



MINISTRY FOR WOMEN AND NETSAFE

# INSIGHTS INTO DIGITAL HARM: THE ONLINE LIVES OF NEW ZEALAND GIRLS AND BOYS

RESEARCH REPORT  
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RESEARCH FIRST



# Contents

Insights into digital harm: the online lives of new zealand girls and boys

## Disclaimer

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# 1

## Foreword

This research is the first in New Zealand to present young New Zealanders' experiences of digital risk and digital harm in their own words.<sup>1</sup> The Ministry for Women has led this project in partnership with Netsafe, and we are delighted to share our results with you.

This research supports the international evidence that digital challenge/risk and digital harm are gendered.<sup>2</sup> This research shows that girls and boys invest in their online lives in different ways; they interact differently online; and the extent to which their online lives impact on their identities also differs. Effective prevention and reduction activities must consider and respond to these gender differences.

The digital landscape continues to change rapidly and this hampers our ability to safeguard young people against digital harm. As adults, we often know little about the online behaviour of our children and young people. The first step must be to hear what they say about their online lives.

One finding that stood out was that young people are most fearful about personal attacks from people they know. In the digital space, potentially harmful content can be shared widely within seconds. Whether the content is a naked image shared beyond its intended recipient, or hateful words, this study shows that impacts on young people can be severe.

Prevention is a major theme in this research, although 'prevention' is not a word young people often used. Young people's suggestions for future solutions included: starting preventative efforts early with primary-age children; considering the whole person (building, developing, and supporting them as people); and education focused on online safety. The research suggests a two-pronged approach to prevention: supporting young people to maintain respectful relationships and sharing expert advice on how to keep themselves safe online. Their prevention suggestions are consistent with the Ministry for Women's research about the primary prevention of violence against women.

Young people want to be able to help themselves, and help each other. These findings have implications for who may be best suited to lead prevention efforts. Adults could lead prevention approaches aimed at developing young people's ability to identify potential harm and take action themselves, but the findings here suggest that young people would learn these skills best from other young people.

The Ministry for Women and Netsafe are working together on this important research. The Ministry for Women has led this first qualitative research phase, and Netsafe is leading the next quantitative research phase, to further add to our knowledge base about young people's online behaviour.

We look forward to continuing to build our evidence base about harm, what helps, and how we can work together to prevent and reduce online harm.

Finally, we acknowledge the students who participated and the educators who facilitated this study over and above their normal duties. Their support made this research possible.



**Renee Graham**  
Chief Executive, Ministry for Women



**Martin Cocker**  
Chief Executive, Netsafe

1 Until now research has largely focused on measuring aspects such as prevalence, but has largely ignored young people's experiences and the way they manage risk and harm.

2 Recent examples include: Crooks, Hayley R. "An Intersectional Feminist Review of the Literature on Gendered Cyberbullying: Digital Girls." *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 8, no. 2 (2017): 62-88, and Campbell, Marilyn Anne, Chrystal Whiteford, Krystle Duncanson, Barbara Spears, Des Butler, and Phillip Thomas Slee. "Cyberbullying Bystanders: Gender, Grade, and Actions among Primary and Secondary School Students in Australia." *International Journal of Technoethics (IJT)* 8, no. 1 (2017): 44-55.

# 2

## Executive summary

This research is the first of its kind in New Zealand to investigate gendered differences in online harm from the point of view of girls and boys. It establishes a gendered evidence base about digital harm experienced by young people in New Zealand.

This research identifies promising directions and potential solutions to prevent and reduce digital harm.<sup>3</sup> It does so by investigating young people's views about their use of digital technologies (such as online platforms); their experiences of harm online; what they currently do to prevent and reduce digital harm; and what they think will help in the future.

Digital harm is a complex issue, and can take a variety of forms. The internet provide a space for a unique form of harassment that is easy to create and distribute and difficult to remove.

Digital harm can have a very damaging impact on young people. For example, a 2013 research paper<sup>4</sup> found that a third of participants reported electronic harassment in the prior year, with over 50 percent rating the harassment as distressing.

