west midlands
police and crime
commissioner

ACCOUNTABILITY AND GOVERNANCE BOARD

Tuesday 22 July 2025

Youth Commissioner Research Report: The Experience and Impact of Online Harm for Young People

Presented by: Srilakshmi Sen, Ayyatulahi Adigun and Maysa Khandoker.
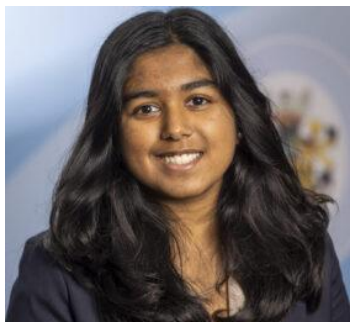
Youth Commissioner Foreword

Ayyatulahi Adigun, Sandwell Youth Commissioner:

"We are growing up in a world that's changing a lot faster than legal regulations can keep up with, and until the law catches up, we are on our own", said a young person during one of our Youth Commissioner workshops, and that captures the core of this campaign. We, as young people, become desensitised to online harm as there is nothing done to actually mitigate it. I have personally received nasty direct messages online and never told an adult. If at the time you asked me whether it counted as harm, I'd have said no. To me, and many others, harm means something extreme like visible threats, but it still affected me and made me question if I was the problem. That's what makes online harm so dangerous. It's subtle and chips away at your sense of safety or self-esteem without you even realising.

That is why this campaign is so important. It is about recognising that online harm is a real threat and changing our response, making sure children and young people are safe online without fear of navigating these spaces.

Srilakshmi Sen, Birmingham Youth Commissioner:

In selecting a focus for this research, the importance of social media to the Youth Commissioners was undeniable. With so much of our world existing online, we felt this area could give an insight into an issue that is frequently discussed, but just as frequently dismissed. We hope that the findings of this report lead to the pursuit of actionable steps that help the young people that need it most and, most importantly, help them in a way that they themselves have requested: a desire for youth agency in tackling social media harm deeply motivated this line of enquiry.

Maysa Khandoker, Solihull Youth Commissioner:

As Youth Commissioners, we chose to focus on the issue of online harm and the impact it has on young people because it is one of the most pressing challenges our generation faces today. The digital world is central to our everyday lives, shaping our education, social relationships, and identities. However, it also exposes young people to risks such as cyberbullying, misinformation, exploitation, and mental health pressures. Our motivation stems from personal stories shared by peers, rising levels of online-related anxiety, and a strong desire to create safer online environments. By addressing this issue, we aim to raise awareness, influence policy, and empower young people to navigate the online world safely and confidently.

Background

The Youth Commissioners are an elected group of 11 young people aged between of 13 and 18 years old, they represent each of the local areas in the West Midlands.

You can learn more about the Youth Commissioners here: [Youth Commissioners - West Midlands Police & Crime Commissioner (westmidlands-pcc.gov.uk)](westmidlands-pcc.gov.uk)

In January 2025, the Youth Commissioners started a research project aiming to find out more about the perceptions of social media and the impact of online harm for the young people of the West Midlands. They spoke to those aged between 13-18, across all 7 local authority areas.

From January to April, the project looked to understand young people's usage, behaviours, and perceptions on and around social media. The research explored which platforms were frequently engaged with, how much time is spent on social media and how social media impacts them as young users. The research project took a direct approach through a voluntary survey and workshops across the boroughs facilitated by the Youth Commissioners.

Social media and online safety for young people is an ongoing problem as young people have increased access to online and digital platforms. This level of accessibility has led to issues around cyberbullying, hate crime, access to inappropriate and adult content and misinformation and can cause lasting impact to mental health and a young persons' self-perception. This research project highlighted these themes as being key issues for young people as they interact online.
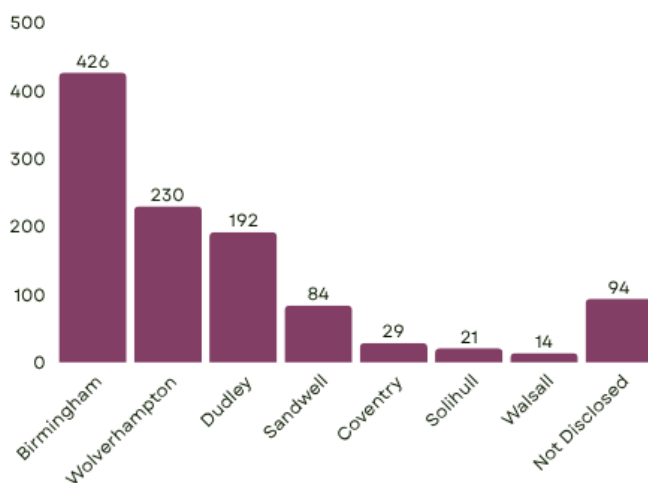
Survey results and group discussions

The voluntary survey was the primary research tool used, receiving a total of 1,090 responses from young people in the West Midlands. The survey featured a series of questions around social media usage and young people's experience, allowing young people to self-select their options to present their views and provide meaningful insight into youth perspectives on social media. It addressed themes such as young people's preferences of social media platforms, frequency of use, purposes for engagement, perceived impacts and experiences of harm.

