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A "Post-digital" Continuum of Young People's Experiences of Online Harms

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Introduction

Young people's online lives encompass but go beyond accessing and consuming content to include active, interactive, and participatory engagement facilitated by so-called "Web 2.0" (Buckingham & Martínez-Rodríguez, 2013; Goodyear & Armour, 2018). Risks and opportunities relate, therefore, both to what they are creating and sharing and what they are encountering and being exposed to online (Iglesias et al., 2015). Studies identify opportunities for learning, communication, self-expression, creativity, and entertainment, but "sexual," "aggressive," "value-related," and "commercial" risks (Smith & Livingstone, 2017). There may arise negative impacts on health and well-being for young people who encounter risk (e.g., Kelly et al., 2018). Yet, evidence suggests that encountering risk does not always lead to harm (e.g., Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2015; Smahel et al., 2020) and, moreover, may

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help young people develop skills and resilience, which then reduces the likelihood of harm (Livingstone et al., 2021). Edwards and Wang (2018) suggest that the process is part of how young people develop "self-narrative" (p. 727) and exercise "self-governance and agency" (p. 728). Attention has, therefore, increasingly turned to identifying the relationship between risk and harm and how best to strengthen young people's resilience online (Throuvala et al., 2021).

Studies suggest, however, that the relationship between risk and harm is complex and shaped by intersecting individual, social, and environmental factors and circumstances rooted in offline contexts (e.g., Livingstone & Haddon, 2008; Sage et al., 2021; Smith & Livingstone, 2017; Stockdale & Coyne, 2020; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Young people's online and offline experiences are not distinct; instead, their lives are digitally mediated (Livingstone et al., 2018) and entail an "always on" culture of compulsory (albeit heterogeneous) engagement with (and access to) technology (Collier & Perry, 2021; Hodkinson, 2015). Nelson et al.'s (2020, 102) research with young people suggests that the meanings of their online experiences in this "post-digital" reality (Jandric, 2019) are "subjective and nonbinary" and entail a "fluid continuum of online and offline."

In this chapter, I discuss findings from a study conducted in 2021 with young people in England to explore a post-digital framing of online harms as operating along a continuum of online–offline meaning and experience. I consider the implications for (post-)digital citizenship regarding critically informed, rights-based approaches to "online safety."

Methodological Note

Data was generated through 13 focus groups with 60 young people aged 12–21 and a survey of 550 young people aged 10–16. The study was conducted between May and December 2021.

Focus groups were conducted virtually in with 12- to 16-year-olds in two schools (a northwest independent girls' school and a southeast

co-educational academy) and with 13- to 21-year-olds in a youth club in northwest England during June 2021. Groups were mixed gender other than one group of year 10 girls in the co-educational academy and all groups in the girls' school. Most participants were white and heterosexual, although there was some socioeconomic and demographic diversity. Participants were shown a word cloud depicting risks and harms that predominate in public and policy discourses about young people's online lives (e.g., "harassment," "anonymity," "racism," "sexism," "homophobia," "scams," "porn," "unwanted nude," "eating disorder," "cyberbullying," etc.). Discussions explored participants' perspectives on the topics, how different issues play out and are dealt with, and views about online safety education. Thematic analysis identified major codes and themes depicting the meanings, norms, and experiences as constructed by participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

An online survey was subsequently administered to 12–16-year-olds to measure prevalence of and perspectives on dealing with different online harms. It was administered within the schools in July–September 2021 and to further young people via a third-party recruitment company during January–February 2022. There were slightly more female (53.8%) than male (42.4%) respondents (2.7% selected non-binary/third gender and the rest non-disclosed). Most were heterosexual (77.0%) and white (70.5%).

All young people provided informed consent. Focus group participants aged under 16 also obtained parental consent. Parental consent opt-out mechanisms were used in schools for the survey, while the third-party recruitment company followed its parental consent process for under 16 s. The study received ethical approval from the University of Surrey Ethics Committee (FASS 2021 049).

Experiences of Online Harms

Focus group participants typically referred to social media platforms when discussing their online experiences, most often TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Snapchat, followed less frequently by Twitter, Tumblr,

Facebook, various gaming platforms, and video hosting platform YouTube. Survey data attested to the dominance of these platforms, with 77.1% of respondents using between one and four apps daily (74.4% using two or more daily). Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and WhatsApp were most frequently selected, with 86.0% of the sample using at least one of these daily, while only 3.5% used none of them.

