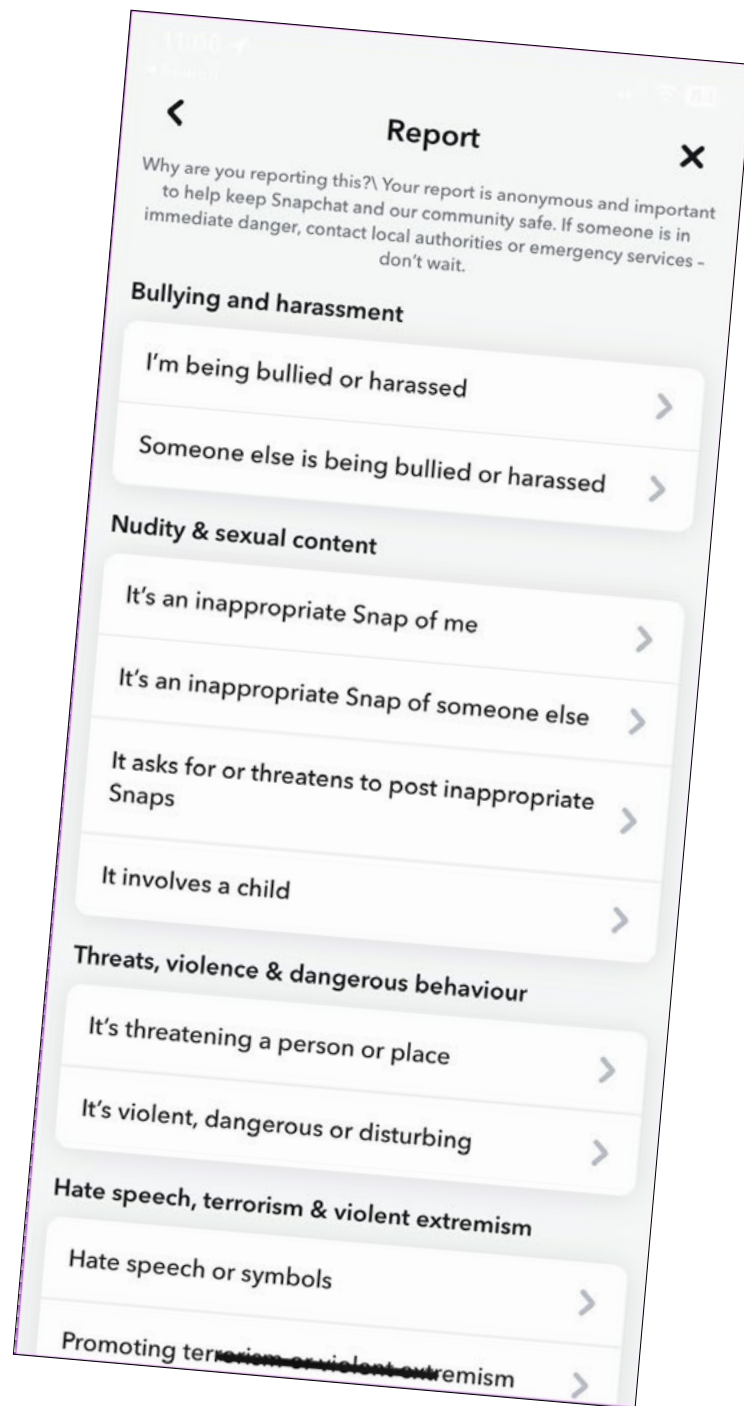
“I think I would if it happened again. I would just be worried about my parents overreacting and then blocking the internet.” (Year 10, School 3)

Others believed that their parents would get mad at them, and victim blame. This stems from a belief that parents have a lack of understanding of social media and its benefits.

- 38.7% of respondents responded that they discussed the experience with a friend, and 4.9% discussed with a sibling.

- 22.6% of young people who experienced at least one form of harm claimed to have done “nothing” as their sole response.
- 28.85% reported the incident to the platform, and 30.2% selected other—which included the various similar responses including: “blocked the user”, “deleted the account”, “reported them and blocked the account”, “unfriended them”.
- Of those respondents who chose not to report their experience of harm to an adult, they gave the following reasons: “would rather sort it out myself” (42.5%); “too much effort” (39.4%) and “didn’t think reporting would help” (35.3%).

