

Social media, psychological harm and violence among young people

Our findings on how social media use relates to violence and psychological harms among young people in West Yorkshire, and the key opportunities for harm mitigation



Contents

Contents

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Executive Summary | 4 |
| Introduction | 7 |
| Part 1: Many young people experience negative mental health effects from social media | 10 |
| 1.1 Social media plays a very important role in young people's lives | 11 |
| 1.2 Young people frequently encounter harmful content on social media | 15 |
| 1.3 This content can be categorised into targeted abuse and non-targeted upsetting content | 19 |
| 1.4 Seeing such content can have serious impacts on young people's mental health | 30 |
| 1.5 Many aspects of social media increase the risk of poor mental health outcomes | 38 |
| Part 2: Social media contributes to violence among young people | 40 |
| 2.1 Social media increases the risk of arguments and fights at school | 41 |
| 2.2 Many aspects of social media can increase the risk of low-level violence | 44 |
| 2.3 Existing research suggests that social media may also play a role in serious violence | 46 |
| 2.4 However, we cannot confirm this without further research including wider experiences of young people | 48 |
| 2.5 Conclusion of Parts 1 & 2 | 49 |
| Part 3: West Yorkshire VRU should commission further research and explore education-based interventions to mitigate the negative impacts of social media on young people | 50 |
| 3.1 Further research is needed to better understand the link between social media and serious youth violence | 51 |

| | | |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 3.2 | Alongside further research, there are different intervention options that West Yorkshire could explore | 53 |
| 3.3 | Harm prevention and reduction are not viable options for WYVRU to implement without buy-in from social media platforms | 57 |
| 3.4 | We recommend focusing on an education-based harm mitigation intervention | 60 |
| 3.5 | West Yorkshire should co-develop trauma-informed support with young people | 70 |
| Part 4: | Conclusion | 72 |
| Part 5: | Appendices | 73 |
| 5.1 | Appendix A: Our methodology | 74 |
| 5.2 | Appendix B: Survey respondents | 76 |
| | Endnotes | 78 |

Executive Summary

Social media is used by the vast majority of young people, and more than 2/3 of these young people view upsetting content on social media

- 91% of young people responding to our survey reported using social media every day. Over 80% of these young people reported using Snapchat, TikTok and/or Instagram
- 70% said they had seen upsetting content on social media, with frequency of seeing this content ranging from rarely to almost every day
- Respondents from Bradford and Calderdale were more likely to report having seen something upsetting than respondents from Kirklees and Wakefield
- The likelihood of young people saying that they had seen upsetting content on social media increased with age among our survey respondents
- The types of upsetting content seen by young people on social media can be split into targeted abuse, such as cyberbullying, hate and harassment, and non-targeted upsetting content, such as depictions of violence and gore and self-harm and suicide
- Girls and young women were more likely to have seen or experienced targeted abuse on social media, and boys and young men were more likely to have seen non-targeted upsetting content

Many young people experience poorer mental health as a result of distressing content on social media

- This can be experienced as a result of vicarious trauma, and/or as a result of harassment and abuse directed at the young person
- The anonymity of social media was identified by young people as a key factor that increases the level of harassment and abuse online compared to offline
- Mental health impacts may be further exacerbated by disrupted sleep associated with high social media use

In some cases, harassment and abuse on social media can lead to low level violence and conflict, such as school fights

- Almost half of young people surveyed were aware of physical and/or verbal fights that had happened following something on social media
- In most of these cases, young people reported that the fights were triggered by comments and messages on social media
- The main mechanism by which social media leads to low-level violence such as school fights seems to be a need to 'save face', which is exacerbated by the wide reach and speed of social media

In rare cases, social media seems to be associated with serious violence

- Previous research has identified that social media was a contributory factor in 20-25% of serious youth violence cases^{1,2}
- Serious violence was not mentioned by many people in our community engagement or survey responses
- Although it is rare for social media to lead to serious violence, more research is needed to confirm whether causality can be attributed to social media in these cases, and if so what the key mechanisms are

We recommend that West Yorkshire commissions further research and looks into education-based, trauma-informed interventions for young people, practitioners and parents and carers to increase safe use of social media and reduce vicarious online trauma and low-level violence

- Further research is needed into 1) understanding experiences as told by young people themselves, including young women's experiences specifically, 2) the impact of specific social media platforms, 3) how the benefits of social media can be better harnessed to support and protect young people from harm, 4) the exact mechanisms by which social media may lead to serious violence specifically, 5) the potential link between mental health problems and violence, and 6) potential link between school fights and serious violence. In all of these areas, longitudinal or experimental research is needed to identify causality.
- An intervention addressing social media-driven violence specifically has not been implemented yet in the UK. Options for mitigating the potential harms caused by social media include **harm prevention**, such as banning social media use or banning content from platforms, **harm reduction**, such as increasing access restrictions on platforms, and **harm mitigation**, such as improving education and support for young people and the adults around them. We recommend VRU focuses on harm mitigation strategies, specifically focusing on school-based education interventions.
 - Increasing restrictions on social media platforms is out of scope for the VRU as this requires buy-in from social media platforms, and young people highlighted the benefits of social media so trying to ban its use is not advised
 - Having extra education, training and support was the second most popular suggestion as to what would make social media safer for young people among our survey respondents, after adding extra restrictions into the social media platforms themselves
 - Research into other violence-prevention interventions highlights the potential of school-based interventions that are trauma-informed, co-produced with young people, focus on social, emotional and mental health skills and involve the whole family
 - Our survey highlighted that having a trusted adult could be a key protective factor: while 70% of young people had reported something upsetting on a social media platform, they had mostly received no or inadequate response from the social media platform. A much smaller proportion said they had spoken to an adult about upsetting content on social media, but almost all of these young people said that they got an 'ok' or 'good' response from the adult. Those who were not aware of social media-driven conflict were more likely to have gotten a good response from an adult they spoke to than those who were aware of social-media conflict.
 - An education-based intervention would address three key areas:
 1. Raise awareness of the potential dangers and consequences of social media use

-
2. Give adults better insight into what young people experience
 3. Improve relationships between young people and the adults around them.

Introduction

Research suggests that social media is a contributory factor in some serious youth violence

- Social media's capacity to incite violence is a key and growing area of concern amongst people working in the youth sector. The Executive Director of the Youth Endowment Fund recently highlighted the potential catalytic role that social media can play in conflict among young people.³
- Previous research commissioned by the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit identified that social media was a contributory factor in ~20% of violent offences committed by young people in Kirklees.⁴
- A separate report identified that young people's use of social media was directly related to the offence they had committed in ~25% of cases.⁵

The various risks posed by social media are a key government focus right now

- The UK Government is aiming to address some of these risks through the recently published Online Safety Bill.⁶ Measures proposed in this bill include:
 1. A greater focus on the responsibility of social media platforms to mitigate risks to their users
 2. Updating the criminal law relating to online communication to bring in new offences for content including cyber-flashing and content promoting self-harm
 3. A new mandatory Code of Practice for all online services accessed by children.
- Ofcom will be the regulator responsible for ensuring everyone's safety online

Against this background, the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit commissioned this piece of work to better understand the links between social media and serious violence and/or trauma among young people, and to identify possible strategies for mitigating the negative impacts of social media on young people

- The three research questions this work aimed to answer were:
 1. How, and to what extent, does social media act as a risk factor for young people under the age of 25 in West Yorkshire becoming involved in serious violence?
 2. How, and to what extent, does social media influence online vicarious trauma?
 3. What strategies can be adopted to mitigate any potential negative impacts of social media on young people?
- Previous research had already been conducted on cases of serious youth violence and had found that social media was an important factor in 20-25% of these cases

-
- As youth justice cohorts and ‘gangs’ had been looked at in previous literature⁷, we set our scope to include the wider community, looking at experiences of a range of young people in schools and youth groups
 - We also wanted to ensure that as much as possible we were not predefining what we understood as violence and/or trauma, so as to accurately represent young people’s experience
 - We therefore decided to start from the point of understanding young people’s general experience of social media and let them lead us on the kind of content and social media use that they consider harmful. From here we investigated what the impact of this harmful content or usage was, and how this may relate to vicarious trauma and violence.

Terminology

- **Young people:** We looked at the experiences of young people aged 11-25
- **Social media:** We allowed the list of platforms included as ‘social media’ to be driven by young people, but crucially all sites included allow young people to engage with each other through the site
- **Online harm:** The government’s new Online Safety Bill defines ‘harm’ as either physical or psychological harm.⁸ As such, we are using the term ‘online harms’ to incorporate both physical violence and psychological harms.
- **Online vicarious trauma:** Vicarious trauma is commonly explained as occurring as a result of empathetically engaging with the experiences of another person who has experienced trauma. Online vicarious trauma is not currently defined in literature. For the purposes of our research, we have defined it as trauma resulting from empathetically engaging with online content that has no direct relationship to the viewer.
- **Violence:** While violence is usually interpreted in terms of physical harm caused, we did not pre-define violence in our research process so as to allow for research participants to bring in psychological and emotional harms that may also be considered as violence, such as intimate image abuse and online harassment.
- **‘Gangs’:** Previous research by Social Finance with young people has identified that the term ‘gang’ can be problematic and harmful, as it is not neutral and can risk racialising the issue. Young people generally do not self-identify as being part of a gang. The label thus ignores the lived reality of those it attempts to describe. We will largely use the term ‘groups’ instead, but refer to the term ‘gang’ in quotation marks when research specifically focuses on this.⁹

Structure of this report

This report is made up of three parts:

1. Social media and psychological harm
2. Social media and violence
3. Mitigating the negative impacts of social media

Through splitting our findings in this way, we aimed to identify the key types of content, outcomes and mechanisms associated with social media use so that potential areas for intervention could be easily identified.

Data sources

The findings in this report come from:

- A review of the existing literature
- Community engagement:
 - Three focus groups with young people
 - Interviewed seven practitioners, primarily in one-to-one sessions
- Responses to surveys that we sent out to young people, practitioners and parents and carers. We received responses from:
 - 213 young people
 - 34 parents and carers
 - 68 practitioners, almost half of whom worked in school or college settings. The rest worked in a variety of services, including mental health, domestic abuse, youth offending, sexual violence and social care
- More detail on our methodology and survey respondents can be found in Appendices A and B respectively.

Limitations

There are various limitations to this report:

- We were unfortunately unable to speak to anyone from Youth Justice or Pupil Referral Units. This means that we did not speak to young people who are more likely to be involved in serious violence, but instead looked at the theme of violence in the wider community
- Our survey responses significantly overrepresent young people from Calderdale (+42pp) and underrepresent Leeds (-30pp). However, most young people we spoke to in focus groups were from the Leeds area.
- Much of the data in this report comes from self-reported survey data. It is not possible to know the extent to which young people responded honestly and openly to this survey – given the sensitive nature of the questions asked, it is very possible that young people did not feel comfortable to disclose some of their experiences. Similarly, it is possible that some young people would not class their experiences consistently – for example, boys and young men did not mention bullying, but this does not mean that what others class as bullying behaviour has not happened to them.
- The sample sizes of subgroups from the survey respondents are not equal. This means that some subgroups were excluded from the analysis. For example, although we collected data from non-binary and other gender respondents, the sample sizes of these two groups were very small and we have therefore not included them in the graphs presented in this report. The data has not been broken down by ethnicity for the same reason.

This report contains discussion of sensitive themes including violence, abuse, self-harm and suicide. Please take care when reading. Warnings are placed at the beginning of each section where these themes are discussed in more detail.

Part 1: Many young people experience negative mental health effects from social media

Summary

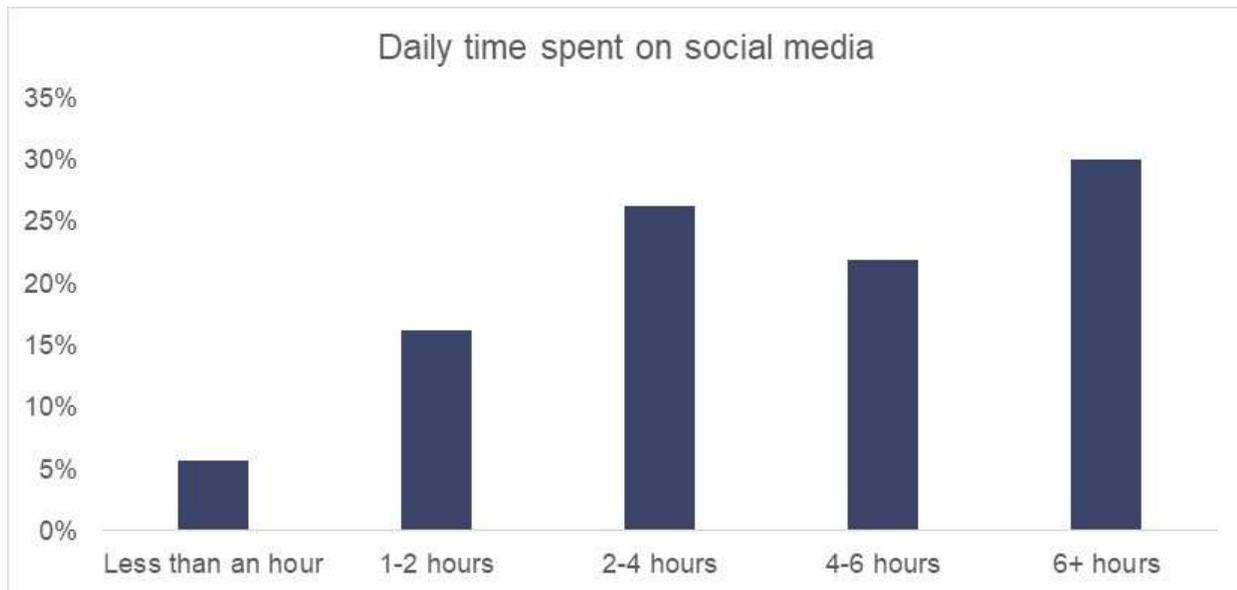
- Almost 80% of young people spend more than two hours a day on social media
- Social media is a very important part of young people's social lives
- Snapchat, TikTok and Instagram are currently the most heavily used sites amongst this age group in West Yorkshire
- Research has shown that social media brings many social benefits to young people, such as improving social skills, and young people overall rate social media as more of a positive than a negative thing
- Despite this, there are many types of upsetting content that young people see on social media
 - This content can be split into targeted abuse, such as cyberbullying, hate and harassment, and non-targeted upsetting content, such as depictions of violence and gore and self-harm and suicide
 - The two most common types of content reported as upsetting are cyberbullying and violence and gore. Much of this content carries potential for vicarious trauma.
- Young people report a variety of negative impacts that this content has on their mental health, including severe impacts such as self-harm and suicidal behaviours
- It seems that the more severe impacts are more likely in young people who are already at risk
- There are various aspects of social media that may lead to or accelerate these outcomes, such as the wide reach of content and the 'addictiveness' of social media use

1.1 Social media plays a very important role in young people's lives

Young people spend a lot of time on social media and use a variety of different platforms

- 91% of young people surveyed use social media every day
- Out of these young people, 30% spend over six hours a day and almost 80% spend over two hours a day, as shown in Figure 1 below:

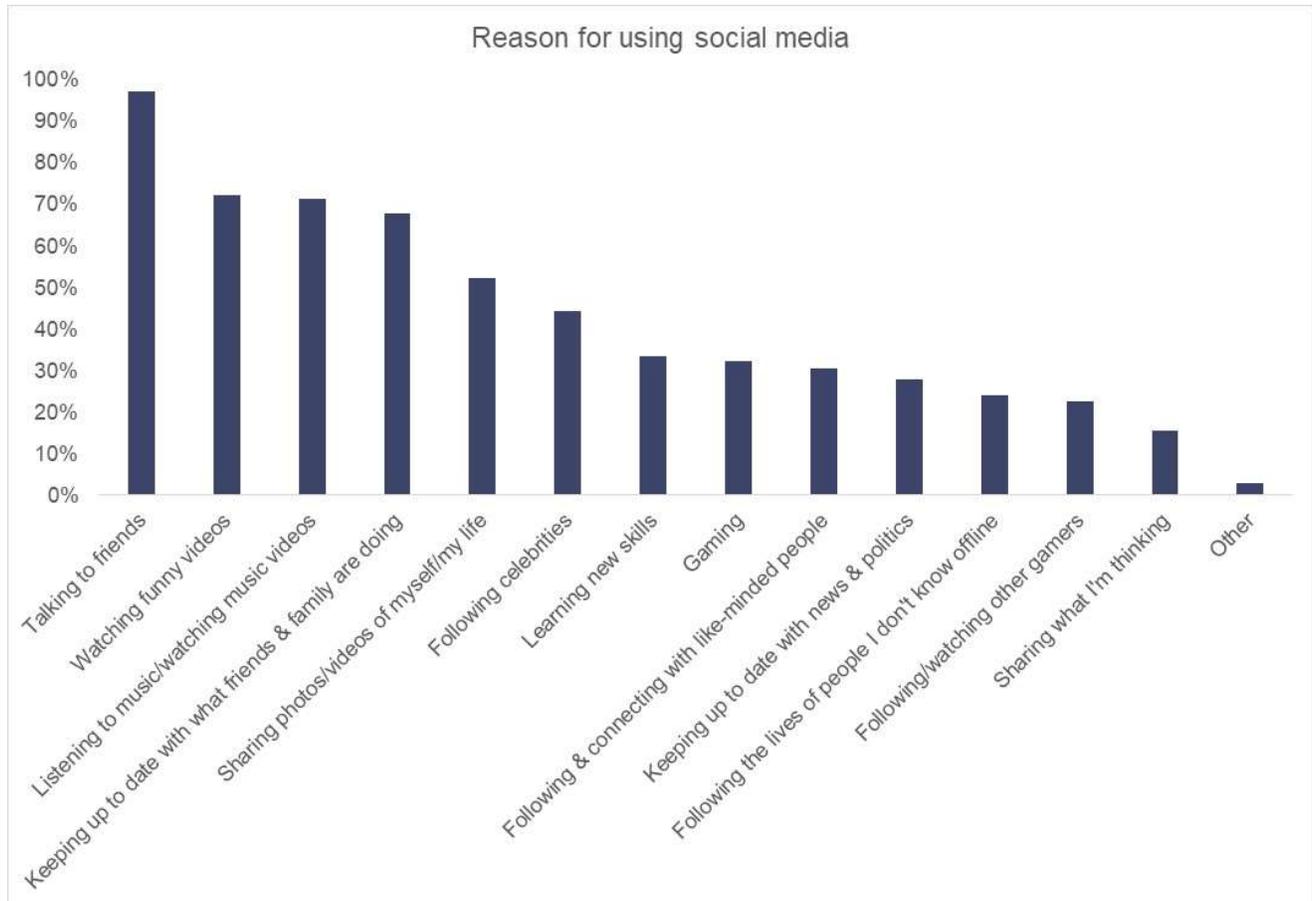
Figure 1: Daily time spent on social media reported by young people



Social media is a key part of young people's social lives

- 97% of young people surveyed use social media to talk to friends. Over 70% also use it as a form of entertainment. This is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Reasons for using social media reported by young people

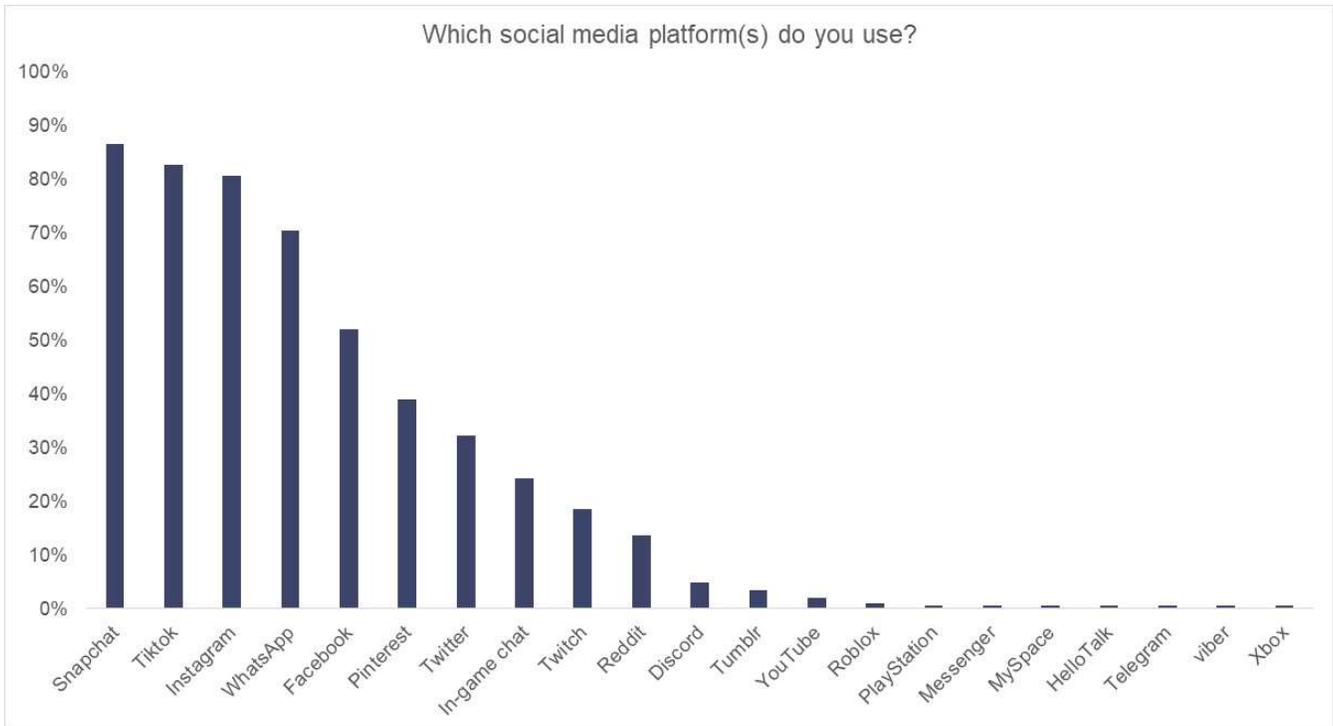


- Benefits of social media for young people that have been identified in literature include greater social connection and acceptance¹⁰ and improved social skills.¹¹
- Overall, young people think social media is slightly more of a positive than a negative thing (average score 5.5/10, with 10 being positive and 1 being negative)
- Some professionals said young people they worked with felt like they were missing out on social interactions when they weren't able to access social media.
- Young people highlighted that social media had been their only way of keeping in touch with peers through pandemic restrictions.