Additionally, the survey explored how instances of harm were reported and resolved, as well as respondents' views on the adequacy of protection measures and suggestions for improving safety. The survey included a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions, alongside demographic questions. The survey was designed with young people in mind, ensuring accessibility and ease of use across multiple device types.
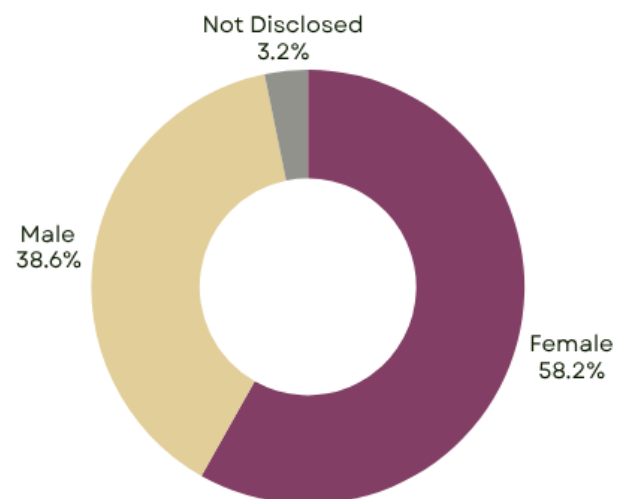
Demographics

The diagrams below show the demographics of the 1090 participants who voluntarily took part in the survey. This survey demographically underscores the diversity of the West Midlands.
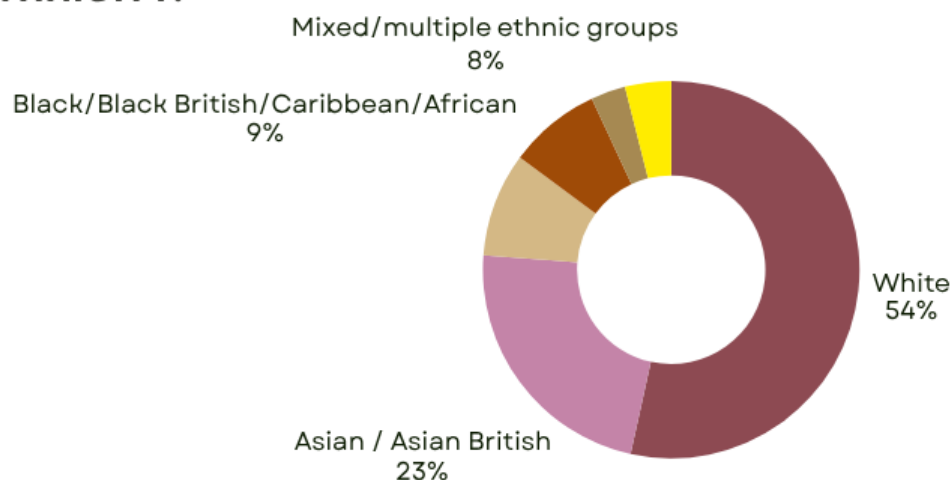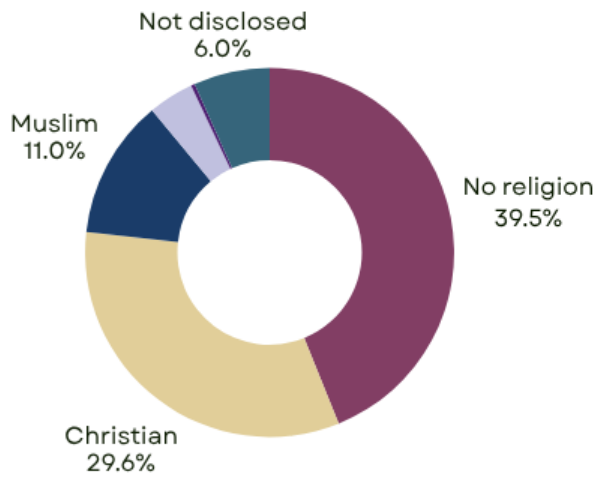
BY LOCAL AUTHORITY AREA:

BY SEX:

Not Disclosed 3.2%
Male 38.6%
Female 58.2%

BY ETHNICITY:

Mixed/multiple ethnic groups 8%
Black/Black British/Caribbean/African 9%
White 54%
Asian / Asian British 23%

BY RELIGION:

Not disclosed
6.0%

Muslim
11.0%

No religion
39.5%

Christian
29.6%

BY AGE:

Age	Percentage
Aged 18	12%
Aged 17	32%
Aged 16	24%
Aged 15	8%
Aged 14	11%
Aged 13	9%
Not disclosed	3%

BY DISABILITY:

Has a disability
8.5%

Did not have a disability
85.7%

BY GENDER IDENTITY:

Non-binary
2.7%

Gender as assigned at birth
95%
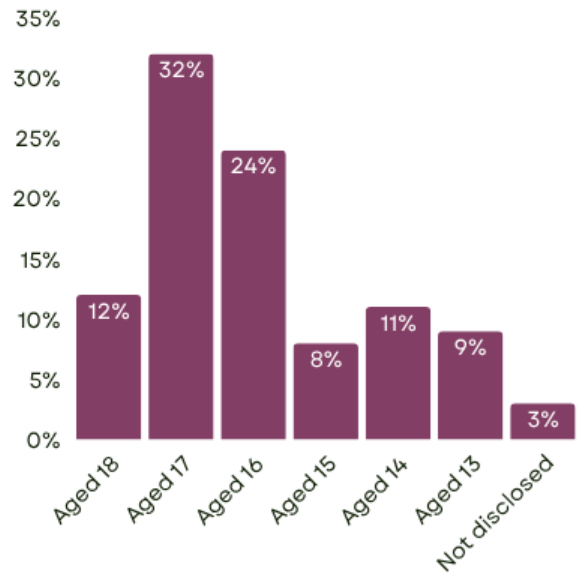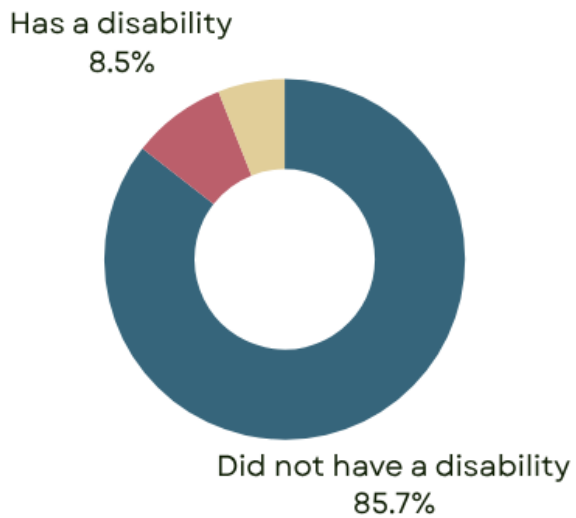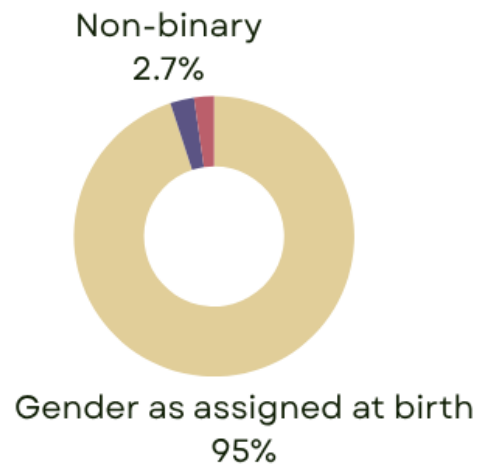
## Social media: Usage, importance & impact

When addressing social media usage, importance and impact the survey determined that social media holds significant weight for young people and remains an important structure in their daily lives. The survey presented that 97% of respondents actively engaged with social media platforms. Young people identified Snapchat, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, as the most popular social media platforms, with 55% of respondents reporting they use all four.
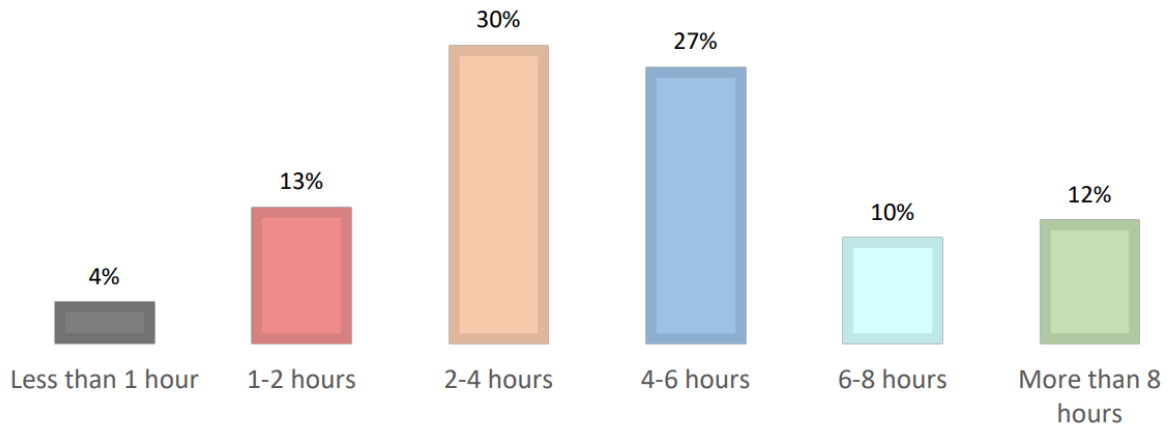
In contrast, LinkedIn and Reddit appeal less strongly to this demographic, as the platform is interpreted to target a more professional audience.

Which social media platforms do you use?
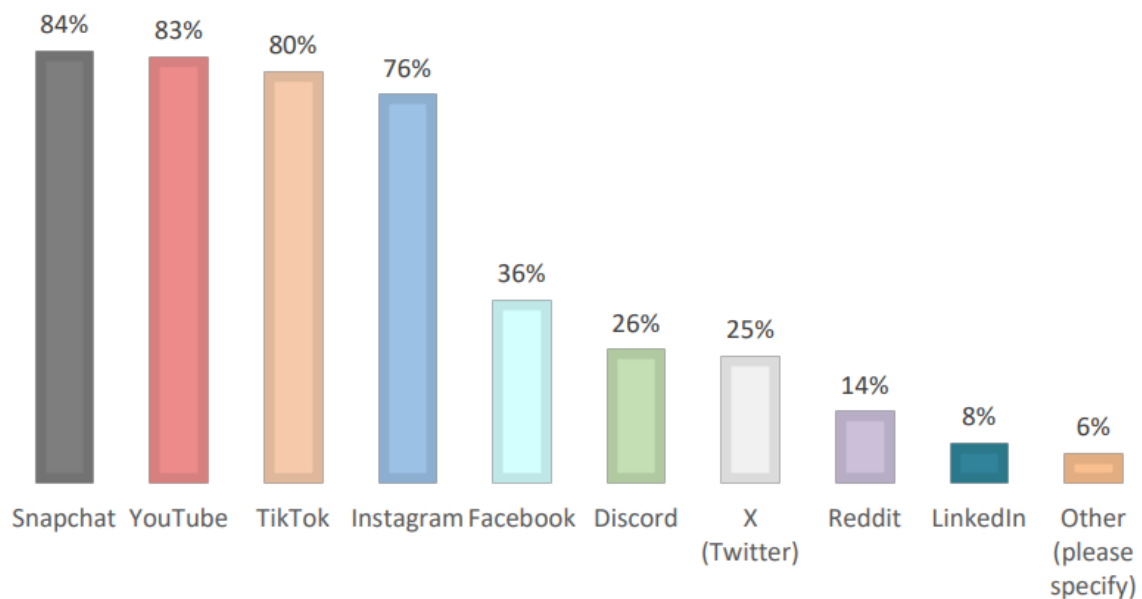
The survey looked at the amount of time young people spend using social media daily. The survey responses presented that around 30% of respondents said they spend 2–4 hours a day on social media, showing how much social media plays a part in a young person's everyday life. Additionally, 12% of respondents said that they spend more than 8 hours a day online, indicating that almost all of their free time outside of schooling hours is taken up by being on social media. Out of those heavy users, 83% said they use YouTube.

