

## Article

# Young People's Perspectives on Online Hate, Unwanted Sexual Content, and 'Unrealistic' Body- and Appearance-Related Content: Implications for Resilience and Digital Citizenship

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**Abstract:** Young people encounter and experience both risks and opportunities when participating as actors and interactors in online spaces. Digital skills and resilience are considered important parts of a “rights-based” approach to keeping young people “safe” online in ways that enable them to avoid harm while benefiting from the opportunities. The present paper discusses findings from focus group research conducted in England with 60 young people aged 13 to 21. The research explored their perspectives on responding to different online harms, including online hate, unwanted sexual content, and unrealistic body- and appearance-related content. The findings are discussed in terms of scholarship on digital citizenship, specifically regarding the social, affective, and technical dimensions of online life and the skills required for resilience. The analysis suggests that there was a tension between young people’s individualistic responsabilisation of themselves and one another for responding to risk online and the socio-emotional aspects of online life as perceived and recounted by them in the focus groups. It is concluded that a youth-centred approach to resilience is required that encapsulates the multidimensional nature of encountering, experiencing, and responding to risk online.

**Keywords:** young people; resilience; online; digital; digital citizenship; qualitative methods; focus groups



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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary online spaces have been described as “... dynamic, and interactive” [1] (p. 3). Comprised of networked publics in which young people act and interact with known and unknown others, Web 2.0 seamlessly flows from their offline lives and realities and digitally mediates how they form, enact, and participate in relationships, sociality, identity construction and expression, and play [1,2]. Keeping young people “safe” online is an ongoing priority [3–5] although there has been an evident shift from early panic and protectionist discourses to a more nuanced examination of the risks and opportunities of being online [6]. Supporting young people to develop and practice digital skills and, in turn, support their resilience, is considered integral to keeping them safe as they navigate and participate in online spaces in ways that enable them to avoid harm while benefiting from the opportunities [3,7–9]. In Web 2.0, skills and resilience are, seemingly, not just about what is encountered online but also the ways in which individuals are participating as actors in terms of their own content creation and sharing [10].

Scholars have, however, also emphasised the need to embed young people’s online lives in a wider social context and to address what it means to be a “digital citizen” in the online age [2,11,12]. As discussed further below, this requires consideration of the communitarian and ethical aspects of being online, as well as individual level skills and knowledge. Furthermore, recognising and legitimising young people as agentic rights-holders and active participants in online spaces requires giving them space to articulate their perspectives and experiences of being online and incorporating their voices into

conceptualisations of risk and resilience [13–15]. In this spirit, the present paper discusses findings from focus groups conducted with young people aged 13 to 21 in England which explored their perspectives on a range of “online harms”, including their perceptions of and responses to content they deemed harmful or otherwise problematic (specifically “online hate”, “unwanted sexual content”, and “unrealistic body- and appearance-related content”). Their accounts are critically interrogated to identify the multidimensional nature of what it means to be resilient online, exploring digital skills but also the socio-emotional aspects of encountering and responding to online harms. Their accounts were shaped by wider socio-structural contexts, reinforcing the framing of online harms as social, as well as online, problems [16]. The contribution of the paper is two-fold: first, it engages with notions of “digital citizenship” grounded in the voices of young people; and second, it offers empirical support for a multifaceted approach to resilience in the online age that encompasses the social, affective, and technical dimensions of digital citizenship. For clarity, “online” is used to refer to young people’s perspectives and experiences of being online while “digital” is used when conceptualising the skills and competences required for resilience and safety.

## 2. Literature Review

While heterogenous in their use of the Internet and experiences of being online, a range of risks and opportunities have been identified for youth. The opportunities relate to learning, communication, participation, creativity, and entertainment on both personal and civic levels [17–19]. Some young people say they find it easier to “be themselves” online and the Internet can help reduce feelings of isolation [4,20]. Risks, meanwhile, span content, contact, and conduct and can be aggressive, sexual, value-related, and commercial in nature [19,21,22]. Examples include hateful content, unwanted sexual content, and “unrealistic” body- and appearance-related content, which are discussed further below. There may arise negative impacts on health and wellbeing for young people who encounter and experience risk [23], although extensive evidence suggests that risk does not always lead to harm [15,21]. Instead, the association between risk and harm, while complex and yet to be conclusively established, seems rooted in offline causal factors and circumstances (e.g., [19,24–28]). Increasing attention has been paid, therefore, to who exactly is at risk of harm online, the nature of the harm, and how young people’s digital safety should be conceptualised and supported.

Livingstone et al. [6] trace the changing discourses about young people’s digital lives from panic, protectionism, control, and restriction to a more nuanced examination of how young people are using the Internet and to what effect in terms of the risks and opportunities. Young people’s heterogeneity and agency online has increasingly been recognised, including regarding how they respond to and engage with risk and opportunity. Livingstone et al. [6] also pinpoint an ensuing conceptualisation of the Internet as socially embedded rather than an “unreal” entity distinct from “real” offline lives. In this sense, existing behaviours, developmental processes, and social issues and concerns are becoming *digitally mediated* as they manifest online. It is yet to be established whether these processes cause harm or whether harm arises due to pre-existing factors [29], with Finkelhor [30] (p. 2) describing it as a “social problem amplifier” which may intensify or change the nature of harm but does not create new or entirely distinct harms that did not exist in some form or the other already.

A rights-based approach, which recognises both protection and participation rights online, has emphasised digital literacy, skills, and knowledge as underpinning effective use of the Internet, in which young people avoid being harmed by what they encounter, experience, and do online [31]. The skills involved relate to young people’s ability to interpret and make sense of what they encounter online and their own sharing and participation as actors and interactors in online networks [8,9,32]. Throuvala et al. [3] group the skills into “cognitive”, “personal”, and “interpersonal” as pertaining to problem solving, emotional, and social skills. Meanwhile, Livingstone et al. [33] (p. 4) describe digital skills as including technical and operational, information navigation and processing, communication and

interaction, and content creation and production skills. They describe these as “the skills required for problem-solving online, or to protect one’s privacy or safety online, participate in civic activities or cope with harmful experiences” [33] (p. 4). They caution, however, that a solely technical approach to digital skills and resilience is not enough; youth also need critical and evaluative skills to respond effectively to what they encounter and to make informed decisions about what they share and do online (also see [3]).

There is evidence that young people, especially as they get older, demonstrate the ability to weigh up the risks and benefits of particular courses of action online and, in turn, make informed decisions [34]. They have been found to be proactive and agentic in how they manage and respond to risk online [35,36] and capable of exercising self-regulation and risk management [37]. In qualitative research with young people, Edwards and Wang found that young people’s experiences in this regard reflected and were part of how they develop a “self-narrative” [38] (p. 727) and identity through their online lives and were, therefore, about “self-governance and personal agency” [38] (p. 728). In a review of studies, Livingstone et al. [33] identified a positive association between digital skills and the ability to cope with online experiences. In this sense, there is a distinction between avoiding harm and eradicating all risk. Evidence suggests that resilience protects against harm but encountering risk is necessary for developing and practicing the skills required for resilience [19] and is thus part of “normal, and usually functional, developmental processes in adolescence” [39] (p. 231).