Snapchat, TikTok and Instagram are the platforms that are used by the highest proportion of young people

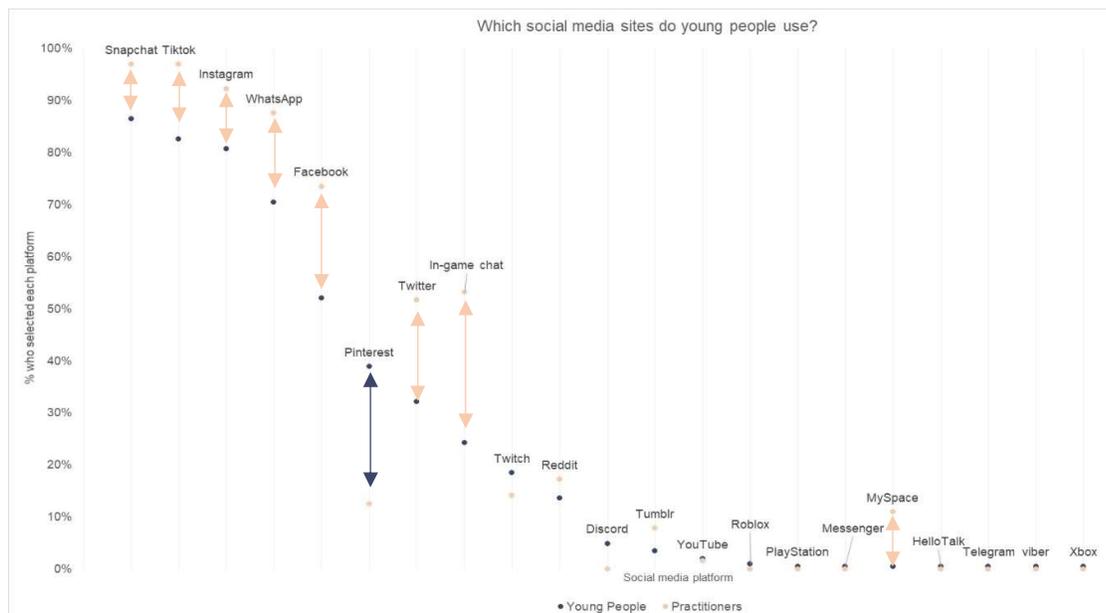
- Snapchat was the platform that had the overall highest number of users as reported by young people in our survey. 86% of young people reported using Snapchat. 83% use TikTok, 81% use Instagram and 70% use WhatsApp.

Figure 3: which social media platforms are used by most young people



- TikTok was voted as the platform that young people use the most
- Practitioners generally have a good idea of which social media platforms young people use, but seem to particularly overestimate the use of Facebook and in-game chat, and underestimate the use of Pinterest.

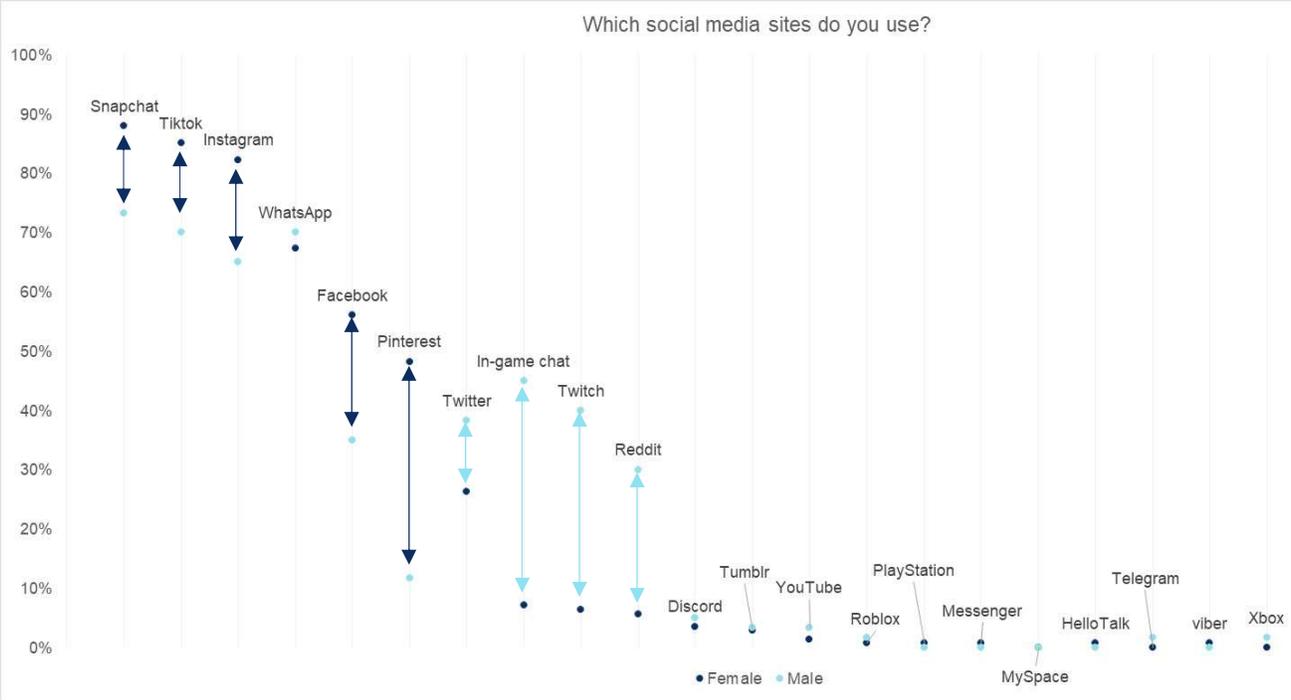
Figure 4: which social media sites young people use most, as judged by young people and practitioners



It is possible that this could be due to the gender split in our responses as we received more responses from girls/young women than boys/young men, but we don't know the gender split of the young people that the practitioners work with.

- In general, girls/young women are more likely to use Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook and Pinterest and boys/young men are more likely to use in-game chat, Twitter, Twitch and Reddit

Figure 5: which social media sites female and male young people report using most

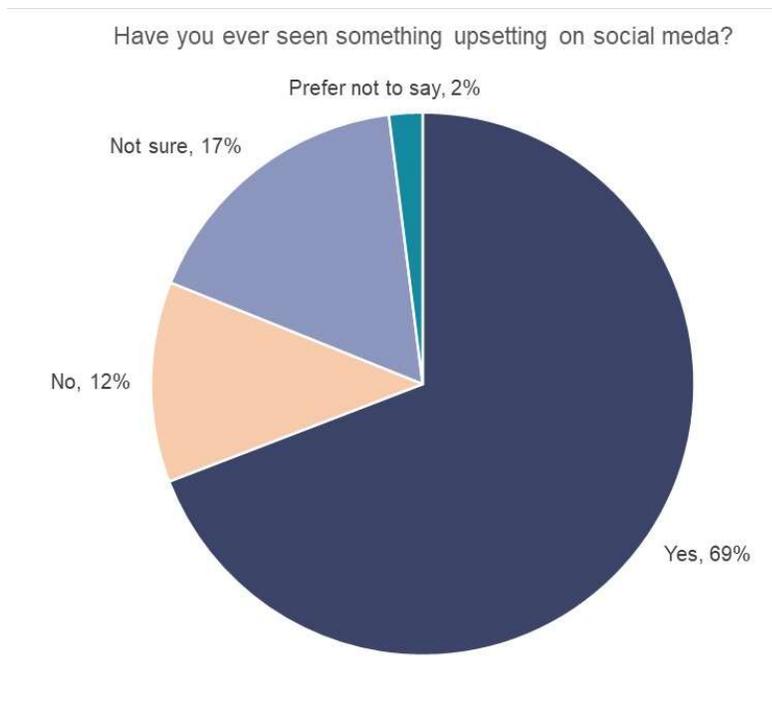


1.2 Young people frequently encounter harmful content on social media

Most young people have seen something they regard as upsetting on social media, and for most of these young people it is not a one-off occurrence

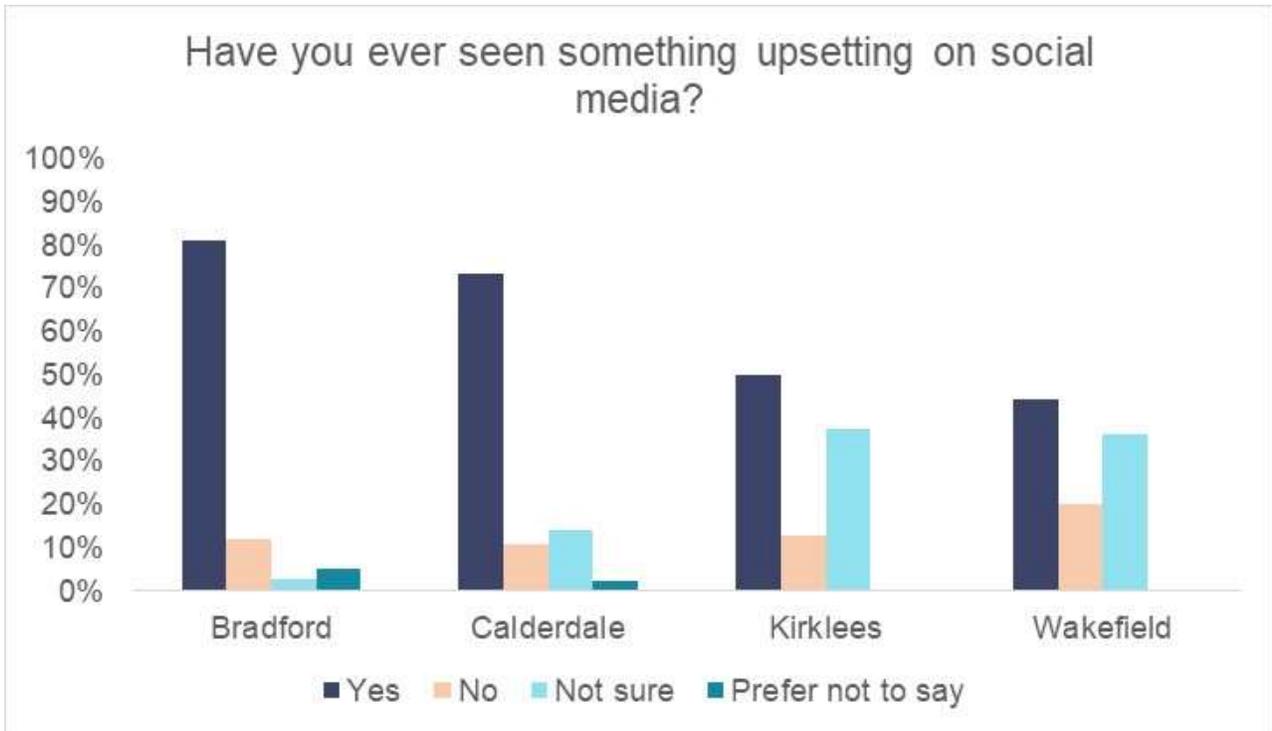
- 70% of young people who responded to our survey said they had seen something upsetting on social media¹²

Figure 6: % of young people who reported having seen or not seen something upsetting on social media



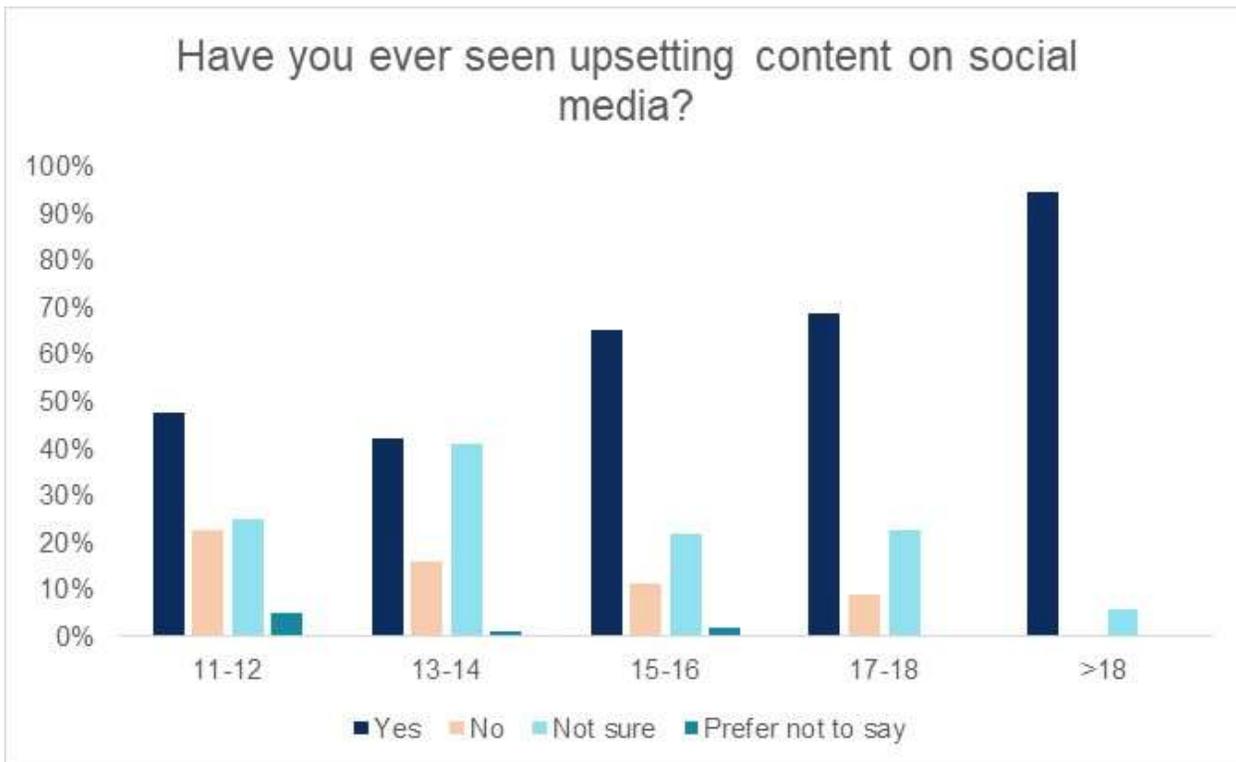
- Young people in Bradford were most likely to report having seen something upsetting and young people in Wakefield were least likely. We have excluded Leeds as we only had eight respondents from Leeds.

Figure 7: Young people reporting upsetting content on social media by region



- The likelihood of young people saying that they had seen upsetting content increased with age

Figure 8: Young people reporting upsetting content on social media by age

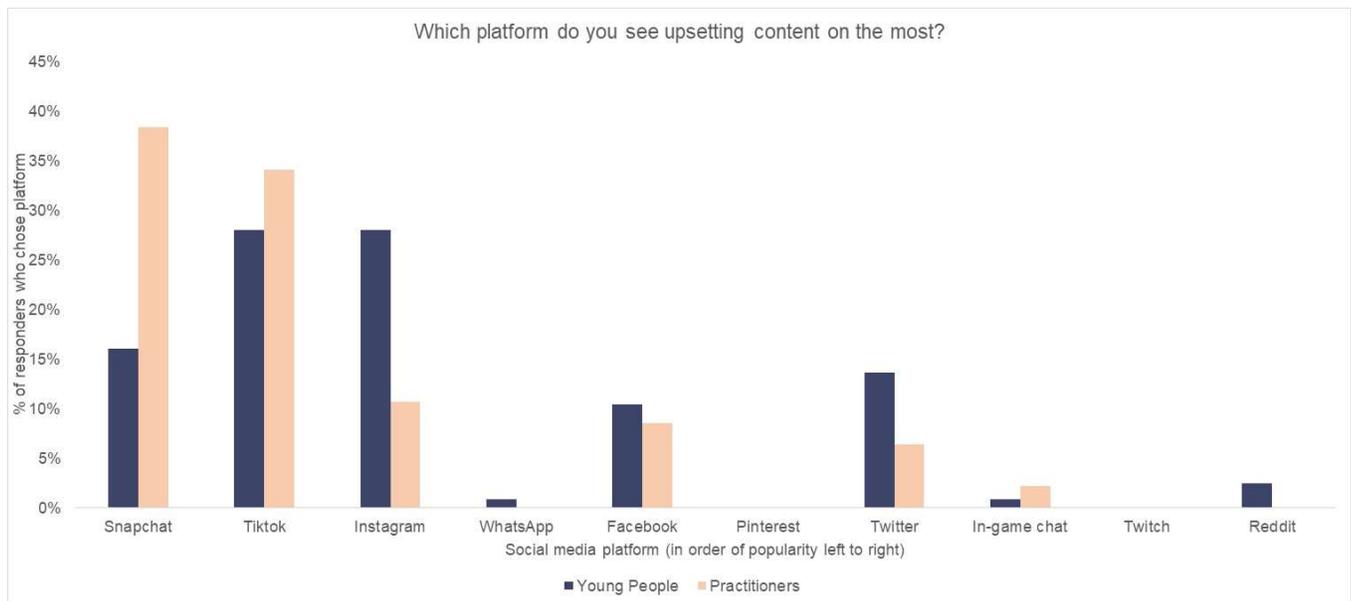


- Parents/carers' judgements of whether their children have seen something upsetting was roughly in line with this, but a higher proportion of practitioners said yes. This is to be expected given that many of the practitioners who responded to our survey work with a particular subsample of young people who are experiencing difficulties and are likely to be at higher risk of having seen something upsetting on social media.
- The average frequency reported was about once a month; some young people said they had only seen this type of content once, but some said this happens almost every day.

Young people rated Instagram and TikTok as the platforms that they see upsetting content on the most, but practitioners were more likely to choose Snapchat

- >50% of young people chose either TikTok or Instagram as the platforms they saw upsetting content on the most
- Our results suggest that practitioners overestimate how often young people see upsetting content on Snapchat and TikTok, but underestimate how often upsetting content is seen on Instagram and Twitter

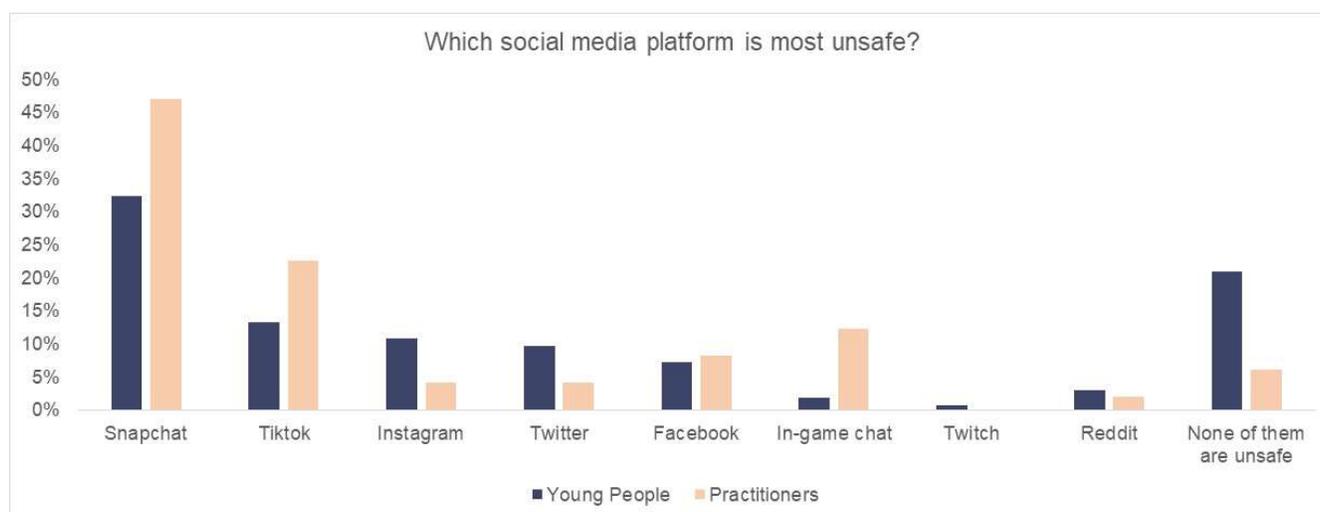
Figure 9: Platform that upsetting content is seen most on, as judged by young people and practitioners



When asked which platform is most unsafe, both young people and practitioners chose Snapchat

- Again, our findings suggest that practitioners deem Snapchat and TikTok to be more unsafe than young people, and regard Instagram and Twitter as overall safer than young people do
- 21% of young people think that none of the social media platforms included in the survey are unsafe for people of their age

Figure 10: The most unsafe social media platform, as judged by young people and practitioners



Young people are exposed to this content in a variety of ways

- Most are likely to encounter this content via their social media feed.
 - It can appear due to being shared by an account that they have connected with, in some cases peers. Young people told us that some peers share negative content because they think that it makes them appear 'cool'. Practitioners told us that some young people might go looking for this content and then send it on to their peers.
 - Young people can also have content pushed to their feed through the platform's algorithm, meaning that they will be seeing content from an account they have no prior connection to. This makes it very difficult for young people to control what they are exposed to on social media.
- Harassment can also happen through direct messaging which most platforms support. Users often have some degree of control over who can send them direct messages – for example, setting privacy controls around who can find them and blocking particular users, but we have heard about perpetrators who create new accounts or involve others in the harassment as a way of trying to circumvent actions users take to block them.