Young people are still maturing and learning about the world, yet their technical expertise often outstrips that of the adults who seek to support them. We all need better answers as parents, caregivers, family whānau, teachers, friends, service providers and policy makers. This research helps us build the evidence base about what will help to prevent and reduce digital harm.

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<sup>3</sup> As defined in Glossary, page 44.

<sup>4</sup> Fenaughty and Harré: 'Factors Associated with Distressing Electronic Harassment and Cyberbullying', *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29, no.3 (2013): 803 - 811 (9).

## 2.1 Key findings

This research investigates young people's online lives. A key overarching finding is the important role the online world plays in young people's lives.

### Gendered differences

Gendered differences were apparent in how participants made sense of, and interacted with, their online worlds, their perceptions of harm, and what bothered<sup>5</sup> them online. For example, girls were more likely to use social media like Instagram to form or 'curate' their identities. Boys, on the other hand, didn't see their online lives as important in forming their identities.

Gendered differences were also apparent in the relationship between participants' offline and online worlds. For example, conflict was more likely to escalate online for girls, while it was more likely to escalate offline for boys. This tallies with the finding that there was a slightly greater disconnect between girls' online and offline lives, compared to boys.

In terms of harm, girls were more likely to discuss sexual harassment than boys. Girls reported being more 'invested'<sup>6</sup> and therefore more at risk of harm; were less likely to participate in 'roasting' than boys, but were more likely to receive unwanted nude images of boys. Images of girls were more likely to be shared by boys while girls were more likely to delete such images of boys.'

### No gendered differences

Girls and boys both said that they felt in control of their online lives and regard themselves as competent users of online technology (this included activity that occurs primarily on the internet, including digital communication, viewing content, uploading content, and engaging with content). However, they feel they do not have an accurate understanding of what happens to their information and online content, and initially said they are not concerned by this gap in their knowledge.

They said that things do not often get out of hand, yet they all appeared to know someone who had suffered severely from digital harm, and discussed the connections between digital harm, mental health, and suicide. This tension will be further investigated in the Ministry and Netsafe's second phase of research.

### Little formal help or support

Participants felt there was little useful formal help or support in place. They also reported that there were a number of barriers to seeking help, including their own reluctance to seek help in case they exposed their own behaviours.

### How girls and boys help themselves and each other

Girls and boys also talked about their self-directed approaches to help including, for example, being careful about uploading content, and being aware of who they are engaging with online. They reported that they would go to friends for support, but not usually adults for fear of getting in trouble. Participants see themselves as developing young adults who want tools to help them help themselves as well as their friends. They want to be seen as able to cope in the online environment.

<sup>5</sup> Participants used the word 'bothered' instead of 'harm'.

<sup>6</sup> Invested refers to the time spent online, and how important their online lives are to them.

## Suggestions for prevention

Participants' ideas about solutions can be placed into two prevention-focused themes:

- a whole-person<sup>7</sup> theme, which focuses on building and developing the young person's understanding of respectful relationships and concepts like consent
- an online safety theme, which focuses on the more technical ways young people can use to keep themselves safer online.

This suggests that effective responses to digital harm need to consider and include as appropriate both themes.

Participants indicated that prevention must begin early; for example, with 11- and 12-year-olds, or even younger, as digital technologies are introduced in learning.

While whole-person education could be led or supported by adults, participants said that online safety would be best led by someone who is young (aged 16-25), considered by the young people to be relatable and engaging, and at least as expert online as themselves.

## 2.2 How to read this report, and next steps

This report is in four parts. First, it looks at young people's online worlds; second, their perceptions of harm; third, their views about interventions and support; and fourth, their proposed solutions.

This research is the first step of a multiple-phase research project, and its findings have been used to design the phase of quantitative research. The quantitative phase is being led by Netsafe. Together these research phases are intended to contribute to actions to prevent and reduce digital harm.

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<sup>7</sup> We suggest that the 'whole person' is considered in their context: including school, family whānau, and community.

# 3

## Methodology

Due to the sensitive nature of this research, ethics were carefully considered. Research followed the Market Research Society Guidelines for research with Children and Young Persons. Research First put in place resources and mechanisms to ensure participants were safe. These included:

- fully voluntary participation in the research, with the opportunity to withdraw at any time
- the provision of a handout containing contact details of helplines and other supports available to students;
- a qualified helpline counsellor to facilitate groups.