“Resilience” can, therefore, be understood as the ability to navigate risk in ways that mean that harm is avoided or overcome without long-term or substantial damage [19]. It has been described as “the ability to rebound from online risks” [40] (p. 171). Harrison [41] describes it as the capacity to withstand or ‘bounce back’ from adversity or even use adversity for positive change. She distinguishes it from notions of vulnerability and passivity, with its relatively more positive orientation and framing. It is, essentially, a strengths-based approach to coping with and responding to negative experiences [42]. Advocates in turn argue for education to focus on skill development (e.g., [3]).

While resilience has typically been related to psychosocial factors (see [12]), the complexity and multifaceted nature of the concept has increasingly been identified, including in ‘resilience science’ models that encompass both “the individual and immediate environment” and the larger community and cultural systems impacting upon individuals and their experiences [43] (p. 927). In their review of research conducted with young people about resilience online, Sage et al. [40] found that it is impacted by individual, social, and environmental factors that exist in offline contexts. These wider contexts may be proximal, e.g., family, peers, school, or distal, e.g., social, economic, political, legal, etc. [44,45].

The social support and relationships young people have with those around them as part of these contexts are, therefore, important [13,46]. Livingstone et al. [6] suggest that attention must also be paid to the “digital ecology” in terms of the nature of and experiences within different digital spaces. They recommend a holistic examination of young people and their wellbeing, “in terms of their embodied, located and social as well as online selves” [6] (p. 1115). They add “community” as the factor representing “the extended social networks that children interact with... whether in their locale, or through religious or ethnic or other forms of belonging” and that “concerns their relationship with the world as mediated by the Internet in particular and changing ways” [6] (p. 1116). Likewise, Edwards and Wang [38] (p. 719) identified that the skills required for resilience pertain to both “individual and communitarian responsibilities” within young people’s online networks.

The socially and structurally embedded nature of online life has, furthermore, been associated with critiques of resilience that rest solely on neoliberal notions of individual responsibility, education, and awareness-raising that arise within contemporary risk societies [44,47]. Essentially, the unequal landscape of risk faced by different groups creates unequal demands for resilience that should be troubled rather than just being left to individuals to deal with (see [15,48]). It has been argued that this means that while it is

important not to be overly deterministic about technology and to instead centre young people's agency and participation, this must be done in ways that are critical of the societal structures that shape their online lives [49]. It needs to *support* rather than presume or demand agency and participation [44]. According to Willet [49], it is about going beyond the structure–agency dichotomy to identify how choice operates within cultural constraints and the contradictory possibilities for identity and experience that ensue. She critiques neoliberal attributions of success or failure to individuals and argues that instead what is interesting are the negotiations that take place within structural contexts. Harrison [41] similarly critiques conceptualisations of resilience that responsabilise “at-risk” subjects to manage the risks they face. She argues that these discourses do not account for the structural factors that create risk and constrain and erode resilience over the longer-term. She contends that it ultimately depoliticises risk and creates value judgments about what is deemed resilient or not. She found that “coping” is costly and argues that resilience should be conceptualised in ways that enable an identification of *why* some people are vulnerable.

Tsaliki [50] (p. 478) locates a neoliberal responsabilisation of young people in discourses of “youth at-risk online” and recommends a shift in focus from a “microscopic” to a “macroscopic” lens of analysis that addresses the social and cultural contexts at play. She contends that it is nevertheless important not to frame the Internet as a “problem” but instead explore wider contexts and identify how safety, agency, autonomy, and creative participation can be supported online. An overly optimistic or celebratory approach to conceiving digital skills, literacy, and resilience should not, therefore, obscure the ways in which the digital mediation of young people's lives and experiences is reflective of socio-structural inequalities; for example, pertaining to class, gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and socio-economic status [51]. The differential patterning to young people's online lives is well-documented, with more privileged Internet users being better positioned to reap the benefits than less privileged users [17,52] These privileged users seem to encounter both risks and opportunities at elevated levels, while having the ability to develop and practice digital skills and resilience [8]. A broad conceptualisation of the “digital divide” in terms of the differences in online experiences, skills, and literacy level is, therefore, required. This conceptualisation needs to consider individual users as part of “networks, groups and communities” [53] (p. 350) rather than atomised units of vulnerability or resilience.

### 2.1. Digital Citizenship

Scholarly conceptualisations of digital citizenship speak to the intersection between the individual and the wider socio-structural dimensions of online life. Evidence suggests that young people are relatively more alive to the individual and interpersonal ramifications of online life and the social norms of online contexts, while the community-level implications of what they encounter and experience are less often explicitly named or identified [54]. James [55] examined the nature of young people's engagement with the Internet and demarcated “self-focused” engagement, where the user thinks mainly of themselves; “moral focused”, where they think about the implications for others that they know, and “ethically focused” where they think about unknown individuals in the wider network. James [55] found that young people were mostly self-focused and, therefore, sometimes behaved in ways that were harmful toward their peers and/or unknown individuals. She suggests that it is important to focus on how online behaviours impact others as well as the need for personal digital literacy.

Digital citizenship can help to articulate these dimensions. Albury [56] discusses the need for digital citizenship, specifically regarding online sexual cultures. She recommends a form of digital literacy that encompasses ethics and (in)justice in online spaces as well as individual skills. It is about broadening conceptualisations of resilience as not just about what an individual does or does not do online but about the deeper contextual causes of online harms and the ethical orientations that young people do and should have toward themselves, as well as known and unknown others online. Her rights-based approach is grounded in deconstructing the social norms that shape expectations of behaviour

online. Harris and Johns [12] (p. 395) conceive of a “global digital citizenship” as “a more integrative and critical approach founded in citizenship principles that moves beyond an emphasis on challenges, opportunities and interventions at the level of the psychosocial”. They argue that it relates to “the socio-political processes by which young people can engage with and build diverse, safe and inclusive social spaces, and position themselves as rights-bearers and responsibility-holders” [12] (p. 401). Their conceptualisation is about responsibilities as well as skills and refers to communities not just individuals.

Digital citizenship is about participatory as well as protection rights; it is not protectionist or disempowering but identifies the conditions in which young people can participate openly in online spaces (see [49,51,56,57]). It includes political and civic activities but also young people’s broader “understanding of citizenship values, their civic engagement and their rights in the world” [46] (p. 25). Here, digital media can become a tool for learning and developing citizenship, because it is within “digital spaces... [that young people] develop preliminary frameworks for interpreting life, sets of opinions and prejudices, stereotypes and dilemmas, that guide their understanding of the meanings of everyday actions” [2] (p. 11). Harris and Johns [12] recommend harnessing digital media to identify how youth create and participate in civic spaces online and the community building that occurs. Albury (s. 34) [12] describes it as reorienting from the “impact” to the role it plays in shaping young people’s “place in the world”. She suggests that this requires participatory and active approaches. Her interviews with educators identified that media literacy may not in itself “inoculate [young people] against their own readings” but needs to centre their “own engagement with media production and media practices” [12] (s. 40). In other words, what young people *do* with media and how it links to their lives. As such, it is beneficial for marginalised “at-risk” youth specifically, but also all young people who are variously navigating these spaces and developing as citizens in the online era. The present paper discusses what young people’s perspectives on online harms reveal about what it means to them to be resilient online and the implications for digital citizenship in light of the socio-emotional dimensions to their experiences. First, a brief discussion of literature relevant to the three categories of online harms is presented.