Young people already take steps to protect themselves online, but harm mitigation is lacking

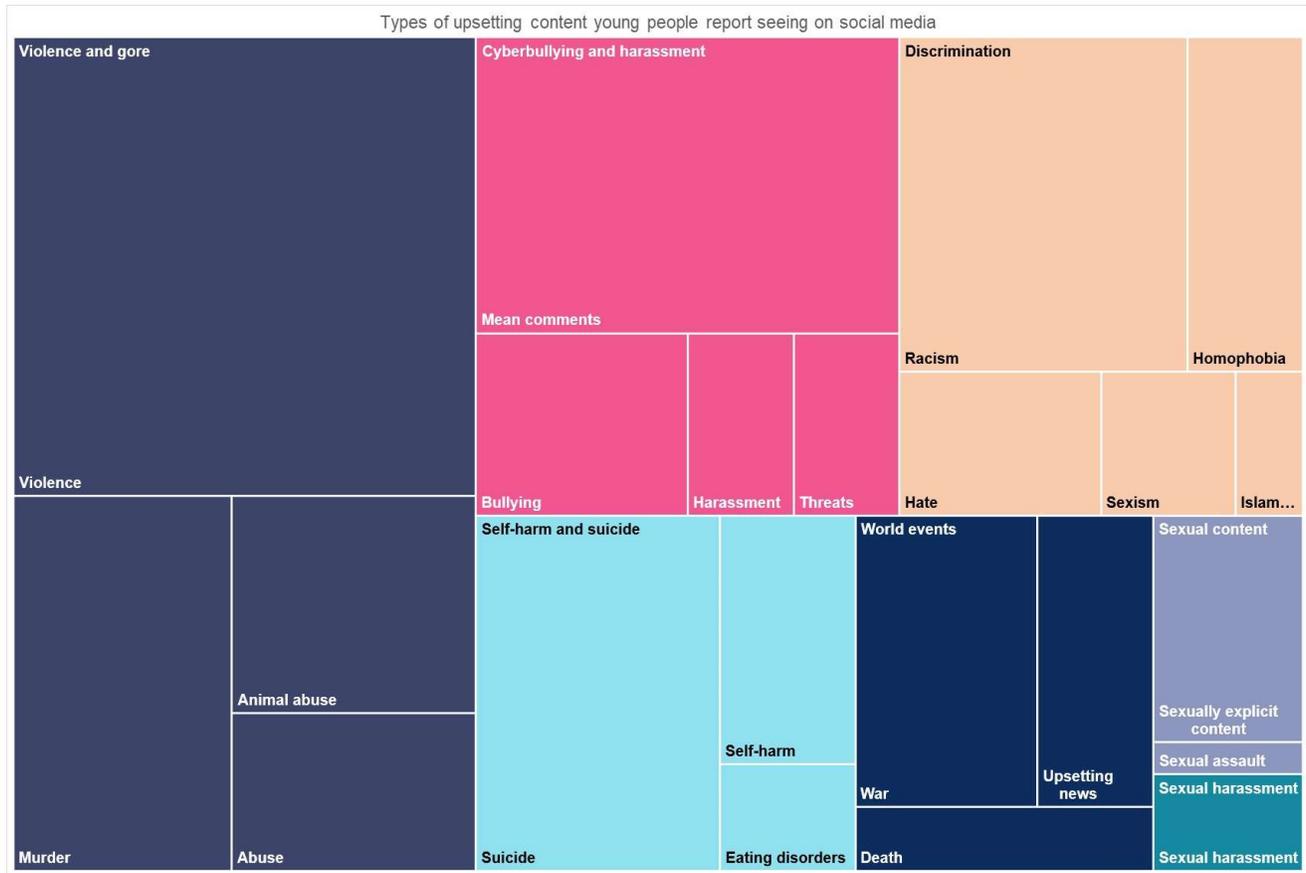
- Young people spoke about ways they protected themselves online. This included steps such as turning off location tracking on the platform, changing privacy settings, and being careful about who you added as a friend or connection.
- Almost 70% of young people had reported upsetting content to a platform. However, we found that platform responses to reports were rare overall. Young people and practitioners agreed that social media platforms had to take more responsibility for the content on their platforms and improve report resolutions.

Most had not spoken about the content to an adult, although those that did generally felt that the adult had responded well. One group of young people suggested that it felt difficult to talk to adults about upsetting content rather than peers, as adults would not have the shared experience of seeing the content and would be likely to dismiss social media as unimportant.

1.3 This content can be categorised into targeted abuse and non-targeted upsetting content

In response to our survey, young people identified a wide range of content that they considered to be upsetting, as shown in Figure 11 below.

Figure 11: types of upsetting content young people surveyed reported seeing on social media



We have categorised this content by the way in which young people experience it.

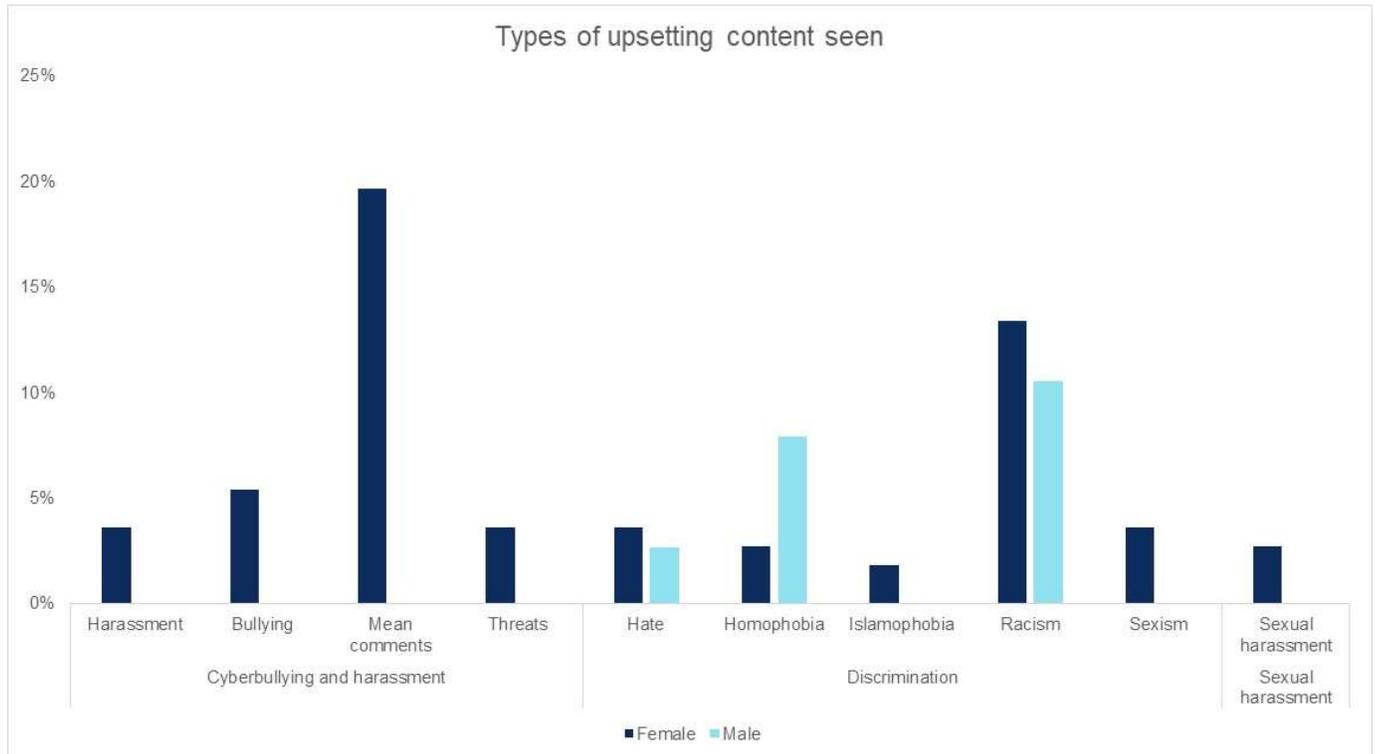
- **Targeted abuse:** specifically, abuse or harassment that directly targets the viewer or someone they know. This could be discrimination, cyberbullying, or sexual harassment.
- **Non-targeted upsetting content:** content viewed online that may have an emotional impact but is not directed at the viewer. Harassment and abuse could be considered non-targeted content if the viewer is observing an interaction between people they do not know.

Targeted abuse

We identified several different types of harassment that young people reported experiencing on social media when we asked them about upsetting content

1. Cyberbullying or harassment (harassment, mean comments, bullying, threats)
 2. Discrimination (racism, homophobia, sexism, islamophobia, hate)
 3. Sexual harassment (intimate image abuse, inappropriate sexual comments, blackmail, grooming, sending unsolicited pictures)
- Girls and young women were more likely than boys and young men to report seeing targeted abuse on social media, particularly cyberbullying and harassment, which wasn't mentioned at all by boys/young men in our survey. However, this could be a difference in how boys and girls recognise or feel comfortable disclosing bullying, rather than a difference in the actual prevalence of bullying.

Figure 12: types of upsetting content seen on social media split by gender

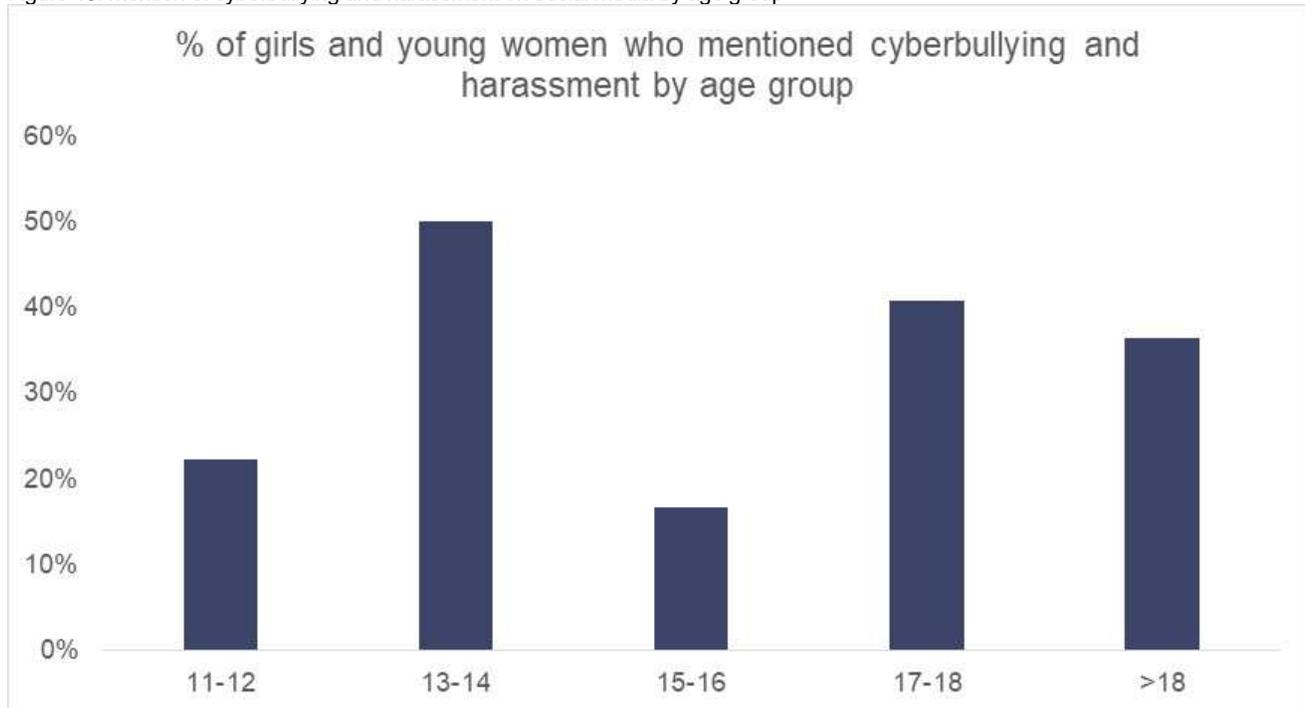


1. Cyberbullying and harassment

- Cyberbullying and harassment was the most common type of upsetting content on social media young people reported seeing in our survey
 - Bullying and harassment was mentioned by 26% of young people surveyed who said they had seen upsetting content on social media
 - Bullying and harassment was exclusively mentioned by girls and young women

- Bullying and harassment on social media was experienced by all age groups, but was more likely to be mentioned by the older age groups

Figure 13: mention of cyberbullying and harassment on social media by age group



“Comments on TikTok videos harassing or picking fun at people”

Cyberbullying was also the most talked about online issue in our community engagement. Young people we spoke to were particularly likely to speak about cyberbullying and it was a key topic in our discussions. In these discussions, young men also spoke about incidents of harassment. Professionals were comparatively less likely to speak to us about this as an issue, but it was mentioned a lot by parents and carers.

“people are very cruel on TikTok, such as shaming people for their appearance, weight.”

- Young people told us that bullies use images as well as sending hurtful comments and written harassment.

“pictures from my childhood and family were found by my bully and were uploaded on their social media”

The remainder of this section contains themes of online abuse and suicide, please skip to Discrimination on the next page if you would prefer not to read.

-
- We heard of predatory tactics from abusers who targeted vulnerable people online. One account was of a young person experiencing suicidal thoughts who had gone to an online community meant to offer support. They began speaking to someone who claimed to be the mother of someone who had died by suicide, who then tried to encourage the young person to carry out the act using the method that their child had allegedly used.
 - A young person told us of a peer in their community who had been the target of harassment online. The harassment had begun following the targeted individual posting a picture of themselves and their family online. It appeared that the harassment began with people that the person knew, but due to the semi-public nature of social media, people 'from the wider community' also joined the campaign. The harassment escalated to threats of violence against this person and their family, to the point where the individual was afraid to leave their own home.
-

2. Discrimination

Discriminatory content was a key theme arising from our survey of young people but was only briefly mentioned in our focus groups. We have grouped this content under targeted abuse as, by definition, discriminatory remarks always target a specific group of people. However, this content can also be distressing when experienced as content not targeted at the viewer personally.

“Racism in general. Happens a lot.”

- Racism was the most common form of discriminatory content, with 12% of young people highlighting this in their response. It was more likely to be mentioned by respondents who were over 18.
- Racism was mentioned across different ethnicity groups.

“hate comments and homophobia and racism”

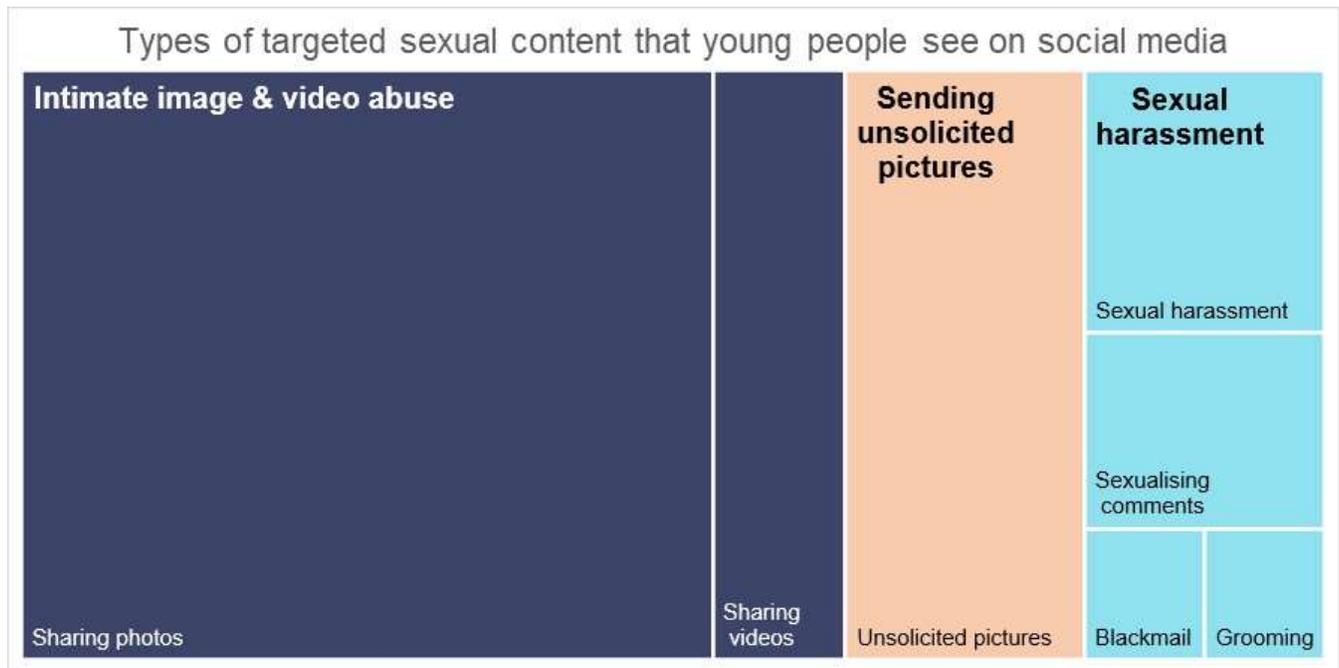
“Islamophobic comments/ tweets or racism towards South Asians”

- Discriminatory content was not mentioned at all by parents and carers.

3. Sexual harassment

Although only 6% of respondents mentioned sexual harassment or explicit sexual content in response to what upsetting content they or their friends had seen, almost 40% of all young people responding to the survey were aware of an incident of sexual nature on social media. This may indicate that this sexual content is not experienced as upsetting by young people, but may also reflect a lower level of comfort with disclosing exposure to such content unless explicitly asked. These responses almost all contained descriptions of targeted sexual content, specifically: intimate image abuse, sending unsolicited pictures, and verbal harassment.

Figure 14: types of targeted sexual content seen by young people on social media



4. Intimate Image Abuse

- We use this term to mean someone sharing intimate images or videos of another person without the consent of that person.

“people sharing indecent photos that weren’t consensual to be shared or even taken”

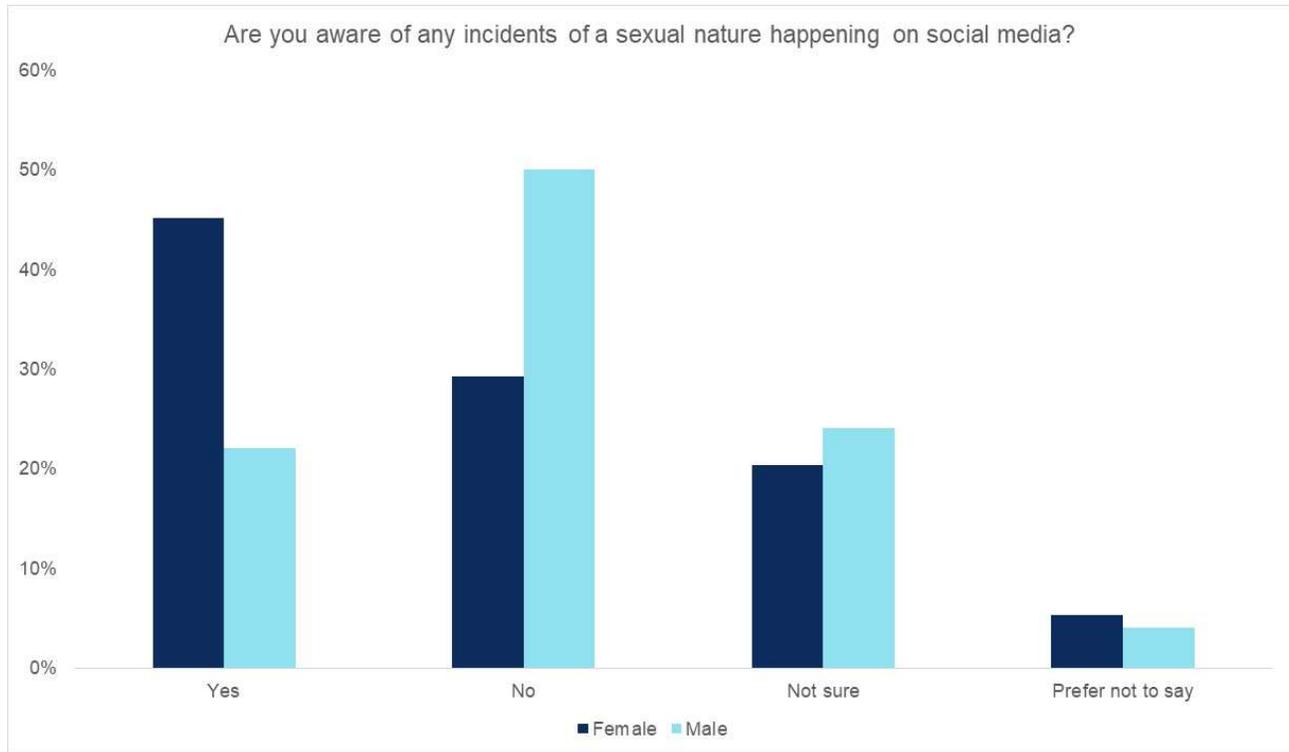
“I always hear about leaking of images and videos”

- In interviews, young people expressed that it was extremely normalised to send intimate images while under the age of 18. Several shared experiences of peers at school having those images then shared further without consent.

Gender differences

- Within our focus groups young people mentioned this happening to male and female young people, however only a single male survey respondent told us about this issue.
- The proportion of survey respondents who said that they were aware of a sexual incident on social media was 45% in girls/women and 60% in non-binary respondents, compared to 38% overall.