How often do you use social media a day?

- Less than 1 hour: 4%
- 1-2 hours: 13%
- 2-4 hours: 30%
- 4-6 hours: 27%
- 6-8 hours: 10%
- More than 8 hours: 12%

What do you use social media for?

- Sharing personal content 22%
- News 33%
- Education/learning 49%
- Socialise with people 83%
- Entertainment 93%
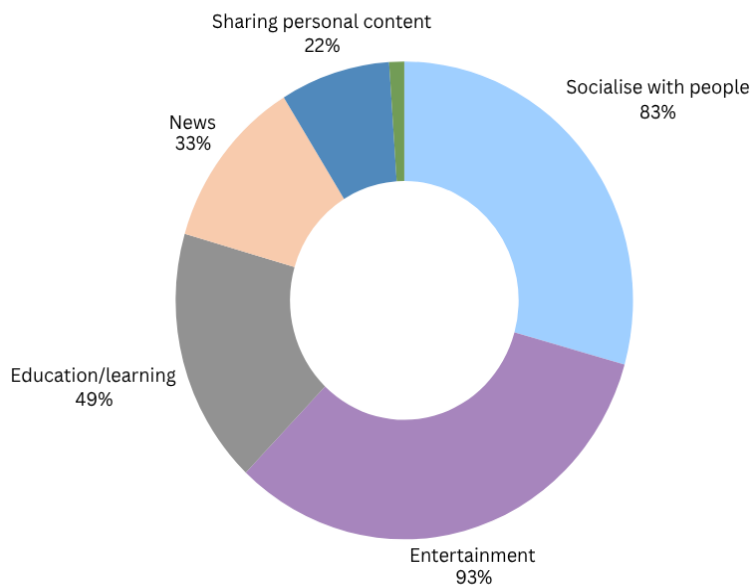
The survey asked young people about what they use social media for. Entertainment was identified as the most common reason, with 93% respondents categorising it as a key purpose. Socialising followed, with 83% saying they use social media to connect with others and highlighting how important social media is for young people to relax or maintain their relationships. In addition, 49% of respondents said they use social media for educational purposes, showing these platforms also support learning and academic growth.

From the research, social media is significantly engaged with by young people as 63% of respondents relaying it as either moderately or very important to their lives. This is compared to 5% of respondents viewing social media as unimportant.
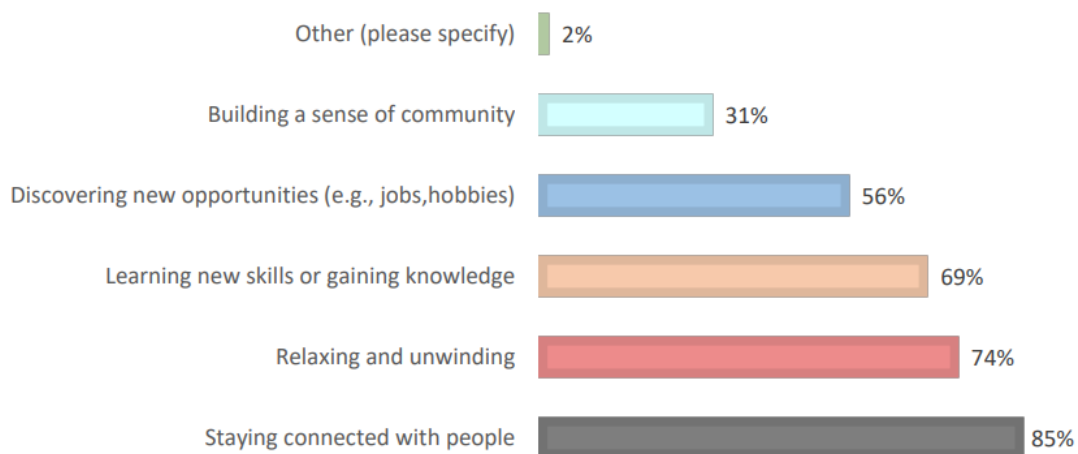
The data also highlights the perceptions of online platforms and the experiences of the spaces that young people interact with online. For instance, 85% of respondents identified social media as having a positive impact, as it helps them to connect with others.