## 2.2. Online Harms—Hateful, Unwanted Sexual, and Unrealistic Body- and Appearance-Related Content Online

Examples of online harms include hate, unwanted sexual content, and unrealistic body- and appearance-related content. Evidence pertaining to these issues suggests they are complex, and the experience and impact is rooted in multifaceted wider contexts that span online and offline. Starting with online hate, it is apparent that marginalised and “non-normative” young people can benefit from connecting with likeminded others, forming communities, and gaining support online [51,58]. At the same time, these youth face risks connected to their socio-structural positions (see [50,52,58,59]). This includes being directly or indirectly targeted with or affected by hate. Costello et al. [59] (p. 312) describe hate online as “the use of digital technology to profess attitudes devaluing others because of their religion, race, ethnicity, sex or gender, sexual orientation, national origin or some other characteristic”. Keipi et al. [60] (p. 55) describe it as the use of technology “to express sentiments that attack others based on race, national origin, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, or any other characteristic that defines a particular group”. It ranges along a spectrum of abuse that may or may not be illegal or liable for criminal sanction [61].

Online hate can take the form of extremist material [62] as well as more routinised interaction between individuals and hateful rhetoric in online spaces [60]. A US study found that most 15- to 36-year-olds surveyed had seen or heard hate material online in the previous six months [59]. Examining online hate affecting LGBT+ youth, Keighley [61] identified an elevated risk that is connected to offline experiences. She surveyed 13- to 25-year-old LGBT+ individuals in France, the US, Italy, Germany, Canada and Hong Kong about their experiences. Respondents described negative impacts and emotional responses. Their experiences of online hate were exacerbating other discriminatory experiences and

feelings of marginalisation. Some described feelings of blame and shame and, in turn, inferiority, invalidity, and a pressure to assimilate. Keighley [61] (p. 40) found that isolation and withdrawal can have implications for “liberty and rights to occupy certain social spaces”. Respondents reported a sense of fear and terror, reduced trust in others, and wider questioning of society in terms of ongoing stigma and marginalisation. Keighley [61] argues that support agencies, platforms, and institutions must be accountable for helping to create and maintain safe online spaces.

In another cross-country study, Keipi et al. [60] surveyed young people and young adults in the US, Finland, UK, and Germany about various types of online hate. They found that substantial proportions had been exposed to hate online, most often relating to sexual orientation, and then gender, religion, physical appearance, and political views. Personal victimisation prevalence was lower, indicating that many users may be exposed to hate but not all are victimised. The authors described the hate as both “specifically targeted at individual characteristics” and “motivated by developments on a global scale relating to issues central to certain identity groups” [60] (p. 70). The study was unclear regarding the direction of causation for wellbeing. The data suggested that even witnessing hate lowers happiness and life satisfaction, and more so for those victimised, but that existing levels of wellbeing may affect their response to the material. The authors recommend digital literacy for all in addition to providing affected young people with support. Harris and Johns [12] (p. 399) suggest, however, that at present there are “fewer guidelines for identifying how diverse young people can navigate risks to participation and inclusion online, or indeed, how civil digital environments can be created, sustained or threatened”.

Turning to unwanted and unsolicited sexual content, it is now well-established in the literature that online sexual behaviours involve risks and harms connected to gendered and heteronormative sexual stigmas and norms and that abusive behaviours are located within wider gender inequitable social contexts (e.g., [63]). There are ongoing debates about whether any digitally mediated sexual behaviours and interactions are acceptable for young people, although growing acknowledgement of developmentally normative and legitimate forms of sexual expression and connection for youth in the digital era. Notwithstanding these debates, there has been increasing recognition of the particular issue of being sent unwanted and unsolicited sexual content online [63]. These behaviours have been conceptualised as technology-facilitated sexual violence [64] and as disproportionately impacting girls and young women as the recipients of the content, with boys and men disproportionately likely to be senders [65].

“Unsolicited dick pics”, as they are termed, are found to be normalised through discourses of male entitlement and a dismissiveness of the needs or wants of girls [66–68]. Hayes and Dragiewicz [66] (p. 115) describe the behaviour as “the contemporary equivalent of flashing online”. It occurs within a landscape of other non-consensual behaviours, including pressure and coercion to produce and share sexual imagery, non-consensual production of images, and non-consensual further distribution of images, regardless of whether or not they were consensually produced initially [63,65,69,70]. These practices operate to the detriment of girls and young women who are at a greater risk of being victimised by all forms of image-based sexual abuse and the ensuing stigma and shame [63,65,71]. The conflation of consensual and non-consensual image sharing in narratives about young people’s online sexual behaviours means, however, that abuse has typically been normalised and young people lack the tools to identify and respond to it effectively [63] and there is an absence of safe spaces for victims to report their experiences [65].

Finally, the opportunity for and presence of user-generated content on Web 2.0 has created opportunities for visual self-expression and both passive and active engagement with others’ self-produced visual content. There are concerns about the impact of body- and appearance-related content on young Internet users, particularly pertaining to the curated and idealised images that dominate some social media spaces. Such imagery encompasses but also goes beyond the “thin ideal” traditionally directed at women, to include fitness and wellness as an aesthetic targeting both men and women [72,73]. Papathomas et al. [73]

(p. 106) suggest that appearance-related social comparison, and the associated dissatisfaction, is intensified in Web 2.0 because the more active and constant engagement with it may be an “all-consuming experience and therefore one that can heighten homogenised portrayals of beauty beyond more passive forms of media”. They describe the “selfie culture” as characterised by self-objectification (seeing and treating oneself as an object) and as leading to both negative comments and transitory positive affects resulting from “likes”. They identified evidence of an association between visual culture, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating and the young people in their study said they wanted more discussions in interventions about limited and unrealistic body shape and size ideals on social media. Papathomas et al. [73] (p. 109–110) suggest that “there is a need to facilitate broader discussions around health (beyond body shape, weight, and size) that challenge some of these restricted sociocultural ideals to which young people are exposed on social media”, as well as addressing what is promoted to young people on the platforms.

Gioia et al., [74] examined visual self-presentation online and its association with appearance-related concerns and monitoring, as well as self-objectification and body shame. Their research with Italian adolescents found that females reported more self-objectification (e.g., appearance control online) and body shame associated with the monitoring and control of self-image. Body image concerns were related to the use of the Internet for these purposes and Gioia et al. [74] recommend addressing how to promote conscious use of visual content online and what is considered “real” and idealised online. In their review of the literature on social media, body image, and eating disorders, Marks et al. [72] identify a need to also tackle broader issues; for example, about how online health and wellbeing cultures are oftentimes based on unsubstantiated and simplistic claims about the benefits of dieting that perpetuate weight stigma. They discuss the Health at Every Size movement, which challenges these conventions, and they consider how social media could become a space for alternative conceptualisations to the weight-loss and idealised imagery that currently dominate. They recommend raising critical awareness of the claims made by influencers and correcting misinformation about health and wellbeing.