Responding to the word cloud, participants most often wanted to discuss abusive (including hateful) content; unwanted sexually explicit/nude content; scams, fake news, and other forms of misrepresentation/misinformation; "unrealistic" body and appearance-related content and "comparison culture"; self-harm and suicide-related content; fights and arguments, among others. Most felt that these issues are ubiquitous online, but some claimed to feel personally unaffected by them. For example, regarding hateful and abusive content, a year 9 boy in the co-educational academy remarked: "it 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." Many participants believed that certain young people are more at risk of harm than others. A year 10 girl in the girls' school, for instance, said: "…for some people it [being online] is a lot worse than it is for others, and for some it's more positive," while a year 10 girl in the co-educational academy described racist hate as potentially damaging to some "people's mental health."

Survey data indicated heterogeneity in online experiences. When asked whether they have seen or experienced different examples of online harms, 17.3% reported encountering/experiencing one or more harms daily online, while 70.2% were doing so daily, weekly, or monthly. Yet, while a slight majority reported having encountered/experienced racism, homophobia/transphobia, and sexism, large proportions said they had not encountered/experienced each harm and most certainly were not doing so regularly. This somewhat contradicts the perception of ubiquity expressed in focus groups.

Experiencing and Seeing Harmful Online Content

	At least once a day	At least once a week	At least once a month	Less often or never	Total
Threatening or abusive content	25 (4.5%)	97 (17.6%)	128 (23.3%)	300 (54.5%)	550 (100.0%)
Violent content	17 (3.1%)	85 (15.5%)	126 (22.9%)	322 (58.5%)	550 (100.0%)
Unwanted nude or sexually explicit content	30 (5.5%)	78 (14.2%)	105 (19.1%)	337 (61.3%)	550 (100.0%)
Racist content	35 (6.4%)	104 (18.9%)	153 (27.8%)	258 (46.9%)	550 (100.0%)
Homophobic or transphobic content	40 (7.3%)	113 (20.5%)	140 (25.5%)	257 (46.7%)	550 (100.0%)
Sexist content	47 (8.5%)	126 (22.9%)	132 (24.0%)	245 (44.5%)	550 (100.0%)
Self-harm/suicide content	24 (4.4%)	70 (12.7%)	100 (18.2%)	356 (64.7%)	550 (100.0%)
Other	13 (2.4%)	17 (3.1%)	27 (4.9%)	493 (89.6%)	550 (100.0%)

Respondents were asked whether they had ever been targeted directly with harmful content. Of those who had been directly targeted (34.9%), 46.4% reported having experienced one type of harm and 45.4% reported between two and five types. Threatening/abusive and unwanted nude/sexually explicit content were most common. Proportions were lower for direct targeting than they were for having encountered/experienced the harms. Many, for example, reported having encountered/experienced racist, sexist, and homophobic/transphobic content, but fewer had been directly targeted with it, which may explain why some focus group participants were aware of these online harms but did not always feel personally affected. A year 10 girl in the co-educational academy, for example, said that she often sees "anti-feminist [posts]… it's regarding women, there's always little jokes, oh yeah, women get back into the kitchen stuff." This may be characterised as *encountering* sexism online, distinct from feeling targeted with it. A year 9 boy distinguished between general racism online and his experiences of being targeted with it, whereby "people think it's funny… [but] sometimes it crosses the line… they've been racist to me… It can happen a lot… Racist comments… messages from other people I don't even know."

Personal Experiences of Online Harms Compared to Any Exposure

	Personally targeted	Ever seen/ experienced
Threatening or abusive content	86 (15.5%)	250 (45.5%)
Violent content	48 (8.7%)	228 (41.5%)
Unwanted nude or sexually explicit content	82 (14.9%)	213 (38.7%)
Racist content	52 (9.5%)	292 (53.1%)
Homophobic or transphobic content	37 (6.7%)	293 (53.3%)
Sexist content	59 (10.7%)	305 (55.5%)
Self-harm/suicide content	41 (7.5%)	194 (35.3%)
None	358 (65.1%)	92 (16.7%)

Focus group data suggested that life online is affected by young people's identity markers. Girls, for example, described extensive experiences of being sent unwanted sexually explicit content, and non-heterosexual and gender non-conforming participants recounted experiences of abuse and harassment online. Survey data supports these findings, with females, non-binary/third gender, BAME, and non-heterosexual young people experiencing/encountering more online harms than their counterparts. For example, BAME respondents were more likely to have encountered/experienced violent content compared to white respondents ($x^2(1)$ =5.71, p<0.05), and likewise for racist content ($x^2(1)$ =8.65, p<0.01). Non-binary/third gender respondents were more likely to have encountered/experienced homophobic/transphobic content than females, who were, in turn, more likely than males ($x^2(2)$ =8.41, p>0.05). The same was found regarding sexist content ($x^2(2)$ =7.70, p>0.05). Non-heterosexual respondents were more likely to have encountered/experienced homophobia/transphobia, racism, and sexism than heterosexual respondents (respectively: $x^2(1)$ =21.04, p<0.001; $x^2(1)$ =6.30, p<0.05; and $x^2(1)$ =13.46, p<0.001). These gender and sexual orientation differences were also found with self-harm and suicide content (respectively: $x^2(2)$ =16.38, p>0.001 and $x^2(1)$ =13.51, p<0.001).

