



Until we are all equal

FROM MEMES TO MISOGYNY:

The gendered content harming
our children on social media.



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CITATIONS

We have aimed to include research from a wide variety of sources to demonstrate the range of challenges facing girls and young women. Inclusion of a source, author or organisation should not be assumed to reflect Plan International UK's agreement with the wider work or necessarily reflect Plan International UK's position on a topic. We are deeply grateful to all those who have published work, which is cited in this report, for contributing to our understanding of the challenges facing girls and young women.

CONTENT NOTE

There are several challenges faced by young people, which may be upsetting. Readers will come to this report with their own unique life experiences and may find some of the content distressing or triggering. The decision to include this content is not taken lightly but is important to show the range of challenges facing young people in the UK today.

Our research shows that these challenges may often be more acute and painful for people from diverse backgrounds — such as people of colour, LGBTQ+ people, neurodiverse people, people with a disability, people with a mental health condition, people living without both of their parents, and young carers. If you identify with these groups, then please take extra care as you explore these themes in the report.

OUR COMMITMENT TO ALL

When we talk about and act for 'girls', we are including anyone whose gender identity is wholly, or in part, 'girl'. This includes cis or cisgender girls (whose gender identity corresponds to their sex assigned at birth), trans or transgender girls (whose gender identity does not correspond to their sex assigned at birth)¹ and non-binary, gender fluid, and agender young people. This is the same for our work with boys where we include anyone who's gender identity is wholly, or in part, 'boy' and will include cis or cisgender and trans or transgender boys and young men. We also recognise that work relevant to girls may also be relevant for trans boys, and gender questioning young people. The term 'girl' encompasses a wide diversity of experiences. All participants in this research self-identified their gender. A small number of non-binary people participated in our survey – the sample size was too small to draw specific robust findings, but experiences have been included where possible.

Plan International UK is committed to values of intersectional feminism and campaigning for gender equality. No one person can represent someone else's life experience or speak on behalf of a whole group. We hope that by highlighting differences, we will give an insight into some of the additional challenges that people may face as a result of the way society discriminates against or prioritises social groups. These social groups, which impact on our identity, may include age, sex, gender identity, sex characteristics, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnic origin, colour, race, language, religious or political beliefs, marital status, disability, physical or mental health, family, socio-economic or cultural background, class, any history of conflict with the law, and more.

Experiences can vary significantly depending on where they live, and their social identities. We realise the experiences within these groups vary considerably and there are as many 'intersections' of identity as there are people. We understand that gender-based discrimination is compounded by other forms of discrimination, and

this is rooted in a society based on deep structural power inequalities. Please see more on this in our The State of Girls' Rights in the UK² 2024 report, pages 27 to 29, detailing our approach to intersectionality including uses of various terminology.

Please note, the findings in this report reference children and young people with a range of health conditions and impairments. Some will prefer phrases like 'people with disabilities' and others will prefer 'disabled people'. We wholly acknowledge that people are disabled by barriers in society and not by their impairment or difference.³ We have sought to use the term 'people with disabilities' in this report, recognising the language used in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).⁴

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FOREWORD

ROSE CALDWELL, CEO

Social media should be a positive place where young people can learn, connect with friends, and understand the world. Yet findings paint a concerning picture of the online environments children navigate.

Our research shows that within just twenty minutes, algorithms begin pushing girls and boys into dramatically different online worlds. Girls are served content reinforcing narrow expectations of their appearance, behaviour and relationships, while boys are exposed to rigid ideas of masculinity, centred on wealth, dominance and self-sufficiency. Seven in ten girls and two-thirds of boys encounter messages online telling them how they should look, behave, dress, or what interests and careers to pursue.

While girls are more likely to recognise and reject sexist content, boys face a different challenge. Harmful messages are frequently disguised as humour, self-improvement or motivational advice, creating online echo chambers where misogyny and rigid ideas of masculinity are normalised and reinforced. Young people are exposed to these messages without seeking them out. What begins as a feed about sport, beauty or entertainment can quickly turn into videos that reinforce inequality, shape identity and even lead young people towards harmful content.

Children's rights and safety must come first. We do not believe the solution is to exclude young people from online spaces through social media bans.

The consequences extend beyond the screen. More than a quarter of children say they have changed how they act, dress or express themselves because of content they have seen online, rising to almost one in three girls. These messages threaten not only the wellbeing and safety of girls, but also boys' wellbeing and the progress towards a more equal society that generations have worked hard to achieve.

And we know from Plan International's work around the world that these challenges are not unique to the UK.

Children's rights and safety must come first. We do not believe the solution is to exclude young people from online spaces through social media bans. Young people want safer spaces, not a smaller world. Nearly two-thirds of 11-17-year-olds want harmful content to be removed or blocked. We are calling on the UK Government to strengthen the Online Safety Act and ensure technology companies are required to design products that put children's safety first.

This report should serve as a wake-up call. If we allow algorithms to amplify harmful gendered messages unchecked, we risk undermining decades of progress towards gender equality. The voices of children and young people must be at the heart of the decisions that affect them. Now is the time for government, regulators and industry to build a safer online world where every child can thrive.



FOREWORD

EDWINA, MEMBER OF THE YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL

As a member of the Youth Advisory Panel, I know that major parts of our lives as young people are deeply rooted in the online world, specifically on social media. This can be a two-edged sword: providing a sense of community, a place to socialise and platforms to express ourselves, but also exposing us to content that can have negative repercussions on our mental health and wellbeing.

In recent years, the online landscape has shifted rapidly. More than ever, young people globally, me included, are exposed to harmful content such as 'looksmaxxing' and 'red/pink pill' content. For boys, this can reinforce restrictive masculine norms, from pressure around appearance to feeling like vulnerability is something they should hide, shaping their understanding of masculinity before they have had the chance to form their own.

If these issues are not addressed effectively, damaging ideas around gender, identity, and self-worth will continue to shape young people's lives.

For girls, misogynistic content can go beyond how we see ourselves and affect how we are treated. I have seen young women harassed in public or recorded without consent through smart glasses, these moments are then shared online as entertainment.

It shows how online misogyny can influence what starts to feel acceptable in real life. I strive to keep my social media algorithms optimistic, where I am inspired by creatives and content that

positively influences my worldview. However, this report suggests that this may not be achievable for all young people, with 70% of girls and 67% of boys regularly seeing messages telling them how they should behave, act or dress. Constant exposure to these expectations can limit our sense of individuality, and make the online world feel daunting and difficult to navigate especially when unwanted content can enter our feeds without us ever searching for it.

Young people are too often spoken about in terms of the future, when the reality is that we are living and experiencing life today. It is therefore fundamental that young people are involved in decision-making around our online spaces. Rather than relying on quick-fix strategies, we should address the problems within the apps we use daily.

This is the time for changes to be implemented to ensure that our online space is protected from harm. If these issues are not addressed effectively, damaging ideas around gender, identity, and self-worth will continue to shape young people's lives. This report shows the significant, positive change that can be made, ensuring our online world is truly for us, by us.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social media is now a central part of childhood. It is where children connect with friends, explore interests, learn about the world and express themselves. But our research shows these spaces are not neutral. Platforms are exposing children to a constant drip feed of gendered messages that can shape how they see themselves, others and what they believe is possible for their futures.

For girls and boys, these messages take different forms. Girls face narrow and often unattainable expectations about appearance, behaviour and relationships. Boys get served rigid ideas about masculinity, wealth, dominance and emotional self-sufficiency, often packaged as humour, motivation or self-improvement. These are two sides of the same system, with algorithms creating increasingly gendered online worlds.

Most concerningly, this can happen remarkably quickly. In our algorithmic testing, feeds became clearly gendered within the first 20 minutes of use. Within less than two hours, accounts could expose young people to increasingly specific and harmful gendered content. What starts as memes, sport, beauty, gaming or motivational content can become a pathway towards misogyny, rigid gender roles and anti-feminist narratives.

20 minutes

is how long it took for gendered content to appear in our test feeds.

This matters because social media does not simply reflect attitudes children already hold. It actively shapes them. When harmful ideas are presented repeatedly alongside familiar, entertaining and trusted content, they can become normalised before children can question them.

When harmful ideas are presented alongside familiar, entertaining and trusted content, they can become normalised before children can question them.

Whilst the UK Government has taken some welcome steps to tackle violence against women and girls (VAWG) as seen in the commitment to halve VAWG in a decade and to tackle harmful online content through the Online Safety Act (2023), we believe the evidence contained in this report demonstrates the need for greater and more urgent action.

This report is a **call to action**. The UK Government must take 'not illegal but harmful' content seriously, using all available levers to shift narratives, regulate platforms, and disrupt the pipeline from casual sexism to violent misogyny. Girls' rights, boys' wellbeing, and our collective safety depend on it.

FROM MEMES TO MISOGYNY IN MINUTES

Children spend significant amounts of time online. Among 7–18-year-olds who use TikTok, average daily use is 2.7 hours, while YouTube users spend two hours a day on average. Across ages 7–17, 90% use video-first platforms such as YouTube and TikTok.

Much of this activity is passive. Children told us about spending long periods scrolling through short-form videos, memes, collages and carousels, often when bored or late at night. They are not necessarily choosing what they see; algorithms decide what comes next.

Short-form content is designed to be consumed quickly, with little time to stop and reflect. Repetition makes messages familiar, while humour can make harmful ideas appear harmless. A misogynistic message delivered as a meme or joke may be harder to recognise as harmful, particularly for children who have not yet developed the tools to critically assess what they see.

For this research, we developed a survey, hosted workshops, and performed algorithmic persona testing. This testing involved setting up six TikTok new profiles, to understand the different experiences of the algorithm for girls and boys. Our algorithmic testing demonstrates how rapidly platforms personalise these experiences.

7 in 10

girls have seen messages online telling them how they should behave, act, dress or what careers and interests they should pursue.

Accounts created around different ages, genders and interests quickly saw different gendered content. A boy interested in football, gaming or humour could begin to encounter messages about masculinity alongside that content, while a girl interested in beauty or fashion could be served increasingly narrow expectations about how she should look and behave.

This creates a pipeline in which harmful content does not announce itself as harmful. It is introduced through familiar interests and trusted



Plan International UK / Marc Sethi

formats, gradually becoming more extreme. For boys, misogynistic content could begin with memes or self-improvement before developing into narratives portraying women or feminism as the source of their problems.

The speed of this process is critical. Children can move from benign content to misogynistic messaging within a single session. Harm does not require a child to seek out extremist material or deliberately enter a harmful community.

The algorithm can bring it to them.

GIRLS AND BOYS ARE PUSHED INTO DIFFERENT ONLINE WORLDS

The content children encounter is gendered in both subject matter and expectations. We asked children whether they had seen or heard content on social media telling them how they should act, dress, behave, what jobs they should do, and what hobbies and interests they should have. Seven in ten girls (70%) have seen at least one – highlighting the breadth and consistency of these pressures in their daily lives, while almost seven in ten boys (67%) have seen at least one of these gendered messages.

For girls, appearance is a major theme. More than half of girls (54%) reported seeing gendered messaging telling them how they should dress, rising to 62% among girls aged 11–17. Girls described highly specific expectations around body shape, facial features, makeup, clothing and femininity. The ideal promoted was often slender, conventionally attractive (to White, Western standards), and highly curated. These standards can be particularly harmful for girls from minoritised ethnic backgrounds.

54% of girls reported seeing gendered messaging telling them how they should dress.



Girls described beauty filters and content promoting predominantly White and European beauty ideals, including filters that dramatically lightened the skin of Black and South Asian girls. Algorithmic testing similarly found a lack of diversity in the ethnicity and body types of beauty creators being promoted.

Girls also encounter messages about how they should behave and what relationships should look like. Content promoting the “clean girl”, “soft life” or stay-at-home girlfriend aesthetic can present submission, domesticity and dependence as aspirational. Attractive lifestyles, luxury products and relationship advice can make restrictive gender roles appear desirable rather than limiting.

Harm does not require a child to seek out extremist material or deliberately enter a harmful community. The algorithm can bring it to them.

Boys encounter a different but equally restrictive set of expectations. Their feeds promoted muscular bodies, particular facial features, wealth, independence, self-discipline and dominance. Looksmaxxing content encouraged boys to identify perceived flaws in their appearance and work towards an idealised masculine body and face.

Crucially, boys often interpreted this content as motivational. They recognised that the standards were difficult to achieve and sometimes acknowledged that the content could make boys feel bad about themselves, but still described it as inspirational. This makes the harm harder to identify. When a message is presented as advice about becoming more successful, attractive or disciplined, a young person may not recognise that it is reinforcing a narrow and potentially damaging model of masculinity.

Concerningly, harmful gender stereotypes are not simply surviving online – they are being monetised, packaged and algorithmically pushed to children, with girls encouraged to equate femininity with beauty, luxury and dependence, while boys are fed messages that masculinity and self-worth depend on wealth and financial success. This gendered economy reinforces outdated expectations, positioning girls as passive recipients of male wealth and boys as pressured breadwinners, while algorithms amplify emotionally charged, aspirational content that turns harmful gender norms into profitable online influence.

BOYS ARE BEING DRAWN INTO AN ECHO CHAMBER OF MISOGYNY

The research is particularly concerning in relation to boys because they appear to have fewer visible counter-narratives to the gendered messages they encounter.

Our testing found that a vulnerable boy persona was quickly exposed to misogynistic content embedded within memes and anime edits. By the second day, content had begun framing gender relations through grievance and victimhood. By the third, this had developed into narratives suggesting that men are overlooked or unfairly treated by women and society.

23% of UK adults believe that gender equality has a negative affect on men.

This reflects the wider manosphere – a loose network of online communities, influencers and content that promote rigid and often harmful ideas about masculinity and gender relations. The danger is not simply that children encounter extreme misogyny, but that they can be drawn towards it through content that initially appears helpful, entertaining or aspirational.

For boys experiencing uncertainty about confidence, relationships, loneliness or their future, self-improvement content can offer answers. But those answers can gradually shift towards blame: women are responsible for men's difficulties; feminism has gone too far; men must dominate rather than cooperate; and emotional vulnerability is weakness. In turn, this has a direct and harmful impact on girls.

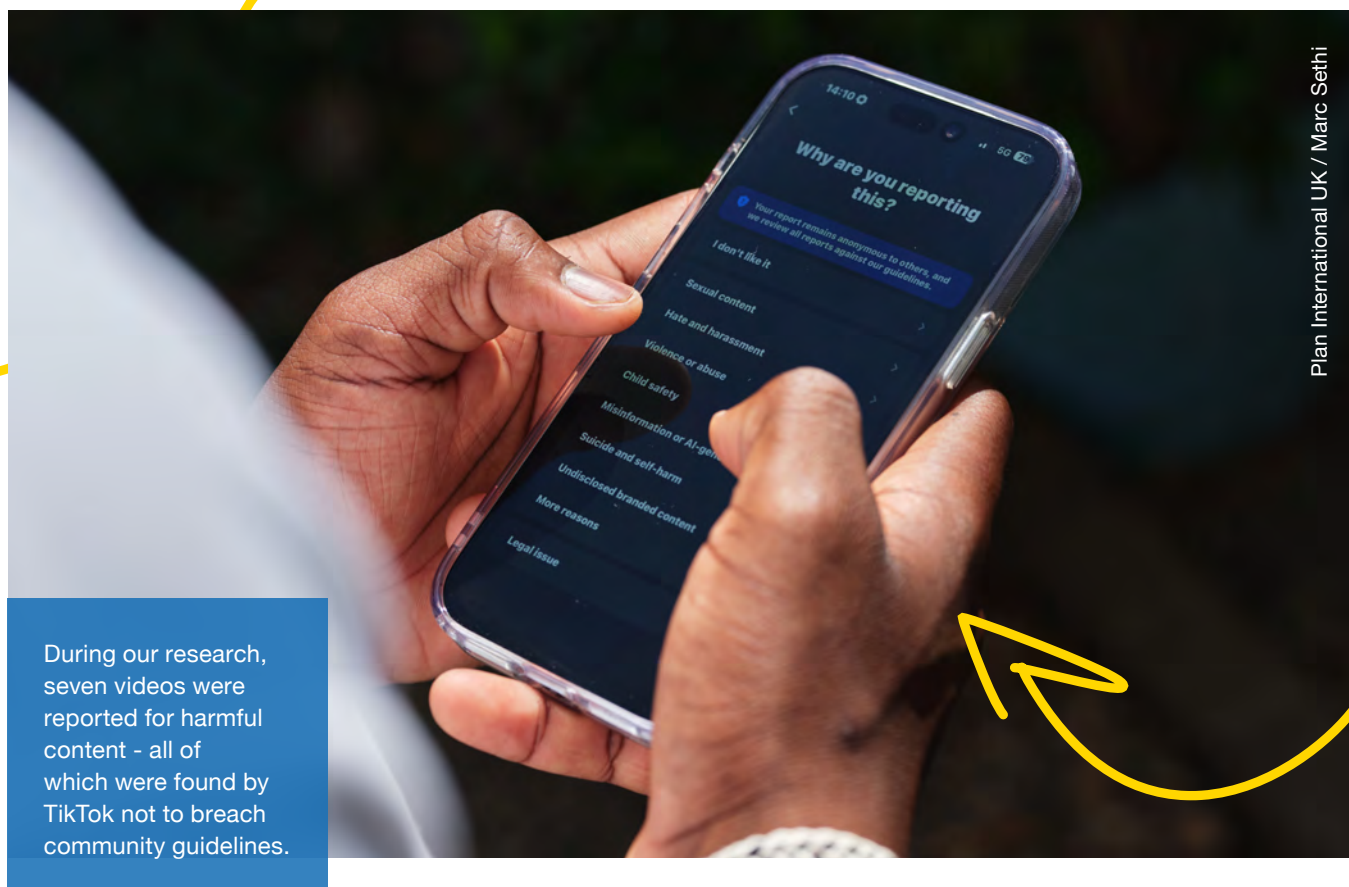
Girls in our workshops were often able to identify sexist content, challenge beauty standards and draw on feminist ideas or peer communities to resist harmful messages. This did not protect them completely but gave them a language to question what they were seeing.

Girls are encouraged to equate femininity with beauty, luxury and dependence, while boys are fed messages that masculinity and self-worth depend on wealth and financial success.

Boys did not demonstrate the same access to alternative narratives. Restrictive expectations around wealth, physical strength, independence and dominance were often treated as normal or aspirational. **This creates an 'empty space' where healthier models of masculinity should be.**

MISOGYNY IS MAINSTREAM – AND IT DOES NOT STAY ONLINE

The impact extends beyond individual social media experiences. More than one in four children aged 7–17 (27%) said they had seen content online that stopped them from acting, dressing or behaving in a way they wanted to. For girls, this rises to almost one in three (32%), compared with 23% of boys.



During our research, seven videos were reported for harmful content - all of which were found by TikTok not to breach community guidelines.

Children described online expectations reinforcing messages they were already encountering at home, at school and through wider culture. Girls spoke about being expected to “lay low” while boys take the lead. Boys described traditional gender roles – men as providers and women as carers – as simply “normal”.

Online and offline harms cannot be treated separately. Social media can amplify and aggravate existing stereotypes, while those stereotypes provide fertile ground for algorithms to exploit. The result is a feedback loop in which harmful gender norms are reinforced across children’s lives.

There are also signs that misogyny is moving from the margins into mainstream culture. Plan International UK polling found that 23% of UK adults believe the advancement of gender equality has had a negative impact on men, while 20% believe a return to traditional gender roles would benefit society. Among 18–24-year-olds, these figures rise to 32% and 29% respectively.⁵

Language originating in niche misogynistic communities is now familiar to young people. Among girls and young women, 87% recognise “simp”, 93% recognise “body count” and 66% recognise “looksmaxxing”.⁶ These are no longer obscure terms confined to fringe communities; they are part of the everyday digital environment.

The consequences are serious. Girls can be made to feel that their bodies, behaviour and choices are constantly judged. Boys can be drawn towards models of masculinity equating success with wealth, dominance and emotional isolation. Both are denied the freedom to develop identities beyond narrow gender expectations.

Because attitudes shaped online are carried into schools, friendships and relationships, these harms can reinforce wider inequalities and contribute to a culture in which misogyny and violence are normalised.

CHILDREN WANT A SAFER INTERNET – NOT SIMPLY A SMALLER ONE

Children themselves are clear about what needs to change. They want online spaces that are kinder, less judgemental and safer. Almost two-thirds (62%) of 11- to 17-year-olds want harmful content removed or blocked, rising to 70% among girls. At the same time, 68% of 11- to 17-year-olds oppose a blanket social media ban.

This distinction is critical. Children do not want to be excluded from digital spaces central to their friendships, interests and lives. They are asking for those spaces to work better. A blanket ban, as proposed by the current UK Government, will not remove misogyny from young people's lives. It will not change the algorithms recommending harmful content, the business models rewarding

62% of 11- to 17-year-olds want harmful content removed or blocked from their feeds.

engagement, or the gender norms children encounter offline. It could instead push some young people towards secretive use, making it harder to seek help or discuss what they encounter.

The answer must be a safer internet, not simply a smaller one.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Children have told us what they need. The responsibility now lies with the UK Government, platforms and wider society to act.

Put young people at the heart of digital policy

We're calling on the UK Government to establish a Youth Council for Online Futures – because decisions about young people's online lives should never be made without them.

Guidance doesn't cut it – Regulate for real change

Voluntary promises from platforms have failed. Children's safety cannot be left to chance—or to corporate goodwill. That's why we're calling on Parliament to take bold action and strengthen the Online Safety Act (2023).

Make algorithms safe and transparent for every child

Big Tech cannot keep marking its own homework. The UK Government should require social media platforms to identify, prevent and mitigate algorithmic systems that expose children to harmful gendered content.

Make tackling misogyny a national priority

For the first time, the UK Government has declared VAWG a national emergency, with a pledge to halve it within a decade. If we are serious about achieving that ambition, we must address one of its root causes: the normalisation of misogyny.

The choice is clear: a safer internet, not simply a smaller one.

INTRODUCTION

Online platforms have become an integral part of young people's daily lives. According to Ofcom research in 2025, more than half of 3–12-year-olds (55%) are using at least one social media app, up from 51% the previous year. When teenagers are included, the scale is even greater: eight in ten children aged 3–17 (79%) have their own profile on a video-sharing, messaging, or social media platform.

Social media is shaping a generation's understanding of gender, relationships and identity, but the messages children receive online are increasingly harmful, unequal and deeply gendered and leading to real life changes in behaviour and attitudes off the screen.