### 3. Current Study

The present paper builds upon the existing literature by examining how young people construct what it means to be resilient online in the face of some of the risks and harms they described experiencing and encountering, namely the above-discussed online hate, unwanted sexual content, and unrealistic body- and appearance-related content. While scholarship has increasingly identified the complexity and socially contingent nature of resilience, the present paper explores how the complexities and contingencies unfolded in participants’ discussions about these online harms. Their perspectives were nuanced and shaped by tensions between, on the one hand, individualistic responsabilisation (of self and others) and a dependency on technical responses to online harms, and, on the other, their varying levels of critical consciousness of the wider contexts that shape the terrain of risk that differently situated youth encounter, and, in turn, that create demands for resilience. The paper offers empirical support for a nuanced conceptualisation of resilience that is grounded in and responsive to the perspectives of young people as articulated in this study. The findings suggest a need to engage with the social and affective dimensions of life online for youth, as well as their digital skills.

### 4. Methods

The research was conducted in line with the established sociology of childhood tradition which uses youth-centred methodologies that give a voice to young people while recognising the socio-structural contexts and constraints that shape their lives [75]. It aimed to understand participants’ perspectives on “online harms”, and the present paper is concerned specifically with how they described navigating risk and responding to harm. It considers the normative socio-structural contexts to and affective dimensions of their per-

ceptions, attitudes toward, and experiences of being “resilient” online when participating in online spaces.

Focus groups were conducted (via MS Teams) with 60 participants in June 2021. The method enabled young people to interact and co-create meaning, thus reducing the power imbalances between researcher and participant, as well as giving a voice to young people [76,77]. Six groups were conducted in a northwest independent girls’ school, six in a southeast co-educational academy, and one in a northwest youth club. Each group comprised four to eight participants. In the schools, two groups were conducted with pupils in year 8 (age 13/14), year 9 (age 14/15) and year 10 (age 15/16), and participants in the youth club were aged 14 to 21. The groups in the co-educational school and youth club were mixed gender, other than one year 10 group of girls in the school. While demographic data were not systematically collected, the groups were diverse in terms of ethnicity, sexuality, and gender identity. No claims are made regarding generalisability. Instead, the research revealed insights into participants’ different perspectives and the processes by which they co-constructed and expressed social meanings about life online.

The school groups were conducted during lesson time and the youth club group was conducted on a weekday evening. Each lasted one hour, co-facilitated by the lead author and one person from Digital Awareness UK (DAUK) and/or a research assistant. DAUK delivers digital safety education in schools and contacted its established network to recruit the research sites. Gatekeepers recruited the participants and organised them into groups. In the schools, participants were present in the classroom and the facilitators appeared via a projected screen, while in the youth club participants were in an outside area and a laptop was used. The virtual method meant that participants’ interactions seemed to be heightened, because we were essentially less “present” in the room and oftentimes observed discussions while interjecting with questions where appropriate. While participants thus had control in this regard, there were sometimes issues with being able to hear what was being said and we had to ask participants to speak clearly and one at a time, which sometimes dampened lively group interaction.

The focus group discussions were semi-structured in nature. At the start, participants were shown a visual display of words relating to different risks and harms online that predominate in mainstream discussions about young people’s online lives. For example, “harassment”, “anonymity”, “racism”, “sexism”, “homophobia”, “scams”, “porn”, “unwanted nude”, “eating disorders”, “cyberbullying”, among others. We asked for their reactions to the words and which they thought were important to discuss (and any they would add or take away). We then asked them about how different issues play out online, the actions they take to deal with them, and their views on online safety education. We also discussed the benefits of being online and how they balanced risks and opportunities. Specifically, we asked:

- Why is that (whichever word they said) an issue? What is happening online with that?
- Why do you think it happens?
- Who is most impacted by it?
- Is it ‘all bad’ or are there good sides to being online too?
- How do you deal with the things you do not like?
- How do you think it should be dealt it?
- Do you get any education about it?
- What do you think about that education? Is there anything else you think adults, or anyone else, could or should do to help deal with it?

The rationale behind this approach was to give participants the opportunity to contribute their perspectives on wider discourses about their online lives and to offer their own view about the issues and challenges they face. A limitation is that the topics were chosen through group consensus and dynamics. As is customary in focus group research, the data relate to group-level attitudes, norms, and meanings, and cannot be taken as indicative of more personal perspectives, although these often emerged. It is, furthermore, recognised that participants were asked to respond to a pre-conceived list of words and a



more youth-led approach would have offered opportunities for them to produce their own list. However, we wanted to provide some structure to the discussions and participants were able to add or remove words.

The discussions were recorded and auto transcribed via MS Teams. The auto-transcriptions were verified against the recordings. Thematic analysis was used to identify major codes and themes. Following Braun and Clarke [78], it involved (1) familiarisation with the data by reviewing and annotating the data; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) sorting and grouping the codes and identifying initial themes; (4) reorganising and reviewing the themes; (5) defining and naming the themes; and (6) describing and discussing the themes. It was a reflexive and active process of interpretation and analysis [79], involving a systematic conceptualisation of the findings [80]. It was iterative and inductive, and attended to the manifest and latent content of the data, i.e., *what* was said and *how* the risks were framed and discussed.

Participants gave informed consent, with those aged under 16 also requiring parental consent. No safeguarding responses were required but some discussions explored unpleasant and troubling matters of intense personal relevance for some participants. These participants were advised about appropriate avenues for support. The study received ethical approval from the University of Surrey Ethics Committee.

## 5. Findings

Participants discussed various direct and vicarious experiences online that they deemed harmful, unwanted, or otherwise problematic. They described and recommended taking action to reduce risk and avoid harm. Some felt that this is relatively easy to do and did not feel that these experiences detracted from the overall beneficial experience of being online. Others had more difficulties and participants generally perceived a differential landscape of risks that young people encounter online. There was also an apparent ambivalence among some participants about being able to take technical actions in response to online harms but also feeling emotionally or otherwise affected by the experience. The socio-emotional dimensions to these experiences are explored across three aspects of online life that participants often wanted to discuss: online hate, unwanted sexual content, and unrealistic appearance- and body-related content.

Across each, many wanted to be supported to develop the skills needed; for example, one girl said: to “help us deal with it. . . to use it in moderation, interpret what we’re reading and understand what’s right and wrong” (year 8, girls, group 2). Most believed that it is the responsibility of individuals to develop these skills, with one girl stating that “it’s just mainly in terms of how you use it. And if you use the app responsibly, then there shouldn’t be too many problems” (year 10, girls, group 2). The tension, however, between individualistic responsabilisation and the socio-emotional dimensions to participants’ discussions suggested a need for a conceptualisation of resilience that legitimises and supports agency and self-governance while accounting for the complexities of young people’s exposure to and experiences navigating risk and harm online, as similarly concluded by Throuvala et al. [3]. Across the three categories of online harms, some participants felt that the behaviours are just extensions and intensifications of wider social issues that need to be critically and holistically addressed.