A similar picture emerged regarding experiences of being directly targeted. BAME respondents were more likely to have been targeted with racism than white respondents ($x^2(1)$ =77.26, p<0.001), as were

non-binary/third gender respondents ($x^2(2)$ =10.57, p<0.01). Females and non-binary respondents reported having been sent sexual content more than males ($x^2(2)$ =24.80, p<0.001), as did non-heterosexual respondents compared to heterosexual ($x^2(1)$ =19.98, p<0.001). Non-binary/third gender respondents and non-heterosexual respondents were more likely to have been targeted with homophobia/transphobia than their counterparts (respectively: $x^2(2)$ =26.84, p>0.001 and $x^2(1)$ =44.46, p<0.001). Non-binary/third gender and female respondents were more likely to have been targeted with sexism compared to males ($x^2(2)$ =31.83, p<0.001), as were non-heterosexual compared to heterosexual respondents ($x^2(1)$ =19.06, p<0.001). Non-binary/third gender respondents and girls were more likely to report targeted self-harm/suicide content than males ($x^2(2)$ =10.02, p>0.01), although the cell count for non-binary/third gender respondents was lower than expected, so the result should be interpreted with caution.

There were some significant associations with age, with 16-year-olds being most likely to report being sent sexual content ($x^2(2)$ =10.57, p<0.01) and reports of being targeted with sexism increasing with age ($x^2(3)$ =9.26, p<0.05). Overall, males were more likely than females, who were more likely than non-binary/third gender respondents to have never been targeted with any of the content ($x^2(2)$ =15.78, p<0.001). Heterosexual respondents were more likely to have never been targeted compared to non-heterosexual ($x^2(1)$ =26.39, p<0.001) and the difference between BAME and white respondents was approaching significance ($x^2(1)$ =3.84, p=0.056). Other findings approaching significance included non-heterosexual respondents being more likely to report targeted racism ($x^2(1)$ =4.1, p=0.065) and BAME respondents being more likely to report targeted sexism ($x^2(1)$ =3.81, p=0.051) than their counterparts.

The small number of non-binary/third gender respondents means that findings about this group should not be over-interpreted, while because it was a self-report survey, data depended on respondents' recall and understandings of the terms and willingness to disclose their experiences (although anonymity may have helped encourage honesty). The survey also did not ask about the benefits of being online, so the relationship between risk and opportunity online found in other studies cannot be

established among this sample. Findings suggest, however, that experiences of online harms are structured in somewhat anticipated ways. It is perhaps unsurprising, although disheartening, for example, that non-binary/third gender and non-heterosexual respondents experience more transphobia and homophobia respectively. Other associations indicate an intersectional dynamic (e.g., between sexism and sexual orientation), but others require further investigation (e.g., between gender and self-harm/suicide-related content). It is also perhaps surprising that there were not more significant associations between age and online harms, given the supposition that encountering and experiencing harm becomes more common as young people use the internet more and exercise more autonomy over their online lives.

Responding to Online Harms

Focus group participants and survey respondents were asked about responding to and (perceived) responsibilities for managing risk online. Focus group participants, at least initially, often emphasised individual-level responses and responsibilities. They considered it important to learn what is and is not safe and appropriate, and "real" or "unreal," and then to act accordingly. For example, a year 10 girl in the girls' school felt that "it's just mainly in terms of how you use it… if you use the app responsibly, then there shouldn't be too many problems." A year 8 girl in the girls' school wanted balanced and skills-based education to "help us deal with it… to use it in moderation, interpret what we're reading, and understand what's right and wrong."

Many participants specifically endorsed ignoring, blocking, and (less often) reporting content and users to social media platform providers and/or others. Discussing unwanted sexual content, a year 10 girl in the co-educational school, for example, said: "…I've had it quite a few times… it's just a case of like blocking them and moving on…" Her perspective was mirrored in responses to the survey question about responding to unwanted sexual content, with ignoring it (47.6%) and blocking the sender (64.6%) being more commonly selected from a list of actions than were reporting it to the app/website (24.4%), telling a parent or

teacher (15.9%), talking to a friend or sibling (6.0%), or reporting it to the police (6.0%).