Figure 15: % of young people who are aware of incidents of a sexual nature on social media, split by gender



- In total, only eleven boys/young men and three non-binary respondents said that they were aware of a sexual incident happening on social media. We have therefore focused on responses from girls/young women.
- When asked what these incidents were, almost 6 in 10 girls and young women who were aware of incidents of a sexual nature on social media spoke about intimate image and video abuse
- Girls and young women responding to the survey also reported receiving unsolicited pictures and sexual harassment.

“people send nude pictures, harass you for naked pictures and send you sexual messages which make you uncomfortable”

“you have male or female accounts pointing out the size of their body or what they’d like to do”

“Sent unsolicited pictures of genitals by a random adult online. This story had come from a number of 13 year old girls I coach” [practitioner]

-
- The reported frequency of this issue by our survey respondents is lower than what has been found in other research:
 - A 2021 Ofsted report found that online sexual harassment and intimate image abuse is extremely prevalent, with 90% of teenage girls and nearly 50% of boys reporting being sent unwanted explicit pictures or videos¹³
 - Grooming was mentioned as a potential online harm by both young people and professionals. However, those who did talk about grooming did not have direct experience of the issue. This suggests that instances of grooming are rare, but awareness of the issue is high. Young people appear aware of the potential dangers of speaking to strangers online, and grooming was only mentioned by one young person in the survey.

Non-targeted distressing content

We identified four types of non-targeted content:

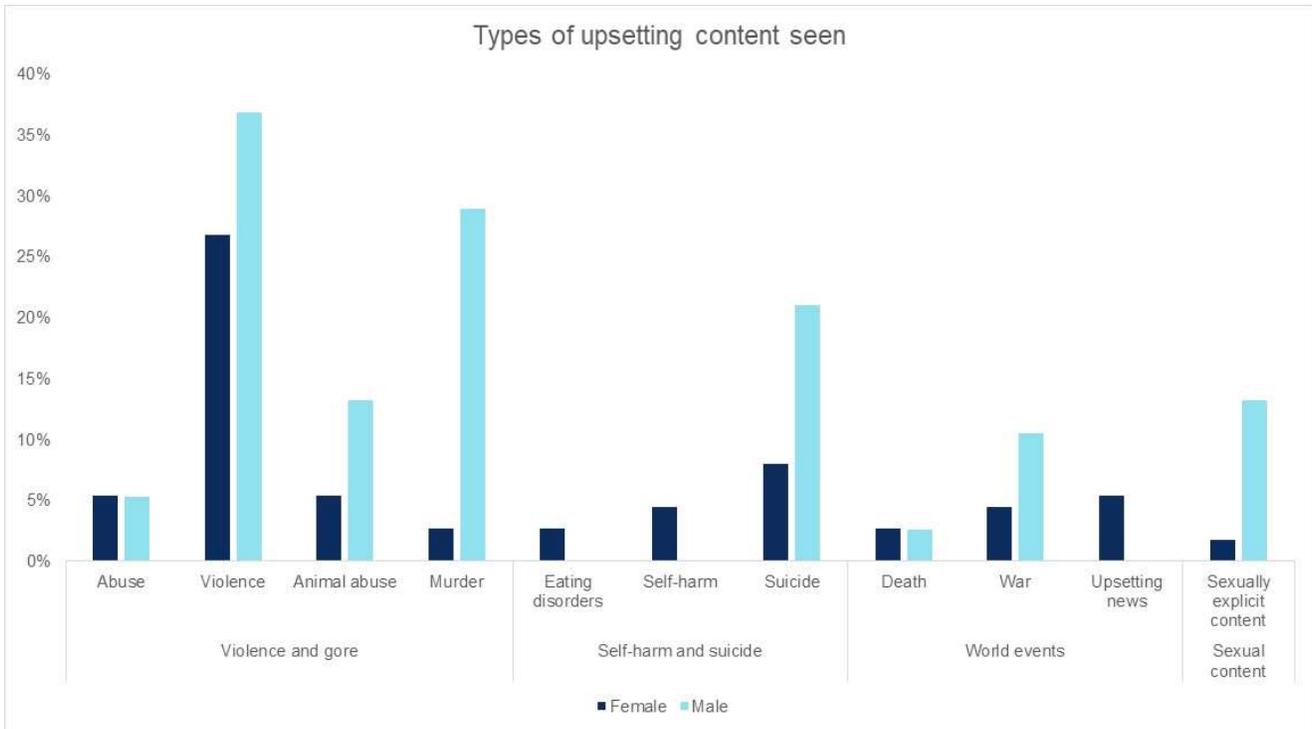
1. Violence & gore: abuse, animal abuse, murder
2. World events: death, war, upsetting news
3. Sexual content: sexually explicit content, depictions of sexual assault
4. Self-harm and suicide: self-harm, eating disorders, suicide

The most common types of this content reported were depictions of violence and gore. We have separated self-harm and suicide from interpersonal violence due to the differing potential effects of this content.

Gender differences

Overall, boys/young men were almost twice as likely as girls/young women to mention non-targeted content in our survey, especially violence and gore. Figure 16 on the next page shows the types of upsetting content seen by gender.

Figure 16: type of upsetting content seen on social media, split by gender



The remainder of this section contains descriptions related to violence, war, sexual content, self-harm and suicide. Please skip to section 1.4 on page 30 if you would prefer not to read.

1. Violence and gore is the most common type of upsetting non-targeted content identified by young people

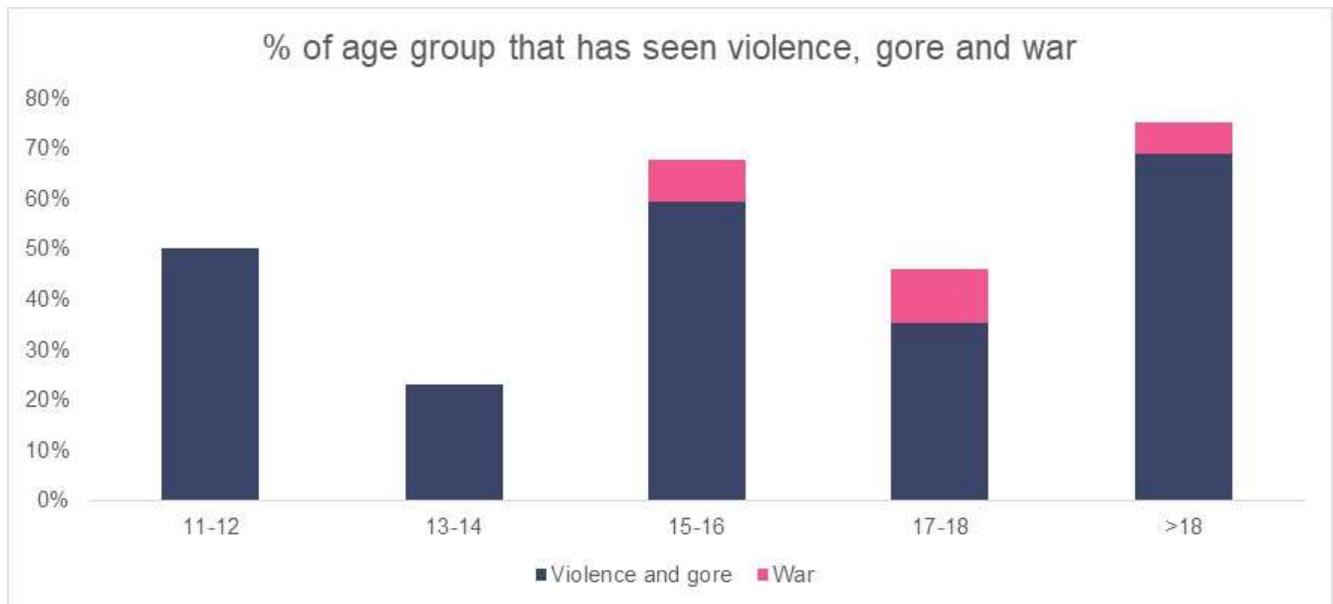
“someone sent me a video of two people stamping on another girl”

“Indian men being beheaded”

“people getting killed, animals getting killed, violence, people being shot”

- 45% of girls/young women and 95% of boys/young men reported seeing violent content (including war)
- Violence and gore was mentioned by all age groups, but more likely to be mentioned by older age groups

Figure 17: violence, gore and war seen by age group



- Young people told us that they knew of accounts dedicated to sharing violent content.
- They said that their peers would brag about sending content to a Snapchat account dedicated to videos of fights, and that some young people would act as though it was ‘cool’ to further share the violent content.
- Practitioners told us that young people would often film playground fights, and we heard accounts of these videos being shared around school.

“blood, violence, dead bodies”

“terrorist beheadings ... KKK rituals, people getting skinned ...”

“someone being run over”

“Abuse towards animals or people” [practitioner]

“Actual live footage of violent acts against vulnerable people” [practitioner]

2. Content relating to world events can also have negative impacts on young people

“Combat footage of civilian casualties in Kabul and Ukraine”

“Image of child in Ukraine dead”

“killings in Palestine”

- The primary type of content relating to world events were images and videos of war which are particularly accessible on social media.
- We heard from young people that they saw livestreams of the war in Ukraine via TikTok, after peers shared them. Young people told us that their peers would share this kind of content because they thought it was ‘cool’.
- Professionals we spoke to highlighted the potential effects of topical news pieces on young people who had already experienced trauma. For example, one professional reported that sexual assault survivors she worked with were re-traumatised by social media feeds containing content relating to sexual assault following Sarah Everard’s murder.

3. Practitioners were concerned about sexual content

“Extreme pornography (bestiality)” [practitioner]

- Non-targeted distressing sexual content can include unwanted sexual content or depictions of sexual abuse.
- Sexual content was primarily highlighted as an issue by practitioners. Only one young person reported being upset by non-targeted sexual content.

4. Young people also frequently see content depicting self-harm and suicide

“graphic self-harm and suicide”

“triggering photos such as self-harm references, thinspiration/pro-ana etc.”

“People forwarding WhatsApp message which directs you to website on how to self-harm”
[practitioner]

“Peers trolling them online, sending images of paracetamol packets, blades, blood, images of cuts, etc.” [practitioner]

- Self-harm and eating disorders content was mentioned by 7% of young people. This was most likely to be seen by over-21s. This content was mentioned by 8% of practitioners.

“person shot themselves in the head – hidden as a regular video on ‘for you’ page”

“A guy shot himself in the face on Facebook live”

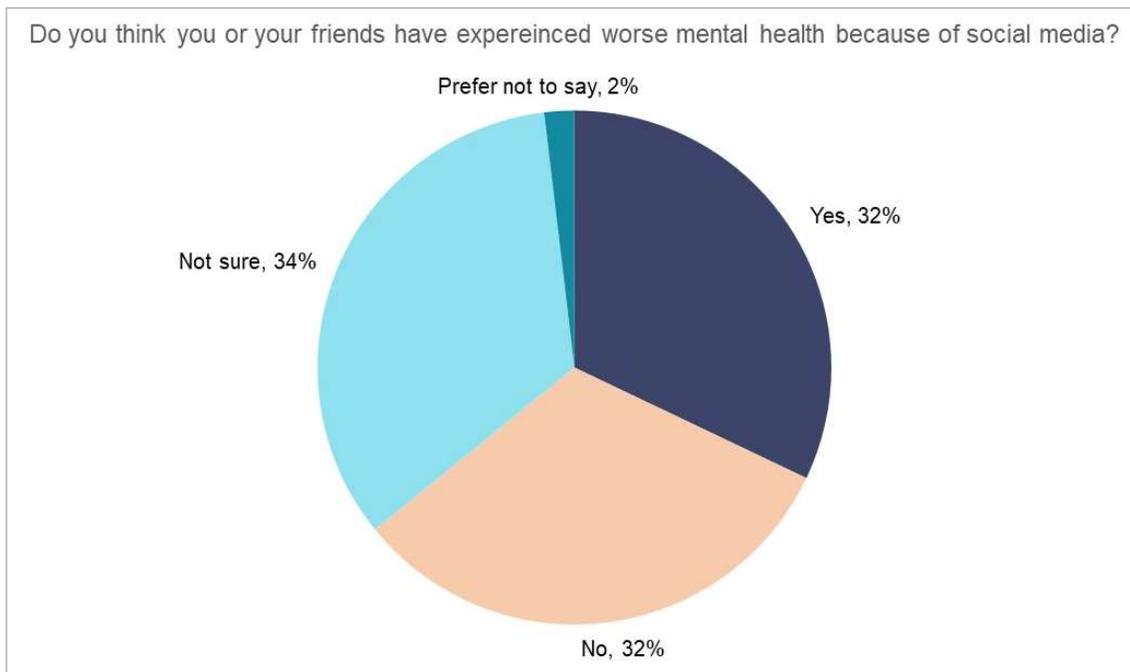
- Suicide content was mentioned by 10% of young people. Most likely to be mentioned by 13-16 year olds. Mentioned by 6% of practitioners.
- Young people also reported being aware of this content online without viewing it themselves. One focus group highlighted that they had received warnings of a video of suicide going around on TikTok, but had not seen the video itself.

1.4 Seeing such content can have serious impacts on young people's mental health

We found evidence of wide-ranging negative impacts on young people's mental health

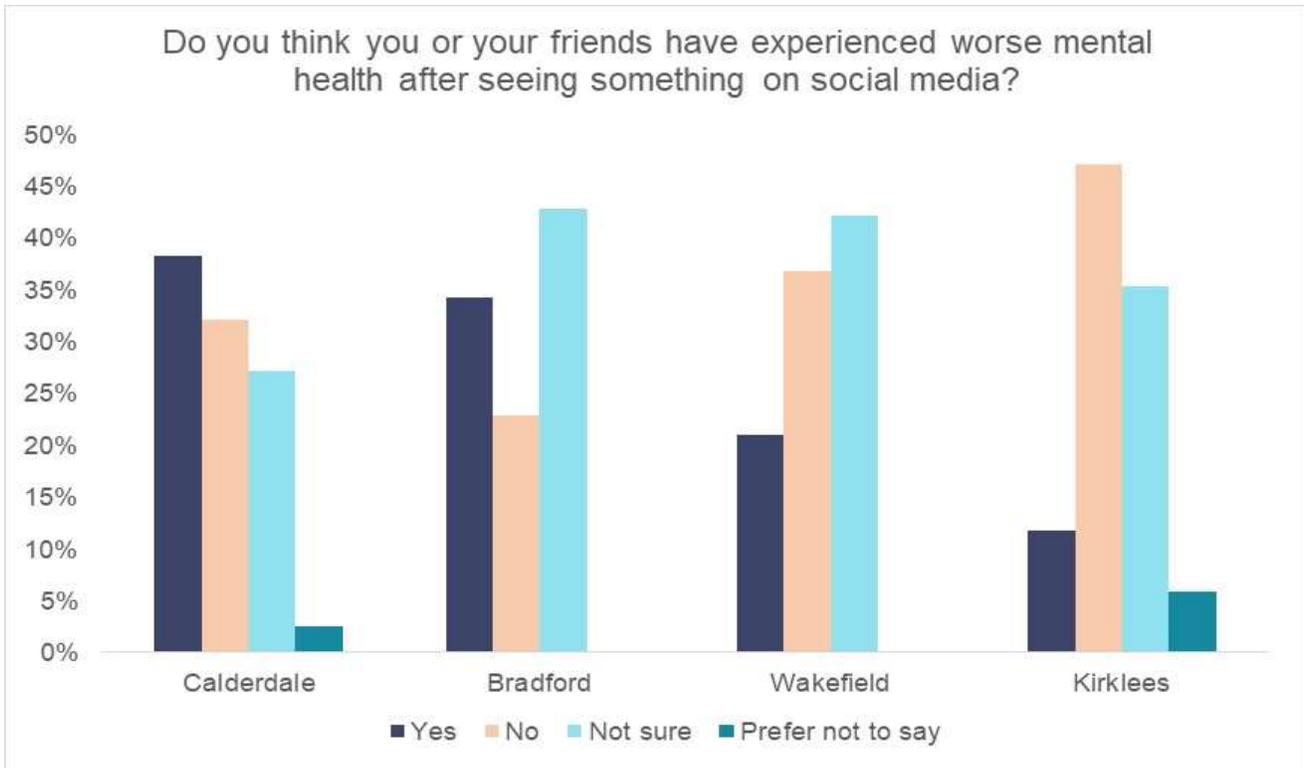
- ~1/3 of young people said that they thought upsetting content on social media had had a negative impact on either their or their friend's mental health; 1/3 weren't sure and 1/3 said they didn't think this was the case

Figure 18: proportion of young people who reported experiencing worse mental health due to social media



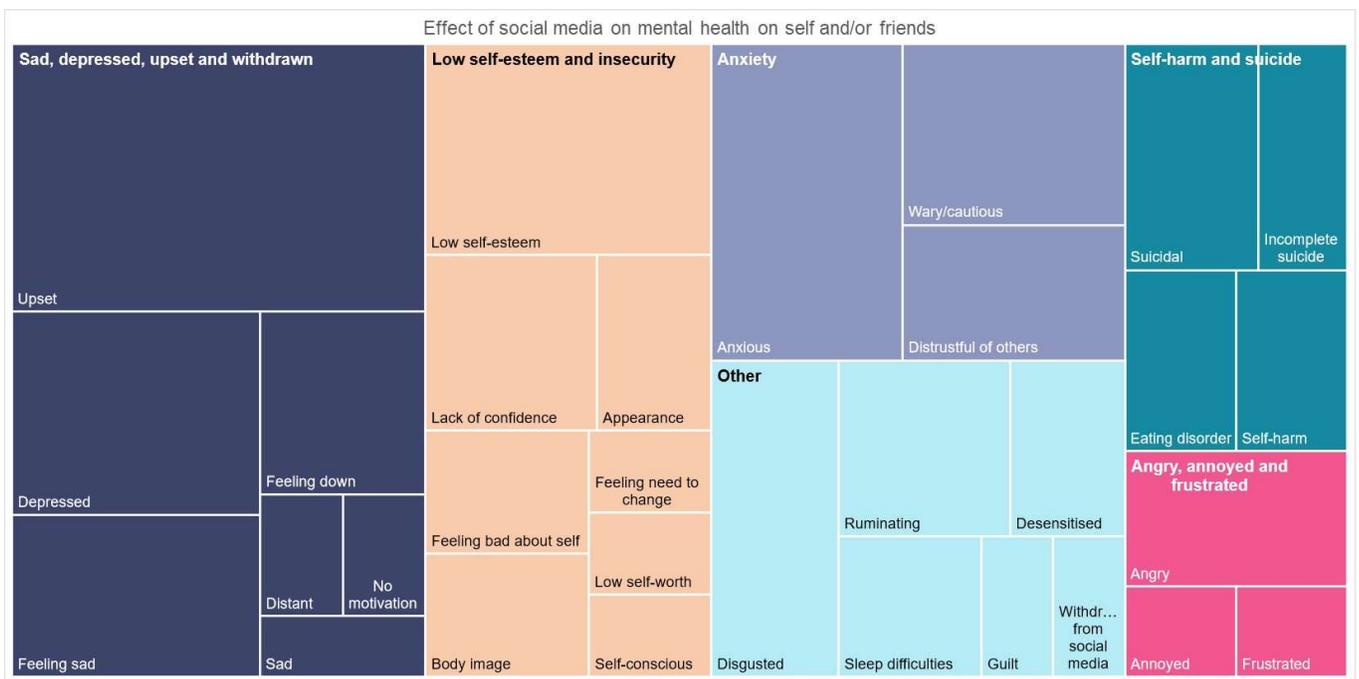
- Again, young people from Calderdale and Bradford were more likely to report a negative effect of social media than respondents from Kirklees and Wakefield

Figure 19: Effect of social media on mental health split by area



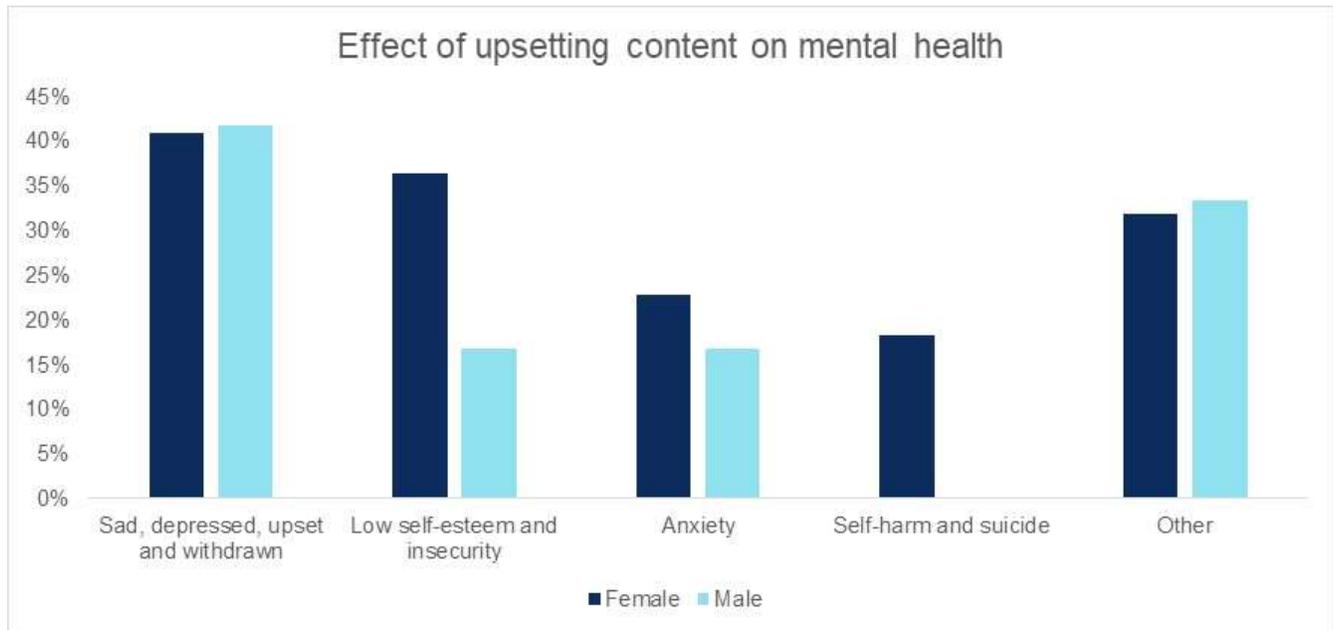
- When asked to explain the effect it had on them, young people spoke about a range of effects, shown in Figure 20 below:

Figure 20: effect of social media on young people's mental health



- Overall, girls/young women were more likely to mention negative mental health effects of social media content
- Body image and appearance insecurities and self-harm and suicide were consequences of social media that were only mentioned by girls/young women

Figure 21: effect on mental health split by gender



The most common effects reported by young people were:

1. Feeling sad, depressed, upset or withdrawn
2. Low self-esteem and insecurity
3. Anxiety
4. Self-harm and suicide

These effects are discussed in more detail below.