Many participants were unsure how to handle these online harms, noting that they did not report these instances because, beyond reporting to the social media sites themselves, they did not know where to go or who to go to. Instead, it was common for participants to try and sort the issue themselves. Caryl (Year 9, School 5) noted: “...if something upsets you, you normally just block the person and don’t really think about it again, there’s no real action you take. But I just think if I was to tell an adult they might start worrying. The school wouldn’t do anything anyway, it’s kind of impossible.”





Teachers

Although many teachers reported receiving training on social media and online harms, 38.5% report that it was unhelpful in preparing them to respond to students' experiences of online risk and harm.

Most teachers indicated their schools have policies on things such as

- Sending sexual photos (69.1%)
- Digital harassment (88.6%)
- Gender and Sexuality based violence (84.1%)
- Online shaming (70.5%)
- Coercion (68.3%)
- Online exploitation (90.7%)
- Unwanted sexualisation online (72.7%)
- Consensual nude image sharing (69.8%)
- IBSA (81.8%)
- Solicitation for nudes (77.3%)
- Image based harassment (65.9%)
- However only 15.5% thought these policies were effective.
- Teachers showed limited confidence in using platforms that students are on such as Snapchat, TikTok, Discord, social gaming, dating platforms, porn sites, VSCO, Reddit, and Yubo. They showed more confidence with YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Live video platforms.

- Teachers displayed concern about their students' use of:
 - Snapchat (58.5%)
 - Instagram (60%)
 - TikTok (50%)
 - WhatsApp (53.7%)
 - YouTube (57.5%)
 - Discord (46.9%)

84.4% of teachers said their concerns about online sexual risks and gendered harms have been heightened since COVID.

Since COVID, teachers have been alerted to at least one students' experience with:

- Digital harassment (76.2%)
- Gender and sexuality-based harassment (52.1%)
- Sexual shaming (59.5%)
- Coercion (50%)
- Exploitation/grooming (38.1%)
- Unwanted sexualisation (59.5%)
- Receiving a sexual image (49.5%)
- Being asked to send sexual images (51.2%)
- Experiencing pressure to send sexual images (42.9%)
- Having sexual photos shared with others (IBSA) (41.9%)

- Teachers believed that girls (82.1%) and gender non-conforming people (17.9%) were more at risk.

There was a consensus amongst the teachers surveyed and interviewed for our study, that youth were struggling following the return to school after the national UK lockdowns. Indeed, teachers expressed deep concern for their students, as perhaps captured most strongly in this quotation from an interview with Anne, a senior teacher of English and form tutor: “I think children are more vulnerable than they’ve ever been before.” (School 2)

Teachers noted the following changes in student behaviour post lockdown:

- Increased mental health issues
- Sleeping problems
- Disaffection with studies
- Aggression, and physical and verbal fighting (leading to higher rates in exclusion)
- Increase in bad language
- More problems amongst friendship groups
- Rise in issues around uniform and appearance

The 17 teachers we interviewed spoke of the consequences of the sharp increase in student use of digital devices including smart phones and laptops during lockdowns for COVID-19.

While recognising the value of digital technologies for social connection and schoolwork, teachers spoke of their concerns regarding the longer-term impacts of increased screen time on students’ sleep, behaviour, and mental health. Upon the return to school, children were not sleeping well because, as one teacher noted, many of them were “still using social media platforms, gaming platforms until the early hours of the morning, because that’s what they got used to doing over lockdown and they haven’t adjusted to school routines again yet” (Sarah, School 3).