Survey respondents were asked, in general, how helpful they considered different actions in response to online harms. Most considered all options at least somewhat helpful, although ignoring it or stopping/reducing use of the app was deemed relatively less helpful. In contrast, some focus group participants felt that risk online is, at least somewhat, related to how people use and participate in online platforms. As explored further below, fatalism about online harms meant that some endorsed ignoring it or stopping/reducing social media use despite these responses not necessarily being deemed "helpful" for fully addressing the harms. Survey respondents may also have had themselves in mind when endorsing options; focus group participants typically recommend that *other* at-risk young people should limit or stop their use of social media but may not have wanted to do so themselves.

Survey respondents were asked about the helpfulness of other actions or efforts, beyond the individual, to address online harms, including monitoring of what people say and do online by social media companies, monitoring by parents or teachers, educating people about what is and isn't acceptable to say and do online, and banning or suspending people's accounts if they do and say unacceptable things. Again, each option was considered "a bit" or "very" helpful, although parent/teaching monitoring was relatively less so, perhaps because of concerns about privacy and the infringement on self-governance and agency that it may have been perceived to represent (Edwards & Wang, 2018).

Platform Affordances and Social Contexts

Endorsement of extra-individual responses to online harms aligned with data from focus groups about how platform affordances were deemed to encourage harmful content creation and sharing that, in turn, emerges from wider social contexts. For example, some participants described experiencing a lack of control over social media algorithms which, they felt, affected the nature of their experiences online. A transgender participant in the girls' school, for example, recounted having experienced:

"…two-sided [interactions], some people defending, some people in the middle, some people being really negative… it's like a big fight but it's just how the algorithm works."

Other platform affordances of concern related to extended networks, ephemerality, and anonymity. A year 9 girl in the girls' school, for instance, described being sent "creepy messages" from unknown and unverifiable others online. Some participants felt that individuals are emboldened online, with another year 9 girl adding that on Snapchat, "unless you save it… it's gone like straightaway after 24 hours, so it's very anonymous," which, she believed, means that people feel they can say and do as they wish online without consequence.

Many participants felt that social media platforms should do more to address the problems. A year 10 boy in the co-education school, for example, felt they should be "stricter with people… there are all these bad comments… [people] don't get punished for it…" Others, however, felt that punitive or restrictive action does not always work. A year 9 girl in the co-educational academy said that people find ways to circumvent it: "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." A year 10 girl in the co-educational school 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."

Participants' concerns about the limitations of individual and technical responses related to how they deemed online harms to be rooted in wider social contexts. For example, many felt that hateful content reflects prejudices that manifest and are exacerbated online, and unwanted sexual content and sexism online was described as operating particularly to the detriment of girls and young women. Some became critical of the idea that it is the responsibility of individuals alone to respond to what they encounter and experience, or are directly targeted with, online. Some year 9 girls in the girls' school, for example, bemoaned being sent unwanted sexual content and one described it as "disgusting" but felt that "girls have just become so used to it, it's just horrible."

Some lesbian, bisexual, and transgender participants discussed the risks and opportunities of being online. A transgender participant in the girls' school valued being able to connect with like-minded others online:

> 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…

Yet, a year 10 participant in the co-educational academy felt that a greater openness about gender and sexuality is "getting a lot of backlash." For example: "people are putting their pronouns online… it's quite new and not really dealt with… People are making fun of it." Others were also concerned about abuse and hate:

> It's just constant… no matter what you do. It could be the simplest thing of just watching a content creator and really getting hated for it on the Internet.

> …it's in safe spaces. There's like group chats online… where people are added and its purposely to hate them.

These participants discussed intersecting online and offline contexts, with one year 9 participant in the girls' school stating: "…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…" Another described feeling:

> …terrified of people finding out [I'm a lesbian] …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…

Critical awareness of the social patterning of online harms did not, however, stop other participants endorsing individual responsibility for managing risk. There was a sense of fatalism, for example, about

prejudice and an attribution of these attitudes, and ensuing harmful behaviour online, to "bad" individuals. A year 10 girl in the girls' school, for instance, said: "…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…," while a year 9 boy in the co-educational school remarked: "no-one's going to end it [hate] overall. It's not going to happen." A girl in the youth club felt "[it's] impossible to control what other people do… all you can do is be taught how to respond."

Some participants endorsed at-risk young people reducing or changing their participation online. They felt that some put themselves at risk. For example, a year 9 boy in the co-educational academy said that LGBT young people "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." Others felt that girls are more likely to be sent unwanted sexual content if, for example, they "have their identity displayed online more, which can be more of a target for men" (year 9, girls' school). Several participants expressed sentiments such as: "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).