How important is social media to your daily life?
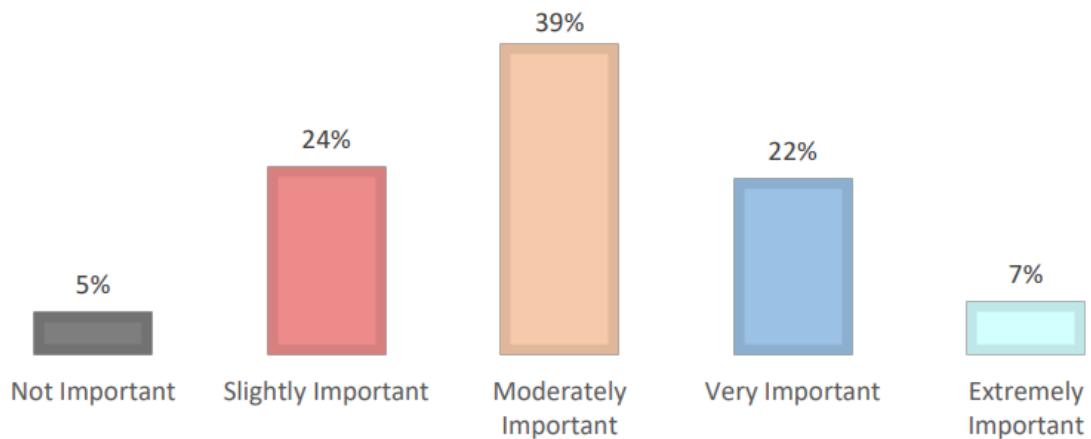
This function of social media was apparent within discussions with young people who also identified using social media to build on relationships and as a tool for relaxation. Overall, the responses showcase how social media can serve as a positive tool for young people's personal development, social engagement and downtime.

What positive impacts has social media had on your life?

Other (please specify) — 2%
Building a sense of community — 31%
Discovering new opportunities (e.g., jobs, hobbies) — 56%
Learning new skills or gaining knowledge — 69%
Relaxing and unwinding — 74%
Staying connected with people — 85%

## Social media harm: Types of harm and frequency of experience

Another objective of the research was to find out whether young people experience harm on social media and how these experiences affected them. **A quarter of survey participants had reported that they have experienced harm online**, which highlights an ongoing issue about what young people come into contact with when interacting with social media.

The survey asked young people about the types of harm experienced, with harm being broken down into categories of cyberbullying or harassment, exposure to inapropriate or harmful content, pressures to look or act a certain way, scams or fraud, and other. These results varied depending on what young people consider as harmful to them and how it relates to the content they consume online, either directly or indirectly.

Both male and female respondents reported cyberbullying and harassment as the most common harm experienced, as identified by 70% of respondents who had experienced harm online. This was corroborated by the workshop discussions as young people raised cyberbullying and harassment as a major problem on social media. They also expressed a growing concern with lack of reporting structures around the issue and a culture, both online and in person, where concerns are dismissed and undervalued and there is a lack of education, leading to a lack of support for victims facing this issue.

What types of harm have you experienced on social media? (Percentage of those who experienced harm)
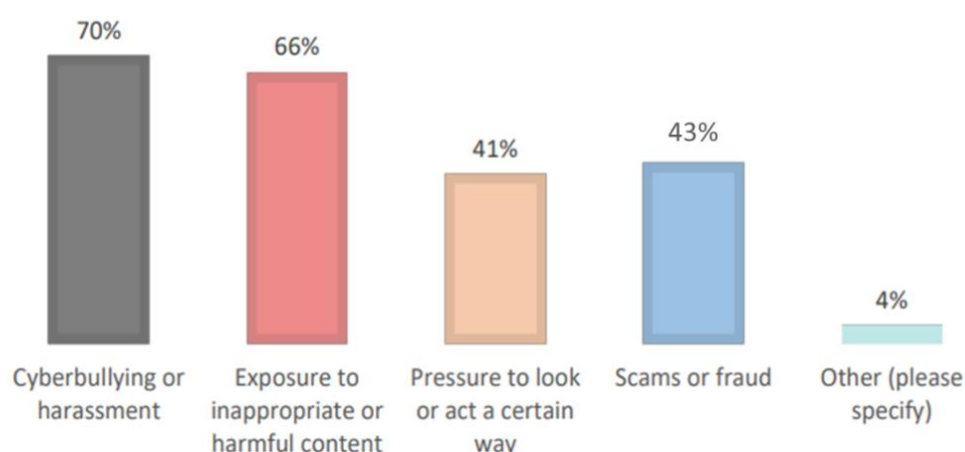
Other prominent concerns that arise from the research was how many young people had experienced exposure to inappropriate or harmful content (66% of respondents). This category was further discussed in workshops where issues of radicalisation, hate crime, and grooming were identified. Many young people indicated that there was a lack of safety and guidance around these issues, including information on what they mean, how to recognise them and where young people can find support. Scams or fraud were also reported by 43% of those who had experienced harm, highlighting the impact of cybercrime amongst young people.

The survey results showed an apparent correlation between increased time on social media and the likelihood of experiencing harm, as the data presents that 43% of respondents who have experienced harm are spending 2-6 hours a day on social media. Compared to the 12% of respondents who are using social media for 1-2 hours or less than an hour, reported significantly lower harm.

Data from the survey looked at the frequency of harm experienced by young people where 42% of young people had experienced harm more than five times on social media, highlighting an issue of recurrence of exposure for young people online.

How often have you experienced harmful content on social media?