The idea of social media as a double-edged sword, whereby the associated opportunities and risks are deeply intertwined, is explicitly acknowledged in this statement from Bonnie, a teacher and student support leader, who worked primarily with the pupil premium students¹ in Year 10:

“I think that social media was very difficult for a lot of them. It was a bit of both, because they felt like they needed to have the social media because they couldn’t have the face-to-face interaction,

1 According to the gov.uk site, the [pupil premium grant](#) is funding to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in state-funded schools in England.

but then people were not necessarily being particularly kind on social media. There were a lot more group chats, and stuff like that, that were being used, which I think the children really struggle with because they can be added to and removed from. And I think that there's always that worry of, am I being talked about by other people, and is it going to be screenshot and shared, so I think that there is a lot of worry around that.”
(School 1)

At one school, teachers told us of a rise in disturbing and “unkind” language upon return from lockdown. Alex (School 3), a young male teacher, said that when students returned to school, “they were really aggressive towards each other. And the language they were using to each other was really barbed and venomous in a way in which I hadn’t quite seen before... They were saying things out loud that they would normally have just typed” (School 3). This kind of bleeding between online and offline spaces, was something that many teachers remarked upon in our qualitative research, as they spoke of the trouble students experienced readjusting to school routines. Teachers reported a rise in school exclusions due to fighting. The general ennui of young people in the immediate post lockdown period emerged as a theme across all our interviews.

Some teachers felt that COVID-19 made communication with parents even more difficult, noting the new challenges faced by parents during lockdowns to maintain “I’m the parent and you’re the child structures” when living in “such close proximity day after day after day” (Lauren, School 2). More – and better – support and education on social media issues was felt to be needed for parents.



SEXUAL VIOLENCE, EVERYONE'S INVITED AND IMAGE SHARING:

Sexual violence in the context of schools emerged as a major concern in our interviews with teachers, many of whom spoke candidly of their worries about how to deal with this problem in the wake of the publicity surrounding the Everyone's Invited Instagram page and website that invites survivors to anonymously share their stories of sexual violence in schools and Universities. Some of the schools we visited were included on the Everyone's Invited list of schools, and this was therefore weighing heavily on many teachers' minds. For example, Alex (School 3), expressed concern about the flood of sexual abuse testimonies from students and the ability of schools – and of society more generally – to fix this serious problem. He stated:

"[T]here's a big group of us who are really committed to this, but...how long is it going to last, when will the momentum stop and how long will the horrible shock value of Everyone's Invited and all the kids coming forward, how long's that going to last. So, that worries me and that's a bit of a downer...I'm optimistic that we can do some things, but I'm worried that schools can't do everything, I think."

Image sharing and inappropriate messaging was another big concern for teachers. In response to the question, 'What do you think some of the biggest harms or risks online are for students?' Melissa, a teacher from School 3 stated:

"Obviously sharing inappropriate images and inappropriate texts. But I think it's more than that. It's the constant feeling that they are at the mercy of their phone every time they look at [it]. There could be a message which is upsetting or something like that, and I think it's changed their behaviour. They're so terrified, sticking their heads above the parapet. A lot of kids now will not ask questions in class. We get emails from parents saying 'please don't ask my child a question in class.'"

Here, as in many of the interviews, the blurring of the lines between home, school, and online culture emerged as a major issue for teachers.

Figure 7: Everyone's Invited Website



SEXISM AND THE PERPETUATION OF GENDERED ROLES AND STEREOTYPES IN SCHOOLS

There was variation amongst the teachers in terms of awareness of gender roles and norms and how that might feed into a culture of gender-based violence and abuse. June, an experienced teacher with long-standing service, was particularly aware of what she referred to as the “sexist culture” and “masculine” structure of her school, with certain departments perpetuating “really traditional ideas about what girls and boys do” (School 3). In June’s view, traditional ideas around femininity and masculinity embedded in school culture impacted on how incidents around sexual harassment and abuse, both online and offline, were dealt with by the school:

“I do think there’s actually a culture in this school, of assuming that certain girls are asking for that kind of abuse through their actions, maybe they might be quite loud in their personality. So they’ve made a judgement that maybe they’re at fault for that kind of stuff.” (School 3)

Some teachers recounted disturbing incidences of sexually aggressive behaviour by male students towards female teachers. Ruth, a history teacher and assistant head of Key Stage 4 (School 3), observed that some of the language used upon the return from lockdown was “incredibly sexist” and that this turned into sexually inappropriate and harassing language directed at her by a male student. Ruth’s experience of

sexual harassment, and the lack of support she experienced from other staff, one of whom told her she should in fact consider it a “compliment”, can be contextualized in relation to wider, growing concerns around educators’ experiences of violence and the lasting impacts that the delegitimization of their experiences has on them (Variyan and Wilkinson 2021).