Young people's experiences of this digital reality are increasingly shaped by algorithm-driven content. For girls, research from the Molly Rose Foundation and the Center for Countering Digital Hate has shone a spotlight on exposure to self-harm, suicide, eating disorder and sexually explicit content: some of the most visible and extreme online harms. But these harms do not develop in isolation. They are often rooted in everyday misogyny, sexist stereotypes and restrictive gender norms that shape how girls are expected to look, behave and relate to others. Ofsted's 2021 review found that nine in ten girls had experienced sexist name-calling, often alongside unsolicited sexual images.

Yet these same online environments can also be harmful for boys. Increasingly, boys are exposed to algorithmically amplified content promoting narrow and restrictive ideas about masculinity, centred on wealth, dominance, physical appearance and emotional self-sufficiency. Online communities, including the so-called 'manosphere', exploit genuine anxieties about confidence, belonging, relationships and success, offering simplistic answers that can reinforce isolation, resentment and hostility towards women. Content that begins as self-improvement or motivation can escalate into anti-feminist narratives that frame gender equality as a threat rather than a benefit, harming boys' wellbeing while fuelling wider misogyny.



Content that begins as self-improvement or motivation can escalate into anti-feminist narratives that frame gender equality as a threat.

Our research shows that these interconnected harms are shaping children's online experiences in different but mutually reinforcing ways. Girls face regressive ideals of femininity and increasing exposure to misogynistic content, while boys are drawn towards restrictive models of masculinity that limit emotional expression and can normalise harmful attitudes towards women and girls.

1 in 3 girls

have seen content online that stopped them from acting, dressing or behaving in a way they wanted to.



This report adds to the growing evidence base on how online content shapes gender norms, focusing on two critical questions:

- How do girls and boys experience and interpret gendered content online?
- How do platforms, and their algorithmic design, amplify these narratives?

Our findings reveal an urgent truth: misogyny has gone mainstream. Harmful gender norms are not confined to dark corners of the internet. They are algorithmically amplified and monetised on the platforms young people use every day.

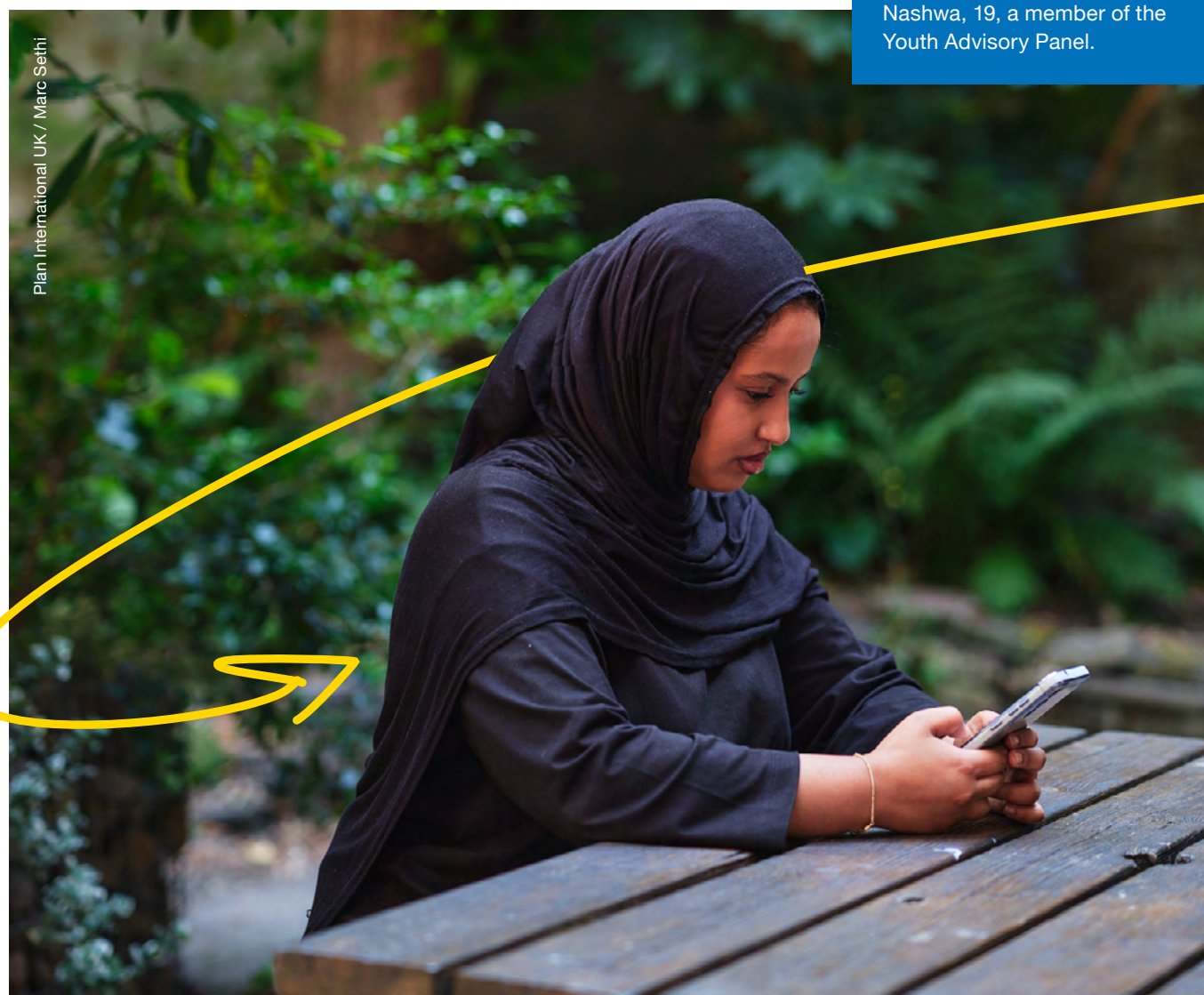
Left unchecked, they limit girls' freedom, undermine boys' wellbeing, and act as a gateway to more extreme ideologies that normalise inequality and violence both online and offline.

Whilst successive Governments have taken some steps to tackle harmful online content, we believe the evidence contained in this report demonstrates the need for greater and more urgent action.

This report is a call to action. Leaders across the political spectrum and different levels of Government must take 'not illegal but harmful' content seriously, using all available levers to shift narratives, regulate platforms, and disrupt the pipeline from casual sexism to violent misogyny. Girls' rights, boys' wellbeing, and our collective safety depend on it.

Nashwa, 19, a member of the Youth Advisory Panel.

Plan International UK / Marc Sethi



METHODOLOGY

To understand both the scale and the nuance of young people's online experiences, we used a mixed-methods approach. Large-scale quantitative data gave us a robust, nationally representative picture of trends across the UK, while qualitative research provided rich insights into how children interpret and experience gendered content.

We complemented this with light-touch desk research and algorithmic testing using synthetic personas, helping us examine how platform design influences what children see. This combination delivered both breadth and depth of evidence.

Full details of the research methods can be found in the Appendix.

Desk Research

Before engaging directly with children, we reviewed existing evidence on online behaviours, trending topics and emerging risks. This provided a foundation for our research design and informed the development of synthetic personas for algorithmic testing, as well as discussion themes for workshops. We also examined behavioural science frameworks linked to social media use to contextualise our findings. References to this wider evidence base appear throughout the report.

Survey of Young People

For the quantitative strand, we utilised the CHILDWISE termly Omnibus study which surveys children in schools across the UK. This gave us access to a nationally representative sample of 1,200 children aged 7–17. The survey explores lived experiences, providing data that can be analysed by gender, age and other demographics—offering a strong evidence base on patterns of exposure and attitudes.

We also conducted a separate survey with Opinion Research in three parts:

- Girls and young women: We surveyed 1,000 UK nationally representative girls and young women aged 16 to 24, with fieldwork taking place from 3 to 10 April 2026.
- Adults: We surveyed 2,000 UK adults aged over 18, with fieldwork taking place from 2 to 10 April 2026.
- Parents: We surveyed 1,000 UK parents, with fieldwork taking place from 2 to 10 April 2026.

Workshops

To complement the numbers with real voices, we carried out four face-to-face workshops in two schools—one in London and one in Cardiff—with 26 children aged 11–16, facilitated by CHILDWISE and Discovery Research. Each 60-minute session focused on how young people encounter and interpret gendered messages online.

The workshops included:

- Group discussions on how online content shapes expectations of gender roles.
- A card-based prompt exercise, designed to spark conversation about different content types—from looksmaxxing videos to anti-feminist narratives. Children only discussed content they recognised, keeping sessions child-led and relevant.
- A short self-completion task about how online spaces could be made safer.

Research facilitators used projective techniques, allowing children to respond in ways that felt safe, and ensuring they had control over what

they shared. While some topics were sensitive, most participants chose to share personal experiences as well as hypothetical views.

We also hosted regular conversations with representatives of Plan International UK's Youth Advisory Panel. We hosted a workshop in

June 2026 to discuss potential youth-centred recommendations built on this research.

The table below provides details around some of the language associated with online subcultures that came up in the workshops and which are referenced throughout this report.

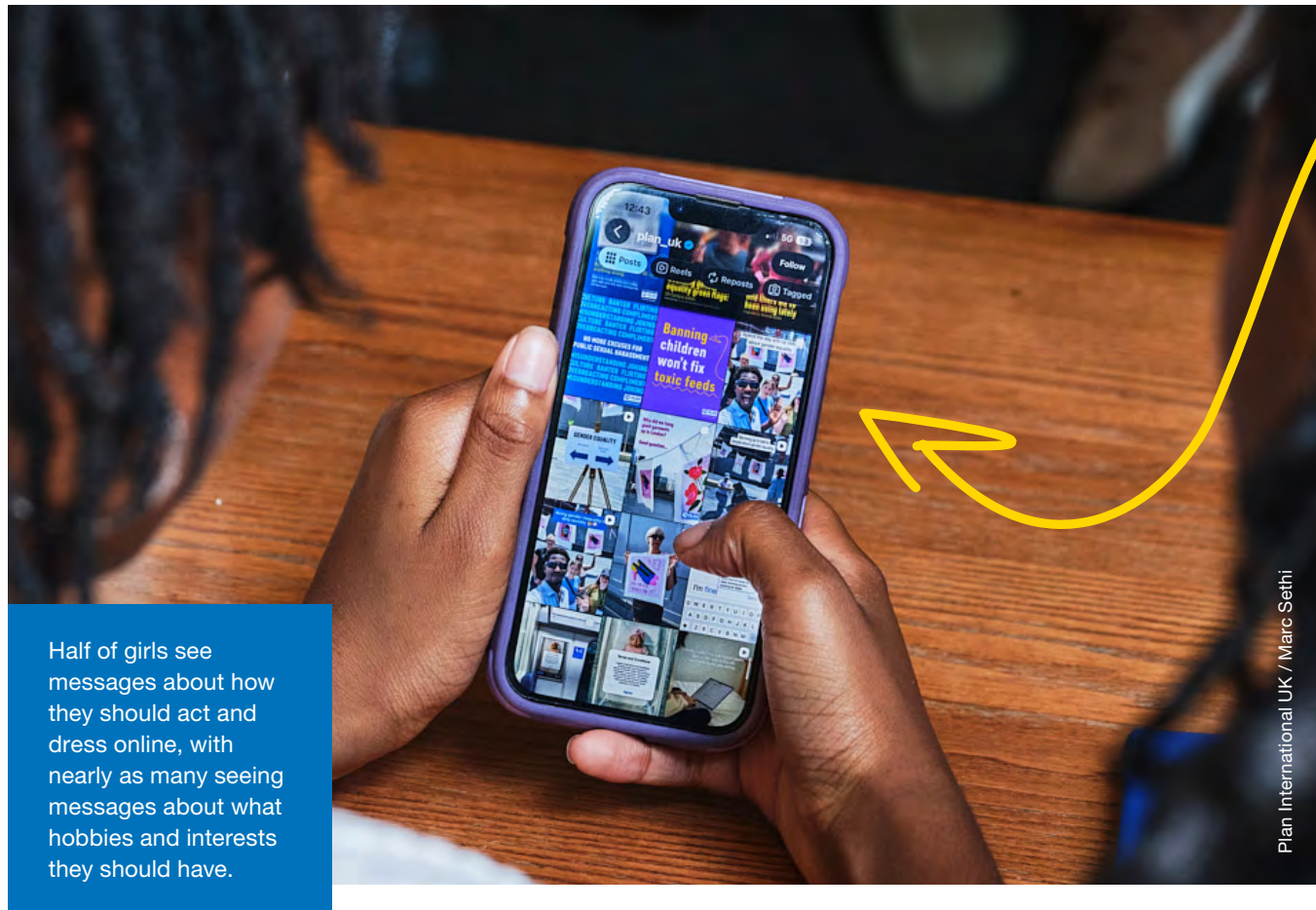
Figure 1: Glossary of terms

Manosphere terms / slang	Meaning
Looksmaxxing	Refers to self-improvement practices aimed at enhancing physical appearance and boosting success in romantic and social situations. While some methods are relatively harmless (e.g. exercise, grooming and fashion), many communities promote surgical alterations such as leg lengthening, fillers and eyelid surgery, as well as dangerous, unregulated practices like “bone smashing” to reshape the face. Though long-established, looksmaxxing has recently gained popularity on TikTok, often appearing in memes.
Alpha male / beta male	An alpha male who is dominant and has choice over sexual partners ⁷ , whereas a beta male is one who is seen as weak and sexually unattractive. The original idea was developed by a biologist studying wolf packs, Dave Mech, ⁸ who has since argued that his original hypothesis was too simplistic.
Hunter eyes	Deep-set narrower eye shape, associated with masculinity and dominance. Looksmaxxing communities ⁹ propose that this eye shape is desirable because it is typical for predators in the wild, however there is no scientific basis for this
Canthal tilt	The angle of your eye measured from the inner corner to the outer corner. It is thought in looksmaxxing communities to have significant impact on how your face is perceived. ¹⁰
Incel	An abbreviation of ‘involuntary celibate’. Incels are men who believe their lack of success with securing sex with women can be attributed to unattractiveness. ¹¹
Chad / Stacey	A term for a highly sexually attractive, confident, muscular male who gets attention and sex from women. ¹² A ‘gigachad’ refers to the most dominant, most ‘alpha’ of the Chads. A Stacey is typically depicted as a highly attractive, conventionally feminine woman who is often idealised. Being sexually involved with a Stacey is viewed by the manosphere community as a status symbol - Chads are able to have their pick of Staceys.
Foid	An abbreviation of ‘femoid’ – a mix of the words ‘female’ and ‘humanoid’ – used by the incel community to describe women. It implies that women are a sub-human group. ¹³
Manosphere	An online network which spreads misogyny and anti-feminist views through websites, forums, social media, and other online spaces. It includes Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), and Pick-Up Artists (PUAs), as well as influencers such as Andrew Tate and incels. Incels are considered to be the most extreme faction.

Algorithmic Testing

Finally, we explored how platform design influences children's feeds. Algorithmic testing, in this context, is a process of exploring how an algorithm shows different content depending on what information it has about the user, and how quickly it does this. We simulated an average user's TikTok feed to see a snapshot of what some people see. Our research team spent 10-20 minutes on each profile a day, for around five or six days, to explore how platform design and recommended content shapes online experiences. By creating a set of six personas that varied by age, gender and interests, we were able to simulate user journeys and identify differences in the content shown by the algorithms. Findings from these personas were uncovered in a maximum of two hours. This method followed the precedent of previous studies in this area¹⁴ and provided critical evidence on how fast young users can be pulled into harmful echo chambers.

The six personas were developed using extensive experience in the field and based in the desk research. We established an initial four personas – an older (16-year-old) girl and a younger (13-year-old) girl, and an older and young boy. The final two personas were developed later and looked at one boy 16-year-old and one girl 15-year-old persona. We used the search function to prompt the TikTok algorithm to expect these users may be more vulnerable to heavily gendered and misogynistic content. A complete breakdown of the TikTok testing can be found in the Appendix however, for ease and clarity, the table below lays out the fake personas that were tested.



Half of girls see messages about how they should act and dress online, with nearly as many seeing messages about what hobbies and interests they should have.

Plan International UK / Marc Sethi

Figure 2: Personas for TikTok Algorithm Testing

No.	Username	Gender	Age	Interests	Preferred Content	Potential vulnerabilities
1	@sparkle_matrix	Female	13	Music Dance Drama	Dance challenges, lip-sync videos, viral songs, friendship/school humour.	
2	@glitter_v1ral	Female	16	Beauty and fashion Travel Sports Oddly satisfying	GRWM ["Get Ready with Me"] routines, fashion hauls, gym routines, skincare tips, 'day in my life' content.	
3	@meme_l3g3nd42	Male	13	Football Funny Gaming Sports	FIFA / Fortnite Clips, football highlights, skill tutorials, funny sports edits, streamer reactions.	
4	@hust13_tr4in	Male	16	Sports Cars Science and Tech Extreme sports Beauty and fashion	Gym/fitness, sports, motivational speeches, cars, finance, transformation edits.	
5	@s1gma_vo1d	Male	16	Anime Gaming Science and tech Learning	AI, coding, tech videos, gaming, looksmaxxing, dating advice content.	Potentially vulnerable to 'incel' content Search bar prompts include: "how to get confidence" "how to talk to girls" "male loneliness" "female nature explained" "how important are looks for men" "why dating is harder for men"
6	@glowgirl_xx	Female	15	Beauty and fashion Sports Music Entertainment	Luxury lifestyle content, soft life, hyper-femininity, relationship content.	Potentially vulnerable to 'tradwife' content Search bar prompts include: "soft life" "Stay at home girlfriend" "hyper-femininity" "how to glow up" "what do boys want in a girl"

“Content I’ve seen on social media has changed how I present myself. For example, if I’m popping to the shops, I’m now hyperaware that I might see someone I know and that it’s a bad thing if I don’t look put together. Or, if I’m going into professional space, I feel an expectation that my hair must look the best it’s ever been and I have to dress in a particular way. That has affected my behaviour - how I speak in rooms and how I act around people, especially with decision makers. But I shouldn’t be quieter just because I’m a woman, when men around me can be louder and more aggressive without facing the same scrutiny.”

Ealaf, 18, London



TIME ONLINE

WHAT ARE CHILDREN DOING ONLINE?

Social media is deeply embedded in children and young people’s daily lives, with platforms such as TikTok, Snapchat and YouTube forming a central part of how they spend their time. The children we spoke to told us they spent several hours a day online, creating significant opportunities for these platforms to influence how they think, feel and engage with the world.

“In general, I’m on it 6 hours a day.”
(Year 8 girl)

CHILDSWISE data shows that children who use TikTok and YouTube specifically, spend significant amounts of time on these platforms each day.

For some children, this time is actively managed by parents. However, many have unrestricted access to their devices. The CHILDSWISE Monitor Report 2024 revealed that 61% of children (7-18) with a mobile phone have access to it at all times (rising to 65% among girls – while just 25% say their parents monitor what they do on their phone.¹⁵ The children told us that it often felt difficult to keep track of their time online, or step away from social media – especially when they used it late at night.

Children’s online lives are shaped by a small number of dominant platforms, with video-led content at the centre of their experiences. Across

ages 7–17, more than nine in ten children (90%) use video-first platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. Gaming platforms, including Roblox and Fortnite, are also widely used (79%), alongside streaming services like Netflix and Disney+ (75%). YouTube stands out as the single most-used platform overall, with 85% of children reporting use.

“I’m watching TikTok and then I’m like okay last video and then I scroll on it and it’s something interesting and I’m like, ‘Oh my God, I need to know what happened.’ So, I go on to start like looking for what happened and going through more videos, and then by the time I know it, it’s 2am!”
(Year 8 girl)

While streaming services form part of children’s digital environment, they were not explored in depth in this research. This highlights an important gap for future study, particularly given their widespread use.

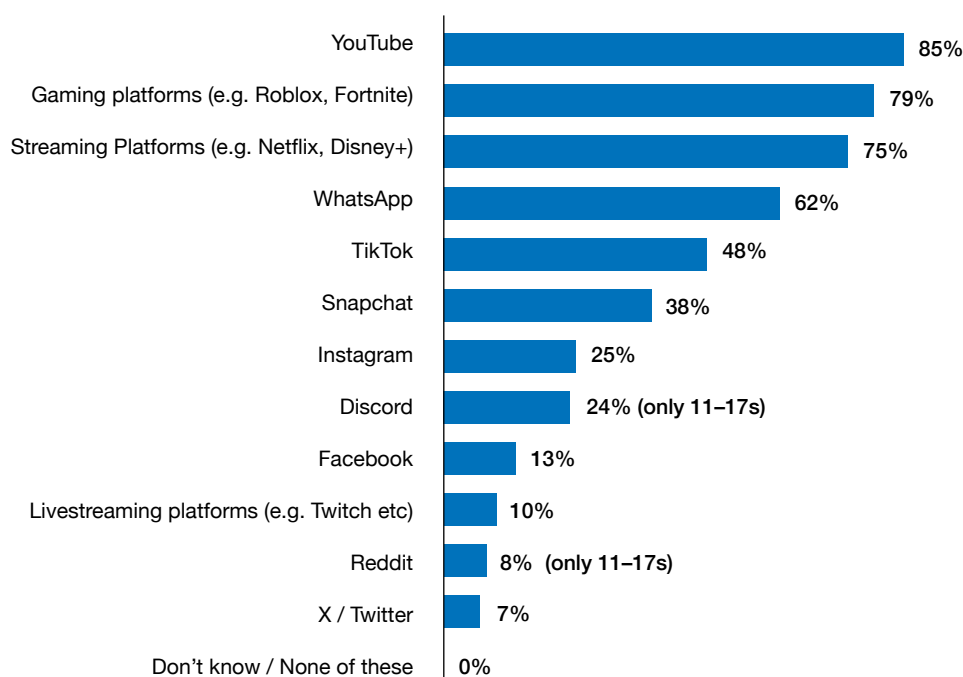
Use of social media platforms increases significantly with age. Among 11–17-year-olds, 94% use platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram and WhatsApp, compared with 49% of 7–10-year-olds. This shift is particularly evident in WhatsApp (84% vs. 40%), Snapchat (58% vs. 18%) and Instagram (45% vs. 6%). TikTok usage also rises sharply, from 28% among younger children.

Figure 3: Social media usage¹⁶

Average hours on YouTube per day among users aged 7-18	2	2.2	1.9	1.8	2.2	1.7
Average hours on TikTok per day among users aged 7-18	2.7	2.5	2.8	2.5	2.6	2.8

BASE: All aged 7-18 who use YouTube (unweighted - 1193 of 1405 total 7–18-year-olds) / All aged 7-18 who use TikTok (unweighted - 722 of 1405 total 7–18-year-olds). Source: CHILDSWISE Monitor Report 2026

Figure 4: Platforms Used by children aged 7-17



Which of the following platforms do you use?
Base size: All answered n=1439

Children's experiences online are not uniform. Clear differences emerge across gender, disability, ethnicity and socioeconomic background.