1. Feeling sad, depressed, upset or withdrawn

“It makes you feel low and horrible. Sometimes you can’t shake the feeling”

- Feeling sad and upset was the most common mental health impact mentioned by young people in relation to seeing distressing content online.
 - 44% of young people who reported a negative mental health effect said the content made them feel sad/upset/down/low/depressed
 - Most likely to be reported by 13-16 year olds.
 - 26% of practitioners also reported this effect on young people

2. Low self-esteem and insecurity may come from comparisons with influencers living ideal lives, and can result from both experiencing and observing harassment

“it upsets you and puts you down, it makes you feel worthless”

“Low self-esteem, identity crisis, anxiety and dysmorphia” [practitioner]

“they felt that they should change who they were”

- We heard from practitioners that young people are developing their sense of self and identity, and portraying this identity online can increase the pressure. Practitioners spoke about how young people were under pressure to live up to idealised versions of lives that they saw on social media, and discussed how although they as adults knew that it wasn't 'real', the young people they worked with struggled to accept this.
- Catch22 (2017) suggest that young people's sense of self-esteem is becoming increasingly dependent on what others think of them rather than how they think of themselves.¹⁴

“I have seen lots of videos which promote eating disorders indirectly and pressure young women to fit certain unrealistic beauty standards”

“Seeing other people's pictures and doubting your own appearance because of that”

- Various studies document negative impact of social media on body image, particularly for teenage girls and young women.¹⁵ One study identified Instagram as having the worst effect in this regard.¹⁶
- A government enquiry in 2021 found that the percentage of girls who feel 'very happy' with their appearance dropped from 51% at age 7-10 to just 16% at age 11-16, and that most adults and children feel negative or very negative about their body image 'most of the time'.¹⁷
- The high rates of poor body image and recent surge in eating disorders amongst young people are frequently attributed partially to unrealistic, idealised images on social media.^{18,19} However, it is important to note that eating disorders are complex, and poor body image is only one potential contributory factor.
- 31% of young people who said that social media had a negative effect on their mental health in the survey said it made them insecure about themselves in some way
 - Most likely to be mentioned by 15-18 year olds
 - 25% of practitioners reported this effect
 - 7% of practitioners reported social media negatively impacted body image

-
- This can be exacerbated by the wide reach of social media and the permanence of content, which both increase the risk of humiliation etc of a young person

3. Anxiety can surface in many ways

“It made the young person’s mental health worse, it caused anxiety and them not want to go on their own social media, they worried about what people thought and would be saying about them.” [practitioner]

“Became worried, troubled, unable to separate reality from online” [practitioner]

- Anxiety was the most prominent mental health problem to be mentioned from our community engagement. It was also the most spoken about mental health outcome in the practitioners survey. However, in the young person’s survey, anxiety was mentioned less than feeling ‘down’, ‘depressed’, ‘sad’ or ‘upset’.
- In our community engagement sessions, anxiety was spoken about in conjunction with the feeling of constant connectedness that social media can bring, leaving people feeling that they are unable to switch off and have some ‘down time’. On the extreme end of this, it was connected to addictive behaviour on social media.
- Young people and professionals spoke about people feeling scared to leave the house as a result of online harassment. We heard accounts of young people who didn’t want to go to school following both offline and online bullying.

“it made us more aware of the hatred out in the real world, making us more cautious of people”

“it can have long-term effects in terms of feeling sympathetic for a victim and having a lack of trust for people”

- Young people also spoke about how seeing constantly negative content on social media might create anxiety about events going on in the world offline, and reduce trust in others generally or lead to beliefs that there are many dangerous people in the world
- 22% of young people who said that social media had a negative effect on their mental health in the survey said it made them more anxious and/or distrustful of others
 - Most likely to be mentioned by over-18s
 - 43% of practitioners reported this effect

The next page contains themes of self-harm and suicide. Please skip to page 36 if you would prefer not to read.

4. Self-harm and suicidal behaviours

“They started to self-harm” [practitioner]

“Thinspiration can often trigger my eating disorders, self-harm images can promote relapse”

“Made urges of self-harm more frequent”

- 15% of young people who said social media had a negative effect on their mental health said it had caused them or their friends to engage in self-harm and/or suicidal behaviours
 - Most likely to be mentioned by 13-16 year olds or over-21s
 - 18% of practitioners reported these effects

“I felt really bad about myself ... and that there was not point of me living anymore ... so I overdosed”

“Suicidal thoughts and temptation”

There is a risk that this kind of content becomes normal, and/or young people become desensitised to it

“When they think social media is a positive place to go and share like positive stuff when they go on there and they see negativity like weapons, fights, stabbings, you name it, they think that’s, they’re gonna think it’s normal and they’re gonna think I can’t go outside my house now because that’s gonna happen or this is gonna happen anything else is gonna happen and the anxiety’s just going to rise through the roof”

“I’m just kinda numb to it now. I don’t really care anymore.”

- In our focus groups with young people a common theme among the effects of troubling content was how normalised it became. Young people felt they became desensitised to the content being posted. They discussed how online people’s behaviour could be ‘toxic’ and how frequently they saw this kind of behaviour could encourage others to think this is acceptable. This creates a loop where young people who become desensitised may then go on to share and post negative content online themselves
- Young people spoke about how the normalisation of violent content on social media might impact on someone’s understanding of the world around them. For example, someone frequently seeing violence on social media might believe that they are at a higher risk of experiencing this themselves than is true, and experience worse mental health as a result. However, only 3% of young people mentioned desensitisation and / or normalisation of this content in the survey.
- 7% of practitioners reported that social media normalised problematic behaviour

“It has confused the lines for them between what is acceptable and what isn’t” [practitioner]

Young women who use social media for four or more hours a day and have pre-existing mental health problems seem to be the most at risk of the most serious outcomes

- Those who said that social media led to self-harm, suicide attempts and eating disorders (either in themselves or their friends) were mostly aged 13-18, either female or didn’t give a gender, and tended to use social media for 4+ hours a day.
- This group reported seeing harmful content mostly on Instagram and TikTok.
- When speaking to professionals about the young people they worked with, it became clear that those most at risk of serious harm to themselves following social media use were young people who were often already experiencing poor mental health.
- Of survey respondents who self-reported the most serious outcomes, 60% had seen content depicting self-harm; 40% had seen content depicting eating disorders; 40% had seen bullying online and 20% had seen content depicting suicide. Those already experiencing suicidal thoughts can be vulnerable to the ‘Werther effect’, which describes cases where online engagement with a prior suicide appears to motivate others to replicate the act.²⁰
- In focus groups it was discussed that those without strong offline relationships may be more at risk online

Targeted abuse versus non-targeted distressing content

- While both targeted abuse and non-targeted content can have negative effects on young people's mental health, we identified some key differences in the ways in which these two types of content impact young people.
 - Only content sitting under the umbrella of **targeted abuse** was identified as potentially **leading to violence**. This will be explored further in **Part 2**.
 - Non-targeted content, which does not have a direction connection to the person viewing it, was identified as potentially leading to poor mental health via vicarious trauma.

1.5 Many aspects of social media increase the risk of poor mental health outcomes

Through our research we identified various features of the design of social media that can exacerbate its potential to harm mental health

The potential for anonymity

“Several fake accounts made of me where I would be insulted in the posts”

“Somebody made a fake account and started to constantly message me off of this account”

- Anonymity was the leading aspect of social media discussed when it came to negative content online. It was seen as an enabler, particularly for perpetrators of bullying.
- The lack of verification when creating new accounts meant that perpetrators are able to create new accounts easily if they get banned by the platform, or blocked by the person they are harassing.
- Young people did highlight that anonymity made them feel more able to talk about sensitive issues. However, the downsides appear to outweigh any potential benefits.
- Further research supports anonymity as a cause for trolling behaviour.²¹ High degrees of anonymity has been linked to increased hostility in interpersonal interactions.²²
- Young people have highlighted that it is often hard to work out who the perpetrators of cyberbullying are; cyberbullying is therefore hard to report, and perpetrators don't see the impact of their actions on the victim.²³ Young people we spoke to also expressed this view.

No place of safety

- The primary way in which cyberbullying or harassment was seen to differ from its offline counterpart is that those who are targeted have no escape. With offline bullying or harassment, the home, or place away from the perpetrators (excluding cases of stalking) can be a respite from what is happening. Perpetrators now can constantly intrude on the lives of those they target.
- We heard about perpetrators of sexual violence using social media to contact family and friends of the survivor in attempts to harass and intimidate.
- While users can have some control over the content that appears in their feed, these mechanisms do not appear to go far enough in not showing unwanted content. Moreover, algorithms sometimes actively work against this by pushing certain content onto young people's feeds, even if they did not search for this content themselves.
- Young people and practitioners told us that staying away from social media did not prevent this intrusion into their lives – they were still made aware of events online by their friends and peers.

Addictive nature of platforms

“Social media is negative but you can’t stay away from it, it’s like an addiction”

- Young people and practitioners described social media as addictive. Nearly a third of young respondents self-reported spending more than six hours a day on social media.
- Addictive or over-use of social media has been found to associate with poor sleep habits, which is in turn positively correlated with worse mental health outcomes²⁴.
- Addictive use can potentially take time away from family and friends, isolating the young person²⁵. However, this can happen in the inverse. We heard about young people who began over-using social media to stay connected with friends that they weren’t able to see offline.

Impermanent content

“Trolls think that it’s acceptable to do the things that they do because they think ‘ah well, you know it’s not going to last a long time and it’ll be gone tomorrow and it’ll be forgotten about and it won’t be able to be traced’. So I think that it sort of enables them in a way.”

- Impermanent content was discussed particularly in relation to Snapchat, where content will disappear after viewing. Professionals told us this made it extremely hard for content on the platform to be regulated, and we heard from young people that drug and weapon sales commonly appeared on the platform.
- One young person told us that they felt the way content disappeared on the platform enabled negative behaviour.

The fast spread of information

- Professionals told us that there was no more ‘rumour’ within schools – everyone knows about an event, either online or offline, at the click of a button.
- However, much as information can spread quickly, online content can also be used to misrepresent the facts and harass those who are the subject of that information. We heard about a young person who was drawn into violence through ongoing harassment, with the fight then posted online where they were depicted as the aggressor.
- This supports research that found text or visual materials used to bully online can reach many more people (or even ‘go viral’), rather than being contained to those witnessing an event.²⁶

Limited control over the content that appears on your feed

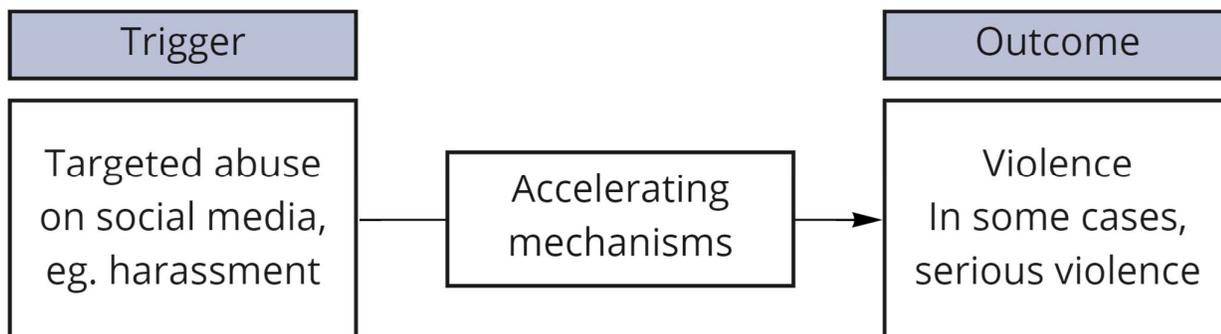
- This can lead to re-traumatisation in people who may be triggered by certain types of content.
- One professional described vicarious trauma as being caused initially by the connection to someone they know being involved in violence – such as a friend either being stabbed or stabbing someone. Social media then has the potential to then feed in to a ‘trauma loop’, where the person experiencing vicarious trauma is re-traumatised by the event appearing on their social media feed.

Part 2: Social media contributes to violence among young people

Summary

- Social media increases the risk of arguments and fights in school
- These outcomes are linked to online **targeted abuse**, such as harassment or threats
- There are several aspects of social media that may accelerate the risk of violence in these instances, including the wide reach and speed of social media posts
- Social media may also play a role in serious violence, but we cannot confirm this without further research
- Even though serious violence is a rare outcome of social media use, it is necessary to explore it further

Figure 22: Diagram summarising our findings about the main way(s) in which social media use can lead to violence

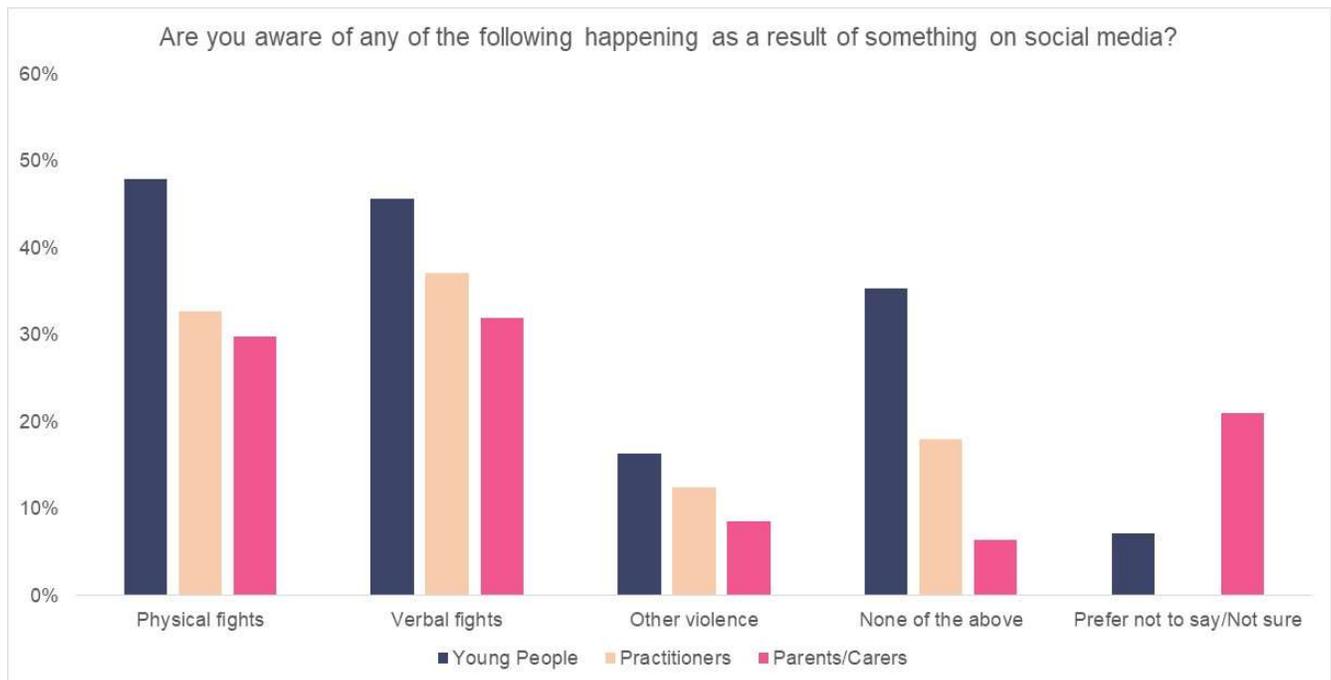


2.1 Social media increases the risk of arguments and fights at school

Social media increases the amount of fights young people experience

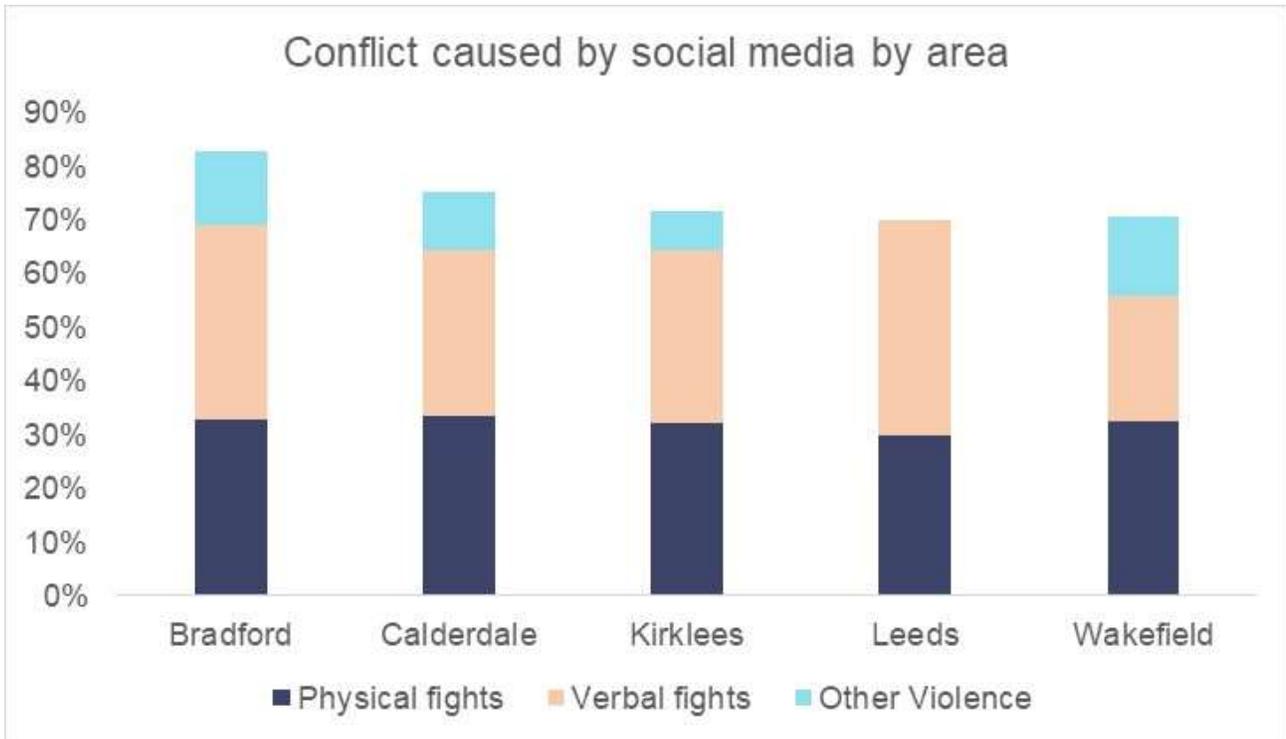
- ~50% of young people surveyed think social media has led to arguments and fights. Parents and carers indicated the highest level of uncertainty about whether or not this had happened.