### 5.1. Online Hate

Many participants described, at least vicariously and for some directly, experiencing and encountering “hate” online, by which they meant abusive content (messages, comments, videos, etc.) pertaining to gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and so on (see [59,60]). Online affordances meant that the content was seemingly dynamic and interactive. It was not just a particular message or post, but oftentimes involved interaction between different Internet users which participants either witnessed or were directly targeted by, reinforcing the need to support skill development regarding young people’s sharing and participation practices as actors and interactors in digital networks [8–10,32]. One girl, for instance, explained:

“...I’ve had things which are like two-sided, some people defending, some people in the middle, some people being really negative, and it’s like a big fight but it’s just how the algorithm works.” (Year 9 girls, group 1)

There was an inherent inequity in the perceived risks facing differently situated youth regarding online hate, with participants describing girls and LGBT+ and BAME youth as having a heightened risk of being targeted or negatively affected by sexist, homophobic/transphobic, and racist content, respectively; one girl referred to:

“... anti-feminist [posts]... it’s regarding women, there’s always little jokes, oh yeah, women get back into the kitchen stuff.” (Year 10 girl, co-ed, group 1)

A boy recounted being targeted with racism:

“People think it’s funny... [but] sometimes it crosses the line... sometimes they’ve been racist to me... It can happen a lot on messages... Racist comments... messages from other people I don’t even know.” (Year 9 boy, co-ed, group 2)

Most participants, including those occupying these subject positions, nevertheless spoke of valuing online spaces for learning about different perspectives and connecting with others, which seemed beneficial from a personal and civic perspective [17–19], for example participants below variously referred to the benefits:

“... I have learnt about of stuff that I didn’t originally know about... LGBTQ... the environment.” (Year 10, girls, group 1)

“... social media can be really helpful... Black Lives Matter movement... I wouldn’t have known about it... because I don’t even watch the news or anything. Most things I find out from social media.” (Year 8, girls, group 1)

“[seeing content] from people from different countries, continents... it’s really interesting to learn about new cultures.” (Year 10 boy, co-ed, group 1)

Online hate was considered a feature of this wider landscape of content (shared and encountered) and interaction, with one girl explaining:

“They’re just people all over the world... posting stuff, like on TikTok, things that are... funny or... interesting or something... but there’s some stuff on there that could hurt someone or... make them feel really upset.” (Year 8 girl, co-ed, group 1)

This girl likewise felt:

“... you can try to be positive about these things, like antiracism... but then there are just like some people who can’t stop saying bad things...” (Year 10, girls, group 1)

Given the perceived opportunities, it was, therefore, something to *navigate* as either a vicarious or direct experience rather than a reason to cease participating in online spaces entirely. Some participants described it as relatively straightforward to do so; they said they would simply just ignore it. These participants tended more to be witnesses to hate that was not about them or their identity specifically, for example the boy below:

“... [hate and abuse online] doesn’t make me not enjoy social media because of what other people are posting. It’s just that you don’t have to look at it.” (Year 9 boy, co-ed, group 1)

Participants were, in the main, not dismissive of the existence or impacts of hate, however, and recognised the differential experiences that young people have online. One girl said that she has not directly experienced but has “heard and seen on other people’s phones and laptops that it [sexism, racism, and homophobia] is happening” (year 9, co-ed, group 1) and another explained that “... for some people it’s a lot worse than it is for others, and for some it’s more positive” (year 10 girls, group 2). One said that experiences such as racist hate “could have an impact on people’s mental health” (year 10, co-ed, group 2).

Those who recounted being directly targeted with hateful content varied in their attitudes toward responding to it. A group of girls discussed how they produce and share videos on TikTok of “dances” and “lip syncs to songs” and that they enjoy doing this but sometimes may receive critical comments or messages in which they are “hated on” including in gendered and sexualised ways. They said that they are “not really worried, everyone just has their opinions. I’m not really fussed by what they say. If they don’t like it... I can’t help that, either they can block me, or I’ll block them”. These participants and others endorsed technical responses and were more preoccupied with the “self-focused” and individual ramifications of this type of online content, with less discussion of the wider community-level and ethical dimensions (see [54,55]).

Some other girls, who variously identified as lesbian, bisexual and trans, recounted more challenging experiences of responding to online hate. The greater openness about gender and sexuality in society was viewed by one participant as “getting a lot of backlash” (year 10 girl, co-ed, group 2). She said that “people are putting their pronouns online... it’s quite new and not really dealt with... People are making fun of it”. More broadly, there was a perception among participants that wider socio-cultural change and developments are associated with online hate (see [60]). There was, thus, a tension between the opportunities to connect with likeminded others online and the risks of being targeted with hate, reflective of the trade-off between the benefits of disclosure to building networks, and the ensuing social capital, with the need to manage the boundaries and implications of disclosure (see [81]). There was a sense of ambivalence among these participants about participating in online media spaces; while they may offer support and connection, they are also risky in a context of ongoing stigma (see [82]). The girl below described the benefits:

“When I was like starting my transition, I didn’t really know anyone like me. But then... I found a group of people that had the same experiences and we’re going through the same things... it really helped to be able to talk to people...” (Year 9, girls, group 1)

These girls, however, referred to the potential issues:

“It’s just constant... no matter what you do. It could be the most simple thing of just watching a content creator and really getting hated for it on the Internet.” (Year 10 girl, co-ed, group 2)

“... it’s in safe spaces. There’s like group chats online... where people are added and its purposely to hate them.” (Year 10 trans girl, co-ed, group 2)

For some participants, online hate was connected to their experiences of marginalisation and prejudice offline, and they were concerned about offline manifestations of hate, reflective of Keighley’s [61] findings:

“... anything that’s happened in real life, often it will follow you online... I have social media and people have left... unwanted and intrusive questions about my gender transition there...” (Year 9, girls, group 1)

“I’ve been terrified of people finding out [I’m a lesbian]... it really traces back to... old friends from my old school tried to dox me on my account. I deleted all the comments, but I’m scared of them in real life... If people find that and... trace it back to you, you get... picked on in real life as well...” (Year 9, girls, group 1)

Many participants felt that generally it is a matter of being careful about what you share online, with some stating that those at greater risk of hate should be particularly restrained. For example, one boy said:

“I don’t think there’s anything they can really do. I think it’s just people need to be a bit more careful like what they’re posting on social media.” (Year 9 boy, co-ed, group 1)

Another boy felt that some young people can put themselves at risk because of how they behave online:

“People that are part of the LGBTQ [community] can start the arguments too. . . people will open up. . . and then they’ll start arguing. . . [e.g., about] if you can be like pansexual. . . and then online, people just push it. . . like, ‘I hate these people’ . . . not like public but in more direct messages.” (Year 9 boy, co-ed, group 2)

These participants said that these young people should not be too open about themselves online, lest they attract hate from others. There was a sense of inevitability about online hate, in which “at-risk” youth antagonise or provoke offenders with their openness and presence (see [83]) with ensuing implications for participation rights online for these young people, as identified by Keighley [61]; for example, one boy said:

“No-one’s going to end it overall. It’s going to happen.”. (Year 9 boy, co-ed, group 1)

A girl similarly felt:

“[It’s impossible to] control what other people do. . . all you can do is be taught how to respond.” (Girl, youth club)

Some participants were critical of online hate, however, and felt that social media platforms need to do more to prevent people from behaving in this way online:

“Social media platforms [should be] more strict with people. . . there are all these bad comments. . . they don’t get punished for it. . . they’re comfortable.” (Year 10 boy, co-ed, group 1)

Others, including those directly targeted, were more despondent about the possibility to prevent online hate and believed that motivated individuals just find other ways to continue the behaviour; for example, the girl below:

“The problem is, I genuinely don’t think there’s a way to stop it because TikTok has tried so many times to say you can’t say certain bad words. . . but the person could post an emoji. . . there’s so many things.” (Year 9, girls, group 1)

Another girl likewise said:

“There’s a setting on Twitter where you can block certain words. . . to reduce the likelihood that you might see this stuff, but they don’t count out the synonyms.” (Year 10 girl, co-ed, group 2)

The lesbian, bisexual, and trans girls discussed above felt that the issue is deep rooted in society and needs to be dealt with from that perspective, with one stating:

“. . . if you block someone it won’t solve the bigger issue of people thinking they can still do this.” (Year 10, girls, group 2)

They wanted more than just being told to be careful themselves online and wanted support and recognition that what happens online reflects and extends the wider problems they face. It was therefore about the wider climate and relationships they have with others, with implications for their ability and willingness to report and seek help (see [13,46]). The girls below felt that:

“[Adults should] actually listen and not just be like dismissive [or say] just don’t go online. . . help the person understand that it wasn’t their fault and try to help them through it, like be a shoulder to cry on. . .” (Year 10, girls, group 1)

“If you go and tell a teacher, sometimes they might not take it seriously because it’s like, oh it’s on the Internet. It’s not affecting you in real life, but. . . it’s not just on the Internet.” (Year 9, girls, group 2)

Others, who described vicariously witnessing hate, discussed how it constrains the opportunities for learning and development that they perceived and described experiencing. For example, regarding sexist content online, many of the girls spoke about awareness-raising about sexual harassment being hampered by sexism and victim blaming content:

“... I have seen videos... like mental things about like sexual assault they [women] have experienced... and then there’s just a bunch of men in the comments saying, oh you shouldn’t have gone out and that wouldn’t have happened to you...” (Year 10 girl, co-ed, group 1)

They felt that this affects both their ability to participate online and progress towards equality and social justice more broadly:

“I feel like there are a lot of people who have been sexually harassed that haven’t come forward... it’s a bigger problem than people may assume today... [and because of the online hate] women are going to be scared to come out and talk about these things because of what they think is going to happen.” (Year 8 co-ed, group 2)

Some described how the nature of online interactions makes it challenging to openly counter the content they disagree with. Some said they had tried to intervene online but have been called “sensitive” or a “snowflake”, and this makes them reluctant to take similar action again. For example, a girl (year 9, co-ed, group 2) said she once posted some anti-racist content on social media because one of her friends was experiencing racism online. She then received messages from other Internet users saying she “shouldn’t cry about it” and is taking it “too seriously”. She blocked these individuals but has since been discouraged from any further such action. The boy below recounted a similar picture:

“People comment on it [sexist, racist or homophobic content] saying that it’s wrong and then they just get told that they are snowflakes.” (Year 9 boy, co-ed, group 1)

As did this girl:

“People call them ‘snowflakes’ as a way of cutting them down... and making that point invalid... I’ve just realised it’s not really worth my time.” (Year 10 girl, co-ed, group 1)

There are, therefore, implications of direct and indirect experiences of hateful content online and young people’s development and participation as citizens vis-à-vis identity and social relations both online and offline (see [2]). Many wanted more opportunities to discuss what they see and encounter online, including vicariously, and for these discussions to be a “normal thing” (year 10, boy, co-ed, group 1). They distinguished between digital skills and the broader issues, for example, of racism and sexism in society from which they felt that abuse and hate online can result and, in that regard, the need for critical and evaluative skills and both a micro and macroscopic lens of analysis regarding the issues they face and encounter (see [3,6,50]). Some participants spoke positively about exploring the issues in the classroom with teachers, for example:

“... with racism online... we did actually go through it in the classroom... the teacher was in the room which I think was actually right because we had to do it and discuss the racist thing rather than just let it be.” (Year 9 girls, group 1)

Some were optimistic that broader attitude and cultural change is possible with the right interventions, as illustrated by the comments below

“... like 50 years ago when there was a really, really big problem with racism toward black people like that... they kind of have those opinions now and don’t want to change, like young people’s opinions about sexism and that sort of thing.” (Year 8 girls, group 1)

“... when [people] are speaking about issues like racism, because sometimes people who are trying to speak up about issues, they get silence. But when people are being racist, homophobic, they get elevated because there’s lots of people like that. But the issue isn’t about social media. The issue is about what we are taught, so we need to be taught to be better as human so we will be better online.” (Year 9 girls, group 1)

It was apparent, therefore, that online hate was not just something to be blocked or ignored but was also about how participants were making sense of themselves and one another regarding wider socio-structural inequalities and injustices. This social patterning shaped participants' demands for and their experiences of having to be resilient online and take responsibility for the risks faced even when these risks were broadly acknowledged to be unjust. There was, thus, a distinction, albeit relationship, between proximal triggers for online hate (e.g., openness about gender or sexual identity) and more distal, deep-rooted, causes in terms of societal attitudes and prejudices (see [44,45]). There was ensuing tension between, on the one hand, technical and individualistic responses to the risks and, on the other, participants' critical consciousness of the injustices and inequalities playing out online, which most wanted the opportunity to discuss and address, while those participants who described being directly impacted by also wanted support and recognition.

### 5.2. Unwanted Sexual Content

Both boys and girls described themselves and perceived others to be affected by unwanted sexual content online. Some of the boys said that they and other boys are sent explicit images or links to pornographic content, often by unknown people online. This content may be sent via "spam" messages or via being added to sexually explicitly or pornographic social media pages or groups. The girls, meanwhile, described the ubiquitous "dick pic" sent oftentimes by unknown older men, although sometimes known peers, via group or one-to-one messages, with one explaining:

"Instagram is where everyone gets added to these group chats... sending... links constantly... it's constant... I think the least I've had it was once a week... it's really bad with the adding to group chats." (Year 10, girls, group 2)

As with hate online, most participants felt that unwanted sexual content is to be ignored, with many saying that they delete it and block the sender. For example, one girl said: "... they can send you anything... I've had it quite a few times... it's just a case of like blocking them and moving on" (year 10, co-ed, group 1). There was a sense of fatalism about the content and an individualistic responsabilisation of recipients to respond effectively without antagonising the senders or entering into a dynamic whereby more images may be sent, reflective of previous research findings on the topic [63,65].

The experience of receiving unwanted sexual content seemed to be gendered. The boys tended to say that they did not consider it particularly harmful or bothersome, with some describing it as "annoying", while the girls seemed to find it more disturbing and distressing with some saying they felt "offended" and "ashamed" and describing the pictures as "disgusting". There may be two aspects to these differential perspectives. First, the boys may have been disinclined from saying that they find the content a problem in the group setting compared to girls, due to the normalisation of masculine sexuality in contrast to the more precarious and stigmatised nature of feminine sexuality, a double standard that is well-documented in the literature [63]. Second, scholars have conceived of unsolicited/unwanted sexual image sharing as a form of gender-based abuse that targets girls and women and acts as a reminder of their vulnerability to sexual assault and violation (e.g., [66]). As found in other studies, participants used more stigmatising language about girls' online sexual behaviours than boys [63]. For example, boys who share images were described "confident" and "definitely not insecure" while the girls are "under pressure" and looking for "attention" (girls, year 8, co-ed, group 1) (also see [84]). Many participants perceived unsolicited/unwanted sexual content affecting girls to operate within this context as a normalised and unpleasant experience whereby it may be stigmatising for the recipient [63], for example these girls explained:

"... like on Snapchat... when somebody adds you and sends like 20 plus messages. Friends, okay fine... but like when you add someone back, particularly boys, when you add a boy and they immediately send like loads of [pictures]... Like I don't need this."