At the all-boys school we visited, teachers also referenced problems with sexually harassing and abusive behaviour from some male students. As Evelyn, a science teacher, (School 4) told us:

“It is a boys’ school, they don’t have much experience with girls. We need to teach them because we’ve had incidences where boys are wolf-whistling and sixth formers, and they’re in lower down years. They have no idea what they’re doing. They just see a girl in a skirt, and they just go, ‘waay’, like that, and they don’t understand the connotations of that. We’ve had kids telling staff, ‘I’m going to rape you.’”

In the wake of the publicity around Everyone’s Invited, such incidents were being looked at in a new light by some teachers who showed awareness of the need to change a “boys will be boys” way of thinking. Michelle (School 1), who is head of safeguarding at her secondary school, told us of her determination to tackle the problem of peer-on-peer abuse and to educate staff about how they “mustn’t accept banter” from boys or excuse it.

TEACHER TRAINING:

We asked teachers about how prepared they felt in equipping young people to navigate digital environments. Although many teachers report receiving training – often as part of general safeguarding policies – as previously mentioned, 38.5% report that it was unhelpful in preparing them to respond to students’ experiences of online risk and harm.

Teachers expressed uncertainty about how to approach issues arising around social media use. As Stacey, head of religious education and personal, social, health, education (PSHE) at School 4, said:

“I think part of the risk is that most of the old fuddy duddy’s like me are not using Snapchat and Instagram. We don’t fully understand how they work. We might be using Facebook. We can figure out YouTube...it’s unlikely you’ll find teachers on Snapchat or Instagram very easily, deliberately because we have to kind of hide ourselves, we don’t necessarily know how it works...I would say as staff, we don’t fully understand what the risks are.”

Teachers were asked how they handled explicit image sharing and what they said to students about the issue. There was a strong tendency to subscribe to the view that “once you’ve sent it [the explicit image], it’s out there, and you’re never going to get it back” (Bonnie, School 1). Some teachers told us about powerpoint

presentations being given to children which highlighted the life changing consequences of “posting things online”. In general, this kind of negative, punitive messaging around image sharing, was common in the schools we visited. Speaking about how sharing nudes is “normalized practice amongst young people”, Caroline, a safeguarding lead for her school, said it was teachers’ responsibility to make sure students realise that sharing nudes is not okay and should be called out as part of an education about healthy relationships. This abstinence-based approach was a strong theme throughout our study, and is one we seek to challenge in favour of a rights-based approach that teaches young people ethical and healthy ways to explore sexuality and intimacy.

In general, teachers felt that training on how to deal with issues arising from online harms was inadequate. As Kelly, a Head of Year 7, said: “I definitely think there’s a huge percentage of staff who just don’t necessarily know how to deal with reporting of that kind of thing” (School 3). Evelyn, a teacher from School 4, told us that women teachers pushed for sexism training in the wake of British woman Sarah Everard’s murder by a police-officer:

“That murder as well totally riled the female staff up. I think that’s why we pushed for that sexism training because I know me and my friends in school and out of school were really... You just get worried, don’t you? So, every time we’re

going somewhere, like, please let me know you've got home safe because it is stuff that we have to worry about that men don't have to worry about, and they don't realise quite how much is different in that sense, big time."

This same teacher discussed the challenges of speaking to the boys in Year 11 about the Sarah Everard case and how they "kicked off" because a female politician said men should be under curfew from 9 PM:

"[T]hey lost it. They didn't care about anything else. There were, like, "I'm not going in at nine o'clock. Can't force me

in at nine o'clock." And it's like, that's not the point. The point isn't we're trying to make you feel like you're not allowed to do stuff, it's that it's not safe for us. They just couldn't get it, and that was one of the points was, the lower down the school you are, they really just don't understand. They don't have the empathetic side to be able to do it, to deal with it."
(School 4)

As with the parents, the teachers in our study expressed a strong desire for more, and better training around how to talk to their students about online sexual harassment and image-based sexual abuse.



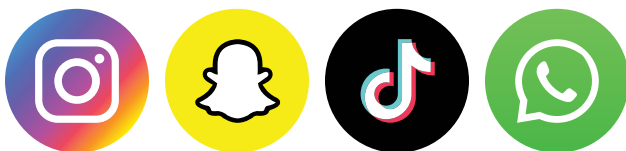
Parents:

We also have evidence of how parents also struggle to support young people as they navigate digital environments.