An experienced research advocate was appointed to provide guidance about ethics and best practice when working with young persons. The Ministry for Women and Netsafe would like to thank Ann Dupuis for her valuable input into this project.

### 3.1 Objectives

The key objectives of this research were to:

- better understand young people's online behaviour and experiences of digital harm
- provide a gendered understanding of digital harm
- identify promising directions to prevent and reduce digital harm, including:
  - contributing to activities that raise awareness about digital harm and possible solutions
  - Providing an evidence base to inform government policy and service provider practice.

### 3.2 Design and analysis

A total of 12 focus groups were run in Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch. Ninety-five 16-17-year-olds participated.<sup>8</sup> Of the 12 groups, six were with girls only and six with boys only. Focus groups were selected on a range of other characteristics including: co-educational and single sex schools; a range of school deciles<sup>9</sup>; and a range of ethnicities, including Māori, New Zealand European, and Pasifika. The focus groups were run in schools only, so views do not capture those young people who are in employment or training, or not in employment, education or training (NEET).

We recorded the focus groups and created transcripts to assist analysis. A thematic approach was used to analyse the transcripts.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Minimum age: 16; Maximum age: 19. The majority of participants were aged 16-17 years.

<sup>9</sup> Decile range: 6-10.

<sup>10</sup> Thematic analysis (TA) is a widely-used qualitative data analysis method. It is one of a cluster of methods that focus on identifying patterned meaning across a dataset.



### **A note on qualitative research**

Qualitative research is valuable because of the rich insights it generates.<sup>11</sup> It is exploratory and illustrative. The ability to hear young people's own voices in their own words adds a direct connection to the experiences and views of young people that is unmatched by other methods.

As is the case for all qualitative research, these research findings are not able to be generalised to the wider population. They cannot tell us about the prevalence or scale of harm. We will follow this qualitative research with quantitative research to test the findings, insights, questions, and tensions generated by this research. Netsafe is leading the quantitative research.

### **How to read/use this report**

Gendered findings are found throughout the report. Summaries of gendered findings can be found in the following tables: p. 10 on gendered differences in platform use; p. 15 on the relationship between online and offline worlds; p. 17 on identity formation; p. 18 on control; and p. 20 on harm.

This report uses some of the terminology used by the participants. A glossary of terms is provided on p.44.

We asked young people about their online lives. They almost all reported being active users of digital technologies. The following section examines their use of different online platforms, the relationship between their online and offline worlds, and their sense of control online.

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<sup>11</sup> Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.

# 4

## Online lives

### 4.1 Young people using digital technology

When talking about their online activities there were some gender differences between the way young people use specific digital platforms and the way they behave when using these platforms. Table 1 summarises these online behaviours.

Table 1: Gendered differences and similarities in how girls and boys use online platforms

Type of use	Girl	Boy
<b>Managing online identities and relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Girls usually created more than one profile on a platform (e.g. public, private, and personal), especially in social media apps such as Instagram.</li> <li>Girls closely managed who sees their private profiles. For example, girls were concerned about what parents and relatives can see about them online.</li> <li>Girls usually 'friend' parents on Facebook, but manage their connections with friends and peers on other apps such as Messenger and Snapchat.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Boys are more likely to use only one profile compared to girls.</li> <li>Like girls, boys are careful about what their families can see online.</li> <li>Boys are more likely to interact with randoms* through online games.</li> </ul>
<b>Maintaining and building social connections with friends and peers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Girls use social networking sites and apps to keep in touch with their personal networks more than boys.</li> <li>Girls engage with a range of platforms such as Snapchat, Messenger, and Instagram. Girls usually have a larger list of friends than boys.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Boys' online interaction was limited to a smaller range of platforms.</li> </ul>
<b>Searching for information and complementing learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Girls searched for trivia and news as well as information about school events. Newsfeeds were mainly restricted to traditional social media such as Facebook.</li> <li>Girls used digital tools (e.g. YouTube) to help with schoolwork and individualised learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Boys' behaviour is similar to girls'.</li> </ul>
<b>Playing online games</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The few comments that girls made about games related to mobile games or apps.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Boys were more likely to engage in gaming online.</li> </ul>

\*Randoms' are strangers.