Boys are more likely than girls to use gaming platforms (83% vs. 75%) and livestreaming services such as Twitch. They are also more likely to use platforms like Discord and X (formerly Twitter). In contrast, girls are more likely to use streaming services and report higher engagement with TikTok (52% vs 44%) and Instagram (30% vs 21%). Workshop discussions suggested that while both boys and girls use social media widely, girls are more likely to spend longer periods on platforms such as TikTok.

Intersectional analysis highlights further differences. Children with disabilities aged 11–17 are significantly more likely to use platforms such as Discord and Reddit than their non-disabled peers. These platforms are often organised around shared interests, rather than existing offline relationships, and can provide spaces for connection and community. This suggests that some children may be seeking belonging or support online that they are not finding elsewhere.

Children from minoritised ethnic backgrounds are less likely to engage with gaming and streaming platforms than White children. Experiences of racism within online gaming spaces have been widely documented and may contribute to children feeling less safe or welcome in these environments.

Children living in areas of higher deprivation are also less likely to use a range of platforms, including streaming services, TikTok, Snapchat and WhatsApp. These differences point to ongoing inequalities in digital access and participation, which shape children's opportunities and experiences online.

Across all groups, children described three main types of online activity: connecting with friends, searching for information, and passive scrolling.

Connecting with friends was often described as the most enjoyable part of being online. This typically involved communicating with existing friendship groups through messaging apps, sharing content, or playing games together. Platforms such as Snapchat and online games

Children from minoritised ethnic backgrounds are less likely to engage with gaming and streaming platforms than white children.

were central to these interactions. Consistent with wider research, children emphasised how important these connections are, and how much they would miss them if they lost access.

However, social interaction online is not always positive. Children shared experiences of harassment and bullying, particularly in spaces where they interacted with people outside their immediate friendship groups. This highlights the risks that can arise in

environments where moderation is limited or harmful behaviour goes unchecked.

Children also use online platforms to search for information and explore their interests. YouTube was the most mentioned platform for this, with children describing how they use it for everything from schoolwork to learning new skills or exploring hobbies. This demonstrates the potential for digital spaces to support learning and curiosity.

Finally, many children described spending time passively scrolling through content, often referred to as “doomscrolling”. This tended to happen when they were bored or late at night. Children linked this type of use to encountering more negative or unsettling content, often unexpectedly. Algorithm-driven feeds can introduce this content gradually, alongside more positive or familiar material, making it harder for children to predict or control what they see.



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Daniel, 16, Nashwa, 19, and Ilyas, 19 members of the Youth Advisory Panel.

HOW DOES BEING ONLINE MAKE CHILDREN FEEL?

In the survey, children generally report positive emotional experiences online, with nearly two-thirds saying they usually feel happy (63%) and relaxed (60%) when they're online. Notably, feelings of being relaxed increase with age, rising from 54% among 7–10-year-olds, to 66% among 11–17s.

However, more than one in ten children said they don't know how they usually feel online (12%), which may reflect the variation in different emotions experienced, and the passive nature of some online activities, where emotions are less clear or less consciously noticed. A sizeable minority of children say they usually feel bored online (16%), while smaller proportions report more negative emotions such as anger (5%), confusion (4%), anxiety (3%), or worry (2%). It is important to note that the survey asked how children usually feel, and therefore only captured the dominant or most frequent emotions. When children are highly immersed in these environments, it's likely they will encounter a wide range of content and experience a range of different emotions.

6 in 10 children

say they usually feel happy (63%) and relaxed (60%) when they're online.

Feeling good online doesn't mean children are free from exposure to harmful content. The proportion of children who say they 'don't know' how they feel online may further reflect this complexity, reinforcing that some content can generate mixed feelings and can be difficult for them to interpret. Some material can be subtle and easy to miss, especially when it's wrapped in humour, memes, or presented as "just a joke". Content like this can normalise certain attitudes

or stereotypes and can shape how children think about gender or relationships without them even realising it. This was demonstrated in the workshops with boys, where they were not always able to identify misogynistic messages as negative or harmful – or indeed, even subjective.

In the survey, boys were more likely than girls to say that they usually experience feelings of anger (7% vs. 3%), but they also reported higher levels of excitement too (39% vs. 28% of girls). This may reflect the types of platforms they use, with earlier findings showing that boys are more likely than girls to engage with gaming platforms (83% vs. 75%). Recent CHILDWISE data shows that the top three gaming platforms among boys aged 7–18 are Roblox, Minecraft, and Fortnite.¹⁷ These games often involve competitive or fast paced social play, which might lead to more emotionally charged experiences.

7% of boys said they usually experience feelings of anger online, compared with 3% of girls.

Children living in areas of higher deprivation are less likely to say they usually feel happy (58% vs. 66% of children in lower deprivation areas) or relaxed (54% vs. 63%) online. As noted earlier, these children are also less likely to use a wide range of online platforms, including streaming services, WhatsApp, TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram. Together these findings suggest inequalities not just in access, but also in the quality of their online experiences. Recent research from the Digital Poverty Alliance (DPA) revealed that over half (57%) of low-income families say their child struggles to access devices or reliable internet outside school, with around one in seven (15%) sharing a single device between siblings or parents.¹⁸

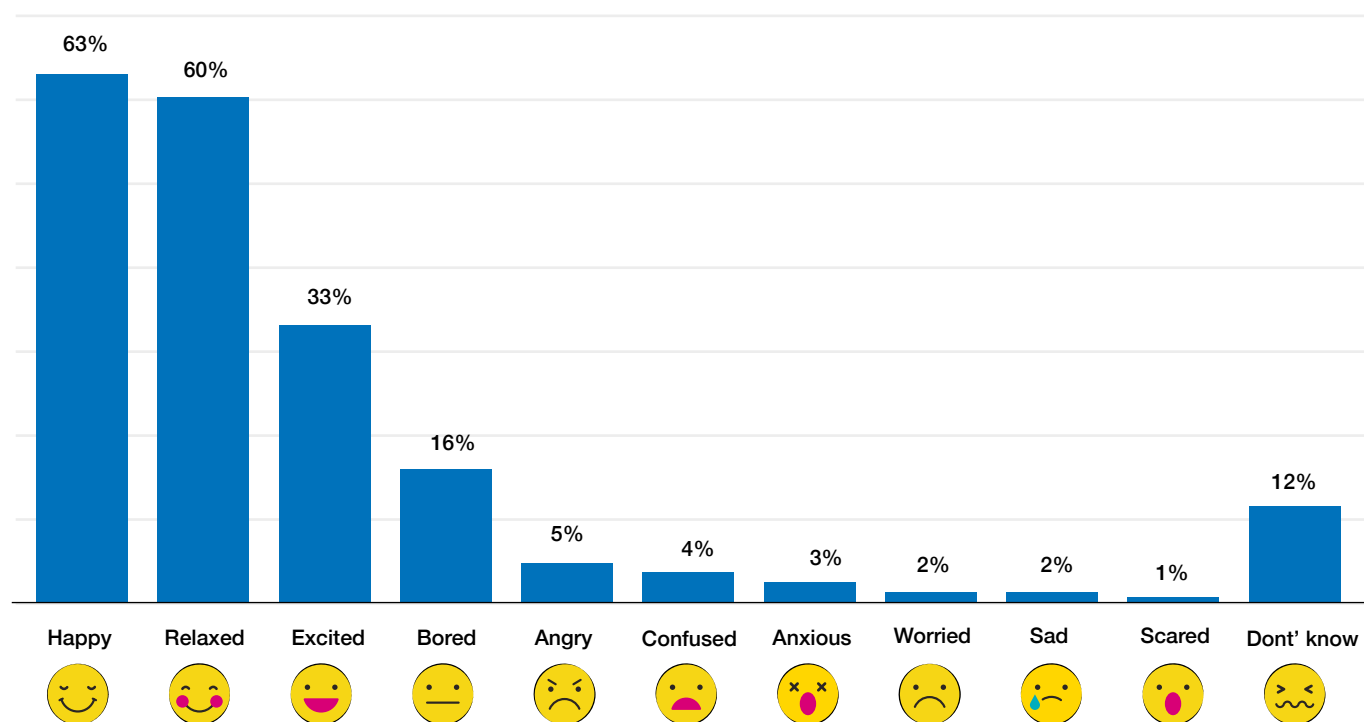
The girls we spoke to told us that they frequently reported harmful content, but often it was not removed, leaving them feeling angry and upset.

The experiences of the children we spoke to in the workshops demonstrated a nuanced picture, a mixture of positive and negative experiences. Participants – especially girls – expressed that encountering some negative incidents was to be expected – this was seen as a routine part of social media, so something that they were resigned to rather than something they questioned. The boys

we spoke to did not express the same level of resignation to having some negative experiences, though this wasn't to say that they didn't have any negative experiences. This gender difference is well documented in wider research, with Ofcom highlighting that girls are more likely to report negative emotional impacts linked to social media.¹⁹

Additionally, girls from minoritised ethnic groups reported encountering frequent racist content online – sometimes independent²⁰ sometimes integrated with - gendered content. This aligns with external research which suggests that girls from minority ethnic backgrounds may be at higher risk of online harassment, including sexual harassment and bullying. The girls we spoke to told us that they frequently reported this kind of content but often it was not removed, leaving them feeling angry and upset.

Figure 5: How children usually feel when they spend time online



How do you usually feel when you spend time online?
Base size: All answered n=1439



SELF-HARM CONTENT: A warning beyond the scope of this research

Although outside the primary scope of this research, a theme that elicited a strong negative reaction was self-harm which highlights the wider risks posed by algorithmically curated feeds.

Our TikTok personas showed how quickly seemingly benign interests could give way to harmful content. An account for a 13-year-old girl built around music, dance and drama was initially served content related to those interests. By day four, videos about **mental health and feeling sad** began to appear, followed rapidly by **suicide, self-harm and substance abuse** content. By the end of testing, almost all content appearing on the feed related to self-harm and suicide, despite researchers not engaging with this content when it appeared. Some posts used subtle symbols and coded language – including emojis associated with self-harm and eating disorders – demonstrating how harmful content can be difficult for children, parents and others to identify.

Our workshop participants described being distressed by self-harm content appearing unexpectedly on their feeds too:

“I was scrolling on TikTok once and I saw someone’s fresh cut.”

(Year 8 girl)

Like the gendered content documented elsewhere in this report, this was not content participants had searched for. They described feeling confused and upset that it had appeared in their feeds. Boys we spoke to did not report seeing similar content, although self-harm and suicide content did emerge for the vulnerable 16-year-old boy persona @s1gma_vo1d in our algorithmic testing.

From these findings alone we cannot establish why this content was recommended, or that it was specifically targeted at girls because of their age or gender. However, they are consistent

with wider research showing that girls are disproportionately exposed to harmful mental health content online. Research by the Molly Rose Foundation found that girls were twice as likely as boys to see high-risk suicide, self-harm, depression or eating disorder content in a single week.²¹ Its subsequent research has also found that children continue to encounter this content despite the implementation of the Online Safety Act (2023).²²

Concerningly, the content, which breaches Ofcom guidelines of harm, was reported seven times during the testing of the @Sparkle_matrix persona, all of which were found by TikTok not to breach community guidelines.

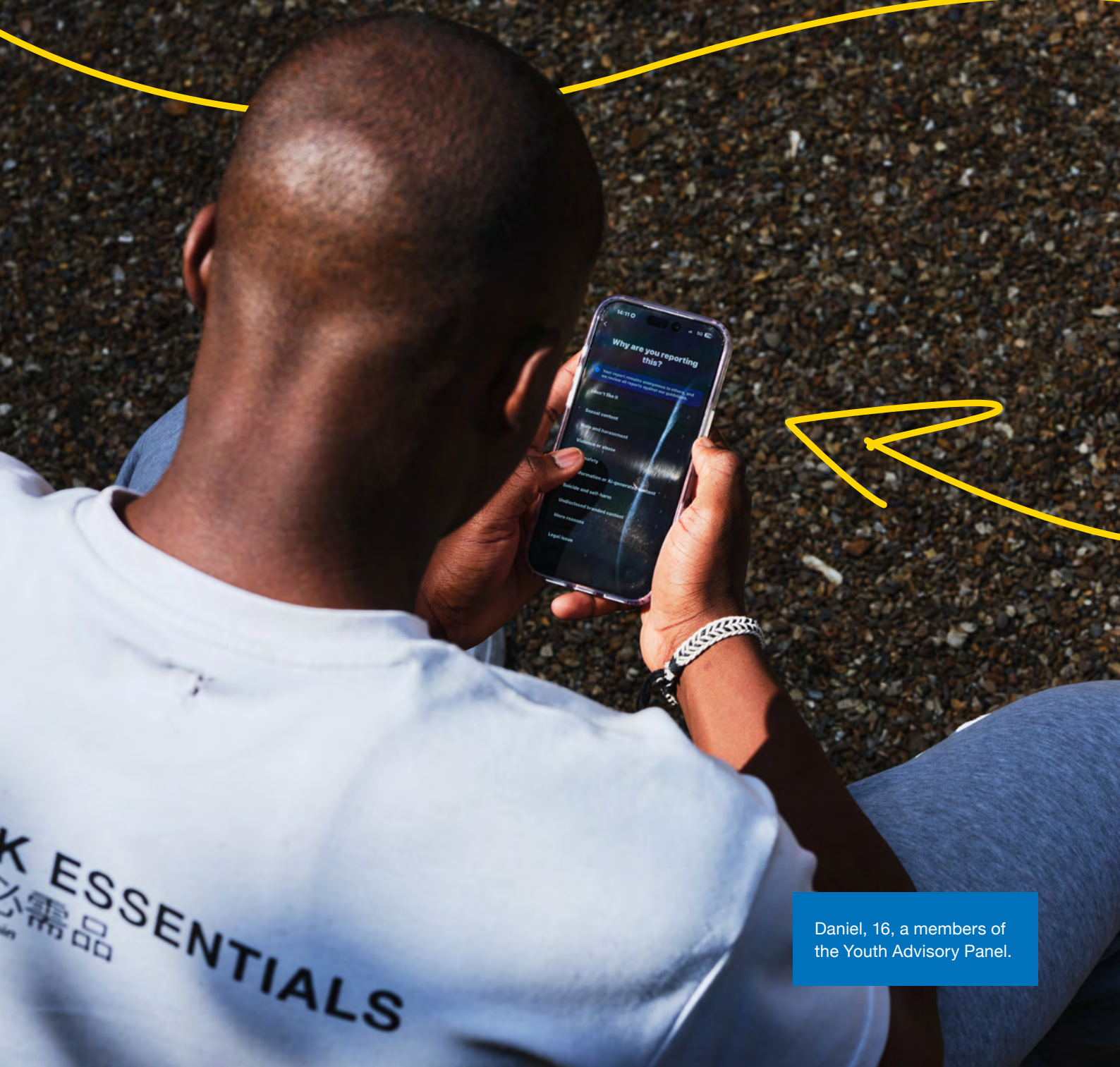
This matters because the relationship between children and harmful online content is complex. Young people who are already struggling may be more likely to encounter or engage with this material, but research also indicates that exposure itself can increase the risk of self-harm. Research from King's College London has highlighted the increased risk among young teenage girls and other groups of young people, with self-harm commonly beginning in early adolescence.²³

This is therefore not a finding that can be separated neatly from the wider concerns explored in this report. The descent from music, dance and entertainment content into suicide and self-harm material demonstrates the seriousness of algorithmic design. **A child does not necessarily have to search for harmful content for an algorithm to place it in front of them.** When recommendation systems learn what holds a young person's attention and continue to serve increasingly extreme material, the consequences can be profoundly serious.

Young people who are already struggling may be more likely to encounter or engage with this material, but research also indicates that exposure itself can increase the risk of self-harm.

Self-harm requires further research beyond the scope of this report. But its appearance in our testing is an important warning: **the same systems that can rapidly push children towards gendered and misogynistic content can also create pathways towards other forms of serious harm.**

RESEARCH FINDINGS



Daniel, 16, a members of the Youth Advisory Panel.

FINDING 1

FROM MEMES TO MISOGYNY IN MINUTES – THE SPEED AND SUBTLETY OF HARMFUL CONTENT ONLINE

Children's experiences show that exposure to misogynistic and gendered content on social media is not a slow or gradual process. Instead, it happens rapidly, often within a single session of scrolling. What begins as light, entertaining content can quickly evolve into more harmful material, with platform design, algorithms, and content formats working together to accelerate this shift.

Children are spending a significant amount of time online. While some of this supports learning, connection, and relationships, much of it is spent alone, passively 'doom-scrolling'. In these moments, they are not actively seeking specific content but instead consuming whatever is presented to them. This passive mode of engagement is particularly important in understanding how harmful content is encountered. When children described what they see online, they consistently referred to short-form content—videos, memes, collages, and carousels—often framed as humorous or 'relatable'.

“Like, my feed’s mostly full of rabbit videos because I have rabbits, and, um, some— and also just like funny stuff or relatable stuff.”
(Year 8 girl)

This reflects the broader ecosystem children are navigating: one that feels personalised, entertaining, and largely benign on the surface. However, this format plays a crucial role in how messages are absorbed. Short-form content is delivered in rapid succession, in small, easily digestible chunks that require little time or cognitive effort to process. Unlike longer-form content, which may prompt reflection or critical thinking, this stream encourages quick, intuitive responses. Children are therefore more likely to engage using automatic, low-

effort thinking rather than more analytical, critical reasoning. Research from 5Rights Foundation shows that children are scrolling through an average of more than 700 videos per day on TikTok alone, spending less than 5 seconds on each.²⁴ Because each piece of content is brief and quickly replaced by the next, there is little opportunity to pause, question, or evaluate what is being seen.²⁵ Over time, this creates an environment where ideas—including harmful ones—can be absorbed quickly and with minimal scrutiny.

Repetition further reinforces this process. Children reported frequently seeing similar or identical content reappear in their feeds. This repetition increases familiarity, which in turn contributes to normalisation. When messages are encountered repeatedly, they can begin to feel ordinary, expected, or even true.²⁶ The use of humour strengthens this effect. Content framed as jokes or memes can feel harmless, entertaining, and socially acceptable, even when it carries problematic or harmful messages.^{27,28} As some girls in the workshops observed, humour is sometimes used deliberately to make offensive content more subtle or palatable.

“They make memes to make it seem more subtle. For example, the foid meme, basically some misogynistic term for females – just calling them foids.”ⁱ
(Girl, year 8)

In contrast, boys were more likely to take such humour at face value, highlighting how these messages can be interpreted differently but still absorbed.

This dynamic—rapid consumption, repetition, and humour—has been widely recognised in

ⁱ The term “foid” has its origin in online incel culture. It is a portmanteau of “female” and “android” and is used as a derogatory term suggesting that women lack agency or individuality.



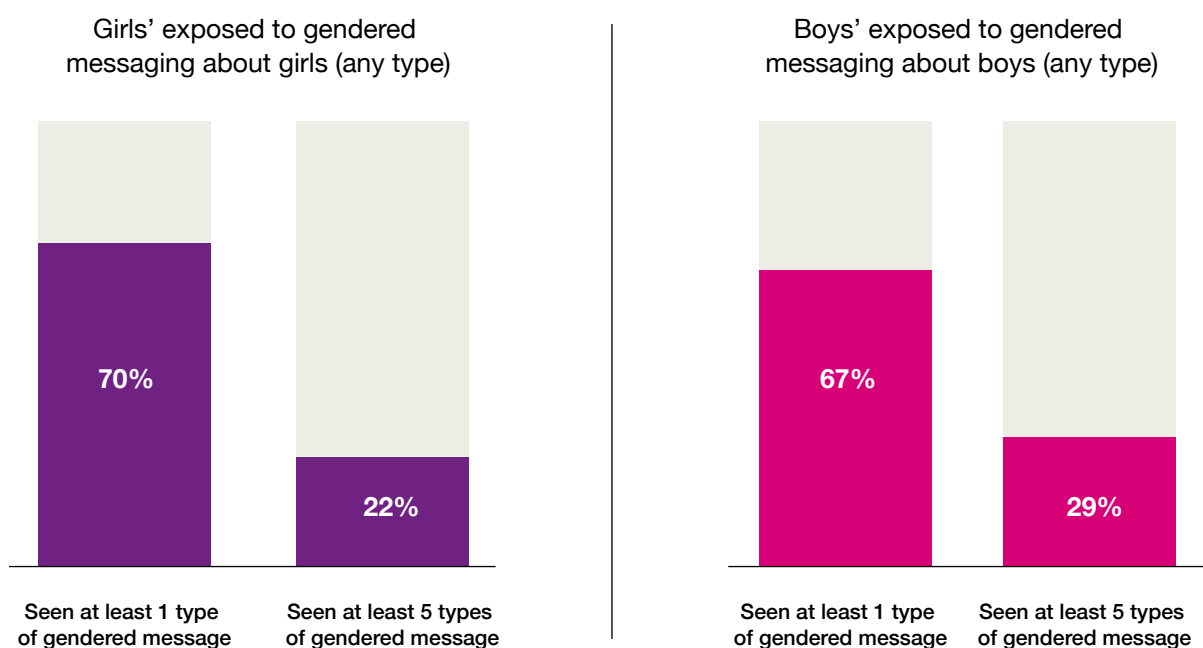
other contexts, including propaganda, where humour can reduce resistance and normalise harmful ideas.^{29,30} In the context of social media, it allows misogynistic attitudes to be introduced in ways that are difficult to detect or challenge. Children themselves often struggle to interpret what they are seeing. Many reported not knowing how content made them feel, reflecting the ambiguity and complexity of these experiences. Harmful messages are rarely presented overtly; instead, they are embedded within everyday, entertaining content, making them harder to identify as problematic.

Crucially, algorithms accelerate and intensify this process. In our testing, personas' feeds became clearly gendered within the first 20 minutes of use. Within this period, content was already linking interests—such as sport or entertainment—to gendered expectations and identities. Children themselves were aware of this process, noting that platforms learn who you are and begin serving different content accordingly. Some also observed that algorithms appeared to detect other aspects of identity, such as ethnicity, further shaping the content they received.

Content often begins with themes such as self-improvement or mental health but gradually shifts towards anger, blame, and misogynistic narratives.