Figure 23: Conflict that has happened as a result of something on social media



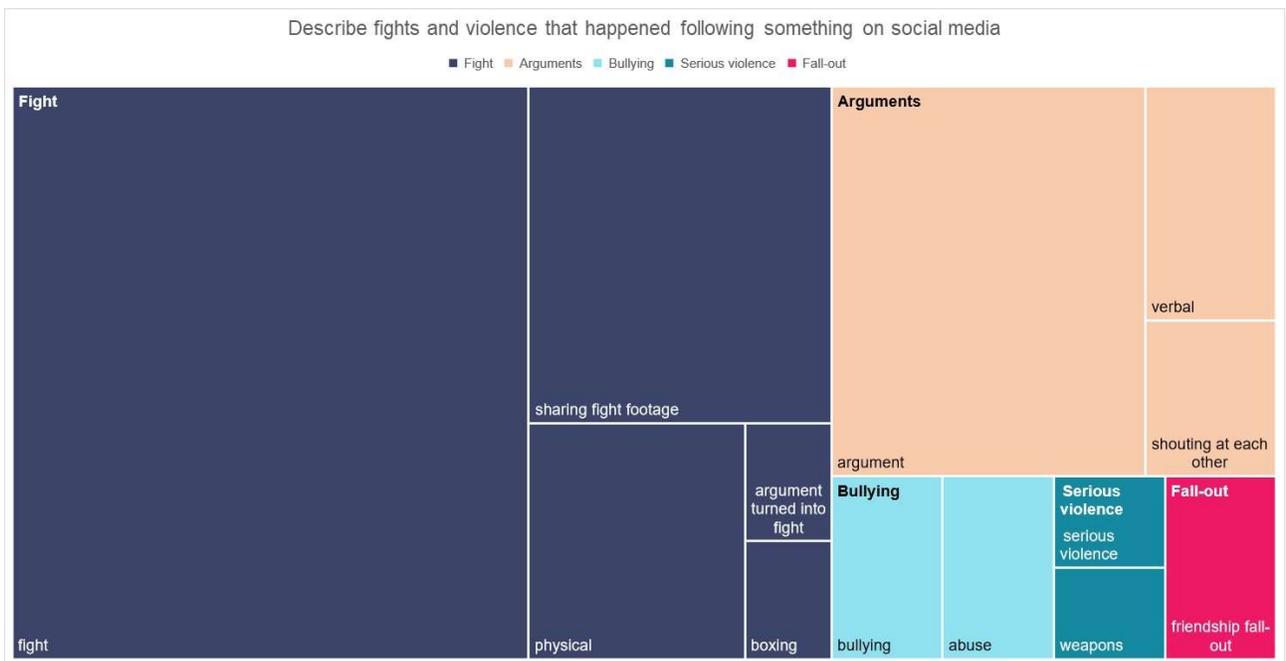
- Conflict and violence was slightly more likely to be mentioned in Bradford, but there was not a great difference between the areas of West Yorkshire

Figure 24: Conflict that has happened as a result of social media split by area



- Most young people who know of conflict following social media spoke about arguments and fights at school

Figure 25: What young people say when describing conflict that has happened following something on social media



-
- The most common reason given for these arguments and fights was comments, messages or posts on social media

“Someone posted something really embarrassing about someone so they started arguing and then eventually started a big fight”

“People make comments about others and it leads to arguments and fights”

“People arguing through text so decided to have some sort of argument in school”

- This supports findings from a recent school survey conducted by the WYVRU that comments on social media were the second highest cause for fights at school²⁷

2.2 Many aspects of social media can increase the risk of low-level violence

Our engagement with young people and practitioners highlighted several distinct features of social media that make engaging with others on social media different from engaging with others offline, and increase the risk of offline violence and conflict.

These **accelerating mechanisms** can increase the likelihood of online **targeted abuse** leading to violence.

Online identity and 'saving face'

- The most common accelerating factor we heard about through our community engagement was the idea of 'saving face'. A young person may build a 'tough' persona, then feel backed into a corner of having to respond to threats or incendiary content. Having this identity on social media (rather than just offline) means that the individual may have the increased pressure of a much wider audience. Practitioners also told us that young people would often build a tough persona as a protective mechanism following difficult or traumatic events in their life.
- This supports further research which found young people can feel pressured to respond to social media content perceived to be disrespectful, with those who choose not to 'follow through' on acts of aggression made online branded 'internet gangsters'.²⁸

Public reach and speed of sharing content

- We heard that the public reach of content on social media can increase the frequency of threats of violence and other targeted abuse; further research confirms that this aspect of social media can increase the risk of violence.²⁹
- Where before a conflict, harassment, and/or bullying might easily be confined to people at a certain place and time, social media allows for this to become public very quickly. Research suggests this can increase the intensity of the conflict.³⁰
- Content with more views is also more likely to lead to retaliation.³¹

Negative cycle

- We heard from practitioners working in schools that students would often film fights among their peers. We heard of some cases where this footage was then shared more widely.
- Several young people mentioned fight footage being shared on social media. This creates a negative cycle whereby social media might lead to a fight between young people, which is then filmed and shared on social media, which may then lead to more trauma, bullying, retaliation, and ultimately more violence.

Overweighting of incendiary content

- Social media companies' business models rely on engagement, which is more likely to be achieved through extreme and/or controversial content. One study found that 'angry' reacts to posts on Facebook had more weight in causing this post to be shared further by the algorithm than other reacts.³²
- While there were some mentions of algorithm recommendations in our community engagement, we didn't hear of this leading directly to violence. However, it would be near impossible to prove this as an observer, and would require further research to confirm.

Lack of authority presence

- This was identified by the University of Huddersfield as a potential risk factor for violence.³³ However, this is not exclusive to social media; young people consistently find themselves in places without an authority presence, and these are not the only places violence occurs. We also heard frequent accounts of violence happening in school, where there is an authority presence.
- We heard from practitioners that the lack of insight into what was going on via social media could make it harder to intervene on or provide support to the young people they are working with. Better insight into young people's experiences would enable adults working with young people to provide better support to them.

2.3 Existing research suggests that social media may also play a role in serious violence

Previous research has found that social media was a contributory factor in 20-25% of cases of serious youth violence

- Previous research identified that social media was a contributory factor in ~20% of violent offences committed by young people in Kirklees.³⁴
- A separate report identified that young people's use of social media was directly related to the offence they had committed in ~25% of cases across different areas in England.³⁵

Targeted abuse was identified by young people as a key trigger in low level violence. It is likely that this may also be a key trigger in serious violence

- Prior research confirms that targeted abuse can lead to serious violence.³⁶
- However, further research is needed to identify what other factors influence whether social media use leads to serious violence.

It seems likely that vicarious trauma from viewing non-targeted distressing content on social media may also increase the risk of violence and conflict

- Some research suggests that those with mental health problems may be at increased risk of being involved in violence
 - Young people who engage in violence often have existing SEMH needs. This trend is more extreme for those engaging in violence where social media was an identified factor.³⁷ Young people with existing social emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs are also likely to be more at risk at being negatively impacted by social media use³⁸ and may require additional support in navigating social media.
- Given that our research suggests social media content can at least exacerbate existing mental health problems, it is possible that upsetting social media content increases the risk of violence via this effect
- Our research also found that young people who were aware of social media-driven conflict were more likely to say that they or their friends had seem upsetting content on social media, than those who were not aware of social media-driven conflict
- However, these are tentative hypotheses and direction of causality is not clear. Further research is needed to better understand the links between poor mental health that is caused or exacerbated by social media, and subsequent violence.

There is some existing evidence that social media is used by 'gangs'

-
- Groups use social media to taunt each other, which then leads to violence. Incendiary posts included groups ‘trespassing’ on another’s ‘turf’; stealing possessions and taunting the victim to ‘get it back’; making offensive and antagonising remarks; and posting videos of violence to friends and family.^{39,40} Group members also report using social media to brag about violence, make threats and display ‘gang’ symbols.⁴¹ A minority of drill videos use similar incendiary tactics to incite violence, but this is not the norm across the genre. Most young people creating drill music do not intend to incite violence.⁴²
 - Social media provides multiple forums for grooming and recruitment of other young people into groups. Groups on social media glamourise the lifestyle afforded through illegal activities, contributing to grooming and recruitment of other young people. This can include photos and videos showing wealth and expensive goods. A significant minority also show displays of ‘power’ such as holding knives and guns. Focus groups and professional interviews suggested these may be covering for high levels of anxiety and trauma, which disproportionately affect young people who later become involved in groups.⁴³ Previous Social Finance research found that grooming for county lines groups would often happen over online gaming chats.⁴⁴
 - However, the focus on ‘gangs’ in the current research is disproportionate. Group violence only accounts for a small proportion of violent incidents, thus focusing predominately on this misses a lot of other types of violence and harm.⁴⁵ Research has also highlighted that young women’s voices are largely missed from the narrative on ‘gangs’.⁴⁶

2.4 However, we cannot confirm this without further research including wider experiences of young people

Serious violence was not mentioned a lot by young people, practitioners or parents/carers that we spoke to

- Of the young people surveyed who did report knowing of conflict and/or violence that had happened as a result of something on social media, only 4% mentioned serious violence
- This is partly because we didn't speak to the right people for this
 - Unfortunately it was not possible to speak to youth justice teams or Pupil Referring Units in our research
- This is also because serious violence is rare by nature
 - Out of the young people who are involved in serious violence, only a minority identified social media as contributory factor in previous research
 - Thus it is not surprising that serious violence was not mentioned much in our research with schools and youth groups

We do not have sufficient evidence to say social media causes serious violence

- In the minority of cases where research suggests social media might lead to serious violence, we cannot conclude whether this is the case or not without having better knowledge of everything else the young people are experiencing in their lives

It is nevertheless important to explore this issue further

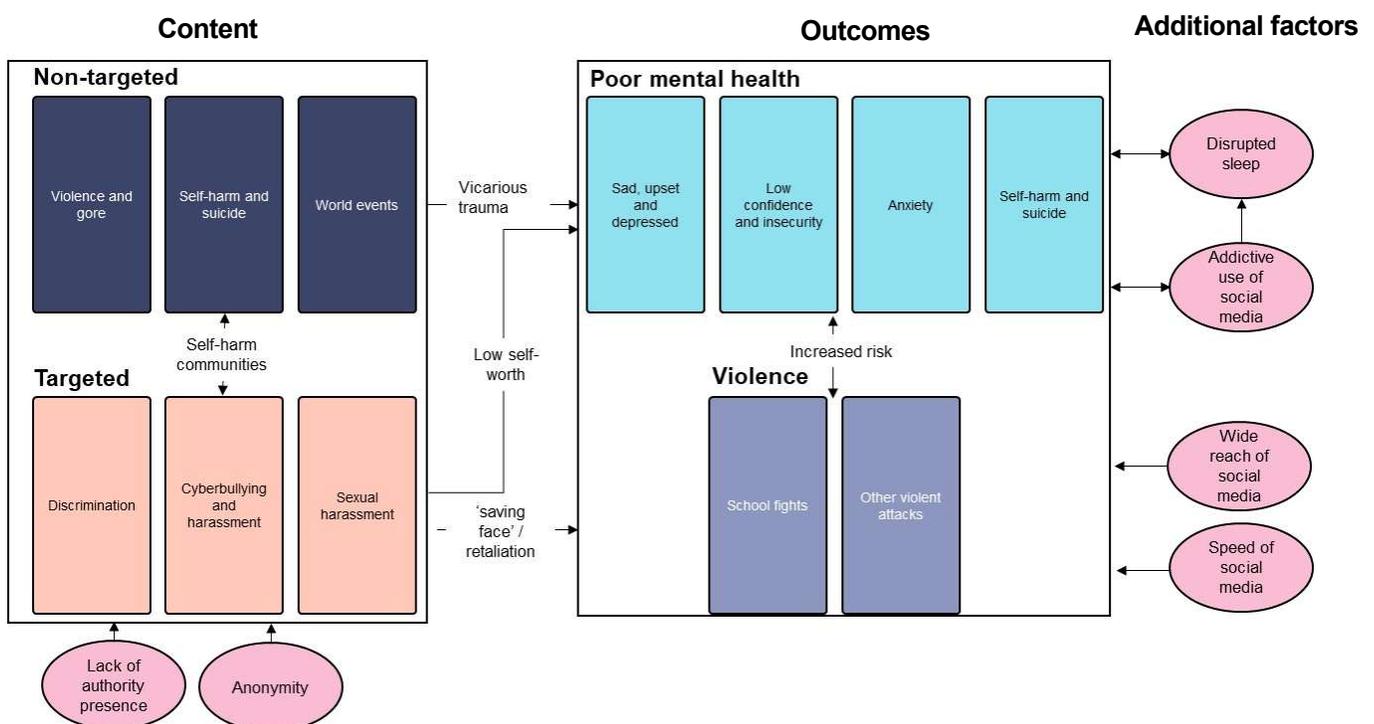
- Even though social media is a factor in a minority of serious offences, 20-25% is still a considerable proportion of offences
- While not common, serious violence was mentioned by a few young people/practitioners in our research:
 - One young person wrote that a stabbing had happened as a result of social media, and other wrote about a social media-driven fight which "involved dogs, knives and more"
- This shows that social media can lead to serious violence in school and community environments as well
- Further research should aim to identify wider experiences that young people have so that the effect of social media may be disentangled from the effect of wider life experiences and trauma. Without doing this it is not possible to say that social media causes serious violence.

2.5 Conclusion of Parts 1 & 2

Through a literature review, community engagement with young people and practitioners, and a survey of young people, practitioners and parents and carers, we have identified that:

- The most prevalent types of upsetting content that young people encounter on social media are violence and gore and cyberbullying and harassment
- Seeing such content frequently leads to poor mental health, including depression and anxiety, and can lead to school fights
- In rare, serious cases, social media use may also contribute to serious violence
- The main mechanisms by which social media use leads to poor mental health that we identified are via vicarious trauma and low self-worth
- The most common factor reported to us by which social media use can lead to low-level violence is through pressure to 'save face'. It is likely that this is also a key mechanism in the link between social media use and serious violence.
- Additional aspects of social media further enhance these risks; specifically, lack of authority presence, anonymity, wide reach and speed of content
- Disrupted sleep and the addictive nature of social media may also be associated with poor mental health
- Figure 26 below lays out these findings:

Figure 26: Overview of our findings on how social media may lead to poor mental health and violence



Part 3: West Yorkshire VRU should commission further research and explore education-based interventions to mitigate the negative impacts of social media on young people

Summary

- Further research into what puts some young people more at risk of experiencing poor mental health and violence as a result of social media use than others is needed. This research should incorporate wider experiences of young people
- Alongside further research, West Yorkshire should explore the possibility of an education-based intervention that aims to raise awareness of the dangers of social media and safe use among young people, practitioners and parents and carers, build trusting relationships, improve support from surrounding agencies and give adults better insight into young people's experiences
- Any intervention should be trauma-informed, co-produced with young people and should follow the key principles found in research to be most effective

3.1 Further research is needed to better understand the link between social media and serious youth violence

Our literature review and engagement with young people and practitioners highlighted key areas where the WYVRU could benefit from further research. These are:

1. Experiences of young women

- a. Research on group violence and social media (or from the perspective of youth justice) generally misses young women^{47,48}
- b. However, in some areas young women are overrepresented, such as in research on social media and body image⁴⁹
- c. Young women are much more likely to engage in online harassment or bullying, as both victim and perpetrator,^{50,51} but the specific mechanisms that drive this are missing from the literature
- d. The link between social media use and poor mental health outcomes appears to be stronger for young women than for young men⁵²
 - i. This seemed to be corroborated by our findings, but further research controlling for other life experiences of young people such as childhood trauma and home life is needed

2. Young people's voice and self-reported experiences

- a. Research has found that young people often discuss negative effects of social media as something happening to others,⁵³ and that young people may downplay involvement with social media.⁵⁴
 - i. This was largely reflected in our engagement with young people. Further research with young people is needed to better understand why they continuously rate social media safe when they report many serious dangers from engaging with social media. It is likely that this is partly driven by the important role that social media plays in young people's social lives, and the lack of understanding of this that they reported among adults around them.
- b. On the other hand, some research has suggested that young people may be echoing overly-negative social media narratives
 - i. We did not find evidence for this, as young people reported very real harms and dangers on social media that they had personally experienced, and did not appear to be repeating narratives around social media without personal experience to back this up

3. Specific platforms

- a. Platforms which receive direct research are often Facebook or Twitter, which are used less by young people today than previously. TikTok, which is currently one of the top three platforms used, if not the top, rarely features in research.

-
- b. Research indicating that social media negatively impacts its users does not break this down by platform.⁵⁵
 - c. Our research with young people suggests that the dangers of Instagram and Twitter may be underappreciated, while the dangers of Snapchat may be overestimated. Further research is needed to understand the relative dangers of each platform specifically.

4. The potential of social media to promote good mental and engage positively with young people

- a. Research highlights that professionals are more likely to focus on the negative effects of social media. O'Reilly argues that the general negative rhetoric around social media is not necessarily helpful for practitioners working in the field.⁵⁶
 - i. Some young people reflected this in our engagement with them, indicating that social media was very important to them and that they did not feel this was appreciated by adults around them

5. More detailed research to better identify causality

- a. Most existing research is cross-sectional which means that identifying causality is not possible
- b. Moreover, it is very hard to control for other factors that may drive vicarious trauma and violence among young people, such as childhood trauma and difficult family situations
- c. While results from our surveys suggest that social media does have a causal effect on young people's mental health difficulties and on school fights, more research which is able to control for some of the other experiences in young people's lives is needed.

6. Research on the mechanisms by which social media leads to serious violence specifically

- a. Our research highlighted some key aspects of social media that contribute to low level violence, such as the speed and wide reach of social media
- b. It is likely that these same elements are important in the link between social media and serious violence, but further research is needed to confirm this

7. The extent to which poor mental health contributes to violence

- a. Our research found that social media can have very damaging effects on young people's mental health, and also suggests that young people who see upsetting content on social media may be more likely to be involved in violence
- b. Further research into links between poor mental health and serious violence would enable us to identify whether social media can be an indirect driver of serious violence in this way

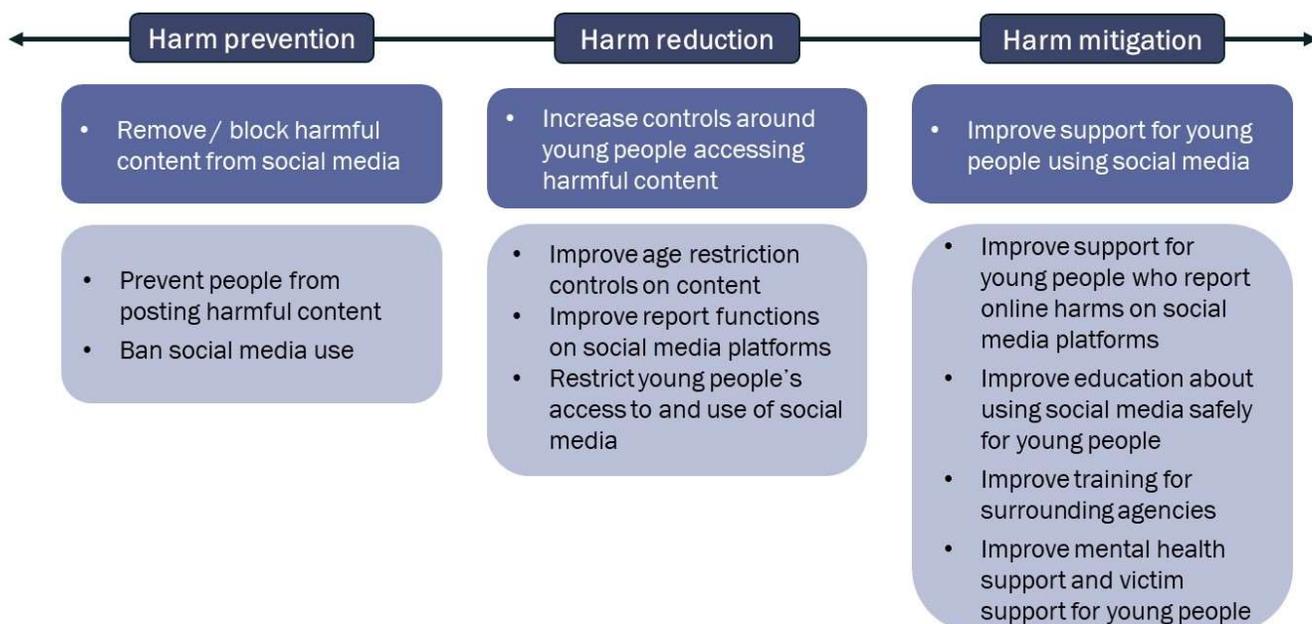
8. Research into the link between school fights and serious violence

- a. Our research suggests that social media plays a key role in school fights
- b. Further research into any links between school fights and serious violence would show whether social media is an indirect risk factor for serious violence in this way

3.2 Alongside further research, there are different intervention options that West Yorkshire could explore

There are three main options for interventions to reduce harm caused by social media, as shown by Figure 27 below:

Figure 27: Interventions



Harm prevention

In order to prevent young people from ever seeing any upsetting content on social media, the two main options are:

- Social media platforms preventing all harmful content from being posted and/or shown to young people
- Banning social media completely use in young people

Harm reduction

In order to reduce the amount of harmful content that young people are exposed to on social media, the two main options are:

- Social media platforms introduce stricter age, user and content restrictions/remove content quicker
- Parents further restrict young people's social media use

Harm mitigation

In order to mitigate potential harm caused by social media without necessarily reducing the level of upsetting content on social media or limiting young people's use of social media, the main options are:

- Give young people, practitioners and parents/carers more training and support on how to help young people use social media safely
- Improve support given to young people who report harmful content
- Improve wider mental health support for young people, so that they may be more resilient against the potential negative outcomes of social media
- Increase anti-violence awareness and support so that young people are less likely to turn to violence as a result of social media conflict

Most survey respondents suggested that harm prevention and/or harm reduction interventions would make social media safer

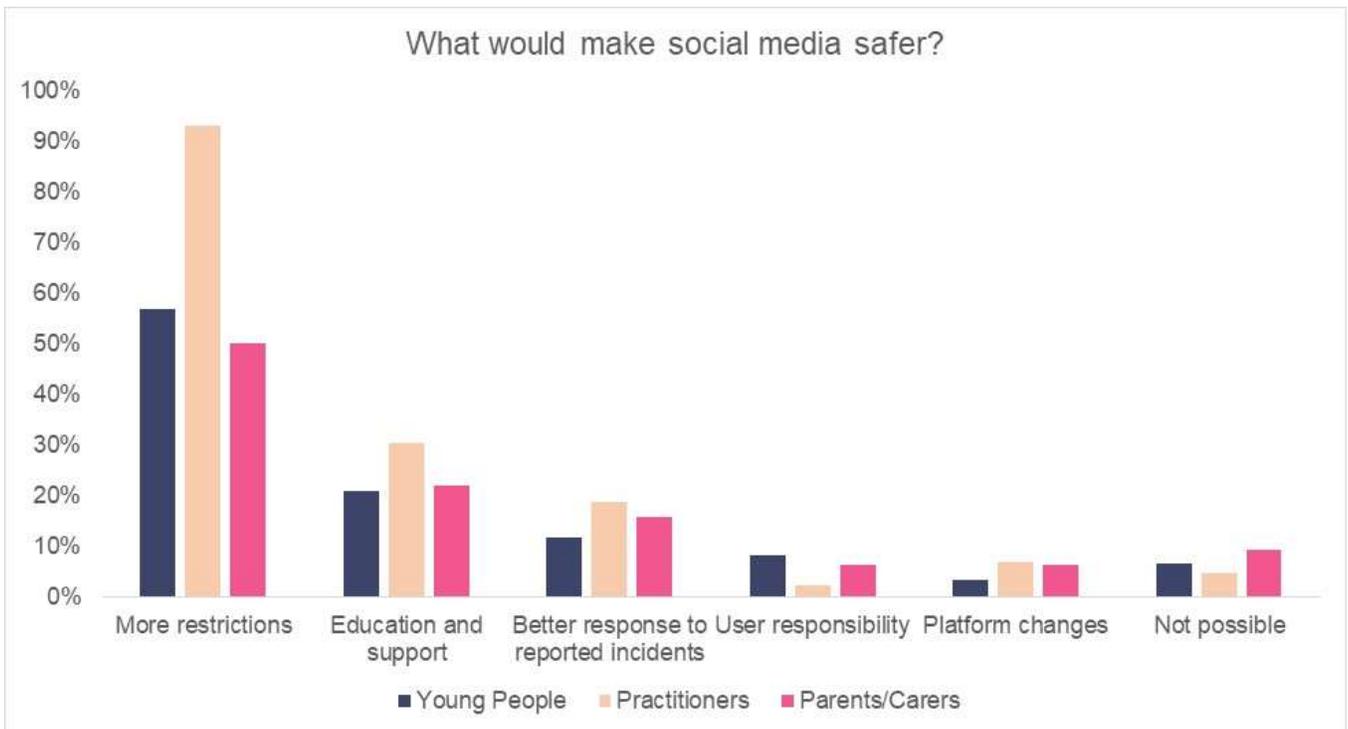
“A way to block anyone over 18 from sending a friend request to a minor. This will prevent minors from talking to 18+ and putting them in an unsafe position”

“restrictions on what people can post /send”

“have better monitoring from the people who run the social media”

- When asked what would make social media safer for young people to use, ~50-90% of young people, practitioners and parents and carers suggested extra restrictions in line with either harm prevention or harm reduction.