PARENTS AND PLATFORMS

- Parents were more confident using:
 - Instagram (67.2% had (some) confidence)
 - WhatsApp (95.4% had (some) confidence)
 - YouTube (97% had (some) confidence)
 - Twitter (67.8 had (some) confidence)
 - Live video streaming (88.2% had (some) confidence)
 - Parents were not confident using:
 - Snapchat 60.3%
 - TikTok 73.1%
 - Dating platforms 89.6%
 - Pornography 87.7%
 - VSCO 94.3%
 - Discord 88.9%
- Most parents did not know how to use privacy features on Snapchat (it was between 60-80% saying no to all the categories) or TikTok (74-89% of parents said no to all categories). Parents had more familiarity with Instagram's privacy features, such as how to set accounts to private, unfollow a user and block comments, but didn't know how to filter comments, mute, restrict users or report posts or profiles.
- In general, parents did not feel overly concerned about most social media platforms (between 33-70% said not they were not concerned about them at all). Parents were most concerned about YouTube (28.8%) followed by TikTok (25.8%), and then Instagram (18.5%) and Snapchat (16.9%)
 - Parents were concerned about their children:
 - Receiving a sexual image (78%)
 - Being asked to send sexual images (72.1%)
 - Being pressured to send sexual images (73.5%)
 - Sending sexual images (69.1%)
 - For 56.5% of parents, these concerns were heightened during COVID.
 - 100% of parents thought girls experienced more sexualised risks than boys.
 - When asked about negative experiences online since Covid, 70.6% referred to digital harassment; 23% to unwanted sexualization (23.5%),

Figure 8: Social Media Platforms



being asked to send sexual photos (17.6%); gender and sexuality based harassment (17.6%).

- Most parents have had conversations online with their child about:
 - Treating people with respect (91.7%)
 - Positive and healthy relationships (96%)
 - Sexting (60%)
 - Consent online and in offline relationships (79.2%)
 - Communicating about what makes them uncomfortable online (96%)
- 48.5% of parents thought digital media like smartphones makes parenting harder. This was also the question that had the highest rate of parents disagreeing (19.1% disagreed with this statement)

A common theme across the parent focus groups was that during COVID many parents became more lenient around screen time rules or boundaries. This was often out of necessity, as parents were juggling their jobs with home-schooling and were not able to set the same rules as in a pre-COVID world. They were also very mindful of the benefits of social media for their socially deprived children who were unable to go to school and socialise with their friends.

“And when we were working, let’s face it people, I didn’t have time. I wasn’t policing it in the same way I was which made me feel guilty.” (Mother from Focus Group 1)

“I think over the course of COVID, the harder rules that I set when they were a bit younger went out the window, partly because I’m a single parent working from home with three children in the house, and I just couldn’t police the rules.” (Mother from Focus Group 2)

“Yes, lots of their social life was online as ours was. So, yes, I became much more lax during COVID about time spent on social media.” (Mother from Focus Group 2)

This loss of control during the lockdown periods contrasted to the quite high degree of control many felt that they had exerted over their teens’ internet and social media usage pre- COVID. Several parents in the focus groups said they use – or had used – parental controls on the devices of their teens, especially the younger teens aged 13 so they could set and monitor screen time. This discourse of control over children’s devices can sometimes overlook the extent to which young people know how to get around limitations and monitoring. **40.6% of young people in our survey know how to bypass parental controls or filters put on their devices.** Further, the use of apps and technology to control teens’ use of social media can serve as a poor substitute for open conversations with young people.

One of the key recommendations from our study (see section x) is the need for greater focus on teaching consent, ethical decision-making skills, and digital literacies.

Parents' knowledge of technology varied from minimal to being quite conversant with certain sites, in particular Facebook and Instagram. Parents showed awareness of TikTok though it was not a site they used personally. There was trepidation about Snapchat which some parents seemed almost fearful of in the sense that they believe dark things happen on there, but feel very ill equipped to navigate the site, which feels uncomfortably far outside of their wheelhouse.