Continuums of Risk and Harm

Binary conceptualisations of risk and resilience and individualistic responsibilisation of those deemed "at risk" may not fully encompass the realities of online harms or, at the very least, may not represent a socially just approach to the problems identified in this study. While some focus group participants felt unbothered by or capable of responding effectively to harmful content, the experience and impact—as well as displays of resilience—seemed diffuse, fluid, and socially embedded, particularly when considering post-digital online–offline interconnections.

For example, in the survey, when asked how being sent unwanted sexual content made them feel, boys were more likely to say, "not at all upset" and girls were more likely to say "very" or "slightly" upset. While

girls were more likely to have been sent such content than boys, recipients' reactions to it, and, in turn, the articulation and experience of risk and resilience online, may also be gendered. Hayes and Draigewicz (2018) describe unsolicited sexual image sharing by men toward women as representing and reflecting systemic misogyny and reminding targets of their vulnerability and, therefore, as distressing for them. In this gendered terrain, boys may display, or claim, more "resilience" than girls. It is also possible that constructs of masculinity constrain boys' ability to define it as problematic.

Another example illustrates the need for continuum thinking to capture the social located dimensions of online experiences that may not be defined as "harmful" but are nevertheless meaningful. Three year 10 girls in the co-educational academy discussed producing and sharing videos together on TikTok of "dances" and "lip syncs to songs." They recounted sometimes receiving critical comments and messages where they are "hated on," including in gendered and sexualised ways. One insisted, however, 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." Here, binary notions of risk and resilience may be obscuring the ways that risk and the demand for resilience resulted from structurally contingent dynamics of online abuse that, perhaps, young people need support to critically identify and deconstruct.

Finally, discussions about unrealistic body- and appearance-related content online suggest that individualistic framings of "vulnerability" may not address wider affective processes and social meanings regarding value and aspiration. Girls were particularly critical of such content, but described *other* girls as being at-risk, typically those with "low self-esteem" who may develop eating disorders or other problems because of the content. They felt that they, in contrast, are aware that the content is unrealistic and so they know just to ignore it and to resist the pitfalls of so-called "comparison culture." Some, however, said they sometimes still feel "unhappy" and "insecure" and described the content as potentially "toxic" to all girls. A year 10 girl in the girls' school articulated a conflict between the affective experience and implorations to ignore it: "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." Lacking, seemingly, is critical attention to what is deemed aspirational regardless of its authenticity.

Post-digital Conceptualisations of a Continuum of Harm

While oftentimes emphasising technical responses (blocking, ignoring, etc.) and individual decision-making (being careful sharing, reducing use of social media, etc.), participants were concerned about offline vulnerabilities and social contexts that shape risk and resilience. Given they tended to construct online harms as reflective and constitutive of wider social problems, they wanted interventions that address deeper causes.

For example, some girls were critical about what they considered to be a lack of attention to the underlying causes of online misogyny and sexual harassment. A year 9 girl in the girls' school, for example, felt that "the blame" is often placed "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…" Another girl in the group added: "…online harassment is an issue, but… like being followed home or catcalled or whatever… [the behaviours are the] problem, not the actual being online…" They said that they would not want to be told not to go out because of street harassment and so should not be told to stop or reduce their time online in response to online harassment.

Some participants, in turn, felt that online harms affect, as well as reflect, wider social realities. For example, online misogyny was also believed to reduce girls' and young women's willingness to speak about and report their experiences of sexual harassment and assault. A year 10 girl in the co-educational academy said she has "… seen videos [online]… about like sexual assault… 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…" A year 8 girl in the co-educational academy felt that underreporting of sexual harassment and assault is common, and that misogynistic comments may make them feel "scared to come out

and talk about these things because of what they think is going to happen."

Those who had been directly targeted and were potentially vulnerable, such as the lesbian, bisexual, and transgender participants discussed above, were critical of individualistic and technical responses and wanted recognition of and a balance between participation and protection rights online. For example, a year 10 participant in the girls' school said: "… if you block someone it won't solve the bigger issue of people thinking they can still do this." Another described wanting adults to "…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…" A year 9 girl in the girls' school felt similarly: "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."

Some participants felt that it can be difficult to speak up against online harms. Several spoke about having been called a "snowflake," for example, if they object to sexism, racism, or homophobia online. They indicated that given the fractious nature of online discourse, they want other opportunities to discuss and reflect upon what they have seen and encountered. A year 9 girl in the girls' school recounted an experience "…with racism online… we did actually go through it in the classroom… which I think was actually right because we had to do it and discuss the racist thing rather than just let it be." She believed that while algorithms may "elevate" hateful content online, "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."