This rapid personalisation is significant because it lays the foundation for what is often described as a 'pipeline effect'. Algorithms create environments—sometimes referred to as echo chambers—where users are predominantly exposed to content that aligns with their existing interests and behaviours. Within these spaces, more extreme or harmful viewpoints can be introduced gradually, alongside familiar and engaging content. Because this content appears in a context that already feels relevant and trustworthy, it can seem more legitimate. Research from UCL and the University of Kent highlights how this process operates in relation to online misogyny.³¹ Content often begins with themes such as self-improvement or mental health but gradually shifts towards anger, blame,

Figure 6: Self-reported exposure to gendered messaging online



Base size: Boys n=752, Girls n=677
Source: CHILDSWISE Omnibus – Spring 2025

and misogynistic narratives. Users themselves describe being drawn along this pathway, often without recognising the shift as it happens.

The speed of this progression is critical. Rather than a slow build over weeks or months, children can move from engaging with benign content to encountering misogynistic ideas within a single session or over a very short period. Because the transition is gradual and embedded within familiar formats, it is often difficult to detect. Harmful messages are normalised not through sudden exposure, but through steady, repeated inclusion in everyday content.

67%

of boys are seeing at least one type of gendered message about how to act, behave, dress or gender roles.

Survey data reinforces the scale and consistency of children's exposure to gendered messaging. A significant proportion of children report encountering content that tells them how they should act, behave, dress, or what roles they should occupy based on their gender. More than one in five girls reported seeing such messaging across all measured areas, while seven in ten (70%) had seen it in at least one area. Similar patterns are observed among boys, with almost seven in ten (67%) seeing at least one type of gendered message. This indicates that gendered content is not occasional or incidental—it is a routine part of children's online experiences.

Exposure begins early. Most primary-aged children (aged 7–10) are already encountering gendered content, with rates increasing further during adolescence. For girls in particular, exposure intensifies with age, suggesting that gendered expectations become more pronounced over time. For boys, exposure starts at a relatively high level and remains consistent, which may contribute to a sense of normalisation—where repeated exposure from a young age makes such content less noticeable or more accepted.

Figure 7: Day 2 - @hust13_tr4in



Figure 8: Day 1 - gl1tter_v1ral



Figure 9: Day 3 - gl1tter_v1ral



Figure 10: How likely are children to see content aimed at their own, or a different, gender?

% Boys that ever see gendered content online (Often/sometimes)	Q. How often do you see or hear things online that say:	% Girls that ever see gendered content online (Often/sometimes)
28%	How girls should act	51% ▲
25%	How girls should dress	54% ▲
26%	How girls should behave	48% ▲
26%	What jobs girls should have	39% ▲
26%	What hobbies and interests girls should have	48% ▲
52% ▲	How boys should act	42%
44% ▲	How boys should dress	37%
50% ▲	How boys should behave	40%
50% ▲	What jobs boys should have	35%
51% ▲	What hobbies and interests boys should have	37%

Boys are more likely
than girls to see content
related to boys

Girls are more likely than boys to see content
related to girls.
Girls are also more likely than boys to see content
related to the opposite gender.

How often do you see or things online that say...
Base size: n=1440 Boys n=752, Girls n=677

▲ Data point is significantly higher than 95% confidence level

Children are also more likely to notice content aimed at their own gender, although many are exposed to messaging about others. Girls are more likely than boys to report seeing content about the opposite gender. This imbalance was also reflected in workshops, where boys were less likely to recognise content that imposed expectations on girls. This suggests that while gendered messaging is widespread, it may not always be equally visible or acknowledged.

Experiences of exposure are not uniform. An intersectional lens highlights how factors such as disability, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background shape both the content children encounter and how they interpret it. For example, children with disabilities report higher levels of exposure to gendered messaging, potentially linked to their greater use of certain online communities or a heightened awareness of social norms.

Similarly, children from minoritised ethnic backgrounds report higher exposure to messaging about boys. Children in more deprived areas were more likely to express uncertainty about whether they have encountered such content – pointing to lower confidence or certainty in recognising these gendered messages.³²

“My For You Page is so annoying sometimes because it knows I’m Black, don’t even play with me, it knows I’m Black. And then it starts bringing stuff on my For You Page about people being racist.”

(Year 8 girl)

Platform type also plays a role. Children using livestreaming services or forum-based platforms report higher levels of exposure to gendered messaging, despite many being below the minimum age requirements for these services.



This raises important questions about the environments children are accessing and the types of content they are encountering within them.

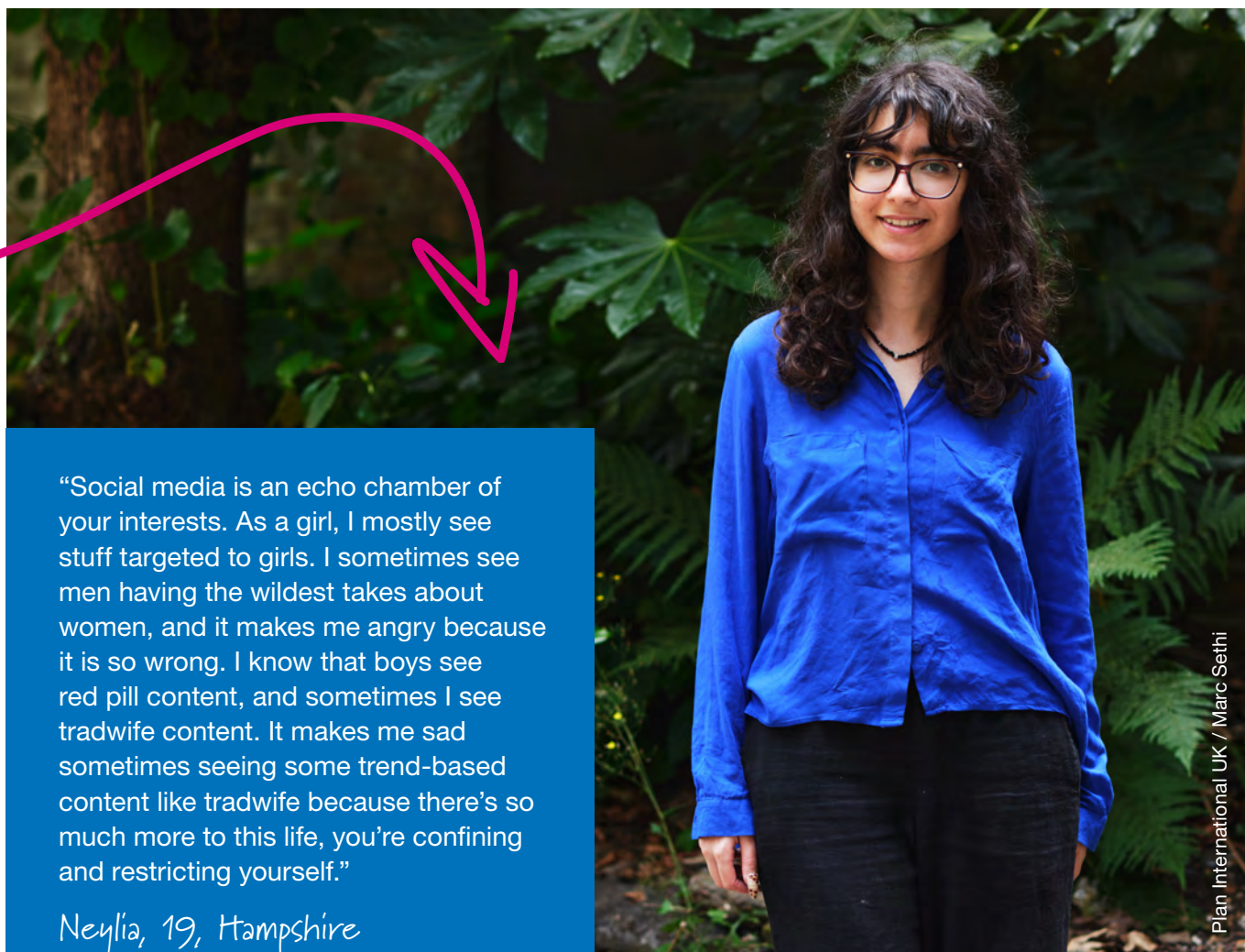
Taken together, these findings point to a clear and concerning pattern. Social media platforms are not neutral environments in which children occasionally encounter harmful content. Rather, they are systems that can introduce, reinforce, and escalate misogynistic ideas at speed. The combination of short-form content, passive consumption, repetition, humour, and algorithmic personalisation creates conditions in which harmful messages can be absorbed quickly, often without conscious awareness.

This rapid escalation has important implications. When exposure happens quickly and repeatedly, harmful ideas can begin to feel familiar, normal, and even factual. This helps explain why some children—particularly boys in our research—did

The combination of short-form content, passive consumption, repetition, humour, and algorithmic personalisation creates conditions in which harmful messages can be absorbed quickly.

not always recognise misogynistic content as harmful or subjective. Instead, these messages can become part of the background of everyday online life, shaping perceptions of gender, relationships, and identity.

In this way, social media does not simply reflect existing attitudes—it actively shapes them, and it does so at speed.



“Social media is an echo chamber of your interests. As a girl, I mostly see stuff targeted to girls. I sometimes see men having the wildest takes about women, and it makes me angry because it is so wrong. I know that boys see red pill content, and sometimes I see tradwife content. It makes me sad sometimes seeing some trend-based content like tradwife because there’s so much more to this life, you’re confining and restricting yourself.”

Neylia, 19, Hampshire

Plan International UK / Marc Sethi

FINDING 2

ALGORITHMS ARE SHAPING GENDER ROLES – WHAT ARE YOUNG PEOPLE SEEING?

When reviewing our discussions with young people and looking at the TikTok testing, we identified four separate themes of gendered messaging that children and young people are being exposed to online: appearance-based content; rigid gender roles; weaponisation of feminism; and political content. Across the workshops both boys and girls gave examples of encountering all these content themes. However, there was some variation between genders in how these manifested.

Appearance-based Content

Across all the strands of our research, what came through clearly from young people was that their social media feeds are frequently presenting them with very clear messaging around how they should look which went well beyond simply clothing choices.

Within our survey, 54% of girls and 44% of boys reported seeing gendered messaging telling them how they should dress. Exposure increases among girls with age, from 47% of girls aged 7-10, to 62% of girls aged 11-17. When we explored in our group discussions what exactly was the 'look' being pushed, girls spoke about messages telling them how they should dress, and about makeup – with a particular emphasis on a soft 'clean girl' makeup aesthetic.

Beyond clothing however, boys and girls felt that there was a very specific expectation of a certain body type, and facial features, characterised by slender bodies; full lips; long hair; and long manicured nails.

“Oh yeah, and it’s just them like, oh, you’re such a fatty, go work out right now. Or they’ll be like...don’t forget not to eat today.”

(Year 8 girl)

Figure 11: What Messages Young People See

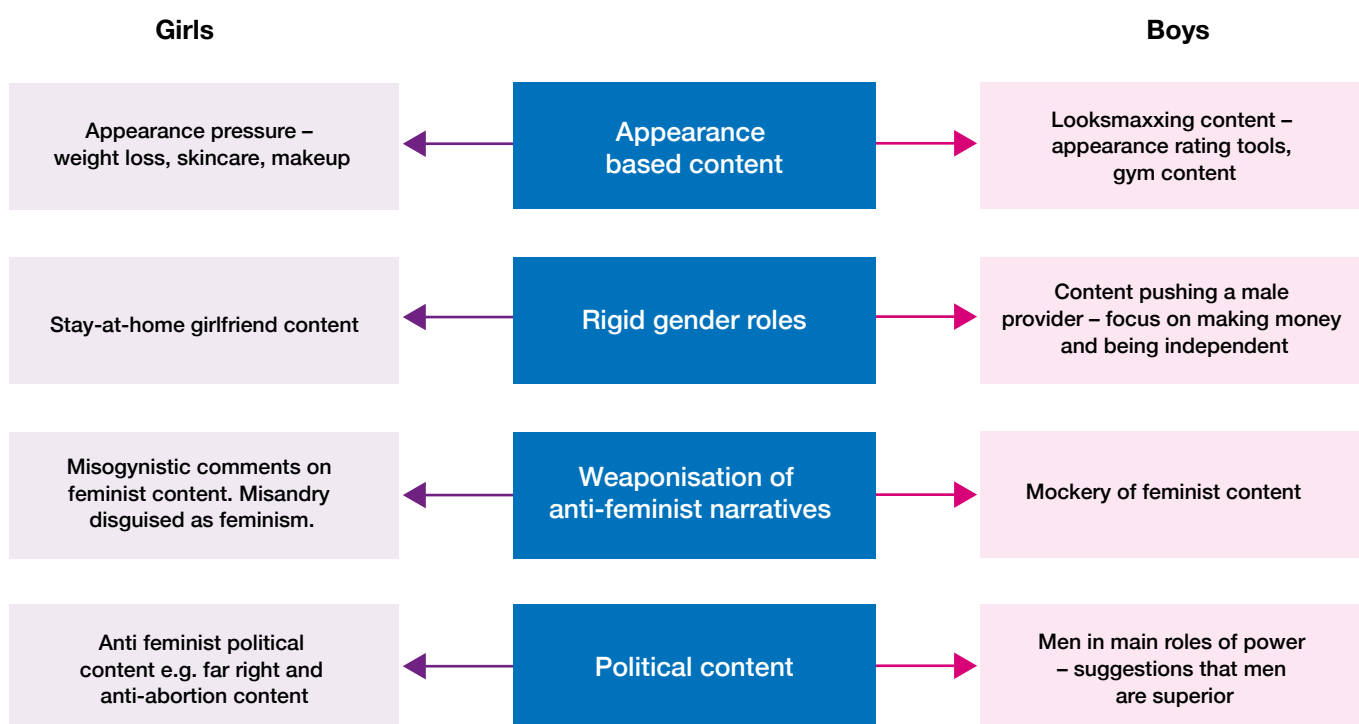
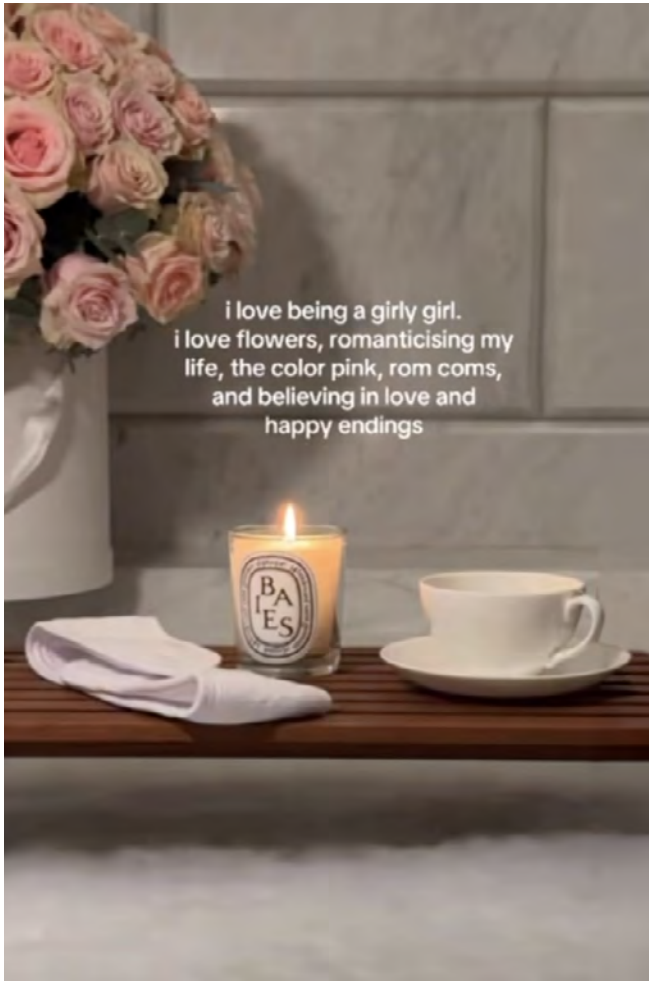


Figure 12: Day 3 - @glowgirlxx



These messages were presented as an objective ideal; this was also reflected in the algorithmic testing and in wider research.

Girls also reported encountering a racial element – for instance ideals being pushed as ‘desirable’ often coincided with European beauty standards. This was seen most explicitly with looksmaxxing filters and apps which altered photographs that users uploaded – purportedly to correct flaws and improve their appearance. Black and girls of South Asian heritage told us that when they had used these filters, they drastically lightened their skin.ⁱⁱ The algorithmic testing also presented a very homogeneous, and primarily White aesthetic within the beauty content shown.

“The [looksmaxxing] filter just turns anyone like completely white.”

(Year 8 girl)

Black girls in the workshops also highlighted that this colourismⁱⁱⁱ reflected similar messages that they encountered in offline media.

Within the algorithmic testing, there was also a **noticeable lack of diversity in ethnicity and body type** of the beauty content creators appearing on the feed. This was even more heightened for the ‘vulnerable’ girl persona, who had been created with specific interests in ‘hyper-femininity’, and relationship content.

For the boys in the workshops, messaging was primarily around their bodies and facial features, rather than what they should wear. Like the girls, boys spoke about Looksmaxxing apps and filters that would tell you what was ‘wrong’ with your appearance – and how far from the ideal that it was. The ideal that was presented to them included a muscular body, a square jawline, symmetrical features and a specific eye shape, known as ‘hunter eyes’.

“[Apps look at] the shape of your eyebrows, your eyes, whether they look good, like Hunter eyes, and then eyebrows, perfect shape, your jawline and stuff like that.”

(Year 9 boy)

The algorithmic testing also showed some content advertising various apps to show the user how to ‘improve’ their appearance, including hairstyle apps, as well as posts perpetuating pseudo-science about the most ‘attractive’ eye shape.

ii While the boys we spoke to didn’t specifically highlight the racial element, this is borne out in other wider research such as Sousbois (2025) “Incels, Looksmaxxing, and the Surgical Design of the ‘Chad’-vertised Body” *Body and Society*, Volume 31, Issue 4

iii The term ‘colourism’ refers to discrimination, which show preference for lighter skinned people over darker skinned people, even within the same ethnic group.

Figure 13: Looksmaxxing app interface

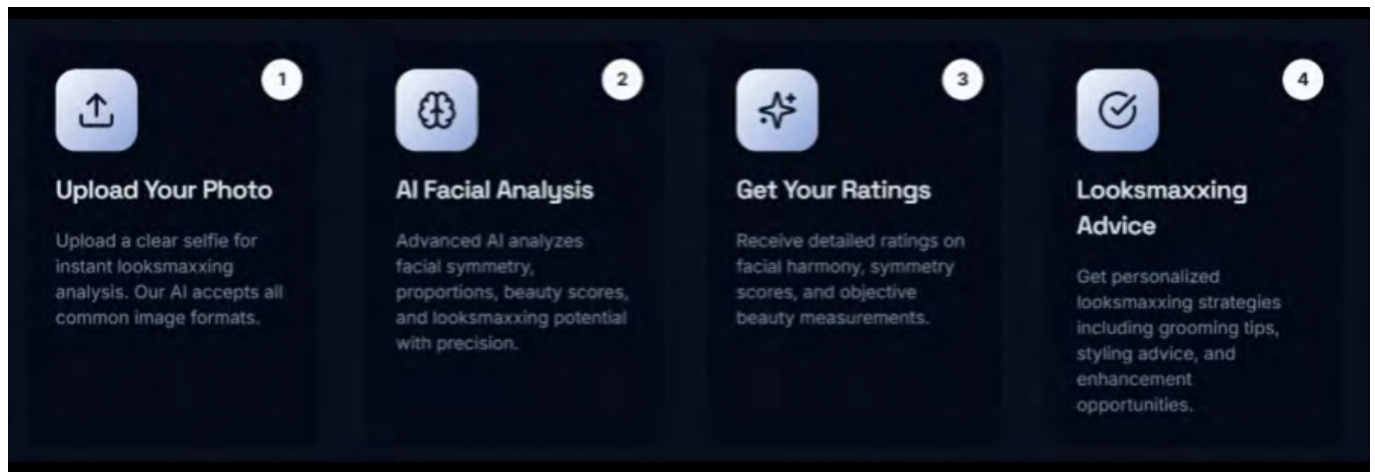
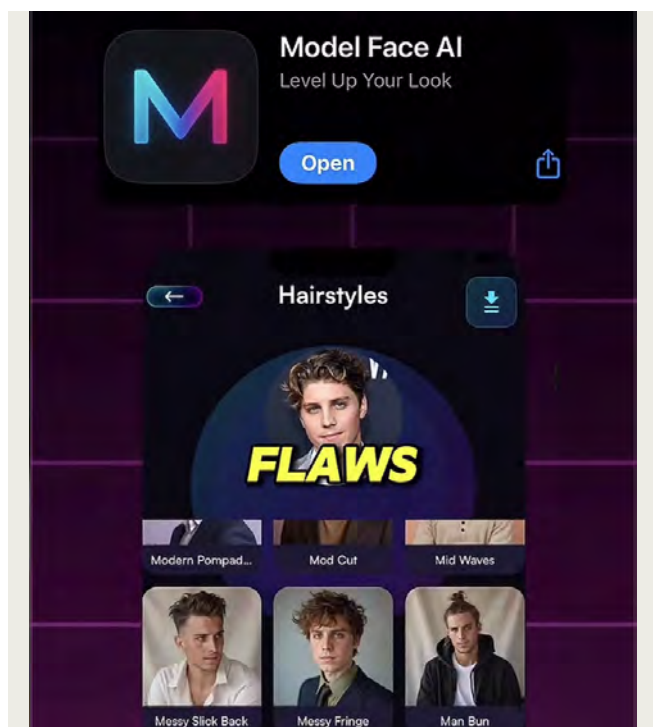


Figure 14: Day 5 - @meme_l3g3nd42



With some hesitation, the boys in the workshops acknowledged that the ideal portrayed was subjective, but nevertheless they almost all felt that it was aspirational and represented a look that they and their peers would want to achieve. They didn't show much push back against this being the ideal look and generally described it as 'perfect' and trying to look 'better'.

"It's about trying to look better...and have like a symmetrical face, trying to make yourself perfect."

(Year 9 boy)

They typically perceived this kind of content to be motivational, even though they felt that it could have a negative impact on how some boys feel.

"Yeah, I think it makes you like wanna just go and like try and like strive towards your goal. It's inspirational."