“...I feel like the girls have just gotten used to it, and it’s really disgusting to see...but some girls have been so used to it that it’s just horrible.” (Year 9 girls, Group 1)

While for both boys and girls unwanted sexual content was a somewhat expected part of being online, there was, as with online hate, a belief that individual girls need to be careful about the extent of their openness and participation in online spaces to avoid being targeted. These implorations reflect the finding that women’s online presence comes with risks of harassment, as is the case offline regarding their presence in physical spaces [58], with one girl feeling that:

“I think it’s when they [girls] have their identity displayed more online which can be more of a target for men...” (Year 9 girls, group 1)

Some girls were critical of this responsabilisation of girls for online sexual harassment and abuse, for example:

“I feel like in situations like this [online sexual harassment], a lot of the blame for what’s happened is put on the person that it happened to, so it’s more like...how can you make sure this doesn’t happen to you again, rather than how can we help make sure this doesn’t happen...” (Year 9, girls, group 2)

They were torn between the perception that ‘exposure’ online increases risk and the inherent victim blaming that these claims represent:

“I feel like it’s girls which you know they just like talking to people more...but it’s not the girl’s fault. It’s like the guy’s fault.”

“...it’s never the girl’s fault. Like any girl can receive a message like that...” (Year 9 girls, group 1)

These girls struggled, therefore, with identifying the appropriate course of action. As with online hate, there was a sense that there are social justice issues to address whereby transformation of gender inequitable conditions is required, as conceptualisations of digital sexual citizenship would suggest (see [56,85]). At the same time, there was an acceptance of risk and a belief that girls need to act accordingly in light of the risk. They wanted more attention to these wider contexts and deeper causes of what occurs online, as illustrated below:

“...Like online harassment is an issue, but like you know it’s not like because it’s online... Like you know being followed home or catcalled or whatever...that’s the problem, not the actual being online...it’s just the behaviours people learn.” (Year 9 girls, group 1)

Again, therefore, it was apparent that individual level and technical solutions were considered only a partial solution to addressing the issue of unwanted/unsolicited sexual content online. The demands for resilience in the face of these risks seemed to disproportionately impact upon girls, in reflection of the longstanding expectation that girls and women have to change their behaviour to avoid sexual assault (see [86]). It is also important to consider how constructs of masculinity may have constrained the boys’ ability to articulate critically informed narratives about unwanted and unsolicited sexual content that they recounted being sent, which has been identified in research on boys’ experiences of youth digital intimacies [71].

### 5.3. Unrealistic Body- and Appearance-Related Content

Many of the girls, but also some of the boys, were critical of what they perceived to be unrealistic body- and appearance-related content online, particularly regarding edited and filtered images shared by other Internet users and the implorations around dieting and exercising to achieve the “perfect body”. As other studies have identified, the content goes beyond the “thin ideal” to encompass fit and toned aesthetics and dietary wellbeing (see [72,73]), with the girl below stating:

“I’ve seen on TikTok like quite a lot of accounts telling people certain things to get like the perfect body.”

I: What are they saying?

“Like telling certain people like this is what you should do to lose weight... certain diets they should try.” (Year 10, girls, group 1)

These girls felt that the diets can be unhealthy and “not necessarily like a good diet, might be restricting things, but it’s just so normalised”. Others described the content as “toxic” and possibly leading to “anxiety” (year 9, girls, group 2). Many believed that the content is ubiquitous and up to individuals to navigate effectively, namely by ignoring it, reminding oneself that it is not real, and/or being mindful about who they follow, with evidence here of critical evaluative skills as integral to their approach to resilience (see [3,6,72]). For example, some girls said they had been “educated about Internet safety and beauty standards... that it isn’t real or true” (year 10 girls, group 2). They believed that some young people are more at risk of being harmed or otherwise adversely affected by the content than others. The development or exacerbation of “eating disorders” was seen by some as a particular risk affecting girls, which is an issue that has been identified, albeit in all its complexity, in the literature (see [72]). Some girls, namely those with eating disorder tendencies or with “low self-esteem”, were seen by these participants as being at risk. Many of the girls felt that they themselves are aware that the content is not real and are able to ignore it, but that others may be less skilled in this regard. For example, one said that if individuals follow “influencers” who are “maybe like working out every day... it might make people think when they are comparing themselves to the influencer, they’re just like, oh, I want to look like them and then they start working on themselves”. (Year 10, girls, group 2).

Interestingly, participants were most critical of content that they clearly identified as ‘not real’, for example content shared by the Kardashian family, which some girls described as depicting a “fake perspective” of beauty (year 10, co-ed, group 2) and as “extreme and unrealistic” (girl, youth club). Other influential online actors were seen as presenting a more realistic image that some of the girls aspired to. For example, Molly-Mae, the Love Island reality TV star and influencer, was mentioned in several groups. A girl in the youth club, for example, said she is more “normal... I think she’s just on the right side. It’s like, she’s not fat, she’s not skinny, she’s just alright”. Other girls said that they liked her “blonde hair” and that her appearance is “what boys’ want” (year 10, co-ed, group 2). The distinctions drawn between different online actors raises questions about how content is deemed realistic or unrealistic and the nature of what is considered aspirational, relatable, and achievable. While participants felt that individuals need to ignore unrealistic content, there was little critical engagement with these constructs in terms of body image for girls or boys. The girl who spoke about Molly-Mae in the youth club said that “she’s still fake actually” but that there is just a more “natural look to it”. As Marks et al. [72] identify, there is a need to go beyond just thinking about this type of content in terms of eating disorders but also the conceptualisations of and claims about the body and appearance that are being made.

Some participants discussed “body positive” content online that they felt offers alternative conceptualisations of what is healthy and aspirational. One boy from the youth club said that some people on social media are calling out the “false Hollywood body image... they’re being more accepting... dealing with insecurities... mental health”. Some girls said that there is pushback against dieting and disordered eating online with “a lot more people talking about how wrong it is... I’ve seen a couple of professionals online on TikTok criticising people who are saying do this or do that [regarding dieting]” (year 10, girls, group 1). Yet, some described how this content can be met with abusive body shaming responses which, as with online hate, can jeopardise opportunities for diversity, equality, and justice. For example, one girl said that she has seen people “comment of an emoji of a whale” under an image pertaining to body positivity (year 9, girls, group 2). Many girls



perceived this as frequent, in accordance with research on online hate that has shown that abuse about appearance is commonly encountered and experienced by youth online [60].

“...it happens actually a lot. Like on TikTok there’s the reaction...So many judging in the comment section, it’s just a bit annoying...you’ll see like really horrible comments.” (Year 10 girls, group 1)

In that sense, one girl felt that body positivity is “being taken over by people who fit the beauty standard, which isn’t what it was meant to be” (year 10, co-ed, group 2).