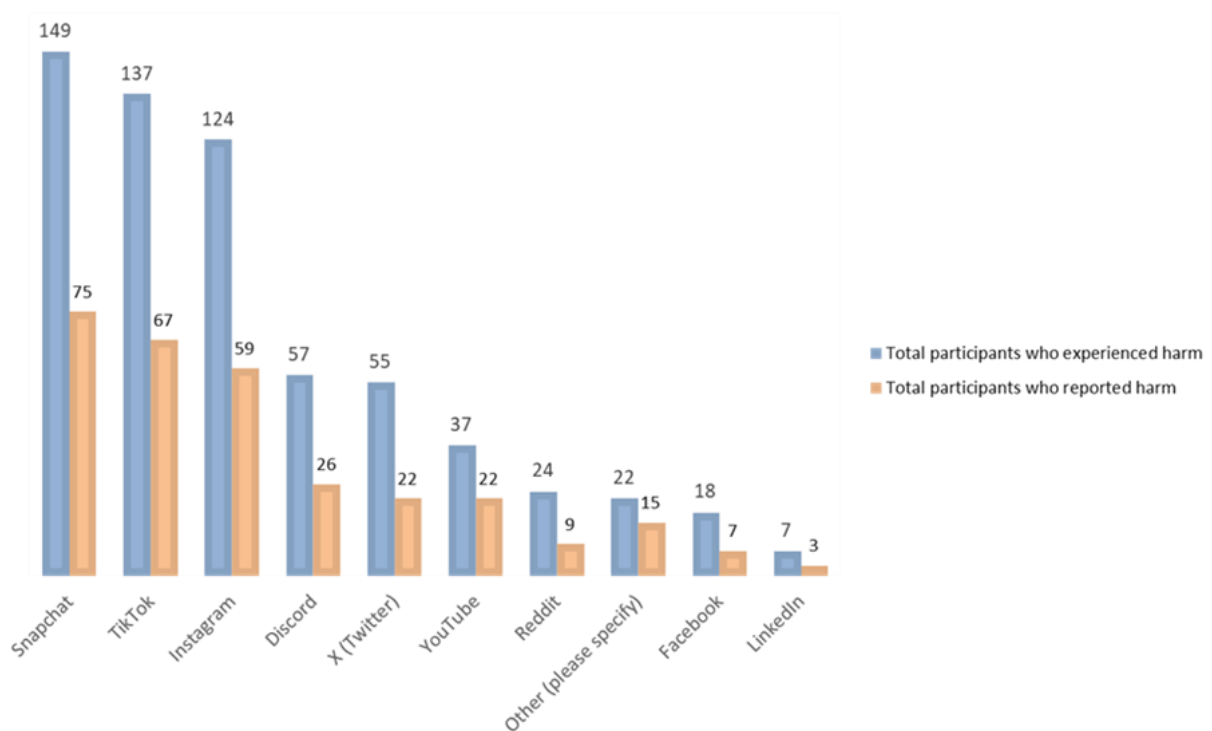- 3-4 times: 24%
- 1-2 times: 33%
- More than 5 times: 42%

Harm on social media platforms

The top three social media platforms that harm was experienced on by survey respondents were Snapchat (56%), TikTok (52%), and Instagram (47%). These findings suggested that platforms with a visual-content led user interface can lead to an over exposure of harm for young people. From workshops, these social media platforms were commonly used amongst young people to serve a purpose of staying connected with people, following trends and influencer content, and entertainment.

These social media platforms were also identified as the top three platforms where young people would report harm, suggesting that users are more open to report issues where harm is more prevalent.

Which social media platforms have you experienced harm on, did you report harm?

Platform	Total participants who experienced harm	Total participants who reported harm
Snapchat	149	75
TikTok	137	67
Instagram	124	59
Discord	57	26
X (Twitter)	55	22
YouTube	37	22
Reddit	24	9
Other (please specify)	22	15
Facebook	18	7
LinkedIn	7	3

Furthermore, the data reveals the lasting effects that harm can have on a young person's wellbeing and mental health. A majority of respondents who had experienced harm online had reported feeling anxious, depressed, angry, and isolated after coming into contact with harm on social media. The emotional impact from these occurrences can create an unsafe environment for young people, particularly with the inadequacy around content filtering and the platforms algorithm's amplifying negative content, even if only engaged with once.
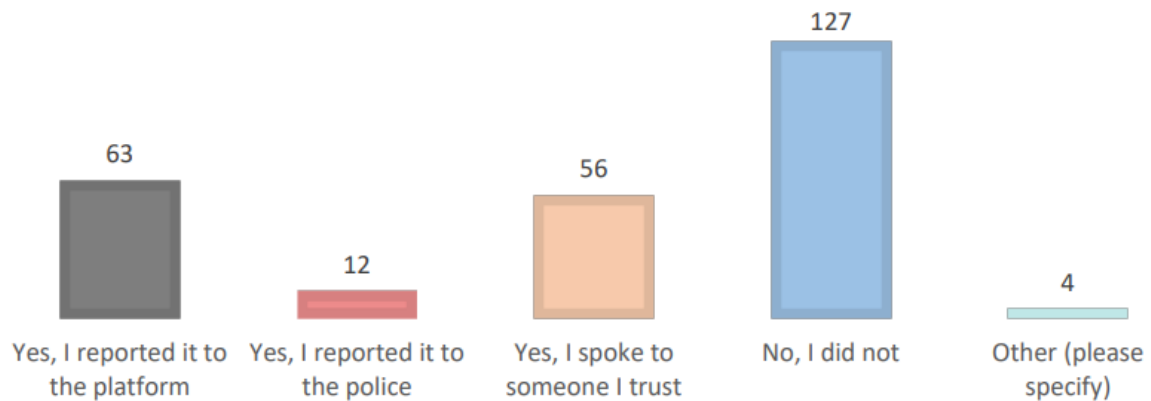
How did these experiences make you feel?