(Year 8 boy)

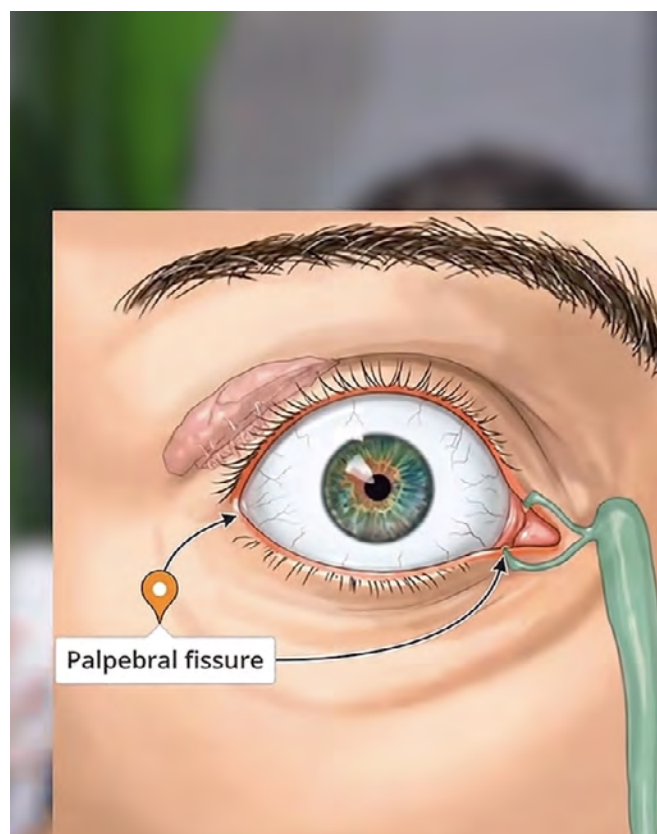
"Say if you don't have like a visible jawline or a very good-looking face, it can make you feel depressed and not feel good about yourself and your own body."

(Year 9 boy)

"I think it might make people feel like if they're not exactly like what's being portrayed, they might feel bad about themselves."

(Year 9 boy)

Figure 15: Day 5 - @meme_l3g3nd42



Rigid Gender Roles

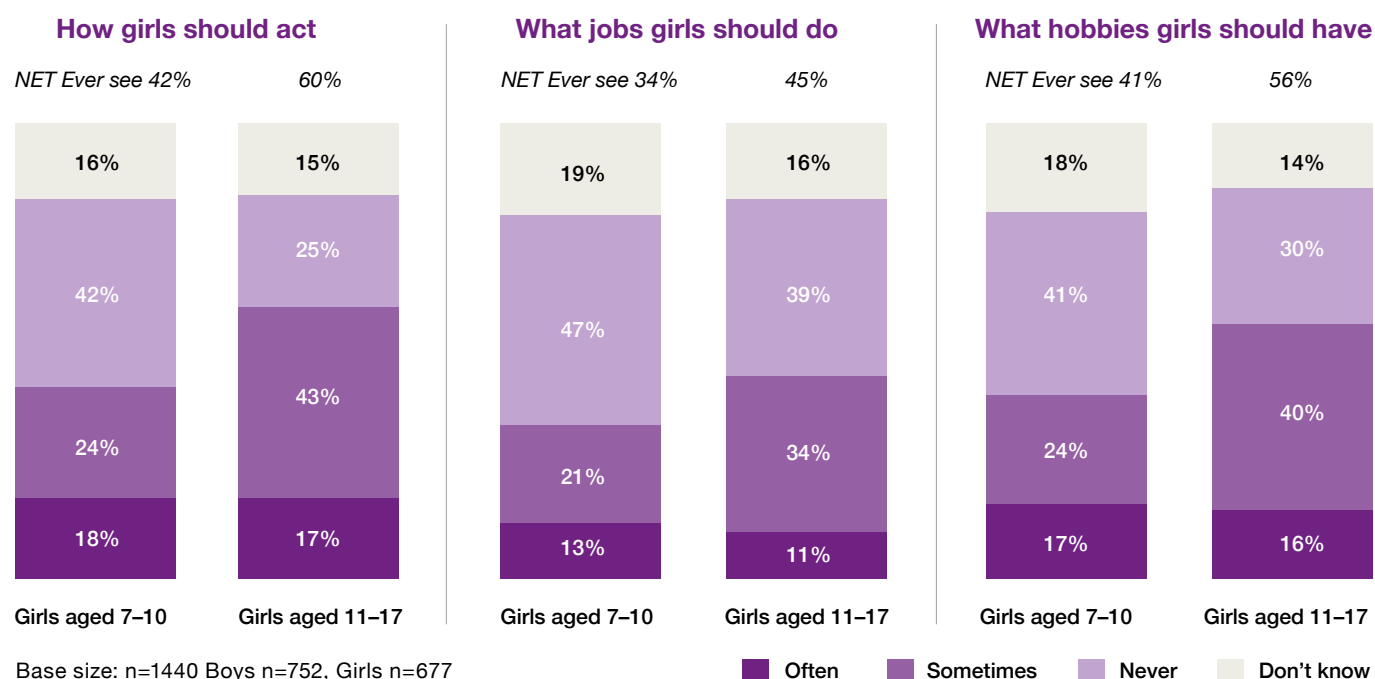
Beyond how they should look, 66% of girls and 63% of boys surveyed reported seeing at least one of three gendered messages about how boys and girls should act, what hobbies or interests they should have, or what jobs they should pursue.

Interestingly, for girls, messaging hardened and increased with age whereas for boys (through the self-reporting survey) messaging remained steady between 7–17-year-olds.

This was also reflected in the findings from the algorithmic testing where content telling girls how to act were very prevalent for the two older girl personas. The ‘typical’ persona was inundated with this type of messaging from an early point in the testing. Content included tutorials on ‘how to become THAT girl’ – with guidance for style, beauty, diet, hobbies, and even morning routines to achieve a certain ‘clean girl’ aesthetic – although the lifestyle this content promoted was unrealistic and highly homogeneous.

Figure 16: Exposure to messaging about gender roles (Girls)

Q How often do you see or hear things online that say:



On the other hand, while the younger girl persona account received a small amount of messaging on how girls should act, this was towards the end of the five days of testing – it should be remembered that as we only tested for 10-20 minutes per day, this content appeared within less than two hours of overall time on the platform.

In the workshops, where the girls were aged 11-13 - so at the same age or slightly younger than the younger persona - participants had experienced exposure to content about how they should act – particularly in terms of gender roles in relationships. It is worth noting here that the minimum age for a TikTok account is 13, so workshop participants who were under this age would have set up their accounts based on stating an older age. It is not known what age they had input, but this may have skewed some of the content they were shown.

“It just comes up on my For You page once in a while and I’m not interested, but he’s [unnamed content creator] going on about ‘I want my girlfriend to be pretty, have blonde hair, stay at home and cook for me’.”

(Year 8 girl)

This messaging reflected the offline norms that both girls and boys spoke about – particularly in terms of expecting girls to have more domestic roles compared to boys. Despite being conscious of misogynistic content, and quite vocal about their disagreement with it, the language used to describe it was interesting. For instance, influencers performing these highly gendered relationship roles were frequently described as “perfect”. So, despite their own rejection of these roles, this suggested that participants saw these roles as something that was aspirational to others or considered the norm.

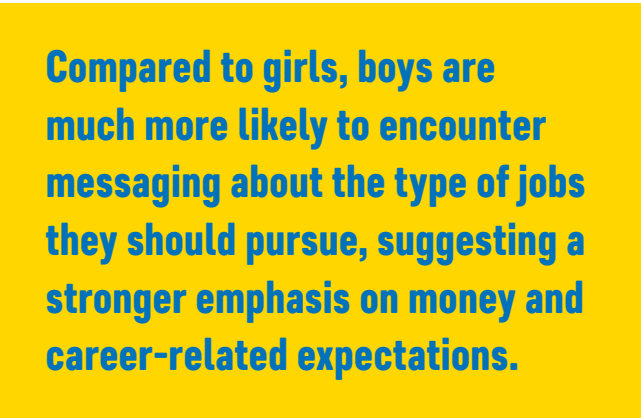
“Has anybody seen that one influencer? And basically, she’s like her whole personality is just about her boyfriend, how she’s this perfect stay-at-home girlfriend.”

(Year 8 girl)

Beyond relationship roles, the girls we spoke to also recounted content – typically couched in humour – which mocked less stereotypical roles or questioned the capabilities of feminists.

“I saw this video about this girl going like, I’m not a feminist, I can actually cook.”

(Year 8 girl)



Compared to girls, boys are much more likely to encounter messaging about the type of jobs they should pursue, suggesting a stronger emphasis on money and career-related expectations.

Amongst the boys, exposure to messaging about gender roles (how they should act, what hobbies and interests they should have, and what jobs they should pursue) remained steadier across the age range (see figure 16). Compared to girls, boys are much more likely to encounter messaging about the type of jobs they should pursue, suggesting a stronger emphasis on money and career-related expectations.

This is an issue that has been widely reported on in recent months, with growing attention on online spaces where narratives emphasise masculine success through wealth, status, and dominance. For instance, the 2026 documentary *Louis Theroux: Inside the Manosphere* highlighted the role of influencers who perpetuate this narrative online, while the Tate brothers – notorious in the manosphere

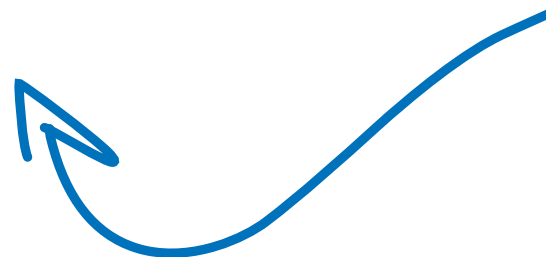
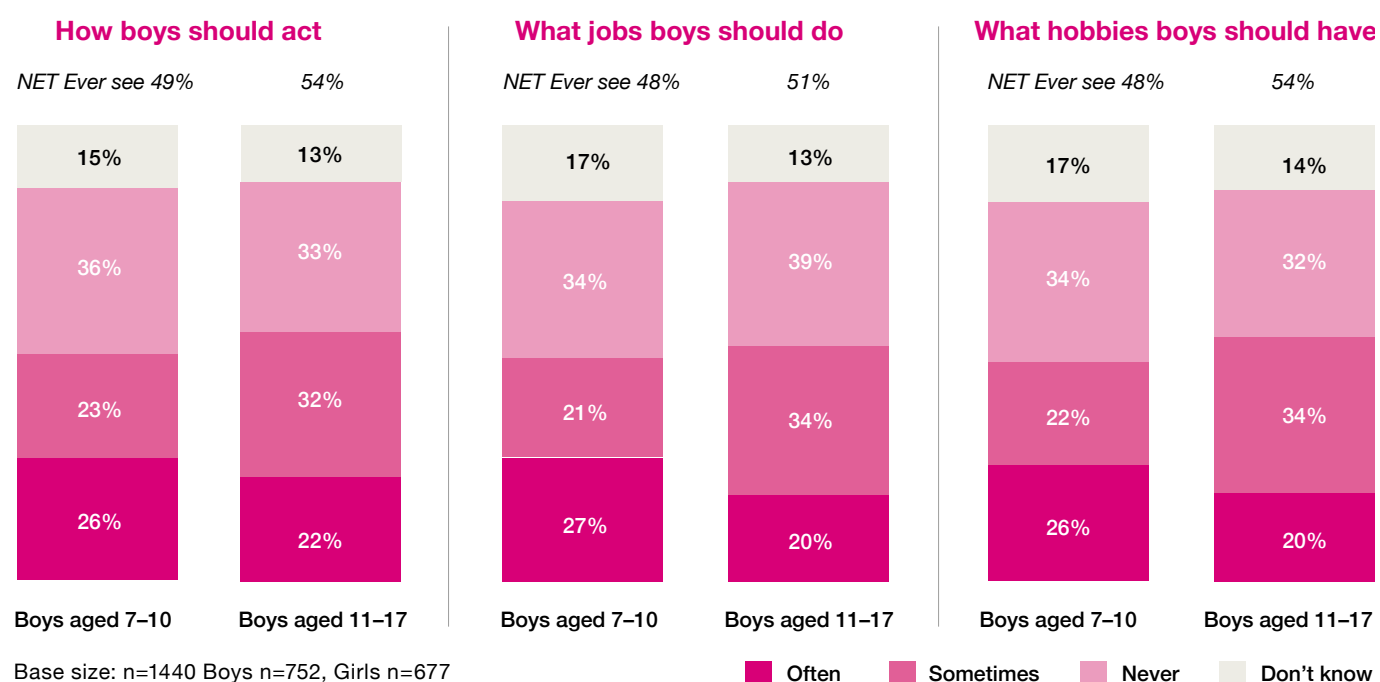


Figure 17: Exposure to messaging about gender roles (Boys)

Q How often do you see or hear things online that say:



landscape – have been in the news frequently in relation to their multiple criminal charges and ongoing investigations. The 2025 crime drama *Adolescence*, while told through the medium of a fictional story, also shone a spotlight on the real-life impacts of online misogyny, and radicalisation, described by then Prime Minister Keir Starmer as “a torch that shines intensely brightly on a combination of issues that many people don’t know how to respond to.”³³

The narrative that came through in the workshops and algorithmic testing around gender roles for men, has clear parallels with other research into masculinity. For instance, the concept of the Man Box³⁴ suggests seven key pillars which constrain and dictate a man’s role. These pillars are self-sufficiency; acting tough; physical attractiveness; rigid masculine gender roles; heterosexuality and homophobia; hypersexuality; and aggression and control. In the workshops, self-sufficiency, rigid masculine gender roles and physical attractiveness came through very strongly.

The findings from the algorithmic testing showed that both the younger and older “typical” personas were exposed to messaging about how they should behave. However, the way these messages were delivered was quite different.

For the younger boy persona, content telling boys how to behave included a variety of styles:

- Collages (collections of different pictures placed together) and carousels on things boys like, e.g. football, gaming, food.
- Skits comparing boys and girls - e.g. how girls vs. boys might react to a teacher telling them off – framed as jokes.
- ‘Relationship psychology’ videos using pseudoscience to explain how men behave in relationships (these videos purport to be scientific fact while not actually demonstrating any link to actual credible scientific research).
- Videos or collages highlighting traits of ‘nonchalance’ and ‘independence’ as aspirational.

36% believed that men should figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help.



In contrast, the older boy persona was exposed to more gendered messaging which pushed a very specific expectation of masculinity, at a much faster rate. The predominant message was that money, and muscles are the most important measures for success – this narrative was laced into self-improvement content.

Boys struggled to differentiate between what they saw as helpful or inspiring advice, versus harmful messaging.

Self-discipline, nonchalance and self-isolation were other key behavioural instructions that appeared relentlessly in motivational videos. This encouragement to isolate and be independent of others may increase boy's vulnerability to this content, as if they are following these instructions, they may be less likely to speak to others about the content they are seeing. And if they don't speak to others about it, they are less likely to question or critically evaluate the messages they are seeing. This aligns with the self-sufficiency pillar of the Man Box concept. Over a third of UK men (36%) believed that men should figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help.³⁵

This, alongside the placement of content interspersed amongst other familiar content and the escalation of the content from subtle to more extreme, creates an environment which challenges children's autonomy to make considered choices about the content that they engage with.

When we explored these messages in the workshops, boys told us that they didn't necessarily consider it to be negative. Boys struggled to differentiate between what they saw as helpful or inspiring advice, versus harmful messaging. Many felt under significant pressure to become what they perceived as a 'successful' man. Rather than questioning why their pursuit of this should be measured by the metrics that they saw on social media, they considered the advice and encouragement on social media to be motivational. Even where boys spoke about potentially having slightly different goals to the influencers that they saw, the delivery of the content, and the overall idea of striving relentlessly towards a goal was seen as inspiring.

"Just always constantly working on your goal and getting towards what you want to do when you're older, your main goal in life. I personally don't see it as a bad thing... it's inspirational."

(Year 8 boy)

This again suggests that repeated exposure to such messaging may mean that they are desensitised to it and are willing to accept it as inspirational.

Weaponisation of anti-feminist narratives

Whilst we did not explore this in our survey, a theme that came up spontaneously during the workshops and was also apparent in the TikTok testing was the anti-feminism messaging.

Girls recounted misogynistic comments on feminist content that they had viewed, or comments which diverted attention from a female focused cause.

“There’s always that annoying man in the comment section, going on about... Oh my God, women can’t be anywhere without men.”

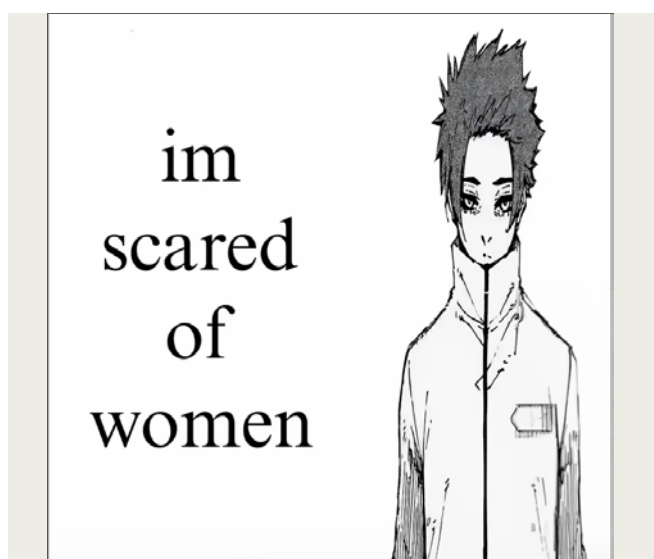
(Year 8 girl)

They also spoke about content they had seen that was prejudiced against boys and men and expressed frustration that this was mistakenly or unfairly portrayed as feminism. For example, they spoke about influencers who suggested that women should cheat on men in relationships, whereas men shouldn’t. The girls we spoke to felt that this kind of content was particularly harmful as it damaged perceptions of feminism, and undermined ‘true’ feminist causes.

“I hate how some people act like hating men is feminism.”

(Year 8 girl)

Figure 18: Day 2 - @s1gma_vo1d



Within an hour, humour quickly intensified into more aggressive and sometimes violent messaging.

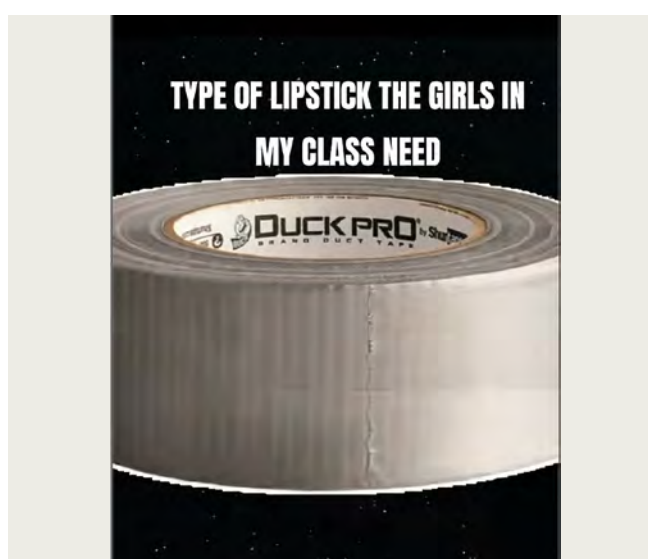
The boys we spoke to had come across less content which they perceived as pitting genders against each other, but some spoke about seeing content which mocked feminist causes – for instance mockery of feminist protests. The boys who mentioned this did not think that this mockery was justified, nor did they express any alignment to the feminist causes that were being mocked.

Other boys mentioned examples where they had seen content where feminists had called out something that a man had said, but they felt that the man had been set up or misrepresented.

“They’ll set him up for saying something, but then they post it online and then it makes him look bad, and then they might say, oh, this is antifeminism, mocking equality, stuff like that.”

(Year 8 boy)

Figure 19: Day 2 - @s1gma_vo1d



In relation to boys, some of the most concerning messaging centred on manosphere narratives that position men as disadvantaged relative to women and frame them as victims of feminism. While rigid gender roles were discussed in the workshops, the TikTok testing revealed a more targeted and escalating pattern of content designed to create division between boys and girls. By day two of our vulnerable boy (@s1gma_vo1d) persona testing, misogynistic content had begun to surface, typically embedded within memes or anime edits, where it appeared initially as humour but quickly intensified into more aggressive and sometimes violent messaging.

By day three, this developed into more explicit narratives framing 'good men' as overlooked or unfairly treated, reinforcing a sense of grievance about how men are perceived by women and society. Alongside this, videos frequently drew direct comparisons between boys and girls, suggesting that girls lead easier and happier lives – for example, by having more friends, more positive social media experiences, or recovering more quickly from relationships.

At the same time, the 'For You Page' became saturated with relationship-focused content that portrayed men as victims, often reinforced by women influencers, creating the impression of a balanced or validated perspective. Taken together, this reflects a clear pathway through which boys are exposed to, and gradually drawn into, increasingly harmful and divisive narratives about gender.

Figure 20: Day 3 - @s1gma_vo1d



Some of the most concerning messaging centred on manosphere narratives that position men as disadvantaged relative to women and frame them as victims of feminism.

Political Content

Once again, this topic came up spontaneously – though it is contextually linked to messaging around how boys or girls should behave, and what jobs they should have. The girls we spoke to gave examples of seeing far right content both from the UK and US, particularly anti-abortion rhetoric. They also reflected on the role of race in some of the political content they saw, particularly from public figures in the US.

“She [US public figure] said something like, ‘we need more men, more strong white men’.”

(Year 8 girl)

Boys spoke more about how the people they saw in power were largely men. For some boys, they noted this as an imbalance which may not be fair – while others felt that this reflected a natural state, and normative gender roles.

“[International Political Leader] being a male and destroying the entire world with war and doing all sorts of terrible things...or all the men on the internet just being these strong, manly figures – whether they’re good or bad, most of them are men, sadly.”

(Year 8 boy)

In the context of current global conflicts, some boys also expressed concerns about their own potential role if they were required to fight in the future. This was a concern that they felt was specifically relevant to boys, as they viewed fighting as a role for men. Some mentioned that their parents tried to shield them from seeing too much online about current conflicts, but this was still something that weighed on their minds.

Girls we spoke to gave examples of seeing far right content both from the UK and US, particularly anti-abortion rhetoric.



Clara (19) and Nova (16) co-hosting *The State of Girls' Rights in the UK* Parliamentary Reception.

The Commercialisation of Misogyny

Beyond the four themes outlined above, our research found that one of the most concerning overarching messages across all the gendered content is the commercialisation of gender norms. Harmful stereotypes are not just surviving online – they are being monetised, packaged, and relentlessly pushed to young people through algorithm-driven feeds.

This highly gendered economy positions girls as passive recipients of male wealth and boys as breadwinners under constant pressure to succeed.

For girls, these messages often revolved around the “clean girl” aesthetic, a hyper-feminine identity tied to expensive beauty products, luxury fashion, and curated lifestyles. TikTok testing revealed that within hours of creating our hyper-feminine persona (@glowgirlxx), the feed was saturated with videos featuring designer handbags, diamond rings, and captions like “Thank God I’m a woman”. These clips consistently framed femininity as defined by looks and material wealth, with love presented as measurable by men’s spending power.