Figure 28: Responses to 'what would make social media safer?'



“Having to have ID to set up social media accounts so you can't be anonymously abusive and it can all be traced back” (parent/carer)

“Making it harder for kids to sign up to them. Having age limits and enforcing them is the way to go” (parent/carer)

26% of practitioners wanted extra parental restrictions

“content restrictions and parents monitoring their child's use”

“More control mechanisms for parents / carers”

The next most popular suggestion was harm mitigation, mainly more education for all groups

- 20-30% of young people, practitioners and parents and carers suggested that more education, training and support on safe social media use would make it safer for young people to use

“more awareness for younger children instead of scaring them off it”

“basic teaching on what you should or shouldn’t do online”

“more guidance towards how to deal with it”

“There needs to be a major increase on education within schools and communities on the dangers of social media. A safe space for young people and possibly parents to go and express themselves if they have any concerns of what they might have seen online.”
[practitioner]

“We need to do something about parenting, re-educating teens to be kind (or to avoid speaking to each other) and also giving school staff the confidence and ability to deal with the above” [parent/carer]

3.3 Harm prevention and reduction are not viable options for WYVRU to implement without buy-in from social media platforms

While increasing platform restrictions was a popular suggestion, this is out of scope for the WYVRU

- Social media platforms do not manage to enforce existing restrictions
- Social media platforms are not necessarily incentivised to remove or block extreme content, as it is often this content which increases engagement with the platform
- It is outside of WYVRU's scope to change social media platforms' policies and practices
- It can also be difficult to delineate what is harmful in some cases; for example, young people may share posts related to mental health as a way of connecting with others which some may find solace in and others may find triggering
- However, there is increasing focus on online harms in the current government, and the Online Safety Bill means that there will be more safeguarding duties on tech companies, and Ofcom will hold a regulatory role. This means that there may be opportunities to work more closely with central government on online safety in the future.

Young people benefit from social media and an outright ban is not advised

- Banning social media use among young people is very difficult to do, carries risks of unintended consequences and does not honour the great benefits that many young people get from social media
- Young people highly value social media for social connections and relationships:
 - Some young people attributed improved social skills with their social media use.⁵⁷
 - Jenkins et al (2020) found use for up to four hours per day on a mobile was associated with decreasing peer problems.⁵⁸
 - Social media has been useful for preventing feelings of loneliness during the pandemic.⁵⁹
 - Young people note that social media helps them with confidence and to feel more like 'themselves'⁶⁰
 - Young people say social media helps distract them from life stresses.⁶¹
 - Young people feel that the importance of their phone and social media accounts is not understood by adults⁶²
 - Adolescents are clear that their access to social media was important to them as without this connection they would miss out and stand out as different⁶³
 - Practitioners we spoke to also recognised that young people would be missing out if they had to leave social media. One practitioner we spoke to even proposed that young people do not necessarily delineate between 'offline' and 'online' life; it is thus important to

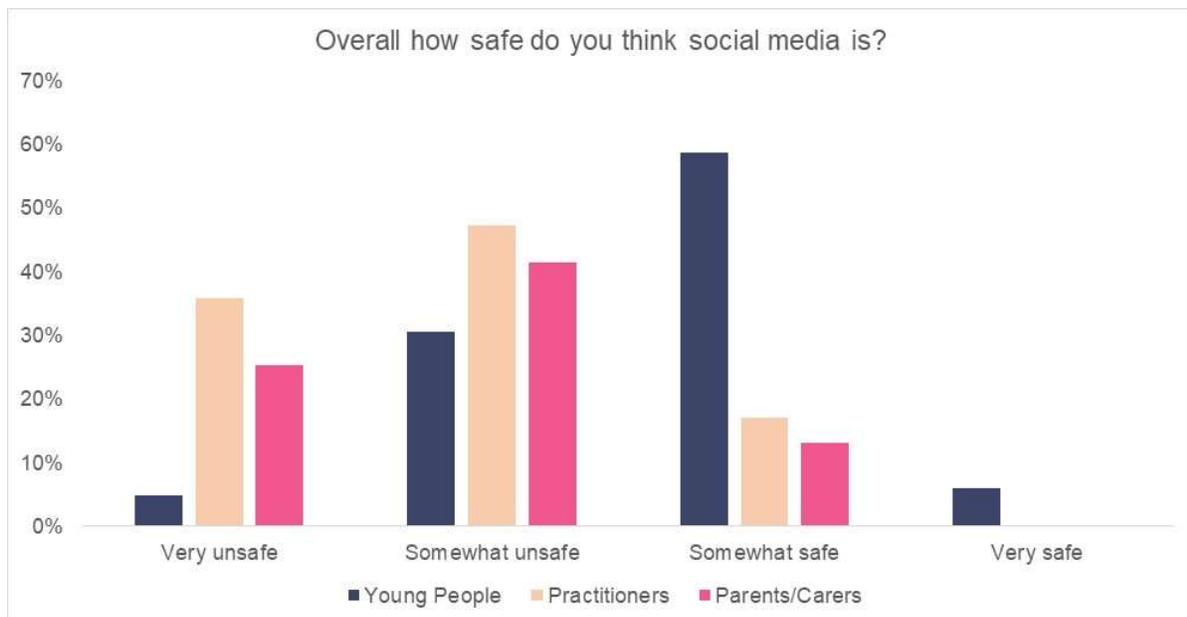
consider that young people's online social lives are just as real and important as their offline social lives.

- A blanket rule for all social media would be difficult to enforce given the variety and number of platforms, and would prevent young people from accessing the benefits of social media
 - O'Reilly (2020) warns that a blanket rule could infringe adolescents' rights and underestimate their digital literacy and competence⁶⁴
 - Not all social media platforms are the same – YouTube and WhatsApp in particular are viewed as safer platforms,⁶⁵ which was largely reflected in our survey
 - Social media use does not pose the same level of risk to all young people. The impact of social media use on young people's mental health and involvement in violence depends on a range of factors, and some groups are more at risk than others
- Young people were affected by online incidents even when not 'online' themselves
 - One young person told us about how an incident online affected them as it was shared to everyone at school, and became the catalyst for in-person harassment, despite them having no access to social media at the time.

Young people do not necessarily agree on the dangers of social media that adults around them perceive. This would make enforcing a ban or further restrictions more difficult and risks creating more tension between young people and adults around them.

- ~2/3 of young people responding to the survey said that they thought social media was either 'somewhat safe' or 'very safe' for people their age, and many commented on the responsibility of the user as a key factor in how safe or not social media is

Figure 29: Overall safety of social media judged by young people, practitioners and parents and carers



Parents are already trying to restrict young people's social media use, and may not feel that there is any more they can do

- Most parents reported that they already restrict and/or monitor what their child(ren) do/does on social media

Figure 30:

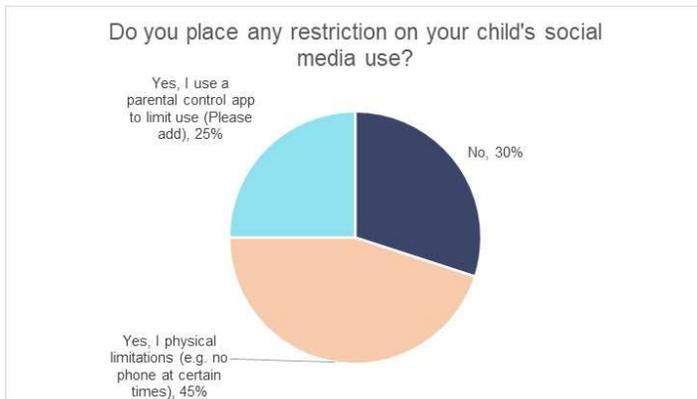
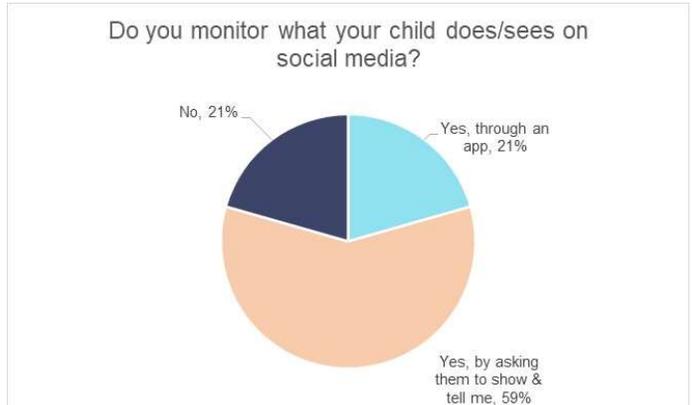


Figure 31:



- 70% use either physical limitations or parental control app
- 80% monitor through asking child to show them and talk to them or through an app
- Parents generally advise children to block accounts and/or report content when they come across upsetting content
- Professionals we spoke to mentioned that they didn't think parental controls were particularly effective.

3.4 We recommend focusing on an education-based harm mitigation intervention

There is a clear need for more support to help young people use social media safely and mitigate negative impacts

- More education, training and support was the second most popular recommendation from young people, practitioners and parents and carers when asked what would make social media safer
- Our findings show that young people currently try to reach out for support, but this need is often unmet
 - For example, over 2/3 of young people have reported something on social media on the platform, yet most of these young people get either no or unsatisfactory response to this report; less than 10% rated the response as ‘good’

Figure 32:

Have you ever used the report function on social media platforms to report upsetting content?

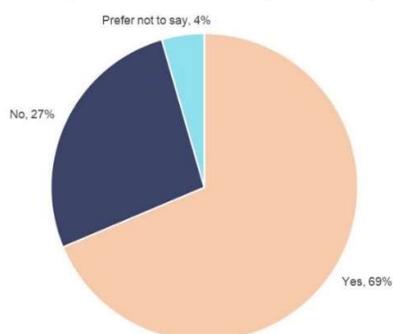
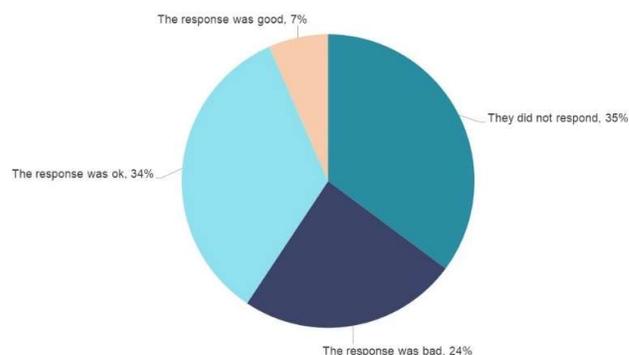


Figure 33:

How do you feel the social media platform responded to your report?



Young people and practitioners also highlighted the need for training/education for supporting agencies

- Aside from the content and interactions on social media, young people have previously highlighted unwanted surveillance and unsatisfactory response from surrounding organisations as potentially harmful as well.⁶⁶

“Police acting upon reports made”

- The most common opinion about police response to online incidents was that they ignore them. Practitioners told us that police response often amounted to ‘victim blaming’ and behaved as though the person being harassed was at fault for being on social media, rather than challenging the behaviour of the perpetrator.

A lot of the time I think [the police's] go to is 'well change your number, block them, then delete the app' and that's all things they've got to do. But it's not them that are doing anything wrong. It's the perpetrator. So I just don't think they look at it through the right lens.

- We were told that police response is often inconsistent and there doesn't appear to be a clear methodology in place for responding to online incidents. Some believed the reason behind poor police response was a lack of resources, specifically in relation to technology expertise.
- It was also recognised that the police often face an uphill struggle in cases involving social media, as platforms will often be non-compliant with investigations.

Snapchat don't work with the police. So they won't hand over any evidence to the police. So it's very, very hard to kind of hunt these down and figure out who's behind it.

Evidence from other interventions suggest this might work

- There is no intervention that has been implemented in the UK that focuses on social media-driven violence among young people specifically
- However, there are interventions in the space of violence prevention that we can learn from. We have included 3 case studies of interventions that are particularly interesting and evidence-based:
 - a. E-Responder Social Media Violence Interruption model
 - i. This is an intervention that has been developed specifically in response to social media-driven violence in the United States
 - b. Learning Together
 - i. This is a schools-based intervention developed in London. The Early Intervention Foundation guidebook gives it an evidence rating of 3, meaning that there is evidence that it has short-term impact on child outcomes from at least one rigorous evaluation, and a cost rating of 1, indicating that it is low cost to set up and deliver⁶⁷
 - c. Becoming A Man
 - i. This is a violence prevention intervention aimed mainly at young men in the US. The Early Intervention Foundation guidebook gives it an evidence rating of 4, meaning that there is evidence that the intervention has long-term positive impact on child outcomes that have been demonstrated in multiple rigorous evaluations. However, the intervention is also very costly.⁶⁸
- We have also pulled out key factors for a successful intervention from research on these and several other interventions

Case study 1: The E-Responder social media violence interruption model⁶⁹

What is the intervention?

Strength-based education and training intervention for young people and practitioners, developed through a university-community partnership to reduce risk of legal system involvement and firearms-related violence in young people

Who?: Developed in partnership between university-based researchers and Citizens Crime Commission of New York City, a nonpartisan, non-profit organisation

Where?: New York City, US

When?: 2019

Why was the intervention developed?

- Law enforcement and community-based organisations had noted a trend of deaths and injuries that seemingly began as taunts or threats on social
- Descriptive data suggested that young people involved in 'crews' used social media to discuss past traumas and express grief and emotional distress, but also that expressions of grief on social media had escalated to gun violence. Data also suggested that social media had allowed individual young people to be identified as the target of a threat

What did it aim to do?

1. Prevent escalation of online provocation to in-person violence
2. Develop young people's skills in social media self-efficacy and critical consumption of and engagement with content

3. Support violence prevention professionals (VPPs) already working with young people to leverage social media as a tool to interrupt potential violence

How did it work?

- An Interruption Toolkit supplemented existing work of VPPs in 4 of the violence prevention sites
 - This toolkit included guidelines for VPPs to assess the risk level of young people's online behaviour, and strategies on best practice from existing research and feedback from VPPs
 - The toolkit emphasised a strengths-based approach and encouraged VPPs to model and reinforce effective online behaviours
- Youth Leadership Program
 - This was made up of 24 lessons which aimed to build on youths' strengths, emphasising mindfulness and emotion regulation and social media literacy
 - The programme aimed to position young people to be active agents in social media change
- Training
 - 26 VPPs were trained in the E-Responder model
 - 70 young people took part in the Youth Leadership Programme

What were the results?

The E-Responder was effective in all of its goals

- VPPs were more likely to interrupt violence-related content

- VPPs made monitoring social media an integral part of their work
- Interventions in response to violence-related posts resulted in positive outcomes
- Young people had increased awareness of online behaviour
- Young people were more likely to report increased digital citizenship
- Young people were better prepared to act in a healthy, socio-politically engaged way online
- Young people reported feeling more comfortable engaging with social issues online, had optimistic views about social change in future and a more nuanced understanding of the impacts of their own online behaviour
- VPPs had increased awareness of risky behaviour among young people and changed the way they thought about young people

What can we learn from it?

- **Strengths-based:** Demonstrates the effectiveness of strengths-based, context-sensitive, intervention efforts for risky online behaviours in young people
- **Relationships:** Demonstrates the importance of relationships between young people and adults engaging them in prevention/ intervention-oriented interactions and young people's desire to connect with their peers

- **Emotion regulation and social media literacy:** Building these skills in young people was a key part of the intervention, and young people reported feeling more aware of their online behaviour and its impact

What is unknown?

- Whether this would work outside US
- What best practices for detection, intervention and prevention are across different social media platforms
- What the long-term impacts of intervention are

Case study 2: Learning Together^{70,71,72}

What is the intervention?

A universal, school-based intervention using a whole-school restorative approach to address youth bullying and aggression in secondary schools across England. Students and staff work together to learn about and implement restorative practices and help minimise harms.

Who?: Developed following an National Institute of Health Research Health Technology Assessment commissioned call. Involved UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health, Chris Bonell, Professor of Sociology and Social Policy at Institute of Education, UCL and leading research institutions including KCL and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Where?: UK

When?: 2011-12

Why was the intervention developed?

- Bullying, aggression and violence among children and young people are among the most consequential public mental health problems
- Bullying is more prevalent among British young people than in other western European countries, with cyberbullying becoming one of the most common forms
- Childhood exposure to bullying and violence results in multiple physical and mental health harms in childhood and in adult life, as well as lower educational attainment
- Challenge is to address these interrelated behaviours using single coherent interventions rather than overburdening busy schools with multiple interventions

- Mounting evidence of health harms and economic costs associated with bullying and aggression

What did it aim to do?

1. Improve young people's health and wellbeing at population level
2. Reduce health inequalities
3. Establish effective interventions which will help develop emotionally healthy and committed learners

How did it work?

- 3 core components to whole-school approach
 - Restorative practice woven into the normal, classroom-based curriculum - enhanced social and emotional learning material taught in PSHE lessons alongside use of circle time delivered by teachers to cohorts of 30 students throughout academic year; use of restorative language by staff
 - Use of restorative conferences to resolve serious instances of conflict between students, led by teachers, for up to 5 sessions typically lasting between 30 mins and 2 hours
 - 'Action Group' delivered by both school staff and a minimum of 6 students, with 6 sessions per year each lasting one hour. Review school policy and rules and how students perceive the school environment, and the implementation of restorative practice as well as recommending tailored actions

What were the results?

- Overall, had short-term positive impact on child outcomes from at least one evaluation

- Has not yet replicated its results in another rigorously conducted study
- Slight benefits to children's mental health and wellbeing
- Better school achievement and employment
- Reduced crime, violence and anti-social behaviour
- Reduced substance abuse
- Small but significant effects on bullying, but no effect on aggression
- More effective in students with higher baseline bullying experience, with greater effects on bullying and psychological problems, quality of life and wellbeing
- More effective in those with greater baseline aggression, with greater effects on both primary outcomes, psychological secondary outcomes and some risk behaviours
- Greater effect in boys than in girls for many secondary outcomes
- Reduced student reports of bullying victimisation
- Seemed to have larger benefits for many secondary outcomes
- Intervention seemed to work to curtail existing bullying and aggression as well as prevent new bullying
- Found strengthening of effects over time for outcomes
- No effect on perpetration of aggressive behaviours

What can we learn from it?

- **Whole-school approach:**
 - Adds to evidence that whole-school approaches to prevent bullying and aggression and promote student health are feasible and have positive effects on a range of outcomes in a broad range of high-income, middle-income and low-income settings
 - First experimental evidence that multiple health outcomes can be promoted by transforming the school environment and increasing educational engagement
 - Interventions to promote student health by modifying the whole-school environment such as Learning Together are likely to be one of the most efficient ways of promoting mental health and wellbeing while also addressing other health harms in adolescence, because of their potential to modify population-level risk and their wide reach across health outcomes and likely sustainability
- **Focus on most at-risk**
 - The intervention was found to be most effective for those who were already at risk of bullying and aggression. This supports the idea of targeting interventions at those most at-risk first, as this is where they are likely to have the greatest impact

What is unknown?

- Whether this intervention could be adapted in a way that would reduce aggression as well as bullying

Case study 3: Becoming A Man⁷³

What is the intervention?

School-based social and emotional learning programme for pupils aged 12-18. Typically works with pupils that live in deprived areas and come from lower socio-economic backgrounds to improve school engagement and reduce contact with the criminal justice system.

Who?: Launched in Chicago, US by Youth Guidance

Where?: US & UK

When?: 2001

Why was the intervention developed?