Category	Percentage
Other (please specify)	2%
Isolated/Lonely	20%
Fearful/Threatened	18%
Angry/Frustrated	36%
Sad/Depressed	34%
Anxious/Stressed	49%
Unaffected	38%
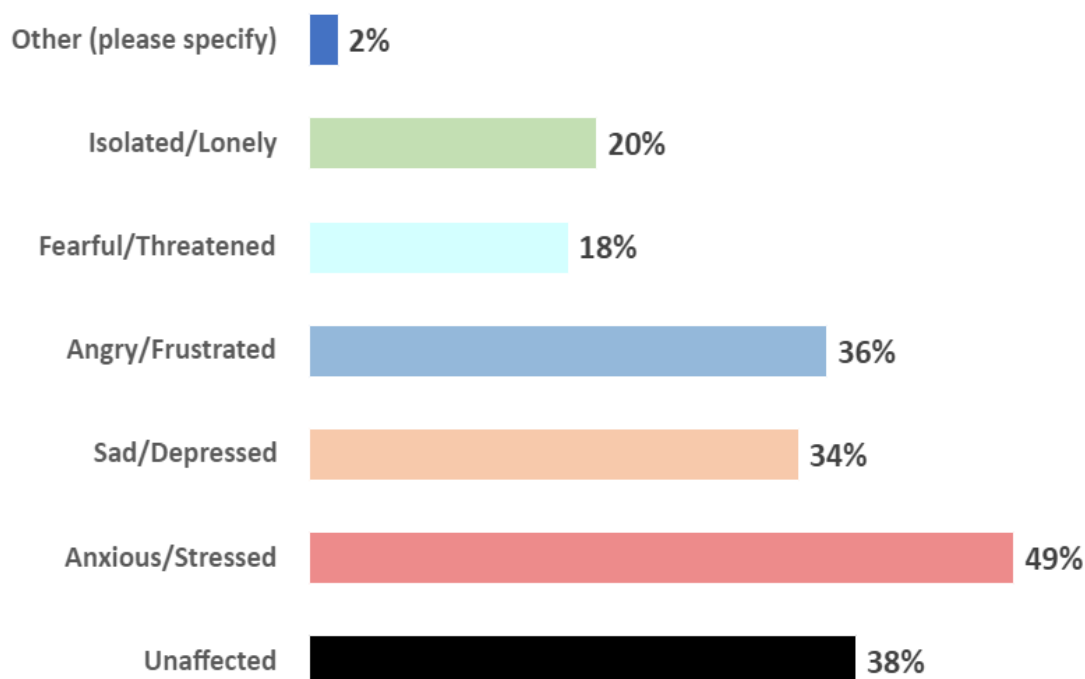
Reporting harm

When it comes to young people reporting the harm they had experienced, a majority of respondents had chosen not to report it at all. Those who did report, preferred to report to a person of trust or the social media platform. In comparison, the number of people who decided to report to the police were relatively low. These figures speak to the lack of comfortability and accessibility with reporting structures for young people.

When the option of reporting was discussed within workshops, young people expressed being more comfortable reporting through platforms, though recognise that action by platforms may be minimal unless content garners negative attention. In regards to policing, young people had the common perception that if they reported concerns to police, it would not be resolved quickly or taken seriously, or that they could not report to police unless the content was considered extreme. Some indicated that they lack understanding in how to report to police and what would be considered an appropriate avenue, suggesting a lack of awareness and education when it comes to reporting issues.

Did you seek help after experiencing harm?

Yes, I reported it to the platform	Yes, I reported it to the police	Yes, I spoke to someone I trust	No, I did not	Other (please specify)
63	12	56	127	4

The results also indicated that age played a large part in a young person's comfortability to report harm. Young people aged 17 years old were the most common to report within all three categories, suggesting that of all age groups, individuals at this age were more likely to act after experiencing harm. However, this is different for younger teens. Findings show that those aged 13-15 reported fewer incidents overall and when they did report they were more likely to speak to a person of trust rather than to the platform or to police. Overall, the common theme within the findings highlight a strong reliance on informal support networks, especially among younger teens, and points to the need for increased awareness and accessibility of formal reporting avenues.

Ages of respondents who seeked help

Age 13	Age 14	Age 15	Age 16	Age 17	Age18
11	13	14	24	53	15

What was the outcome?
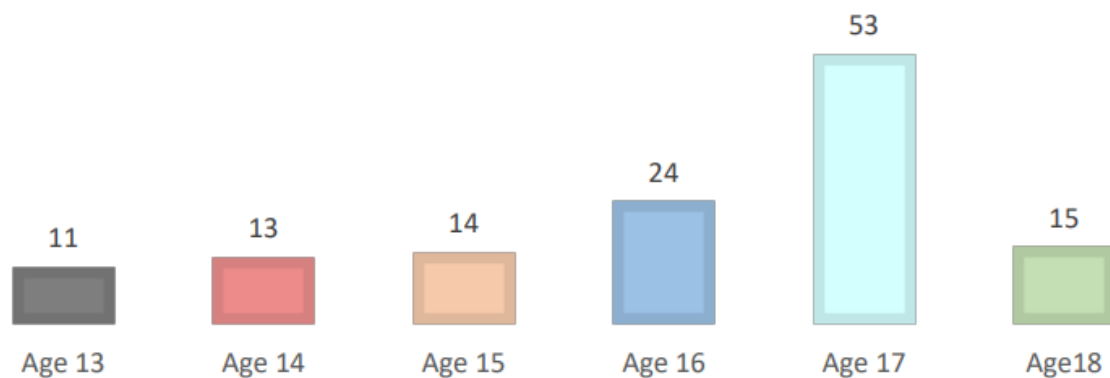
- there was a positive outcome
- There was no outcome
- There was a negative outcome
- I'm waiting for an outcome

The survey also asked young people who sought help from police, a trusted adult or the platform for the harm they experienced about the outcomes. The data reveals that only 50% of respondents who experienced harm answered this question, where a majority reported that there was a positive outcome. These results are comparative to a smaller portion of respondents who reported there was no outcome, suggesting how difficult it is for young people to have a conclusive resolution.