Later content evolved into relationship advice stressing the importance of being ‘soft’ and submissive, while men take on the role of provider. While some videos blended in positive self-care messages, these were intertwined with narratives normalising dependency and rigid gender expectations, making them harder to challenge.

Meanwhile, boys were fed a different version of the same story: your worth lies in wealth. Within minutes of setting up one of our boy personas (@hustl3_tr4in) the feed was dominated by clips glorifying financial success – luxury cars, designer clothes and high-rise apartments, all positioned as markers of masculinity. By day two, wealth-oriented motivational videos featuring figures like Andrew Tate escalated in frequency, pushing a relentless mantra: “Get rich now”.

This highly gendered economy positions girls as passive recipients of male wealth and boys as breadwinners under constant pressure to succeed. Not only does this reinforce outdated stereotypes, but it also exploits them for profit. Algorithms reward emotionally charged, aspirational content – meaning harmful norms are not accidental; they are embedded in the very design of influence online.

Harmful stereotypes are not just surviving online – they are being monetised, packaged, and relentlessly pushed to young people through algorithm-driven social feeds.

Counterculture

Girls in the workshops demonstrated a clear awareness of the pressures placed on them by social media, particularly around appearance. Importantly they were able to articulate that the “beauty ideal” promoted through their feeds was not inherently better than other ways of looking. This critical perspective reflects the influence of a wider cultural shift, where feminist ideas and body positivity movements have created a language – and a community – through which girls can challenge harmful norms. At its strongest, this functions as a form of quiet rebellion: a refusal to accept the standards being imposed on them.

“They act like misandry is supposed to be more feminist.”

(Year 8 girl)

However, this resistance is not absolute. Even among girls who were visibly critical, there were moments where dominant ideals resurfaced. Describing the algorithm-driven aesthetic as ‘looking perfect’ and sharing experiences of the harm that causes shows how deeply embedded these messages remain. As one girl explained:

“I used to be very depressed because all I saw on my ‘For You Page’ was like you have to be skinny or you’re just not [attractive].”

(Year 8 boy)

This tension – between critique and internalisation – underlines both the power and the limits of this counterculture. It offers tools for resistance, but it does not fully shield girls from harm.

There was little indication of a shared language or movement that encouraged them to question what they were seeing.

What is significant, however, is that this counter narrative exists at all. Girls are not navigating these pressures in isolation. As Plan International’s *Free to Be Online?* report highlights, a sense of community plays a crucial role in helping girls persist in online spaces, even when facing hostility or pressure.³⁶ These networks – whether rooted in feminism, peer support or shared experience – provide alternative ways of understanding themselves and the world around them.

Girls are exposed to harmful content but they also have access to narratives that help them resist it. Boys are exposed to similarly restrictive ideals without the same tools to question them.

By contrast, boys in the workshops showed little evidence of access to an equivalent counterculture. While they were exposed to similarly rigid ideals – centred on wealth, physical strength and dominance – they tended to accept these as aspirational, even when they recognised them as unrealistic or unfair. As one boy described:

“It’s like the perfect man, having loads of money, having a good body... I think most teenagers want to achieve that goal.”

(Year 8 boy)

Crucially, boys did not articulate alternative ways of being. Unlike girls, they did not reference counter perspectives that challenged dominant norms. There was little indication of a shared language or movement that encouraged them to question what they were seeing. Instead, traditional expectations – such as men being providers – were repeated and reinforced. Even when boys acknowledged that girls were not subject to the same expectations, they did not interrogate this inequality.

"In 2021, when school was disrupted and I was about 10 or 11, I was looking at this content thinking, 'I want to be successful, so I need to listen to what this person is saying and follow in his footsteps.' I would abandon relationships or share the same advice with friends. There was also a rise in red-pill content, with the idea that men should be aggressive, show pride and constantly grind. I started thinking I needed those traditional values to be successful."

Daniel, 16, London



One participant reflected messaging they had seen online:

"Men should be the one making money... girls should be in the house taking care of the kids."

(Year 8 boy)

This reflects a wider cultural pattern. The persistence of these beliefs, echoed in findings such as the Man Box study, suggests that for boys, dominant models of masculinity remain largely unchallenged in their everyday digital environments.³⁷ Without a visible alternative, these norms are not only normalised but aspirational.

The result is an uneven landscape. Girls are exposed to harmful content, but they also have access to narratives that help them resist it. Boys, meanwhile, are exposed to similarly restrictive ideals without the same tools to question them. This creates an 'empty space' where a counterculture for boys could – and should – exist.

Addressing online harms therefore requires more than reducing exposure. It means recognising and supporting the kinds of communities and narratives that enable young people to challenge what they see. For girls, these are already emerging. For boys, they remain largely missing. Filling this gap is essential if we are to create an online environment where all young people can develop identities free from harmful and limiting norms.

FINDING 3

ONLINE MISOGYNY IS MAINSTREAM AND EXAGGERATES OFFLINE BEHAVIOURS

Impact

What impact does this constant, subtle, drip-feed of gendered messaging have on children and young people and how does it affect them?

Concerningly, more than one in four children aged 7 to 17 said they have seen content online that has stopped them from acting, dressing or behaving in a way they've wanted to (27%), rising to almost a third among girls (32% of girls vs. 23% of boys). This suggests that gendered messaging isn't just something children notice – it is actively shaping their behaviour and their sense of identity. When children say this type of content has made them change or hold back on how they act or dress, this points towards it limiting their confidence and their ability to express themselves freely. It also suggests that these kinds of expectations are becoming a common, everyday part of their online (and possibly offline) lives.

29%

of those among aged 18–24, support a return to traditional gender roles.

With girls notably more likely than boys to report this impact, this may reflect the type of messaging that girls receive around behaviour. The findings from the workshops demonstrate that this messaging often related to restriction or limiting what they do. For example, content around appearance included a focus on eating less, and content around gender roles in relationships was focused on a mindset of being subservient. Though further evidence

is required to draw firm conclusions, it is also possible that the specific self-harm and 'depression core'^{iv} content that emerged both in the groups and in the algorithmic testing may be a more direct way of chipping away at girls' self-esteem and encouraging limiting behaviours.

In the workshops, the girls demonstrated a very strong sense of self – they could name the expectations placed on them and many spoke about actively rejecting them.

“I think anyone could be like who they want to be... it's your life.”

(Year 7 girl)

However, they also gave examples of times that their behaviour had been impacted by gendered messaging around appearance. Several girls told us that they had to adhere to a specific beauty ideal. They explained that they were influenced both by what they saw online, and messages about how they should look that they got from family and classmates at school. Girls also expressed that they felt other girls' behaviour was influenced by gendered messaging, particularly in terms of gender roles in relationships.

“I feel like the more there's videos about people saying, oh I want a stay-at-home girlfriend, the more girls want to change because some of them are so desperate for a boyfriend.”

(Year 8 girl)

Around a quarter of boys (23%) reported seeing content that has stopped them from acting, dressing or behaving in a way that they wanted to. However, it is likely that this figure understates the proportion of boys whose behaviour is

^{iv} 'Depression Core' refers to an online aesthetic, which is characterised by muted colours, emotional heaviness, musical angst and references to mental health struggles.

impacted by gendered messaging. The boys in the workshops described the behavioural changes that were encouraged as positive and aspirational actions. The masculine ‘ideal’ promoted by online messaging was centred around being independent and in control – positioning a man as a provider and leader, attributes which taken neutrally and not in the context of a patriarchal society – aren’t necessarily negatives. Messaging focused on instructing boys on what they should do to make money, or to become more ‘attractive’ – this was interpreted more around self-fulfilment and actualisation rather than change or limiting behaviours. This positive framing also contributed to boys struggling to differentiate between content which they considered positive and aspirational versus content which was harmful.

57%

of boys reported seeing content that has stopped them from acting, dressing or behaving in a way that they wanted to.



Children aged 11-17 who use forums or newsletter-style platforms (e.g. Reddit, Substack) are more likely to report seeing content that often stops them from acting, dressing, or behaving in a way they’ve wanted to (14% vs. 5-6% among other platforms). This might partly reflect the age profile of users on these platforms, which in our sample is exclusively older children (11-17), along with the fact that platforms like Reddit tend to host more opinion heavy discussions where users defend their own views while criticising others.³⁸ This potentially creates environments where expectations about gender become more visible.

“[As a result of seeing this content] maybe like after school they may like start putting money into investments and start making money.”

(Year 9 boy)

Looking at the impact through an intersectional lens, children with disabilities are more likely than children without disabilities to say they have seen gendered content online that has stopped them from behaving in ways they would like to (36% vs. 25%). This aligns with their higher reported exposure to some forms of gendered messaging.

Children from minoritised ethnic groups are also more likely than white children to say the gendered messages they see often stop them from behaving in ways they would like to (8% vs. 4%). While overall proportions are relatively small, levels are similar for both girls (9%) and boys (7%), suggesting this pattern is seen across genders within this group.

Online vs. Offline

While the research focused on the content that children consumed online, within the workshops, it quickly became clear that online and offline experiences were closely connected. Experiences of gendered content online reflected and reinforced experiences in real life, school, and in wider media. Both girls and boys reflected that gender roles were an ingrained part of life – with beliefs and expectations of gender coming from their own families and communities, as well as from public figures such as politicians or celebrities, and wider media such as books, film and TV.

For the girls we spoke to, there was a deep frustration and weariness at the gendered expectations and messaging that they saw all around them. They felt that this was so ingrained in everyday life, that by the time they encountered it online, it was routine and unsurprising.

“I think it’s like passed down from like generation to generation because in the past I think the world used to be a lot more sexist, but the thoughts and the ideas have still like come down because someone will hear stuff, they believe it so they tell their children about it. And then that’s the role model to the children, so you know, you listen to your role model.”

(Year 8 girl)



The girls were able to articulate how stereotypes about gender were reinforced in the books and films that they saw from a very young age - for instance they noted how girls were frequently portrayed as weaker than their boy counterparts.

“If they make a girl strong, they have to make the man stronger that she is going to be in a relationship with. And it’s just like - why?”

(Year 8 girl)

They also identified intersectional dynamics, such as racial stereotyping or discrimination, alongside gendering. For example, they described feeling that where female representation was already often limited to stereotypes, this was even more limited when the characters were Black, Asian or Latina. Girls described how Black female characters often lacked a range of different personalities and styles. Instead, they felt that they were either “ghetto” or “nerdy”.

“I hate when the Black girls in shows are always so ghetto, and if they don’t make them ghetto, they make them the nerdiest person in the whole wide world.”

(Year 8 girl)

An expectation of certain behaviours based on gender were reflected in school where they felt that there was an expectation that they should behave in a passive way.

“At school, the boys just expect you to, like, lay low, let the boys do everything.”

(Year 7 girl)

Amongst the boys we spoke to there was a greater mix of opinions about the gendered messages they encountered in day-to-day life. Like the girls, they were very aware of different expectations and roles relating to gender, but they demonstrated far less push-back about these. They were more likely than the girls to refer to these roles as simply a fact of life.

The girls were able to articulate how stereotypes about gender were reinforced in the books and films that they saw from a very young age.

“Girls stereotypically just stay around the house, do all the cleaning, take care of the kids. And men go out and fight in wars and work, do that kind of stuff.”

(Year 8 boy)

Some boys reflected that these roles and messages around them may not reflect a universal experience, and some suggested that they were quite old-fashioned. Others gave examples of how gender roles are rooted in longstanding societal views of women which depict them as less capable or powerful than men – but did not explicitly state whether they themselves agreed with these views or not. Others still, expressed a misogynistic belief that the gendered roles they saw in everyday life were grounded in objective differences between the genders, which positioned girls to be in some way ‘less than’ their boy counterparts.

“I think it’s normal nowadays for a man to have a higher pay. In my life, yeah, my dad gets more money than my mum... That’s what’s supposed to happen pretty much.”

(Year 8 boy)

Figure 21: Day 5 - @s1gma_vo1d

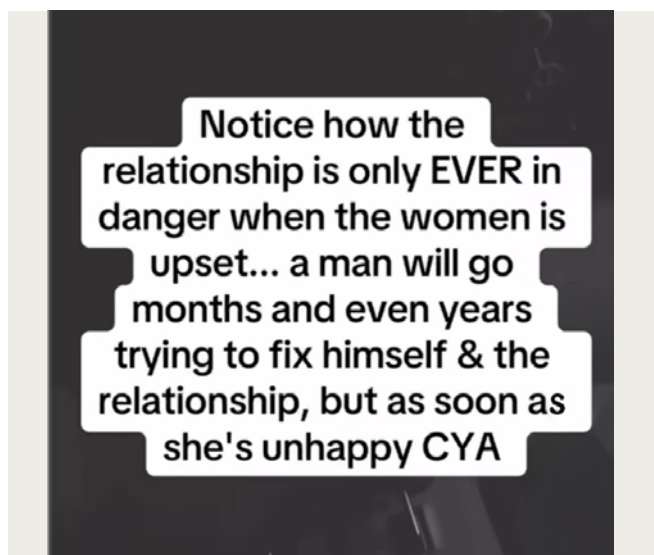
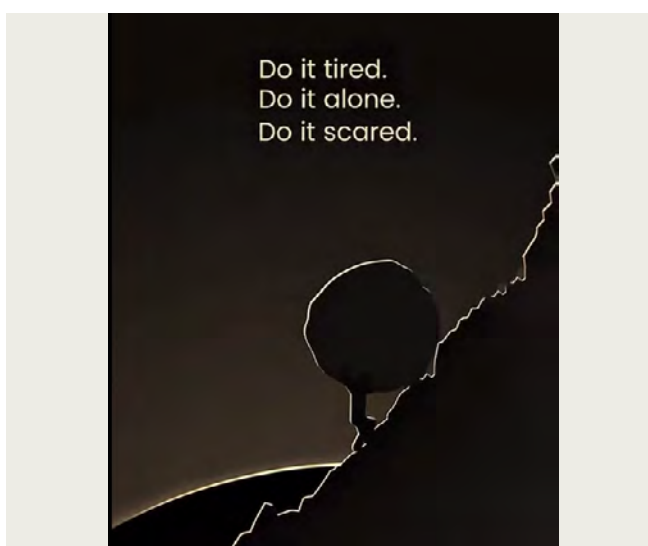


Figure 22: Day 3 - @hustl3_tr4in



The Manosphere Going Mainstream: From Fringe to Everyday Influence

One of the key impacts of the flood of misogynistic messaging that young people are exposed to is that regressive attitudes towards gender equality are no longer confined to the margins of society – neither online nor offline. Instead, they are increasingly visible in mainstream culture, particularly among these younger audiences. Polling commissioned alongside this research shows that almost one in four UK adults (23%) believe that the advancement of gender equality has had a negative impact on men. One in five (20%) think that a return to traditional gender roles would benefit society. Alarming, nearly one in ten (9%) believe women now have too much power in the UK, while over a third (37%) believe women have “about the right amount.”³⁹

“It comes from statistics... testosterone...why girls are weaker than boys.”

(Year 8 boy)

These attitudes are even more pronounced among younger men. Among those aged 18–24, nearly a third (32%) believe men have been negatively affected by gender equality, and 29% support a return to traditional gender roles. These findings point to a growing backlash against gender equality, particularly among a

generation raised in a digital environment where harmful narratives are increasingly normalised.

This shift is closely linked to the growing influence of the manosphere. Our polling shows that 61% of men aged 18–34 have engaged with online content about masculinity, and of those, 41% say they have learned something from it.⁴⁰ While some content may offer support, our research highlights how quickly users can be exposed to more extreme and misogynistic ideas.

“Well, for most of, for hundreds and hundreds of years, men have always been thought to be much more capable than girls.”

(Year 8 boy)

Content that begins as self-improvement or advice as has been discussed throughout this report can rapidly evolve into narratives that blame women or feminism for men’s struggles.

These messages often reinforce harmful expectations: that men must suppress emotion, remain detached, and measure their worth through dominance or success. This reflects what has been described as “psychic armour” – a set of emotional restrictions that can leave men feeling isolated, frustrated and under pressure.⁴¹

23%

of girls encounter the term “body count” on a daily or almost daily frequency.



The paradox is clear: while these norms promise power, they often produce fear, isolation and pain. In some cases, they can also legitimise harmful behaviour. By framing women as adversaries or as holding unearned power, these narratives can tacitly excuse hostility and even violence, both online and offline.

Misogynistic content is no longer hidden in obscure online forums; it is increasingly “algorithmically offered, and often pushed, on popular teen platforms.”⁴² Our research found that such content can appear within minutes of use, and most young people report recognising these messages in their feeds.

Terms and concepts that originated in niche incel communities are now widely used across mainstream youth culture. 14% of girls encounter “looksmaxxing” daily or almost daily, and 23% encounter “body count” at the same frequency.⁴³

The consequences for girls and young women are profound both online and in the physical world. In the Plan International and CNN As Equals “Building Digital Resilience” research, 40% of girls and young women aged 13–24 across nine countries reported experiencing harassment at least once a month. Over a third (37%) had received inappropriate sexual messages, and 44% had encountered unwanted sexual images or videos.⁴⁴

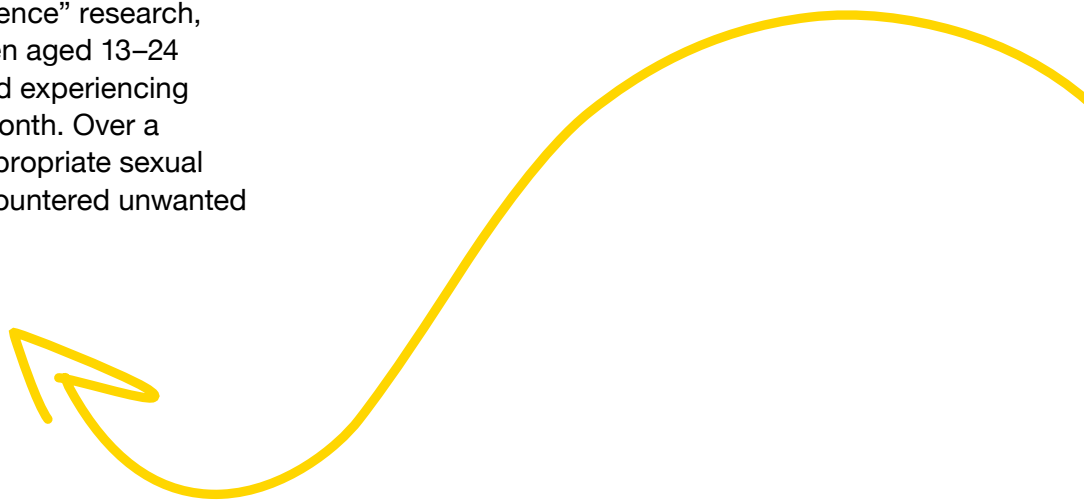
The emotional and behavioural impacts are significant: One in four girls who experience online abuse report feeling physically unsafe as a result.⁴⁵ This has a silencing effect, limiting girls’ participation in digital spaces and restricting their freedom of expression.

This rise in misogynistic content reflects a broader cultural shift. Anti-feminist narratives are increasingly presented as common sense of humour, rather than ideology. At the same time, research by HOPE not hate suggests that some young people are becoming more sceptical of gender equality, with studies indicating that a growing proportion of Gen Z believe it has “gone too far.”⁴⁶

“No one makes a decision of who you can be. You choose to be yourself”

(Year 7 girl)

Girls themselves recognise the influence of online spaces. Our polling shows that 35% believe online platforms have the greatest impact on women’s and girls’ freedoms in the UK, second only to wider social attitudes and norms. At the same time, concerns about body image – often reinforced by online content – remain one of the top worries for girls.⁴⁷



WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE WANT?

Children were clear about what would improve their online experiences: more kindness, less judgement, and stronger safety measures. They consistently called for spaces that feel respectful and age-appropriate, with less exposure to harmful or inappropriate content.

This aligns with recent CHILDWISE research. While many young people oppose a blanket social media ban (54%, rising to 68% among 11–17s), there is strong support for safer platforms. Almost two-thirds (62%) of 11–17-year-olds want harmful content to be removed or blocked – rising to 70% among girls.⁴⁸

Children also raised concerns about unintended consequences of restrictions that do not address underlying harms:

“[A social media ban] will just encourage people under the age of 16 to use those services secretly... it will prevent things from being spoken about and dealt with.”
(Girl, 14–15)

Across workshops, participants expressed frustration with how platforms currently respond to harm. Many felt reporting systems were ineffective and that harmful content – including sexist, racist and offensive material – often remains online despite multiple complaints.

“Six people reported the account, and it still didn’t get taken down.”

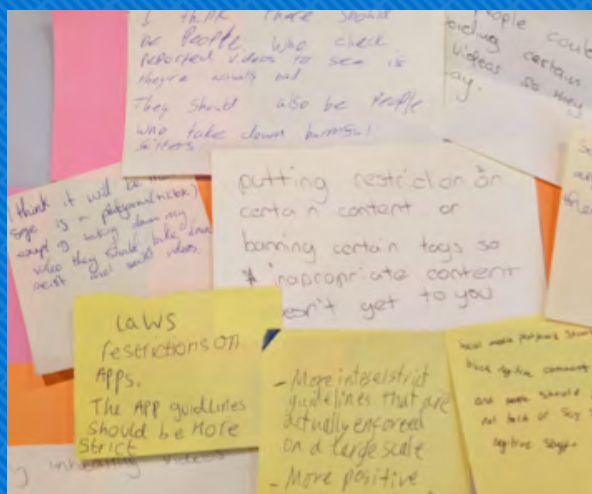
(Year 8 girl)

This was reflected in our algorithmic testing, where all our reports of unsafe content resulted in “no violations found”.

Young people’s perspectives also highlight differences in how harm is experienced and understood. Girls were more likely to describe the emotional impact of online spaces, emphasising the need for less judgement, greater kindness, and freedom from misogyny. They spoke about wanting to feel safe and able to be themselves.

“If people didn’t say girls have to look this way... then girls could behave however they wish.”