Risks and Opportunities in Online–Offline Networks

The opportunities and risks entailed in being online for participants unfolded across online–offline networks (as I discuss in further depth here: Setty, 2023). Participants described interacting with peers and

connecting with new people and expanding their social networks. Most did not consider the latter inherently risky, but an expected and desired part of being online. A year 9 boy in the co-educational academy, for example, said: "naturally people add you… people talk to you, and then you start a conversation." Survey data on perceptions of where and with whom young people are starting romantic/dating relationships likewise suggested some normalisation of online interactions with "new" people. Many felt that young people mainly start relationships offline (50.9%), although 36.9% said via social media and 12.25% said on dating apps. Focus group data indicated that dating apps are rarely used, and any "online dating" occurs informally via social media and often with people already known offline. Yet, 61.5% of survey respondents believed that young people are starting romantic/dating relationships with mutual friends met online and 29.6% said an entirely new person online, while 14.7% disclosed having started a romantic/dating relationship with someone met online and 27.1% would consider doing so. Males and older respondents were more likely than counterparts to have already done so or would consider doing so.

A year 10 boy in the co-educational academy described interacting with new people online as a "gamble," whereby "[interacting with strangers] is how you meet new people who might be interesting… so [not doing so] is not good." Risk seemingly related to misrepresentation and there was extensive discussion about unverifiable others and unreliable content, for example scams, "fake news," and "catfishing." A year 8 girl in the girls' school said that sometimes it is "obvious that it's fake… but then sometimes… you don't really know… it's dangerous." A year 9 boy in the co-educational academy was concerned that perceptions of intimacy online mean the interaction "just escalates, you start a relationship… you might think you know who they are, and you might think you can trust them." Participants typically considered these *online* risks best navigated through showing caution.

Online interactions were, however, also associated with *offline* problems and implications. Whether interacting with a new person online or with an already known peer, some participants felt that online interactions are not "real" and may not reflect what happens offline. A year 9 boy in the co-educational academy said that offline people "can be just really

quiet" whereas online you "talk to them much more." He felt that people "…have more confidence on social media but then when it comes to real life or whatever, you lose all that confidence… they don't have anything to say." Others described online interactions as less "normal" or meaningful compared to "real life" and "face-to-face" interactions. They constructed the former as a distinct "unreal" entity, with disappointment arising from incongruence between online and offline, notwithstanding any benefits for interpersonal connection and relationship-building arising from disinhibited online interactions at the time (see my discussion of these co-existing risks and opportunities here: Setty, 2023).

The significance of "fights" and "arguments" online between offline peers, meanwhile, seemed rooted in offline contexts. Rarely did participants refer to "'cyberbullying," but recounted instances whereby peers are added to group chats or video calls where people may be arguing and/or being abusive. Some participants trivialised these interactions as funny, while others described them as unpleasant. Even when unpleasant, they recounted feeling obligated to remain as witnesses/bystanders because of the potential ramifications for their friendships and peer relations. A year 8 boy in the co-educational school, for example, said: "I just don't say anything. I just stay in the group just like in case… someone said something about me, I just read the messages."

Participants' concerns about friendship and trust and unfolded through online affordances. For example, a year 8 girl in the co-educational academy explained that seeing who people are speaking with online can be disconcerting:

> …sometimes if you get into an argument at school, like there's always one person who texted you… saying, oh, there's been someone that's been saying stuff about you, she's fat, ugly. But five minutes later they are talking to them and it's sometimes hard to know who to believe…

A year 9 girl in the co-educational academy felt that scope for privacy online means it can be difficult to verify trustworthiness. She said that people may post "positive comments" on social media, for example, under someone's picture, "but they know that it is getting shared in group chats and things have been said about them, because they won't say it to

their face… but they don't agree with the picture." There was little indication that participants considered these issues best dealt with through digital skills; instead, it was about peer dynamics. It happened online but was not an online issue per se.

Discussions about nude image sharing often related to offline norms and peer group processes. Some participants described risks related to "reckless" sharing with unknown and untrustworthy others online because of (seemingly flawed) feelings of intimacy. However, others said that known peers often do "leak nudes" (year 9 boy, co-educational academy). They constructed the risks as arising from online affordances (e.g., the technological ability to "leak") coupled with social motivations and consequences in offline contexts (e.g., the desire to impress peers or shame the person in the image). A year 9 girl in the girls' school explained how nude image sharing may involve "…a group of boys joking round… oh, this girl just messaged me and then it'll be, oh, send her a picture of you… ask for that… it can be a joke but sometimes it doesn't come across as a joke."