The parents in our study expressed a range of worries in relation to their teen's social media use during COVID (and beyond), the most prevalent of which included:

- grooming and predatory adults
- nude image sharing
- porn
- bullying
- online harassment and abuse

NUDE-IMAGE SHARING

Parental awareness/knowledge of the topic of nude-image sharing varied. Some parents said that, to their knowledge, this was not an issue for their teens. Other parents seemed more aware of the realities of nude image sharing and spoke

of incidents in which their daughters, for example, had been sent dick pics. Matthew and Tracey, a mother and father who were interviewed together, said they found a nude image of a girl's breasts on their daughter's phone that was "doing the rounds" at school. This same couple acknowledged that they have shared nudes between themselves and had knowledge of the realities of digital intimacy – the positive aspects of it as well as the negative. As Tracey stated:

"Yes, it's like I said to you about how easy it is, she can just send a friend a picture of herself in some skimpy, or I don't know, a boyfriend a picture or herself topless or something and then all of a sudden he sends it to his mate who then sends it to his mate and then it gets around the whole school and it's literally like a plague, you know, once it's in one person's hands, it's in everybody's hands, but do I expect it to happen at some stage? Yes, if I'm honest with you."

Another parent, Jane, expressed awareness of nude image sharing as part of twenty-first century intimacy, even if it was something she did not have direct experience of:

"My...friend was exchanging nude images with a man she met online. And this was a few years ago...and during lockdown [she] was essentially having virtual sex with people because she couldn't date, she couldn't meet people. So, she was single,

and she was trying to meet new people. And so, it is a world that I have a little bit of knowledge of but I don't feel equipped to be able to help my daughter or my son in that world because it's not something that I'm taking part in."

In many of the focus groups, the notion that "once images are online, they are there forever" and cannot be erased, entered the conversation. For the parents in our focus groups, this idea of permanence and reputational damage was a strongly entrenched belief.

As part of the discussion of online risks and harms, parents were asked if they thought gender impacted on teens' experiences of online sexual harassment. The responses were mixed. One mother, Rebecca, spoke at length about the ways in which girls present themselves on social media. It was interesting that whereas she was able to grant a degree of latitude to boys who might send dick pics out of "immaturity", more judgement crept in when talking about how girls pose in what she viewed as worryingly sexual and provocative ways on social media.

Only one parent, Matthew, thought there was no difference in how girls and boys experienced online sexual harassment, suggesting that boys and girls are as bad as each other in "this culture now where everyone is trying so hard to be who they're not and try and look better than what they are." Most of the parents, though, agreed that girls and women experienced greater

harm on social media. However, what varied considerably were the reasons why they thought this was the case. Some parents suggested that it was because boys were not that concerned or invested in social media and that girls faced additional pressures to conform to beauty standards. Rebecca, for example, linked girls' experience of social media to innate gendered qualities, suggesting that girls and women tend to "react more personally" to things.

The topic of gender also emerged in focus group conversations around whether during lockdown their teens came to them with anything they found upsetting online. One parent, Jane, told us that the murder of Sarah Everard really affected her 17-year-old daughter. Jane said that after the murder of Sarah Everard the family had a lot of conversations about girls and about how to feel safe etc.

"I remember this vividly actually because she said to her brother, what would you do if you were catching a woman on her own at night. If you're walking back from something, what would you do? And he went, well I'd cross the road because I wouldn't want to scare her. She was like yes, yes, that's exactly what you do."

SCHOOLS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

In the main, parents said they would try to intervene and/or sort out situations themselves around social media and smartphone usage before calling the school for help. One of our parent participants, Susan, told us that when her teen daughter was getting upset about threatening messages she was receiving from a boy, she intervened through her daughter's phone. In another instance, Susan phoned the school when one of her daughter's friends threatened suicide via text message.

The parents in our study seemed to appreciate that schools were in a difficult position when it came to dealing with issues around online harms. As Tracey stated:

"I don't blame the school at all...I actually feel sorry for the school, because I've got one kid to worry about and they've got 500 or however many they've got to deal with, so I get how hard it is for them and I think social media companies need to be doing more...If the school banned the kids from going on social media at school, they'll find a way to get back on it. So, it's here now, isn't it, there's no getting away from it, social media."