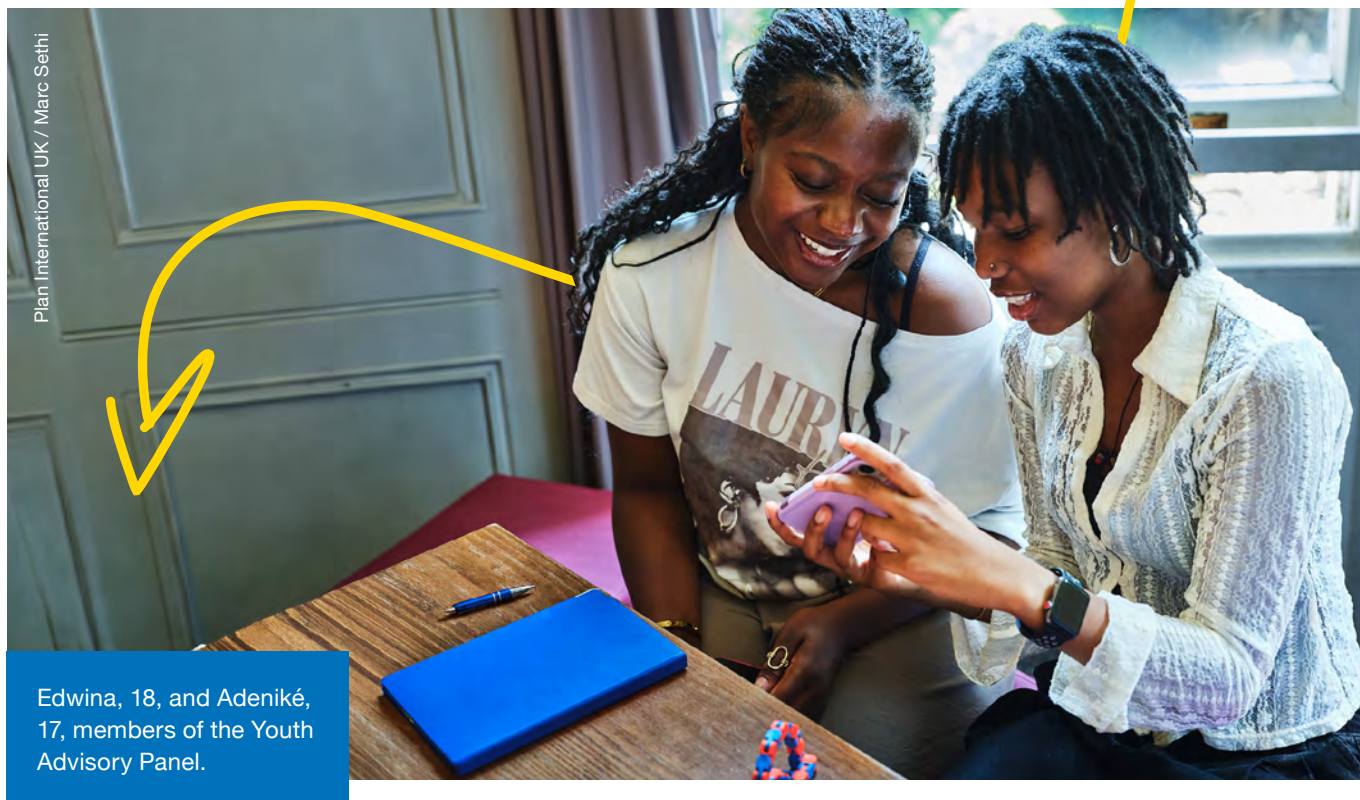
(Girl, 10–11)



Suggestions to improve safety reflected a frustration with current regulations and guidelines – and participants felt that platforms needed to be stricter, and more proactive to responding to harmful content.

“Pay people to look at accounts and block certain videos or ban them.”

“Social media platforms should automatically block negative comments.”



Edwina, 18, and Adeniké, 17, members of the Youth Advisory Panel.

Boys also raised concerns about safety, but focused more on broader issues such as inappropriate content, fake material, and platform functionality. They were more likely to look to external intervention from parents, teachers and platforms.

“Tell a trusted adult, teacher, parent...”
(Year 8 boy)

Across all groups, social connection remains central to positive online experiences. Young people value being able to talk, play and connect with friends, alongside having greater control over what they see and how content is recommended.

Non-binary participants emphasised safety, respect and freedom from discrimination, while children with disabilities highlighted the importance of acceptance and being free from judgement. Children from minoritised ethnic backgrounds consistently called for kinder, less hostile environments, alongside opportunities to connect and relax.

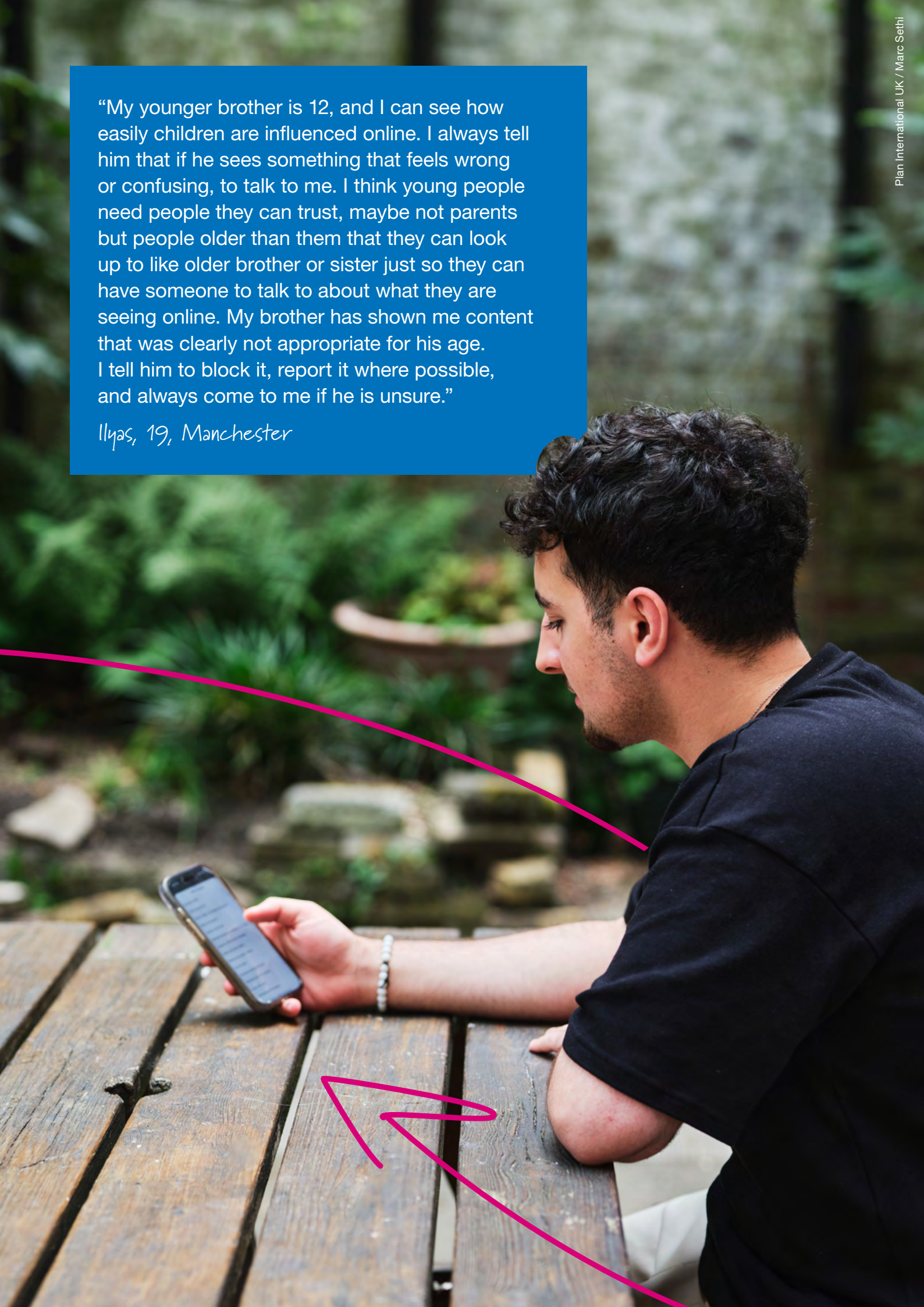
Children in areas of high deprivation reflected many of the same themes, particularly the importance of safety and positive interactions, while also highlighting practical barriers such as poor connectivity.

Young people value being able to talk, play and connect with friends, alongside having greater control over what they see and how content is recommended.

Taken together, these findings show a clear and consistent message: children do not simply want less access to online spaces – they want those spaces to be safer, kinder and more accountable.

“My younger brother is 12, and I can see how easily children are influenced online. I always tell him that if he sees something that feels wrong or confusing, to talk to me. I think young people need people they can trust, maybe not parents but people older than them that they can look up to like older brother or sister just so they can have someone to talk to about what they are seeing online. My brother has shown me content that was clearly not appropriate for his age. I tell him to block it, report it where possible, and always come to me if he is unsure.”

Ilyas, 19, Manchester



CONCLUSION

Why the Government must act

This research provides compelling evidence that children's online environments are not neutral spaces. In as little as 20 minutes of social media use, children can be exposed to gendered messages that shape how they see themselves and others. These messages do not simply reflect existing inequalities – they reinforce and normalise them, limiting children's potential from a young age.

Crucially, it is not only the content itself that matters, but how it is delivered. Misogynistic ideas are often woven into everyday content through humour, memes and short-form videos, sitting alongside material that feels entertaining, relatable and familiar. This creates a 'drip-drip' effect, where harmful messages become normalised and increasingly difficult for children to identify or challenge. As exposure escalates, these ideas can become embedded in children's understanding of gender, relationships and the world around them, often without their full awareness.

Online harm does not stay online. Gendered content can reinforce attitudes and behaviours in schools, relationships and wider society. The research also shows that children experience these pressures differently. Girls described the emotional impact of narrow and often racially biased beauty standards, while boys were more likely to encounter restrictive ideas about masculinity framed as aspirational – centred on wealth, independence and appearance. Boys were also less likely to recognise misogynistic content as harmful and had fewer visible counter-narratives to challenge what they were seeing. For children from minoritised backgrounds, these pressures can compound existing experiences of exclusion and discrimination.

Yet children are clear that they do not want to be excluded from online spaces. Digital platforms are central to how they connect with friends, explore interests and express themselves. They want online spaces to be safer, kinder and more accountable – not simply to have less access to them.



Online harm does not stay online. Gendered content can reinforce attitudes and behaviours in schools, relationships and wider society.

There is already significant political recognition of the need to act. Campaigners, researchers and civil society organisations have worked for years to bring online harms and misogyny up the political agenda, and successive UK governments have developed an increasingly comprehensive legislative and policy framework. This includes the Online Safety Act (2023), strengthened criminal offences relating to online pornography and non-consensual intimate image abuse in the Crime and Policing Act (2026), and further proposals including the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill and Representation of the People Bill. The *Freedom from Violence and Abuse cross-governmental Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy* published December 2025 also recognises the role of online spaces in shaping harmful attitudes, with prevention and education at its core.

These are important steps forward. But this research shows that they are not yet sufficient to address children's lived experience online.



The UK Government's proposal for a blanket ban on social media for under-16s risks treating the symptom rather than the cause. While there is understandable concern among parents and policymakers about children's safety, restricting access does not address the algorithms, platform design and business models that drive harmful content. Nor does it remove the gender norms that children encounter across their online and offline lives.

Children themselves have warned of the unintended consequences. We know from evidence from Australia that four months after the ban, "fewer than one in three 14–15-year-olds were in compliance" and two months later, compliance had fallen to "about one in twenty".⁴⁹ Liz Kendall explained that "we want to have a reset for them [children] and future generations"⁵⁰ and that the UK Government is aiming for a cultural shift away from the assumption that under 16s would be on social media at all. But in Australia, and compliers are perceived as "less popular" – with most children still easily accessing social media platforms, the social cost is reversed as "it is complying that is socially costly".⁵¹

Most importantly, banning children does not ban misogyny. The harmful content will remain on platforms, ready to reach young people when they are permitted to return – unless the systems that amplify it are changed. A child who turns 16 should not suddenly enter an online environment without the experience, critical skills or safeguards needed to navigate it safely.

The answer must therefore be a safer internet, not simply a smaller one. Platforms must be held accountable for the content and experiences they create and amplify. Algorithms and design features that promote harmful gendered narratives must be scrutinised and changed. Reporting systems must work, with children able to trust that harmful content will be acted

A safer internet must enable all children to participate freely, without being exposed to content that limits who they can be or how they understand others.

upon. And prevention and education must equip children with the knowledge, confidence and alternative narratives they need to challenge harmful gender norms.

This is particularly important for girls, whose participation online is already constrained by fear of misogynistic abuse, and for boys, who can be drawn into increasingly harmful narratives without access to strong counter-perspectives. A safer internet must enable all children to participate freely, without being exposed to content that limits who they can be or how they understand others.

We therefore undertook an extensive listening exercise with young people and sector experts to identify the policy changes needed to create a safer and more joyful internet. The recommendations that follow set out a route towards an online environment where children's rights, safety and equality are designed in from the start – rather than addressed only after harm has occurred.

Children have told us what they need.

The responsibility now lies with Government, platforms and wider society to listen – and to act.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Put young people at the heart of digital policy

We're calling on the UK Government to establish a Youth Council for Online Futures – because decisions about young people's online lives should never be made without them.

This Council must be diverse, gender-balanced and inclusive of marginalised voices, ensuring policies reflect real experiences in a rapidly changing digital world.

This Council should have regular, meaningful engagement with Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport; Department of Education; and Ofcom, so young people can influence regulation, education, and hold platforms to account. It's time to create a digital future shaped by those who live it every day.

Guidance doesn't cut it – Regulate for real change

Voluntary promises from platforms have failed. Children's safety cannot be left to chance—or to corporate goodwill. That's why we're calling on Parliament to take bold action and strengthen the Online Safety Act (2023).

The Act must go further. It needs a clear, legal definition of Safety by Design and a mandatory Safety by Design Code of Practice, so safety is built in from day one—not patched in after harm happens. New online products must be required to put children's safety front and centre of their design features—not squeeze it in as an afterthought.

We back the Online Safety Network's Ten-Point Plan⁵² in full, as the roadmap to a safer digital future.

But rules mean nothing without teeth. Ofcom must have real power and proper resources— including funding, capacity and enforcement authority. Without that, the Act risks becoming another empty promise.

And every measure must work for all children, not just some. Intersectionality must sit at the heart of every Code of Practice, so girls and the most marginalised children are not left behind online.

Make algorithms safe and transparent for every child

The UK Government should require social media platforms to identify, prevent and mitigate algorithmic systems that expose children to harmful gendered content. Platforms must test recommender systems for gendered harms, including how quickly children are funnelled towards misogyny, harmful stereotypes and restrictive gender roles, and demonstrate that foreseeable harms are being addressed.

Big Tech cannot keep marking its own homework. Platforms should publish mandatory annual transparency reports, with accessible data on breaches of Ofcom's rules, broken down by age, gender and other protected characteristics. Independent researchers must have meaningful access to platform data, while Ofcom must have the powers and resources to independently audit algorithms and take enforcement action.

Platforms should also provide safer default settings and meaningful ways for children to understand, challenge and reset recommendations.

Children should not have to change their behaviour to stay safe online. Platforms must change the systems putting them at risk.

Give every young person the power to stay safe online

It's time to embed comprehensive social media education in every school, starting from primary level. Young people need to develop algorithmic literacy skills to understand how algorithms shape what they see, recognise harmful content (even when it's subtle), and know how to stay in control online.

Curricula must be co-designed with young people, so it keeps up with technology and reflects real digital lives—not outdated rules.

But education can't stop at the classroom.

We're calling for Government-funded, practical social media literacy training for parents, carers, and teachers, so no family is left behind. And let's be clear: this is about empowering people, not shifting responsibility. Platforms must still be held accountable for harm prevention, always.

Create safe, inclusive third spaces — Online and offline

Every child deserves a place where they can connect, learn, and feel safe—whether that's on the street, in a youth centre, or in a digital space. For minoritised and marginalised communities, who often face barriers to physical interaction, this is even more vital.

We welcome the UK Government's £132.5 million Every Child Can programme, but investment must reach every community fairly—there can be no postcode lottery in access to opportunities.

We are calling for long-term funding and commitment to new physical spaces for children and young people to socialise safely. Alongside this, we need inclusive digital platforms designed with safety and creativity at their core—places where young people can explore ideas, connect with others, and thrive without harm.

Give children agency over their online world – Safer default settings now

Young people shouldn't have to fight for safety or be punished for Big Tech's failures. Children over 13 should have a right to access safe online lives and communities but platforms must make safe settings the default. Plan International UK believes internet regulation should focus on safety by design approaches, not on a broad approach which treats all children nor social media sites the same. We do not support children being banned from social media entirely, but in building safe online communities. Current default settings can include elements such as endless scroll features, autoplay, or push notifications - these are not wanted by young people. They want the standard settings on platforms to have these harmful features turned off as default for under-16s.

Young people want agency over what they see and how they experience online. They want to explore different ideas, cultures, and experiences, communicate with friends, and be creative. We need meaningful user control for teens.

Make tackling misogyny a national priority

For the first time, the UK Government has declared VAWG a national emergency, with a pledge to halve it within a decade. If we are serious about achieving that ambition, we must address one of its root causes: the normalisation of misogyny.

This requires a whole-society approach, backed by clear leadership, sustained investment and measurable action. The UK Government should set clear, time-bound targets for reducing misogyny and harmful gender stereotypes, and report publicly on progress as part of its VAWG strategy. It must also collect and publish robust, disaggregated data – by gender, age, ethnicity, disability and location – to understand who is experiencing misogyny, how it is changing and where action and resources are most needed.

Prevention and education must be a much stronger and properly funded pillar of the VAWG strategy. Schools are one of the most important places to challenge harmful gender norms before they become entrenched. The Relationships, Sex, and Health Education (RSHE) Guidance already expects teachers to address misogyny and promote respectful relationships, but schools need the funding, training, resources and confidence to deliver this consistently and well. The UK Government should set out a long-term plan for prevention and education, including investment in teacher training and the professionalisation of RSHE, with a clear ambition that every young person receives credible, high-quality healthy relationships education.

If VAWG is a national emergency, preventing it must be treated with the urgency that emergency demands. Eradicating systemic misogyny is not just about protecting girls and women – it is about creating a society in which boys and girls can grow up free from harmful gender stereotypes and where violence against women and girls is no longer normalised.

APPENDIX

Methodological approach

This new research study takes an intersectional feminist approach to provide a rounded snapshot of girls' rights and girls' lives, in all their diversity, across the UK today. We based the development on learnings from *The State of Girls' Rights in the UK* reports in 2016, 2020 and 2024.

This report was built on a methodological approach inspired by feminist and participatory action methodologies. Feminist methodologies can be described as an “attempt to eradicate sexist bias in research and find ways to capture women's voices that are consistent with feminist ideals.”⁵³

The research is guided by Plan International UK's Feminist Leadership Principles.⁵⁴ In practice this meant continually foregrounding the voices of girls and young women and reflecting on decisions made in the research from a feminist perspective.

Feminist methodologies have much in common with participatory approaches. For example, both approaches focus on collaboration, emphasise the lived experiences of participants, challenge common ways of generating knowledge, minimise hierarchies, and have an overall motivation to support social change. Participatory action research (PAR) approaches are described as:

“Research by, with, and for people affected by a particular problem, which takes place in collaboration with academic researchers. It seeks to [democratise] knowledge production and foster opportunities for empowerment by those involved.”⁵⁵

This research combines elements of PAR and feminist methodologies and is also inspired by Plan International's ambition to be youth-centred, as set out in our organisational strategy 2021-23. The key areas of the research where girls and young women participated included:

- Plan International UK's Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) were consulted on the topics of focus for the research and recommendation development, as well as on specific topic of the social media ban.
- Primary research was conducted in workshops and surveys with young people.
- Our survey included open box questions where girls and young women could share what was important to them.

We also engaged with third sector and campaigning organisations through including organisations committed to girls' rights in the UK, members of the Online Safety Network, and further contacts which included holding an open call and workshop sessions to discuss potential recommendations that would reflect the wider feelings of the girls' and women's rights and online safety sectors.

Plan International UK is committed to adhering to and implementing ethical standards in monitoring, evaluation, and research initiatives.⁵⁶ All research activities were undertaken in line with Plan International's Research Policy and Standards. Researchers were required to adhere to strict codes of conduct, including child protection and safeguarding policies, and additional safeguarding measures were put in place including in the handling of data. Discovery and Opinion Research are members of the Market Research Society.⁵⁷ Opinion Research is a member of the British Polling Council.⁵⁸

We seek to ensure that the wellbeing, dignity, rights, and safety of children, young people and other participants in monitoring, evaluation, and research initiatives are respected and protected. As with all of Plan International UK's programmes, campaigns, and research, this research adhered to the highest standards of ethics, safeguarding, and risk mitigation.

There are a number of challenges faced by children and young people which may be upsetting to participants in our research and to readers. Readers will come to this report

with unique life experiences. The decisions to include this content is not taken lightly but is important to show the range of challenges facing children and young people, in particular girls, today. We took specific steps to safeguard younger and more vulnerable participants. We went through a rigorous safeguarding and ethics process, which was followed in response to any disclosures. Results were processed in line with Plan International's Safeguarding policies and processes.

As outlined in our *The State of Girls' Rights in the UK 2024* report:

This shows a complex picture of mixed progress. While this report focuses on girls and young women, the associated actions and recommendations are designed to help the social and economic institutions and structures to change to accommodate the interests of a more diverse constituency – girls may face challenges but do not need to be 'fixed', nor treated as the 'problem'.⁵⁹

Desk Research

Ahead of the primary research, a light-touch literature review was conducted. The reports reviewed provided valuable insights into online behaviours and trending topics among children, thereby feeding into the design of the personas for algorithmic testing, and into the topics to be covered in the qualitative workshops. In addition, the review included reviewing behavioural frameworks and cognitive biases linked to social media consumption. This then helped to contextualise findings from the workshops and survey, and references to this wider research are included throughout the report.

Survey sample from CHILDSWISE Omnibus

We utilised the CHILDSWISE Omnibus survey, a termly research study conducted in schools across the UK (in Spring, Summer, and Autumn), to access a nationally representative sample of more than 1200 children aged 7 to 17. The omnibus offers a valuable opportunity to capture young peoples lived experiences, providing

results that can be cross-tabulated with key demographic data.

The 2026 Spring wave of the omnibus surveyed 1,440 children and young people via the CHILDSWISE schools panel. Children from school years 3 to 12 were approached to take part in this research, with interviews carried out online in school.