Survey data, meanwhile, indicated that unwanted sexual content is sent by young people and adults whom respondents either do or do not know offline, as well as anonymous others. Male respondents were more likely to have received it from a friend or someone known directly (20.0%) compared to females (16.4%), who were much more likely to have received it from a stranger (young person) (55.7% vs. 40.0% for males) and a stranger (adult) (50.8% vs. 13.3% for males). Focus group data suggested that gendered experiences were given meaning differently depending on who is involved. Where it occurs online with strangers or others not already known offline, it was predominantly conceived of as an *online* issue facilitated by platform affordances and disinhibition, albeit shaped by wider gender norms and inequalities. When involving known peers, it was a (gendered) social process rooted in peer group dynamics, exacerbated by online affordances, much like the discussion about fights and arguments between peers online.

(Post-)Digital Citizenship

The socially embedded and structurally contingent nature of participants' accounts of their online lives and experiences indicates that the notion of self-governance and agency may need to be reframed beyond individual responsibility, education, and awareness-raising (see Hamm et al., 2015; Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2015). Tsaliki (2022, 478) recommends a "macroscopic" rather than just "microscopic" lens of analysis to identify how safety, agency, autonomy, and creative participation unfold (or not) and can be supported for so-called "youth-at-risk" online. (Post-)Digital citizenship may help advance a more critically informed approach to addressing risk and harm in young people's digitally mediated lives.

The (post-)digital divide is, Jandrić et al. (2019, 166) argue, now less about access to devices but about "agency," whereby "being at the 'worse end' of the 'digital divide' does not imply living an 'analogue' life – but merely a non-privileged digital life." Knox (writing in Jandrić et al., 2019) elaborates on how all individuals are affected by digitisation, which, he argues, has developed from representing a distinct entity to (inter)active participation in Web 2.0, and most recently, algorithms and automation. He suggests that these latter developments entail human–non-human (digital) interaction, and "postdigital education" must focus on "the kind of thinking and learning we might associate with a critical citizen of our times" (ibid., 167). There is a distinction here between "operative skills" and "critical reasoning skills" (Smith, writing in Jandrić et al., 2019, 171; also see Throuvala et al., 2021).

As articulated by some participants, digital citizenship has been conceived of in terms of participation, provision, and protection rights online and the conditions required for these rights to be realised (see Pascoe, 2011; Thelwall, 2011; Willett, 2008). It includes young people's "understanding of citizenship values, their civic engagement and their rights in the world" (Stoilova et al., 2020, 25). Harris and Johns (2021, 395) conceive of "global digital citizenship" as an "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" (ibid., 401).

Young people's digital citizenship—like their citizenship more broadly—is, however, "subject to control, contestation and a range of cultural formations" (Green, 2020, 7). It tends to be more readily advanced in terms of protection rights, with disquiet about what it means to support provision and participation rights online (see Livingstone & O'Neill, 2015). Third and Collin (2016) describe digital citizenship for young people as often framed as an extension of online safety and as oriented toward harm avoidance/reduction, albeit with emphasis on "holistic and strengths-based approaches… that recognise the importance of skilling users to engage safely and to maximise the full potential of connectivity." They suggest that the focus on risk arises from how young people lack access to a discourse of citizenship. They trouble the framing of citizenship in terms of rights and responsibilities and as bestowed or accomplished. They instead draw on notions of "the everyday" and "acts of citizenship" to consider the scope for transforming the meaning of citizenship in ways that position young people as "disruptors" and "meaning-makers."

It is, therefore, necessary to centre young people's voices and experiences through active and participatory methodologies (Phippen & Street, 2022; Scott et al., 2020), while interpreting and contextualising their accounts in terms of the wider meanings, norms, and socio-structural patterning within online–offline/human–non-human intersections. Albury (2013, s34) recommends examining how the internet shapes young people's "place in the world" through centring their "own engagement with media." Young people's perspectives should, perhaps, be the basis on which the conditions for post-digital citizenship are identified and created. Studies suggest, for instance, that young people are typically oriented to individual, interpersonal, and normative dimensions of life online and lack awareness of or give less explicit consideration to the community and ethical dimensions (Davis, 2011; James, 2014). These orientations have implications for young people's role in creating and sustaining the conditions and patterns of risk and harm as (inter)active participants (Setty, 2023), and, in turn, communitarian and socially

embedded approaches to post-digital citizenship that go beyond (perceived and actual) personal skills and positionality (James, 2014).