- Founder Anthony Ramirez-Di Vittorio wanted to reduce violence among young men and create a safe space for them to openly express themselves and receive support

What did it aim to do?

1. Improve school engagement and completion and reduce interactions with criminal justice system
2. Reduce likelihood of adolescents turning to aggressive or defensive behaviours

How does it work?

- 25 weekly group sessions of 1 hour duration and 30 weekly individual sessions lasting 15 mins each led by 1 practitioner over course of school year, to groups of 10-12 participants

- BAM counsellor leads group sessions and individual 1:1 check-ins
- BAM counsellor with QCF-6 level qualifications, 300 hours of programme training
- Practitioner supervision recommended by 1 external programme developer supervisor and 1 host-agency supervisor
- Training manual, online and printed material, training and fidelity monitoring

What were the results?

- Evidence from at least 2 Randomised Control Trials /Quasi-Experimental Designs demonstrating positive impacts lasting a year or longer
- Improved school performance immediately after intervention and a year later
- Reduced arrests for violent crime and other crimes immediately after
- Now supporting more than 8,000 young people in 140 schools in the US and London, UK

What can we learn from it?

- **Social, emotional and mental health skills:** Addressing the social, emotional and mental health needs of young people should be a key part of violence prevention efforts
- **Relationships:** BAM focused on building trusting relationships between the counsellors and the young people, with lots of 1:1 time built into the intervention.

What is unknown?

- How well it works in the UK context
- Whether a similar intervention would be effective for female and non-binary young people

Main features of successful interventions in this area

A review of these and other interventions in violence-prevention and/or school-based mental health support highlighted that interventions that are most likely to be effective have the following qualities:

- **Focus on social, emotional and mental health:**
 - Some recent research highlighting the importance of incorporating SEMH skills into violence-prevention interventions includes:
 - A review of the effectiveness of school-based interventions in adolescent mental health by the Early Intervention Foundation last summer found that a focus on social and emotional skills seemed to be a core component of effective violence and bullying prevention interventions⁷⁴
 - A review of violence-prevention interventions delivered in the UK and abroad found that a focus on problem-solving, self-control, anger management, conflict resolution and socio-emotional skills is particularly effective with at-risk children⁷⁵
 - A review of what works to prevent youth violence by the Scottish government last year found that programmes seeking to develop young people's social, emotional and life skills were particularly effective⁷⁶

- **Build strong relationships:** Focus on the whole family and aim to develop positive family relationships and on building trusting relationships more widely
 - Recent research highlighting the importance of trusting relationships in violence-prevention interventions includes:
 - Research by the Big Lottery Fund into what works to prevent serious youth violence, which identified that one thing that is often missing from the lives of many young people who are involved in serious violence is good relationships⁷⁷
 - A report by UK Youth and others on a youth-led consultation on the causes and solutions to serious violence against young people, which highlighted that a positive relationship between the youth worker and the participants was key to success⁷⁸
 - Research also highlights the benefits of adopting a whole-family approach:
 - Maxwell and Corliss (2020) emphasised the need to support teachers to effectively engage parents in the intervention, and they and the Early Intervention Foundation highlighted the effectiveness of specific family-based interventions such as Functional Family Therapy and Multi-Systemic Therapy^{79,80}

- **School-based:** Use a whole-school approach whereby the intervention is built into the curriculum across the school and is not a one-off class or assembly
 - Many studies mentioned the important role of schools in violence prevention
 - The Scottish Government's review of what works to prevent youth violence (2021) highlighted school-based approaches⁸¹
 - The Early Intervention Foundation found that school-based approaches that were most effective were those that were implemented as part of a 'multi-tiered' approach across the school⁸²

-
- **Led by young people:** Engage young people in the development and implementation of the intervention and are led by their needs
 - Interactive approaches that engage young people in the design as well as the delivery of the intervention were identified as more effective:
 - The Scottish Government's review emphasised the need to work together with young people in their natural setting⁸³
 - UK Youth highlighted the importance of working with those with lived experience,⁸⁴ and Big Lottery Fund stressed the importance of trusting young people as experts in their own lives⁸⁵
 - **Multi-agency:** Involve multiple agencies who work together to support young people
 - Collaborative working between statutory and community agencies was highlighted by the Big Lottery Fund⁸⁶ and a 2020 review of youth violence prevention efforts⁸⁷

In addition, research highlighted that high implementation fidelity and delivery by trained facilitators are important predictors of the success of an intervention in this area

- Maxwell and Corliss (2020) suggested that having specialist, detached youth workers can be particularly effective⁸⁸
- The EIF emphasised that interventions which maintain high fidelity to the model are more likely to succeed^{89,90}

Based on this research, we think it is likely that an education-based intervention focused on safe use of social media for young people, practitioners and parents/carers would bring benefits, following the key principles identified. Specifically, this would help:

- Raise awareness of the issues highlighted in this report
- Give professionals a better understanding of what is going on in young people's lives
 - Our findings showed that there may be some mismatch here
- Build trusting relationships
 - Our findings suggest that this could be key protective factor against violence, as young people who were not aware of social media-driven violence were ~2x more likely to have gotten a good response from an adult about upsetting content on social media than those who were aware of social media-driven violence
 - Only ~1 in 3 young people said they had reported upsetting content to a trusted adult, but when they do they get a good response

Figure 34:

Have you ever spoken to a trusted adult about something upsetting on social media?

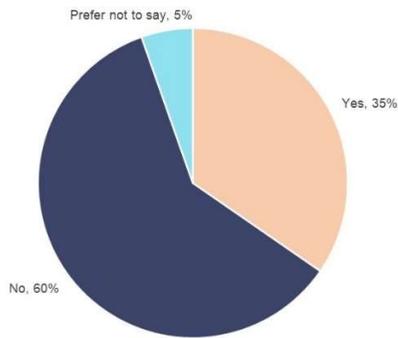
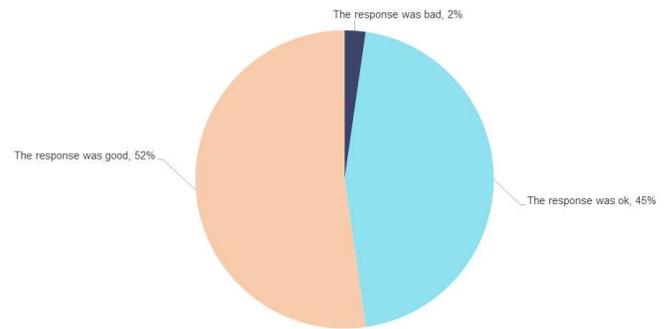


Figure 35:

How do you feel the adult responded to you?



The core focuses of such an intervention depend on whether the aim is to reduce the negative impacts of social media on young people generally, or to reduce violence

- If aiming to reduce negative impacts generally, bullying is a key focus area
- If aiming to reduce violence, bullying may not be so relevant, but things such as e.g. racist content may be more important to think about

3.5 West Yorkshire should co-develop trauma-informed support with young people

Based on this research, we recommend that West Yorkshire uses this and future research to develop trauma-informed education-based support

Any intervention developed should incorporate the key principles outlined in section 3.4

Our research suggests that an education-based intervention is the most feasible, and will reduce the negative impacts of social media on young people by:

4. Raising awareness
5. Giving practitioners a better understanding of what young people's experiences are
6. Building trusting relationships between young people and adults in their lives

West Yorkshire should co-produce the design of an intervention with young people to ensure that it will respond to their needs appropriately

The specific areas of focus of an intervention depends on the exact aims and should be identified in this coproduction work with young people, but our research suggests key areas to consider would be:

- **Non-targeted upsetting content:** Support young people in how to cope with seeing non-targeted upsetting on social media
 - Two top categories of this that were reported are:
 - Violence and gore
 - Self-harm and suicide
 - Our research suggests this content can lead to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety in young people via vicarious trauma, and can lead to increased self-harm and suicidal behaviours in young people with pre-existing mental health needs
- **Targeted abuse:** Aim to reduce the amount of targeted abuse on social media by raising awareness and educating young people in the impact of bullying and harassing others
 - The top categories of targeted abuse that were mentioned by young people are:
 - Cyberbullying and harassment
 - Discrimination including racism and homophobia
 - Sexual harassment, mainly intimate image abuse
 - Our research suggests that this content can damage self-esteem and lead to mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and self-harm and suicide among young people
 - Our research suggests that cyberbullying and harassment is also a key driver of fights in school

-
- **Snapchat, TikTok and Instagram:** these are the three most used platforms and are considered by young people and practitioners to be most dangerous. Any intervention developed should consider how these platforms may need to be tackled differently.

Part 4: Conclusion

This research has shown that social media is a hugely prevalent and important feature of young people's lives, and that seeing upsetting content on social media is a common occurrence amongst young people in West Yorkshire. Whilst exposure to such content does not affect every young person, many report that seeing content such as violence, abuse, harassment and self-harm and suicide makes them feel upset, anxious, and bad about themselves. Many young people also spoke of school fights that happened because of something that was said or shared on social media.

Targeted abuse was identified as a trigger for violence, and the wide reach and speed of social media can increase the pressure young people might feel to retaliate. However, it was not possible in this research to isolate the effects of social media on young people's mental health or involvement with violence from other contributing factors; the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit should consider wider experiences of young people, including offline trauma, in order to better understand the role that social media plays in serious violence.

What is clear is that more support is needed for those young people who are at risk of poor mental health and/or involvement in violence due to interactions and content on social media, and that it is extremely difficult to prevent young people from being exposed to harmful content on social media. Interventions to mitigate the potential harms of social media use among young people should therefore involve adults from different areas of young people's lives, and focus on building young people's skills and support networks to deal with the content that they are exposed to.

Lastly, it is crucial to be led by young people's experiences and ensure that any future research and interventions are co-designed alongside young people where possible.

Part 5: Appendices

5.1 Appendix A: Our methodology

Literature Review

We have mostly focused on UK-based research so that our findings are most likely to be applicable to the West Yorkshire context. However, we have also brought in some global studies where UK-based research is lacking; primarily in relation to vicarious trauma.

We searched academic databases and Google Scholar for primary research papers, literature reviews, and reports containing keywords 'social media', 'mental health' and 'violence'. Papers were not included if they did not mention the impact of social media on either mental health or violence.

1 Write up notes from research



2 Pull out key themes for each paper reviewed



3 Identify common themes across papers



Community engagement

- We used semi-structured interviews when speaking to young people and professionals
- Our interviews were designed to allow the participants to define what they considered to be emotional harm and violence
- The interviews were transcribed and then thematically coded

Young people

- We spoke to three groups of young people. One in Leeds, another in Leeds serving young people across West Yorkshire, and a group bringing together young people across the combined authority.
- We spoke to significantly more girls/young women than boys/young men.
- Most young people we spoke to were from a white ethnic background.

Practitioners

- We spoke to seven practitioners in six groups.
- Most practitioners we spoke to were women and from a white background.
- We spoke to two practitioners working nationally, two serving Kirklees and Calderdale, one working primarily in Bradford, one in Wakefield, and one working across West Yorkshire
- 49% of the practitioners who responded to our survey worked in school or college settings; 13% worked in mental health, and 6% worked in youth offending. Others worked in domestic abuse, housing, Early Help, substance misuse, sexual violence and social care services

Surveys

- The survey design was informed by our community engagement work
- Surveys were shared through schools, youth groups, and professional networks. In total we received:
 - 214 responses to the Young People's survey
 - 69 responses to the Practitioners' survey
 - 34 responses to the Parents and Carers' survey
- Surveys were ran via SurveyMonkey, and a prize draw for £20 Love2Shop vouchers was offered as incentive
- Responses were downloaded from SurveyMonkey and analysed in Excel

5.2 Appendix B: Survey respondents

Surveys

West Yorkshire population – 2011 census⁹¹

- 2.2 million people within the combined authority
- 23% from Bradford, 9% from Calderdale, 19% Kirklees, 34% Leeds, 15% Wakefield

| | |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| Indian | 2% |
| Pakistani | 9% |
| Bangladeshi | 1% |
| Chinese | <1% |
| Asian Other | 1% |
| Black African | 1% |
| Black Caribbean | 1% |
| Black Other | <1% |
| Mixed White and Black Caribbean | 1% |
| Mixed White and Black African | <1% |
| Mixed White and Asian | 1% |
| Mixed Other | <1% |
| White British | 78% |
| White Irish | 1% |
| White Gypsy or Irish Traveller | <1% |
| White Other | 3% |
| Arab | <1% |
| Other ethnic group | <1% |

Young People's survey:

- Total number of respondents was 214
- Age range of respondents was 11-25
 - 45% were aged 13-15
 - 40% were aged 16-18
- 66% were female, 28% male, 2% were non-binary and 2% were other gender
- 51% of respondents were from Calderdale, 21% from Bradford, 13% from Kirklees and 12% from Wakefield and 4% from Leeds
- 68% of respondents were White British or Northern Irish; 11% Pakistani; 6% other White or White mixed; 2% Indian; 2% African; 1.5% Gypsy or Irish Traveller

Practitioners survey:

- Total number of respondents was 69
- 84% were female, 13% male and 3% were non-binary

-
- 39% worked in Kirklees, 17% in Wakefield, 17% in Calderdale, 14% in Leeds, and 12% in Bradford
 - 78% were White British or Northern Irish; 6% Pakistani; 4% Indian; 4% Irish; 3% Other White; 1.5% Caribbean; 1.5% Other Asian

Parents & carers survey:

- Total number of respondents was 34
- 56% were from Wakefield; 21% from Kirklees; 12% from Leeds; 6% from Bradford; 6% from Calderdale
- 35% had one child; 38% had two; 24% had three
- Children were aged 10-21

Endnotes

- 1 Christmann, Dr. Kris and Ioannou, Prof. Maria (October 2020), *West Yorkshire Social Media Research Project: Summary of Research Findings*
- 2 Walker, University of Leeds, *Social Media and Violence: a study into the relationship between them and interventions to address this issue in West Yorkshire*
- 3 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/social-media-violence-london-croydon-phd-b1984798.html>
- 4 Christmann, Dr. Kris and Ioannou, Prof. Maria (October 2020)
- 5 HM Inspectorate of Probation (October 2017), *The Work of Youth Offending Teams to Protect the Public*, https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2017/10/The-Work-of-Youth-Offending-Teams-to-Protect-the-Public_reportfinal.pdf
- 6 <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3137>
- 7 Catch22 (January 2017), *Social media as a catalyst and trigger for youth violence*
- 8 <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3137>
- 9 Previous Social Finance research
- 10 Weinstein, Emily (2018), *The social media see-saw: Positive and negative influences on adolescents' affective well-being*
- 11 O'Reilly, Michelle (January 2020), *Social media and adolescent mental health: the good, the bad and the ugly*
- 12 This matches findings by a separate UK study in 2021: Gordon, Dr. Faith (November 2021), *Online Harms Experienced by Children and Young People: 'ACCEPTABLE USE' AND REGULATION*
- 13 Ofsted (June 2021), *Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges#executive-summary-and-recommendations>
- 14 Catch22 (January 2017)
- 15 Kelly et al (January 2019), *Social Media Use and Adolescent Mental Health: Findings From the UK Millennium Cohort Study*
- 16 Royal Society for Public Health (May 2017), *#StatusOfMind: Social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing*
- 17 Ofsted (June 2021)
- 18 <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/article/isolation-and-social-media-among-factors-behind-surge-in-eating-disorders-during-pandemic-charities-warn>
- 19 <https://news.sky.com/story/social-media-influencers-could-be-required-to-display-warning-logo-on-edited-body-image-photos-12513783>
- 20 Patton et al (March 2014), *Social media as a vector for youth violence: A review of the literature*
- 21 O'Reilly, Michelle (January 2020)
- 22 Patton et al (March 2014)
- 23 Catch22 (January 2017)
- 24 Jenkins et al (March 2020), *Social networking site use in young adolescents: Association with health-related quality of life and behavioural difficulties*
- 25 O'Reilly et al (2018), *Is social media bad for mental health and wellbeing? Exploring the perspectives of adolescents*
- 26 Patton et al (March 2014)
- 27 West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit school survey, December 2021
- 28 Catch22 (January 2017)
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Whittaker et al (April 2021), *Evaluation of the Lewisham Trauma Informed Group Work Programme*
- 31 Catch22 (January 2017)
- 32 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/26/facebook-angry-emoji-algorithm/>
- 33 Christmann, Dr. Kris and Ioannou, Prof. Maria (October 2020)
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 HM Inspectorate of Probation (October 2017)
- 36 Catch22 (January 2017)
- 37 Christmann, Dr. Kris and Ioannou, Prof. Maria (October 2020)
- 38 O'Reilly, Michelle (January 2020)
- 39 Catch22 (January 2017)
- 40 Previous Social Finance research
- 41 Patton et al (March 2014)
- 42 Catch22 (January 2017)
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Previous Social Finance research
- 45 Ibid.

- 46 Catch22 (January 2017)
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Christmann, Dr. Kris and Ioannou, Prof. Maria (October 2020)
- 49 McCrory et al (May 2020), *The relationship between highly visual social media and young people's mental health: A scoping review*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105053>
- 50 Kelly et al (January 2019)
- 51 Jenkins et al (March 2020)
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 O'Reilly, Michelle (January 2020)
- 54 Whittaker et al (April 2021)
- 55 McCrory et al (May 2020)
- 56 O'Reilly, Michelle (January 2020)
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Jenkins et al (March 2020)
- 59 Gordon, Dr. Faith (November 2021), *Online Harms Experienced by Children and Young People: 'ACCEPTABLE USE' AND REGULATION*
- 60 WYVRU (2021)
- 61 O'Reilly et al (2018)
- 62 O'Reilly, Michelle (January 2020)
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 NSPCC (January 2019), *Social Media and Children Survey: Headline Report*
- 66 Gordon, Dr. Faith (November 2021)
- 67 Early Intervention Foundation, *Guidebook*, <https://guidebook.eif.org.uk/programme/learning-together>
- 68 Early Intervention Foundation, *Guidebook*, <https://guidebook.eif.org.uk/programme/being-a-man>
- 69 Sichel CE, Javdani S, Ueberall S, Liggett R (2019), *Leveraging youths' digital literacies: The E-Responder social media violence interruption model and pilot evaluation*. *J Prev Interv Community*. 2019 Apr-Jun;47(2):76-89. doi: 10.1080/10852352.2019.1582145
- 70 Bonell, Prof. C. B., et al (November 2018), *Effects of the Learning Together intervention on bullying and aggression in English secondary schools (INCLUSIVE): a cluster randomised controlled trial*, doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)31782-3, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)31782-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)31782-3/fulltext)
- 71 UCL, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/child-health/research/population-policy-and-practice-research-and-teaching-department/champp/learning-together>
- 72 Early Intervention Foundation, <https://guidebook.eif.org.uk/programme/learning-together#child-outcomes-detailed>
- 73 Early Intervention Foundation, [https://guidebook.eif.org.uk/programme/being-a-man#:~:text=Becoming%20A%20Man%20\(BAM\)%20is,from%20lower%20socio%2Deconomic%20backgrounds.](https://guidebook.eif.org.uk/programme/being-a-man#:~:text=Becoming%20A%20Man%20(BAM)%20is,from%20lower%20socio%2Deconomic%20backgrounds.)
- 74 Clarke, Dr. Aleisha et al (July 2021), *Adolescent mental health: a systematic review on the effectiveness of school-based interventions*, Early Intervention Foundation
- 75 O'Conner & Waddell (November 2015), *What works to prevent gang involvement, youth violence and crime: a rapid review of interventions delivered in UK and abroad*, Early Intervention Foundation
- 76 Russell, Dr. Kirsten (February 2021), *What works to prevent youth violence: a summary of the evidence*, Scottish Violence Reduction Unit
- 77 Big Lottery Fund (July 2018), *Preventing serious youth violence – what works? Insights and examples from the community and voluntary sector*
- 78 UK Youth et al (October 2019), *Harnessing lived experience: A youth-led consultation on the causes and solutions to serious violence against young people*
- 79 Maxwell, Dr. Nina & Corliss, Dr. Cindy (July 2020), *Good practice in youth violence prevention: a mapping and horizon scanning review*
- 80 O'Conner & Waddell (November 2015)
- 81 Russell, Dr. Kirsten (February 2021)
- 82 Clarke, Dr. Aleisha et al (July 2021)
- 83 Russell, Dr. Kirsten (February 2021)
- 84 UK Youth et al (October 2019)
- 85 Big Lottery Fund (July 2018)
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 Kovalenko, A. G., Abraham, C., Graham-Rowe, E., Levine, M., & O'Dwyer, S. (2020). *What Works in Violence Prevention Among Young People?: A Systematic Review of Reviews. Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838020939130>
- 88 Maxwell, Dr. Nina & Corliss, Dr. Cindy (July 2020)
- 89 Clarke, Dr. Aleisha et al (July 2021)
- 90 O'Conner & Waddell (November 2015),
- 91 <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by->

[ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest#ethnic-diversity-by-area](#)

Social Finance Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk
London
SE11 5HJ

info@socialfinance.org.uk
+44 (0) 20 7770 6836

socialfinance.org.uk
Publication date: March 2022

Disclaimer and Terms of Use

This report is not an offering of any Notes for Sale and is provided by Social Finance solely for information purposes. Neither Social Finance nor any of their respective affiliates, directors, officers, employees or agents makes any express or implied representation, warranty or undertaking with respect to this Document, and none of them accepts any responsibility or liability as to its accuracy or completeness. Social Finance has not assumed any responsibility for independent verification of the information contained herein or otherwise made available in connection to the Document. The text in this Document may be reproduced free of charge providing that it is reproduced accurately and not used in a misleading context. The material must be acknowledged as Social Finance copyright and the title of the document be specified.

Social Finance is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority FCA No: 497568