- Fieldwork was carried out between 24 February to 27 March 2026.
- A total of 1,440 children aged between 7 and 17 took part via 30 schools from the CHILDSWISE panel.
- The sample has been weighted to ensure equal representation by age (Primary / Secondary) and gender – and included a small sample (11) of non-binary participants. Students in the survey were able to self-identify their gender, with trans girls and trans boys included within the girls and boys groups respectively. Due to the small sample of non-binary participants, it is not possible to draw any robust or statistically reliable findings for this group.
- The sample includes children with disabilities (self-reported) and reflects a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds.
- School level Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) data was also included. While this is less precise than individual level measures (such as Socio-Economic Group or SEG), it provides useful socio-economic context and is based on the school postcode.
- Together, these additional demographic variables enable analysis across intersectional groups (people who share more than one identity characteristic), providing a more nuanced understanding of children's experiences. Throughout the report we highlight statistically significant differences between groups (to a 95% confidence level). Where no differences are mentioned, none were found to be significant.
- The sample also includes representation from England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

Figure 23: Sample breakdown by age

Total	Primary years 3-6 (Age 7-10)	Secondary years 7-12 (Age 11-17)
1440	510	930

Figure 24: Sample breakdown by gender

Boys	Girls	Non-Binary*
752	677	11

*To reflect the changing nature of gender identity, and to give all respondents equal opportunity to express themselves in the way they prefer, we asked children on the survey how they identify (“How would you describe yourself”) and provided three options—boy, girl, and an open response box to be completed in their own words. We refer to these children using the umbrella term ‘non-binary’ to include all those who identify outside the gender binary, while still acknowledging their own individual ways of self-identifying.

Figure 25: Sample breakdown by nation

England	1027
Wales	116
Scotland	121
Northern Ireland	176

Figure 26: Sample breakdown by disability (self-reported)

People with disabilities	Not disabled	Don't know/ No reply
189	1047	11

Figure 27: Sample breakdown by ethnicity

White	805
Other white	138
Black	78
Asian	156
Mixed	65
Other	35
DK/NR	163

Figure 28: Sample breakdown by school-level IMD

High deprivation (IMD 1-5)	412
Low deprivation (IMD 6-10)	1028

Survey Questions from CHILDWISE Omnibus

Included as a standard CHILDWISE question
Multi response – randomise order of codes

1) Which of the following online platforms do you use? Tick all that apply.

YouTube
TikTok
Snapchat
Instagram
WhatsApp
X / Twitter
Facebook
Reddit (only shown to 11+)
Substack only shown to 11+)
UpScrolled (only shown to 11+)
Discord (only shown to 11+)
Gaming platforms (e.g. Roblox, Fortnite, Minecraft etc.)
Livestreaming platforms (e.g. Twitch etc.)
Streaming platforms (e.g. Netflix, Disney+ etc.)
Somewhere else – write in
None of these
Don't know

Multiple response - randomise order of codes

2) How do you usually feel when you spend time online? Tick up to three responses

Happy
Excited
Relaxed
Bored
Confused
Sad
Worried
Angry
Scared
Anxious
Don't know

Grid, single response per statement

Columns: often / sometimes / never / don't know

3) How often do you see or hear things online that say:

- a) How girls should act
- b) How girls should dress
- c) How girls should behave
- d) What jobs girls should do
- e) What hobbies and interests girls should have

Grid, single response per statement

Columns: often / sometimes / never / don't know

4) How often do you see or hear things online that say:

- a) How boys should act
- b) How boys should dress
- c) How boys should behave
- d) What jobs boys should do
- e) What hobbies and interests boys should have

Single response

5) Have you seen or heard things online about boys and girls that have stopped you from acting, dressing or behaving in a way that you wanted to?

Yes, often
Yes, sometimes
No, never
Don't know

Open response

6) What would make being online feel more enjoyable or comfortable for you?

Topline data from CHILDSWISE Omnibus

Please note, data has been weighted to ensure equal representation by age (Primary / Secondary) and gender. **Green ▲** markers indicate where the data is statistically significant (to a 95% confidence level).

Age 7-17: Multi response

1) Which of the following online platforms do you use?

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.1439	7-10 (PRI) n.510	11-17 (SEC) n.929	Boy n.751	Girl n.677	Other* n.11
YouTube	85	85	85	87	83	-
Gaming Platforms e.g. Roblox, Fortnite, Minecraft etc.	79	82 ▲	76	83 ▲	75	-
Streaming Platforms e.g. Netflix, Disney+ etc.	75	71	79 ▲	71	79 ▲	-
WhatsApp	62	40	84 ▲	61	64	-
TikTok	48	28	67 ▲	44	52 ▲	-
Snapchat	38	18	58 ▲	36	40	-
Instagram	25	6	45 ▲	21	30 ▲	-
Discord (only shown to 11-17s)	24	-	24	38 ▲	10	-
Facebook	13	6	20 ▲	12	13	-
Livestreaming Platforms e.g. Twitch	10	6	15 ▲	16 ▲	5	-
Reddit (only shown to 11-17s)	8	-	8	10	5	-
X / Twitter	7	3	11 ▲	9 ▲	5	-
Substack (only shown to 11-17s)	1	-	1	2	0	-
UpScrolled (only shown to 11-17s)	1	-	1	1	0	-
Others	4	5	4	4	4	-
None of these	0	0	0	0	0	-
Don't know	0	0	1	1	0	-

*Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

**This question was included as a standard CHILDSWISE question

Note: Platforms highlighted in grey were only asked of children aged 11-17, therefore figures in the total column are based on the 11-17s sample rather than the full 7-17s sample – and the same for the gender columns

Age 7-17: Multi response (combined app groups)

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.1439	7-10 (PRI) n.510	11-17 (SEC) n.929	Boy n.751	Girl n.677	Other* n.11
Video-first Platforms e.g. YouTube / TikTok	90	87	93 ▲	90	91	-
Gaming Platforms e.g. Roblox, Fortnite, Minecraft	79	82 ▲	76	83 ▲	75	-
Streaming Platforms e.g. Netflix, Disney+	75	71	79 ▲	71	79 ▲	-
Social-first Platforms e.g. Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter / X, Discord	72	49	94 ▲	70	74	-
Livestreaming Platforms e.g. Twitch	10	6	15 ▲	16 ▲	5	-
Forums and newsletter style platforms e.g. Reddit, UpScrolled, Substack (11+)	9	-	9	11	6	-

*Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

Note: Forums and newsletter style platforms include apps only asked of children aged 11-17, therefore figures in the total column are based on the 11-17s sample rather than the full 7-17s sample – and the same for the gender columns

While streaming services were included as part of the survey, they were not explored in depth elsewhere in the research and therefore represent a potential area for further research.

Age 7-17: Multi response

2) How do you usually feel when you spend time online? Tick up to three responses

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.1440	7-10 (PRI) n.510	11-17 (SEC) n.930	Boy n.752	Girl n.677	Other* n.11
Happy	63	62	65	63	63	-
Relaxed	60	54	66 ▲	60	61	-
Excited	33	36	31	39 ▲	28	-
Bored	16	14	18	14	18	-
Angry	5	5	5	7 ▲	3	-
Confused	4	5	3	3	5	-
Anxious	3	3	3	2	3	-
Worried	2	3	1	2	2	-
Sad	2	2	1	2	1	-
Scared	1	2	1	2	1	-
Don't know	12	12	11	9	14 ▲	-

*Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

Age 7-17: Grid, Single response

3-4) How often do you see or hear things online that say:*

* Two different versions of this question were shown, question 3 for girls and question 4 for boys. Data is combined below.

a) How girls should act

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.1440	7-10 (PRI) n.510	11-17 (SEC) n.930	Boy n.752	Girl n.677	Other** n.11
Often	14	15	12	10	17 ▲	-
Sometimes	26	18	33 ▲	18	34 ▲	-
Never	41	44 ▲	37	48 ▲	33	-
Don't know	20	22	17	24 ▲	15	-

**Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

Age 7-17: Grid, Single response

How often do you see or hear things online that say:

a) How boys should act

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.1440	7-10 (PRI) n.510	11-17 (SEC) n.930	Boy n.752	Girl n.677	Other* n.11
Often	19	19	18	24 ▲	14	-
Sometimes	28	20	35 ▲	28	28	-
Never	37	42 ▲	32	34	40	-
Don't know	16	18	15	14	19	-

*Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

Age 7-17: Grid, Single response

How often do you see or hear things online that say:

b) How girls should dress

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.1440	7-10 (PRI) n.510	11-17 (SEC) n.930	Boy n.752	Girl n.677	Other* n.11
Often	16	16	16	9	23 ▲	-
Sometimes	24	19	29 ▲	16	31 ▲	-
Never	41	44 ▲	38	50 ▲	31	-
Don't know	19	21	17	25 ▲	14	-

*Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

Age 7-17: Grid, Single response

How often do you see or hear things online that say:

b) How boys should dress

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.1440	7-10 (PRI) n.510	11-17 (SEC) n.930	Boy n.752	Girl n.677	Other* n.11
Often	16	18	14	22 ▲	11	-
Sometimes	24	18	30 ▲	22	26	-
Never	42	45	40	41	43	-
Don't know	18	19	16	16	20	-

*Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

Age 7-17: Grid, Single response

How often do you see or hear things online that say:

c) How girls should behave

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.1440	7-10 (PRI) n.510	11-17 (SEC) n.930	Boy n.752	Girl n.677	Other* n.11
Often	14	16	11	11	17 ▲	-
Sometimes	23	17	29 ▲	15	31 ▲	-
Never	45	47	42	51 ▲	37	-
Don't know	19	20	18	23 ▲	16	-

*Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

Age 7-17: Grid, Single response

How often do you see or hear things online that say:

c) How boys should behave

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.1440	7-10 (PRI) n.510	11-17 (SEC) n.930	Boy n.752	Girl n.677	Other* n.11
Often	19	22	17	26 ▲	13	-
Sometimes	26	19	32 ▲	24	27	-
Never	38	41	35	35	41	-
Don't know	17	18	15	15	19	-

*Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

Age 7-17: Grid, Single response

How often do you see or hear things online that say:

d) What jobs girls should do

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.1440	7-10 (PRI) n.510	11-17 (SEC) n.930	Boy n.752	Girl n.677	Other* n.11
Often	11	12	9	9	12	-
Sometimes	22	17	27 ▲	17	27 ▲	-
Never	48	49	46	52 ▲	43	-
Don't know	20	22	18	22	18	-

*Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

Age 7-17: Grid, Single response

How often do you see or hear things online that say:

d) What jobs boys should do

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.1440	7-10 (PRI) n.510	11-17 (SEC) n.930	Boy n.752	Girl n.677	Other* n.11
Often	18	19	16	24 ▲	12	-
Sometimes	25	21	28 ▲	26	23	-
Never	41	41	41	35	46 ▲	-
Don't know	17	19	15	15	19	-

*Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

Age 7-17: Grid, Single response

How often do you see or hear things online that say:

e) What hobbies and interests girls should have

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.1440	7-10 (PRI) n.510	11-17 (SEC) n.930	Boy n.752	Girl n.677	Other* n.11
Often	12	13	11	8	16 ▲	-
Sometimes	25	21	30 ▲	18	32 ▲	-
Never	43	44	43	50 ▲	35	-
Don't know	19	22 ▲	17	23 ▲	16	-

*Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

Age 7-17: Grid, Single response

How often do you see or hear things online that say:

e) What hobbies and interests boys should have

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.1440	7-10 (PRI) n.510	11-17 (SEC) n.930	Boy n.752	Girl n.677	Other* n.11
Often	17	19	15	23 ▲	11	-
Sometimes	27	21	33 ▲	28	26	-
Never	39	41	37	33	43 ▲	-
Don't know	17	19	16	16	20	-

*Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

Age 7-17: Combined table

Number of gendered messages young people have seen online about GIRLS:

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.1440	7-10 (PRI) n.510	11-17 (SEC) n.930	Boy n.752	Girl n.677	Other* n.11
None	43	47 ▲	39	56 ▲	30	-
1 statement from Q3	8	9	8	10	7	-
2 statements from Q3	11	11	10	8	13 ▲	-
3 statements from Q3	11	11	11	8	15 ▲	-
4 statements from Q3	10	11	10	8	13 ▲	-
5 statements (ALL) from Q3	16	11	21 ▲	10	22 ▲	-

*Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

Age 7-17: Combined table

Number of gendered messages GIRLS have seen online about GIRLS, by number of platforms used:

%	Total	Number of Platforms Used (GIRLS)		
	n.677	1-3	4-6	7+
Seen 1-5 statements about girls	70	58	74	83
Seen NONE	30	42	26	17

Note: Age is likely to be a factor here because we know usage of platforms and exposure to gendered messaging both increase with age. Therefore, these findings should be interpreted and used with caution.

Age 7-17: Combined table

Number of gendered messages young people have seen online about BOYS:

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.1440	7-10 (PRI) n.510	11-17 (SEC) n.930	Boy n.752	Girl n.677	Other* n.11
None	37	42 ▲	32	33	40	-
1 statement from Q4	8	8	8	7	10	-
2 statements from Q4	12	10	13	10	14	-
3 statements from Q4	11	11	11	11	11	-
4 statements from Q4	10	9	10	10	9	-
5 statements (ALL) from Q4	23	20	26 ▲	29 ▲	17	-

*Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

Age 7-17: Combined table

Number of gendered messages BOYS have seen online about BOYS, by number of platforms used:

%	Total	Number of Platforms Used (BOYS)		
	n.752	1-3	4-6	7+
Seen 1-5 statements about boys	67	59	70	74
Seen NONE	33	41	30	26

Note: Age is likely to be a factor here because we know usage of platforms and exposure to gendered messaging both increase with age. Therefore, these findings should be interpreted and used with caution.

Age 7-17: Single response

Have you seen or heard things online about boys and girls that have stopped you from acting, dressing or behaving in a way that you wanted to?

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.1440	7-10 (PRI) n.510	11-17 (SEC) n.930	Boy n.752	Girl n.677	Other* n.11
Yes, often	5	5	6	5	6	-
Yes, sometimes	22	21	23	18	26 ▲	-
No, never	58	58	58	64 ▲	51	-
Don't know	15	16	13	13	17	-

*Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

Age 7-17: Single response

The government is thinking about making new rules that could stop children under the age of 16 from using social media. Do you think it is a good or a bad idea for the government to stop children under 16 from using social media?

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.1443	7-10 (PRI) n.508	11-17 (SEC) n.926	Boy n.747	Girl n.676	Other* n.11
A good idea	25	32 ▲	18	22	27	-
A bad idea	54	40	68 ▲	56	51	-
I'm not sure	21	28 ▲	14	21	21	-

*Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

Age 11-17: Multi response

Thinking about young people who currently use social media – what do you think could help to make it safer or healthier for them?

%	Total	Age		Gender		
	n.913	7-10 (PRI) n.0	11-17 (SEC) n.913	Boy n.468	Girl n.435	Other* n.10
Block or remove harmful content	62	n/a	62	54	70 ▲	-
Let children unlock more features on the apps as they get older	37	n/a	37	34	40	-
Require parent's permission before setting up an account	37	n/a	37	33	40	-
Have versions of the app made just for children e.g. like YouTube Kids	32	n/a	32	25	38 ▲	-
Stricter age checks so younger children can't sign up	31	n/a	31	26	35	-
Limit how much time young people can use it each day	29	n/a	29	25	34 ▲	-
Have social media apps switch off overnight (so no one can use them)	23	n/a	23	20	26	-
Something else	5	n/a	5	6	5	-
Do nothing – it's fine as it is	14	n/a	14	18	11	-
Don't know	7	n/a	7	9	5	-

*Base size too low to make statistically valid conclusions

Qualitative Workshop sessions

The qualitative research comprised **four face-to-face workshop sessions**, delivered across two schools, one in London and the other in Cardiff. Each workshop involved around 6-7 children, providing an overall sample of 26 participants. The workshops were conducted in March-April 2026.

The workshops lasted 1 hour each and covered the following areas of discussion:

- Introductions and rapport building.
- Group discussion with exercise exploring how experiences shape gender norms and expectations in real life and online.
- Card based exercise, where children were shown cards with prompts on them to signpost specific examples of gendered content. This exercise was used flexibly to stimulate discussion. Children were only asked to discuss the content types that they were familiar with, and where children spontaneously discussed other examples of gendered content, the researcher followed their lead. This meant that the discussion remained child focused and centred on what they felt was highest priority. It also meant that not all topics were covered in all groups. The content types that were included were based on some key themes that emerged from the desk research. These content types were:

- Redpill/Blackpill/Incelosphere/manosphere.
- Alpha/Beta/Sigma.
- Looksmaxxing/appearance culture/beauty standards.
- Grindset - finance and fitness.
- Distinct gender roles and expectations in relationships.
- Pickup artists/advice on how to 'get' women/art of seduction.
- Judging people's value by past relationships.
- Online harassment / bullying and moral policing of people due to their sex, gender identity or sexual orientation.
- Anti feminism / mocking equality.
- Self-complete task to explore how children think online spaces can be made safer.

Throughout the discussion, the researchers used projective exercises which allow participants to answer how they think someone like them might feel or behave, rather than being required to recount their own actual experiences. This is a technique which helps to ensure that children feel safe and means that they retain control over how much they choose to share. The children included in the groups all chose to share examples of their own experiences as well as answering some questions protectively.

Figure 29: Qualitative sample

Region / School	Gender*	Age (year group)	Other demographics	Online experiences
School 1: London	Workshop 1: Girls	Year 7	Diverse sample within each school, including a mix of ethnicity and range of perspectives.	All participants used some forms of social media – and had seen some gendered content** A mix of participants with varying levels of online activity, and confidence online. (This was established by the teachers that selected pupils to participate).
	Workshop 2: Boys	Year 8		
School 2: Cardiff	Workshop 3: Girls	Year 8		
	Workshop 4: Boys	Year 9		

*Gender was self-defined by participants in the workshops, based on how they identify at school

**All students taking part were required to use at least one social media platform and have some awareness of gender-related content online e.g. posts, videos, or messages that communicate certain ideas or expectations about what it means to be a boy, a girl, a man, or a woman.

Algorithmic Testing using Synthetic Profiles

Algorithmic testing, in this context, is a process of exploring how an algorithm shows different content depending on what information it has about the user, and how quickly it does this.

The personas developed were informed by the Research Team's extensive experience of this field and our initial desk research which provided data around typical hobbies, interests and content preferences of children. Children are not a homogenous group, and it would be impossible to cover an extensive range of possible interests and ages within a limited number of personas. Therefore, we took a pragmatic approach, including four personas which were designed to be "typical" – covering an older (16-year-old) age category and a younger (13-year-old) age category, and encompassing the interests and hobbies that are particularly common within these age ranges.⁶⁰

It was not possible to specify gender when setting up the TikTok accounts, so interests and hobbies were used as a proxy to gender the personas. While interests and hobbies are not inherently gendered, there are statistical differences in which are more common amongst different genders. It was also clear from the findings that the algorithm assumed gender in line with the hobbies we had selected. This is detailed in the findings, where we explain that the personas were targeted with messages that referred to 'boys' and 'girls' explicitly.

The final two personas were developed later on in the research process – after the quantitative survey, qualitative workshops and some of the algorithmic testing had been completed. Drawing on the evidence collected, including gendered content discussed in the discussion groups and themes encountered in the algorithm tests so far, alongside evidence from the literature review, we developed a boy and a girl persona who were more strongly aligned to heavily gendered views and designed to be more vulnerable to misogynistic messaging online. For instance, we designed the girl to have an interest in 'stay at home girlfriend' content, 'hyperfemininity' and traditional gender roles.

The boy was designed to be interested in dating advice and content that suggests men are at a disadvantage compared to women. To ensure that these personas were more vulnerable to this type of content, we developed a list of prompts to search for in the TikTok search feature.

All personas used a London IP address.

An overview of the six personas is included below.

Each persona was set up as a TikTok account created on a phone which had been erased and reset to factory defaults, using a new email address each time. The sign-up process involved selecting date of birth and then choosing interests from a list.

For each profile, we spent 10-20 minutes per day watching content that appeared on the For You Page and repeated this for five days. Testing took place at a similar time each day – between 4-6pm. To avoid interacting with any users, especially users under the age of 18, we followed previous guidance from similar research⁶¹ and did not like/follow/comment on any content or creators. To guide the algorithm, we copied the share link of the video – we only did this where the content being shown aligned to the interests and preferred content of the persona.

For personas 1-4, the "typical" personas, we did not actively search for any specific content. For the vulnerable personas 5 and 6, we added a further step to the process. The search bar prompts outlined were inputted each day (one per day) to ensure that these profiles were more vulnerable to misogynistic content. Every time we searched one of the terms/phrases, we watched 10 seconds of the first five videos that appeared, then returned to the videos on the For You Page.

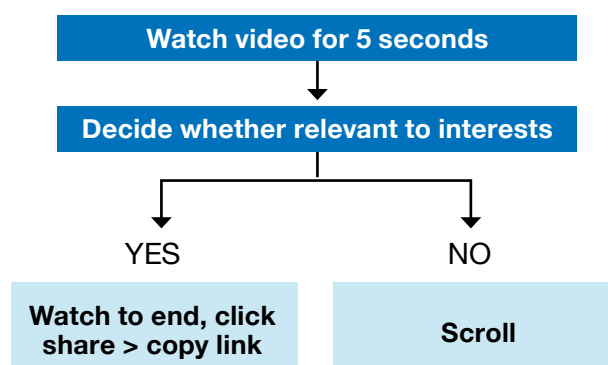


Figure 30: Information on Personas for Testing

No.	Username	Gender	Age	Interests	Preferred Content	Potential vulnerabilities
1	@sparkle_matrix	Female	13	Music Dance Drama	Dance challenges, lip-sync videos, viral songs, friendship/school humour.	
2	@glitter_v1ral	Female	16	Beauty and fashion Travel Sports Oddly satisfying	GRWM ["Get Ready with Me"] routines, fashion hauls, gym routines, skincare tips, 'day in my life' content.	
3	@meme_l3g3nd42	Male	13	Football Funny Gaming Sports	FIFA / Fortnite Clips, football highlights, skill tutorials, funny sports edits, streamer reactions.	
4	@hust13_tr4in	Male	16	Sports Cars Science and Tech Extreme sports Beauty and fashion	Gym/fitness, sports, motivational speeches, cars, finance, transformation edits.	
5	@s1gma_vo1d	Male	16	Anime Gaming Science and tech Learning	AI, coding, tech videos, gaming, looksmaxxing, dating advice content.	Potentially vulnerable to 'incel' content Search bar prompts include: "how to get confidence" "how to talk to girls" "male loneliness" "female nature explained" "how important are looks for men" "why dating is harder for men"
6	@glowgirl_xx	Female	15	Beauty and fashion Sports Music Entertainment	Luxury lifestyle content, soft life, hyper-femininity, relationship content.	Potentially vulnerable to 'tradwife' content Search bar prompts include: "soft life" "Stay at home girlfriend" "hyper-femininity" "how to glow up" "what do boys want in a girl"

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