Jandric (2019) describes "post-digital critical media literacy" as involving critical consumption, participation, and production. He contends, however, that it must acknowledge the lack of control and unpredictability of online spaces. McCosker et al. (2016), likewise, emphasise the "'platformed' socio-technical, political and economic context" (p. 31) and conceive of digital citizenship as enacted through platform affordances and the "interface" of "global forces, state regulation and local experiences and points of intervention" (pp. 34–5). The "digital ecology"—what exactly is happening and made possible in online spaces—is, therefore, of importance, as are the online–offline social networks and supports available to young people (see Livingstone et al., 2018; Phippen and Street, 2022; Stoilova et al., 2020). Livingstone et al. (2018) argue that young people's safety and well-being should be conceived of "in terms of their embodied, located and social as well as online selves" (p. 1115), encompassing "community" or "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" (p. 1116). Post-digital citizenship is, therefore, not an objective or normative ontological reality, but a relational process claimed through, oftentimes constrained, action (Third & Collin, 2016).

Despite these complexities, a post-digital framing of citizenship helps offer an optimistic set of possibilities that challenge the idea of digital as "other" and instead centre and identify the conditions for human agency (Jandrić et al., 2019). Focus group participants wanted to discuss online–offline dynamics of risk, opportunity, and resilience as perceived and experienced by them, including with one another and the adults around them. Most survey respondents, likewise, described online safety education they had received at school as "a bit" (59.5%) or "very" (28.5%) helpful, although 12.0% said "not at all helpful," and those with personal experience of one or more harms were particularly likely to describe it as helpful. It is not, therefore, that young people do not want or value input from adults, particularly those who personally encounter risk and/or experience harm. Interventions must, however, resonate and engage with

and challenge young people to think critically about the wider contexts that shape their meanings and experiences, including among those who claim to be unaffected whether or not they are encountering the content. This includes taken-for-granted and normalised patterns of risk and harm that may disproportionately affect some young people, but are nevertheless shaping how all young people are learning, developing, and acting as post-digital citizens.

Conclusion

The integrated nature of young people's online–offline experiences means that the internet is digitally mediating their lives in ways that make it difficult to disentangle the "online" from the "offline" and, moreover, calls into question this distinction. Online experiences unfold and are given meaning through social contexts and inequalities, although exist along a continuum regarding the extent and nature of harm as articulated and experienced (or not) by participants. The findings suggest that young people need to be supported to identify how they and others may be affected by (or implicated in) online harms beyond binary notions of risk, resilience, and responsibility (Setty, 2023). This chapter has argued that post-digital conceptualisations of a continuum of harm may help to create scope for young people's experiences online to become a resource for helping them develop critical awareness and, in turn, ethical digital cultures.

Summary

This chapter describes findings from focus group and survey research conducted with young people in England about meanings and experiences of online harms. A post-digital framing of online harms as operating along a fluid and non-binary continuum of online–offline shaped the interpretation and discussion of the data.

Findings suggest:

- Participants were regular and heavy users of social media platforms, particularly Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and WhatApp, and these spaces featured extensively in their discussions about online harms.
- Concerns about online harms related to abusive and hateful content; unwanted sexually explicit/nude content; scams, fake news, and other forms of misrepresentation/misinformation; "unrealistic" body and appearance-related content and "comparison culture"; self-harm and suicide-related content; fights and arguments, among others.
- Participants perceived, and survey data attested to, differential terrains of risk regarding prevalence and experience of online harms, with patterns unfolding in expected and sometimes less expected ways.
- There were distinctions drawn between, on the one hand, encountering and being aware of online harms and, on the other, feeling directly affected and/or targeted.
- Participants typically held individualistic attitudes to managing and responding to risk, including in ways that may constrain the participation rights of those deemed "at-risk." Yet, survey data indicated that they endorsed active and extra-individual responses to online harms, including by social media companies.
- Endorsement of extra-individual responses to online harms may relate to perceptions regarding online harms as exacerbated by social media platform affordances, while emerging from a wider social context. Many participants wanted solutions that tackle the deeper-rooted causes and that uphold both protection and participation rights online. There was some fatalism about these causes, however, hence the emphasis on individual responsibility.
- Despite some binary conceptualisations of risk and resilience online, some participants' experiences indicated that they are affected by online harms in ways that may not be deemed "harmful" but were nevertheless meaningful and pointed to socially located and structurally contingent patterns of experience. There are also wider learning and development processes occurring, shaped by what they are encountering and experiencing online.
- Participants described interacting with existing and new contacts online, and risks and harms were meaningful in terms of online–offline intersections, albeit in different ways depending on who is involved.

For example, conduct involving known peers was typically discussed more in terms of offline peer dynamics and ramifications.

The findings support post-digital framings of young people's lives that address the wider social contexts and meaning-making processes that shape their articulation and experience of risk and resilience online. While conceiving of and upholding young people's post-digital citizenship is contested and fraught, it is vital to centre, albeit critically interpret, their voices and experiences. Youth-centred accounts are needed for identifying how young people can be enabled and empowered to uphold their own and others' rights as post-digital citizens in ways that resonate and address the realities of the challenges they face.

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