Overall, parents expressed a strong interest in learning more about the online issues their teens face. Many shared the sentiment that they felt "out of their depth" as they did not grow up with the internet, and also because they are not as familiar with the everyday digital sexual intimacies of 21st century media culture. As Rebecca said: "I don't always feel like I am mentally... equipped for the world that they are growing up in because I don't understand it."





Recommendations:

For Schools

Teach students about social media and ethics but avoid messaging that suggests social media=bad.

Our mixed methods research reveals the complexity of young people's relationship with social media, including how during lockdown, social media was a tool which served various uses, which were both positive and negative and sometimes simply functional. Messaging given through class discussion, assemblies and policies that characterises social media as simply 'bad' is likely to alienate students. Similarly, "just don't do it" and abstinence-based messaging around digital media use is ineffective and unhelpful.

Rather, educating young people about how to responsibly use technologies is the way forward. It is important to provide young people with opportunities to engage in nuanced discussion around digital sexual harassment and gendered sexual pressures and how these play out in online contexts. We follow Sonia Livingstone and Amanda Third (2017) who promote a rights-based approach to young people's digital practices, which acknowledges their experiences of risks and harms online while simultaneously thinking about ways to empower them and "maximize the opportunities of the digital age" (666).

Such a rights-based approach to young people's digital practices is important for how it conceptualizes young people's digital practices as "deeply entwined with the conditions and possibilities of children's everyday lives" (Livingstone & Third, 2017, p. 668). Additionally, helping them think about how they might take an active role as a digital citizen or a digital bystander will enable them to build critical thinking and ethical decision-making skills to help them navigate the realities of 21st century life.

Ensure policies and teaching accounts for the gendered nature of online harms

Our research found that girls and LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience digital sexual violence compared to boys and heterosexual students and were also most adversely affected by the way in which increased screentime during lockdown exacerbated digital sexual violence.

School policies and procedures should make it clear that whilst any young person can be the victim and/or perpetrator of sexual violence, girls and the LGBTQ+ community are more likely to experience digital sexual violence. At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge that boys are also victims of sexual violence and to find ways to speak about boys' vulnerabilities, and of how toxic masculinities and forms of violence (both online and offline)

can hurt them as well. Our research shows that it is essential to find ways to include boys in the conversation about how to prevent sexual violence. The secondary curriculum, in particular RSE, can provide a space to explore gender double standards and gendered sexual expectations, and support young people to consider how these negatively affect all genders. An intersectional approach which acknowledges how race, ethnicity, gender identity and sexual orientation amongst other intersecting identity factors impact young people's experiences and perceptions of gender-based sexual violence is also imperative.

Support young activists

This project and previous research (Mendes et al. 2019; Ringrose et al., 2021) has found that young people use social media as a tool to speak out about issues they care about, including misogyny, racism, transphobia, body image and more. However, when they do, students often face a backlash, including cyberbullying from peers and trolling from strangers online.

Schools should support students who are trying to bring about positive social change. This might include setting up a formal club or society so that they can have a peer support network, or providing them with assembly time or space in a newsletter. Young activists should be reminded about the importance of taking care of their wellbeing and enhancing their digital

literacy skills (to know when and how to block/report/delete abusive accounts), which might sometimes include taking a break from their activism.

Invest in supporting young people's mental health

Our research supports the existing evidence around the impact that COVID-19 and lockdown has had on young people's mental health. Schools have an important role to play in helping young people to recover from the trauma of COVID-19 and the upending of their lives during periods of lockdown. As it begins to feel as if the pandemic is behind us, schools must not forget that the impact of it on young people continues, and where possible should resist reverting to a focus on academic attainment over student welfare.



For parents and carers

Avoid simply banning or reducing social media/phone use or overly relying on parental filters and controls to monitor your child

A common response from adults to the issues social media and smartphones present is to try to reduce their use, for example, taking away phones or prohibiting phones in schools. However, the reality is that banning or reducing social media is not a long-term viable solution. Nor is the tendency to simply install parental filters or controls to monitor their online accounts. Most young people told us they know how to bypass these parental filters and controls anyway. A more sustainable approach is to equip young people with the skills needed for life in the digital age. This includes:

- Developing ethical decision-making skills, including how this applies to online contexts - for example, if you see that your friend has posted a harmful comment online, you can be a responsible bystander and message them asking them to remove it.
 - Understanding self-care and digital self-care: encouraging your child to use digital technologies in a way that improves their life and well-being, and empower them to spend less time with apps that make them feel down or negative.
- Helping your child build digital literacy skills, for example discussing privacy settings and exploring how to change them to ensure apps are set to a privacy level that feels right for them.