While advocating ignoring it, there was seemingly an affective dimension to encountering this type of content. For example, some girls said they feel “unhappy” and “insecure”, even when trying to ignore it. In that sense, they wanted recognition and support for the affective experience as well as technical skill development, for example:

“Teachers say that you shouldn’t be looking at other people...and you know you shouldn’t but then sometimes you can’t help but feel like that anyway. You know that you can’t stop feeling like that.” (Year 10, girls, group 1)

There is seemingly a need here to address not just the unrealistic nature of much content online but also the critical consciousness of what, exactly, is being celebrated as ideal and why, as argued by Marks et al. [72]. It is one thing to say that something is not realistic but another to question narrow depictions of idealised appearance and the emphasis on appearance as a significant part of identity. Without addressing these latter points, there may still be an affective response and wider size- and appearance-based stigma and inequities, which may hamper efforts for more diverse conceptualisations and representations online. Those such as Molly-Mae, who portray a seemingly achievable or aspirational “unreal” appearance, further complicates the processes by which young people relate to idealised body- and appearance-related content online. There was some discussion about idealised standards impacting boys, for example regarding muscular physiques and fitness, but this was more limited. As with unwanted sexual content, the perceived harms were gendered regarding the impact on girls. Resultantly, there is a need for further exploration of boys’ experiences of body- and appearance-related content online and the implications for their developing self-concepts.

## 6. Conclusions

Participants’ discussions about online hate, unwanted sexual content, and unrealistic body- and appearance-related content suggest that the need for resilience online emerges from a wider socio-cultural-structural context which, in turn, creates uneven demands on differently situated youth. Participants perceived online hate to be rooted in wider societal prejudices and inequities impacting marginalised and non-normative groups and that certain young people are more at risk of being negatively affected by the content than others. The experience of receiving unwanted sexual content online was seemingly gendered, in particular regarding the reaction to and normalisation of receiving the content. Finally, body- and appearance-related content online was believed to rest upon particular idealised standards and messaging about diet and lifestyle that perpetuate weight stigma and narrow conceptualisations of beauty and appearance that operate to the particular detriment of girls. Participants endorsed developing and practicing digital skills in response to the content; namely, being mindful about participating in online spaces and sharing online, ignoring and blocking the content and the users who create and share the content, and reminding oneself about what is “right” and “wrong”, and “realistic” and “unrealistic”. They were notably individualistic in their attributions of responsibility for responding effectively to the content and predominantly framed vulnerability and resilience in individualistic terms.

Notwithstanding, it was also apparent that these framings were in tension with their recognition of the wider contexts shaping these online experiences and the affective dimensions of the demands for resilience. Participants were often concerned with the individual and interpersonal ramifications of the content for themselves and their peers, but also of the wider issues reflected and reinforced at a group, community, and ethical level

(see [55]). In that sense, they responsabilised themselves as neoliberal subjects but were also participating in networks of “unregulated publics” that they do not control (see [87]). Many expressed a desire for holistic discussions that equip them with digital skills while addressing the social and structural contexts at play and recognising the emotional burden of encountering and responding to the content, including, as Buckingham and Martinez-Rodriguez [2] argue, how it impacts their developing self-concepts and understanding of the world and their place in the world, as emphasised in conceptualisations of digital citizenship (see [12,56]).

Digital citizenship in this regard was not just about specific forms of civic activity but also how young people conceive of themselves as citizens and what this means to them (see [46]). Some participants wanted greater emphasis on how young people can be supported when they encounter negative content and for these online experiences to be acknowledged as legitimate issues requiring a supportive, rather than a dismissive, response (see [13]). Individualistic tendencies among many seemed to crowd out a deeper critical consciousness, however, with there being a sense of inevitability about these online harms given their inherently social nature. This meant that some participants responsabilised others in ways that may have implications for equitable participation rights in online spaces, reflective of Keighley’s [61] findings regarding the effects of withdrawing from online spaces in response to hateful content. It was most notable around LGBT+ youth, whereby some believed that it was the open participation and self-expression of these youth that contributed to the landscape of risk they face, which reflected an almost common-sense notion that targets may antagonise or provoke offenders and thus contribute to risk (see [83]). The lesbian, bisexual, and trans girls in the study indeed perceived and navigated these risks with evident implications for their participation online.

While the risk of harm was unevenly distributed, it was apparent that all participants were, to some extent, vicariously experiencing the harms, for example, as witnesses to online hate. While those directly affected need recognition, it is also important to explore the affective implications for all youth (see [6]), as well as how the content is impacting them as developing citizens vis à vis race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and appearance-related social dynamics and relations and personal self-concepts (see [2]). There are implications here for digital citizenship with regard to strengthening young people’s critical consciousness of the social and structural factors that shape the online harms discussed in this paper. There are the direct ramifications for participation rights among differently situated youth and the wider social and emotional learning, developmental, and participatory processes affecting all youth in these spaces. Even where harm is downplayed; for example, among the girls who received gendered and sexualised abuse when sharing videos on TikTok and the boys receiving unwanted sexual content, there may still be an affective dimension to having to display resilience in response to these interactive experiences and ramifications for how young people make sense of themselves and one another.

Interventions to support young people online could, therefore, perhaps benefit from starting with the perceptions and experiences that young people have about risk and harm online and the actions they take in anticipation of and response to these experiences. Rather than binary and individualistic conceptualisations of “at risk” versus “resilient”, young people could be helped to conceive of risk and harm as operating along a continuum, whereby all young people in online spaces are variously exposed to and affected by different content in ways that link to wider social contexts and structural inequities (see [88]). The use of a continuum may engender critical consciousness of these contexts and inequities and the role they play and perceive or expect others to play in their maintenance within and beyond online spaces. It would mean that the Internet could become a tool for learning about different social issues and for young people to develop their understanding of themselves and one another as citizenships in the world (see [12,56]). It would also help create a climate whereby young people feel able to speak openly about what they encounter and experience online and that their concerns and perspectives will be taken seriously rather than either be trivialised and dismissed or responded to with control or punishment (see [13]).

Scholars emphasise the need for integrative and communitarian conceptualisations of digital citizenship (see [3]). This entails acknowledging the need for emotional self-awareness and emotional literacy in ways that disentangle technical responses to online harms and the affective experience of encountering and having to be resilient in the face of these harms. Throuvala et al. [3] discuss the need for self-awareness and self-reflection as part of “control and emotional regulation skills” and “social and emotional intelligence and metacognitive skills”, alongside “digital resilience and assertive skills”. Perhaps, *mindful* critical digital citizenship encompasses the ways in which young people can exercise agentic resilience as legitimate digital actors and interactors but in ways that raise critical consciousness, address victim blaming of self and/or others, and reflect the ambivalence and tensions between the social, affective, and technical dimensions to being online. It would help develop young people’s understandings of their rights and responsibilities that both manifest and transcend online spaces and that affect individuals and wider communities and collectives which youth are part of, affected by, and obligated toward (see [12]). It can, in turn, support their participation rights online (see [49,51,57,58]) and, some scholars would suggest, may be best achieved through harnessing the Internet as a tool for understanding the realities of young people’s lives, rather than the cause of the problems they face (see [11,12,50]).

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