From both the survey and discussions with young people, there was a clear frustration around lack of appropriate safeguarding, lack of age restrictions and age verification across platforms. Furthermore, young people suggest there is minimal support for young victims, education for parents and guardians and a lack of awareness within schools to support when reporting online harm. Re-emphasising the need to prioritise young users and protect them when engaging with content online.

Key findings and themes

This section summarises the key findings and themes observed through the research project and are apparent through the survey and the workshops facilitated by Youth Commissioners. It overviews a breakdown of what the survey presented and the views of young people during discussions.

Sex and Gender Identity:

- Female respondents (58%) were more likely to experience harm on social media compared to males (38.5%) – data could be interpreted that female respondents have an increased exposure to online risks and greater openness to disclosing such experiences.
- Workshop discussions indicated that female respondents felt a greater pressure after consuming content relating to appearance and body image – subsequently causing potential effects on their mental and physical health.

Age:

- Young people aged 17 reported the highest incidence of harm, this age group may be more vulnerable due to increased online activity, peer pressure, and developing emotional resilience.

Ethnicity:

- Through the analysis, the data did not reveal any distinguishable patterns or disparities among groups.

Concerns about social media:

- Young people were unaware of measures in place to protect young users, and expressed concern that harmful content isn't addressed effectively and that better filtering on platforms was needed.
- Groups raised issues about misleading content, especially from older people/users on the same platforms. Social media's anonymity allows harmful views to spread and algorithms amplify negative content if engaged once.
- Not enough is done to prevent radicalisation and hate speech under the guise of free speech, and hate speech is often disguised as jokes, leading to 'too woke' stigma if challenged.
- Concern over harm becoming normalised online where: death threats and "doxing" (publishing someone's private information, such as their name, address, or other identifying information without their consent) are becoming common; radicalisation from influential figures creating a sense of shared grievance and cyberbullying can be subtle, escalating from 'banter' to ongoing harassment
- Other identified issues from workshops were that fraud, identity theft and scams are a rising issue. In addition, doom scrolling and addiction, where groups felt that time gets wasted online; and grooming becoming a major concern, especially for young children receiving unsolicited messages.

Support for harm experienced on social media:

- Young people felt comfortable to turn to parents, but many feel they would lack support. Teachers are not seen as reliable sources of help and schools should engage students in safety discussions.
- Inconsistent reporting: police involvement is only considered for serious cases – people often avoid reporting issues unless they are extreme.
- Young people should be encouraged to self-reflect on time spent online.
- Organisations should look at why young people are spending time online.

Workshop conversations revealed common themes around young people's deep concern about digital safety, mental health, and online harm. Young people often expressed wanting action around better education, platform accountability, and improved legal protections.

Conclusion and suggestions

The Youth Commissioner research project provides deeper insight into the online interactions of young people and how it can have an impact on them during their most developmental ages. The findings highlight that social media remains an important structure for young people and is deeply embedded in their lives for social connection, learning development and entertainment.

Platforms like Snapchat, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram dominate usage, and many young people are spending several hours online each day, reinforcing the perception that these platforms play a large part in shaping habits. The survey showed a quarter of participants had reported that they have experienced harm online and young people have been forthcoming in their views on social media and raised issues around the types of harm that they experience, just how influential these spaces are to change their behaviour and mentality, and the lack of support they feel when navigating the online sphere.

Some young people may feel wholly unprepared when interacting on social media and have expressed frustration to be further protected from the current issues and potential harm caused in the future.

Communication with young people:

As young people have expressed that they have a lack of information to better protect themselves from online harm, WMP could respond to this report by increasing information and communication with young people to help them stay safe and report crimes.

Throughout the research, young people expressed not understanding the routes they can use to report harm experienced online. To support this, WMP could ensure their digital offering used to report crimes are young people-friendly and easily accessible.

One idea from our Youth Commissioners is that this could be a 'traffic light system' which shows examples of escalating types of online harm, and the reporting action that could be taken for each.

WMP could also ensure young people are told with more consistency what action is being taken after they report online harm or criminality to increase confidence to report.

Offering more support with schools and youth groups:

Young people have also talked about the level of support within schools. WMP may choose to engage more closely with young people in the classroom to advise how they can stay safe online. This could take the format of workshops that include:

    a. Education around what is harmful behaviour and the different types of harm that young people may experience.
    b. Providing a better understanding of what young people can do if they experience online harm.
    c. Describing successful interventions and prosecutions that the police have made to keep young people safe online. This will help to increase the relationship between police and young people.
    d. Education and awareness sessions for teachers, supportive adults, parents, and guardians, to better protect young people.
    e. "Digital self-defence classes" to train young people to proactively safeguard themselves and learn how to use content restrictions, and a skills workshops to recognise untrustworthy sources and the context of social media content.

f. Sessions with young people to influence peer behaviour online, being "Upstanders not bystanders" – supporting other young people and calling out inappropriate and harmful rhetoric.

Multiagency approach

Young people expressed how experiences of online harm affected them and had an impact on their lives. To support, WMP could consider working with the Police and Crime Commissioner, Violence Reduction Partnership, National Health Service, and other regional agencies to support the work to tackle issues affecting young people from online safety. They could also consider working with community groups and community leaders to promote role models in communities and schools, utilising the existing wellbeing support systems to further support young people and tackle harmful online behaviour.

Author(s): Ayyatulahi Adigun, Sandwell Youth Commissioner; Srilakshmi Sen, Birmingham Youth Commissioner, and Maysa Khandoker, Solihull Youth Commissioner.

Supported by: Yazmin Francis, OPCC Engagement Coordinator.