For Government

Provide more resources for schools so that they can meet their students' mental health and wellbeing needs

Schools require sustained funding and support to train teachers to better prevent and respond to sexual violence, including technology-facilitated sexual violence. Resourcing is also needed to help schools respond to the current mental health crisis facing young people. This involves seeking expert support, such as in-house school counsellors or other well-being support initiatives.



For technology companies

Improve reporting tools

Young people told us that one of the reasons they don't report is because they don't think reporting works. Reporting needs to become more efficient to improve user confidence in reporting mechanisms and help children to be safer online. Some social media companies either never responded to their complaints or did not resolve them in a satisfactory manner. This may mean hiring extra moderators or it might mean revisiting the terms of service to ensure harmful content isn't inadvertently being allowed.

Take urgent action to remove harmful users

Internet users, including adult strangers, can too easily contact and harass children with little or no consequence. Technological solutions are urgently needed to address these forms of online sexual abuse.

Stop encouraging users to lower their privacy settings

Apps including Snapchat are sometimes designed in a way that makes it favourable for a user to have lower privacy settings - we saw evidence of this in our research. The gamification of Snapchat including 'snap scores' means that this functionality disproportionately affects young people, putting them at greater risk of harm. Apps should not be configured in such a way that encourages users to reduce their privacy settings, nor should the default privacy settings be the most open.



Appendix A

Survey Participants

Survey Demographics for 551 young people:

- 50.47% of respondents were girls, 45.07% were boys and 4.47% were 'gender minorities' (3.35% non-binary, 0.56% trans and 0.56% 'other').
- 74.16% identified as heterosexual or 'straight', 20.68% identified as LGBTQ+ or 'sexual minorities' (9.29% bisexual, 3.53% questioning, 2.42% pansexual, 1.12% Lesbian, 0.93% Queer, 0.93% Asexual, 0.74% gay, 0.37% 'other'), and 6.51% responded 'I don't know'.
- Respondents ranged from 13 to 18 years of age, with the majority being between 13 and 14 years old.

Survey Demographics for 47 Teachers:

- 73.3% of respondents were women; 28.9% were men.
- Age range was between 27-62 years old.
- 91.1% identified as heterosexual, 4.4% as gay, 2.2% as queer.
- 95.2% identified as White, 2.4% identified as Asian, and 2.4% identified as Latinx.
- 100% of respondents worked at a state-funded school.
- 28.3% of respondents were school safeguarding leads.
- 92.3% have received safeguarding training.

Survey Demographics for 72 Parents:

- More women than men responded to the survey (81.7% women vs. 18.3% men)
- 94% of parents in the survey identified as heterosexual; 2.9% as bisexual and 2.9% lesbian.
- 94.3% identified as White; 2.9% as mixed heritage; 1.4% as Asian, and 1.4% as other.
- Most parents in the survey had between 1-2 children aged between 13-21.
- 52.8% of parents in the survey said social distancing negatively impacted their child's mental health (10.1% said Very much).



Appendix B

Focus group and interview participants

In our qualitative research with 65 young people:

- 53% of participants were boys, 45% were girls, 2% were non-binary.
- Among these participants, 81% identified as heterosexual or 'straight', 15% identified as LGBTQ+, 6.4% responded 'I don't know' or 'prefer not to say'.
- As with the survey sample, the majority of LGBTQ+ youth identified as bisexual or pansexual. Participants ranged in age from 13 to 17 years old, with the majority in Year 9 (i.e., 13 to 14 years old).

In our qualitative research with 17 teachers:

- 17.6% of participants were men, and 82.4% were women.

In our qualitative research, we conducted 4 focus groups with 9 parents:

- Age Range: 46-52 years old
- 8 participants were women (89%) and 1 man (11%)



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