The participants were asked about which platforms they use the most and how they specifically employ them. Below is a description of the key remarks they made.




### Using Instagram

Instagram is a popular platform for girls and for boys, but the way it is used differs by gender.

Many girls have multiple profiles with different privacy setting levels. These include a completely public 'spam' profile, a 'personal' profile shared with family and friends only, and a 'private' profile.


Girls closely manage who can see their 'private' profile, and typically only have their closest friends able to see this page. Here they post screenshots of messages, rants, and talk about their deep feelings and worries.

 *Usually, you'll have a person who'll have [their main profile], that's just all your random photos that you like, that probably keeps people who're seeing it, you might not know half of your followers. And then another one is a spam, just photos, you may post 2 or 3 photos a day of random stuff, and then a private one which is private stuff.*

(SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)

Boys typically have just one Instagram profile, and use it to follow role models such as sportspeople.

Instagram can also be used to connect with sub-cultures that are not as accessible offline. For example, one male reported enjoying Instagram because he was able to express an aspect of his identity (i.e. him wearing makeup) on this platform without being attacked.

 *With the whole like just thinking back about the lack of moral code and using it to be someone else. For me that's why I want Instagram though. That is why I use it so I can have an escape. I know I could not rock up to school doing what I would like to be doing which is what I use Instagram for. I can just put on as much makeup as I want and just not care what people are going to think because I'm putting that out to people that don't really care if they see it because I know that they won't attack me for it. It is also why I don't post that sort of s\*\*t on Facebook. So I enjoy Instagram so I can almost be someone else in a sense.*

(CO-ED BOYS' GROUP)


Participants perceive Instagram to be more of a youth-focused platform, and their parents do not generally use Instagram.




### Using Facebook

Girls and boys both described their use of Facebook in a similar way. Participants are careful about what they post, as their parents and other family members are often friended.

Facebook is an important platform for staying connected to family and friends overseas.

 *I use Facebook, I'm connected to tons of my cousins who live around the world, and they're sometimes not my friends on there. So, when I share something, Dad can Like it and then it'll pop up around... because he's got brothers and sisters around the world, so it pops up for them, even though I'm not friends, so that's how they see what I'm doing.* (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)


Participants reported using Facebook less often than when they were younger (e.g. participants do not often post status updates). Instead, Facebook is used to follow pages such as those for sports, school, and events, and world news, rather than actively posting, commenting, or engaging.

 *I'm not really posting anything now on Facebook. It's more for seeing what other people are up to.* (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)




### Using Messenger

Both boys and girls said that they use Messenger extensively. Although an offshoot of Facebook the two apps are used very differently: participants actively use Messenger to connect and communicate proactively with social networks compared to their more passive use of Facebook.

 *I just moved here from Australia and I'm still talking to friends from over there now and this is like a year ago. I couldn't be doing that without Messenger.* (CO-ED BOYS' GROUP)

Messenger includes group chats: participants are often involved in multiple group conversations with different groups of friends.

 *People you go in group chats with are usually personally school friends.* (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)




### Using Snapchat

Snapchat is used by most participants, although some boys perceive it to be 'for girls'.

Lists of friends on Snapchat are usually much smaller and more select than friends lists on Facebook.

Some participants said that Snapchat streaks – the number of consecutive days snapchatting – were very important to them, to the extent that they get friends to manage their streaks when on holiday. If a streak is lost, the other person may get very upset.


 *There's a bit of guilt. Like one day I had a 300-day Snapstreak with someone and we lost it and we cried.* (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)

In contrast with other platforms and apps, it is possible to see when someone screenshots messages or pictures. This gives the user the chance to confront the person who took the screenshot.



### Using YouTube

Use of YouTube was described similarly by both boys and girls. Participants generally use it for viewing content rather than posting videos.

 *M: Are there any other things that you guys use online that's not like Snapchat, Facebook, and Instagram like...?*

 *YouTube.*

 *Don't post on it, just watch it.* (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)


The types of videos watched on YouTube most often relate to entertainment and schoolwork; one participant said that he uses YouTube to help improve his technique for sports.



### Using gaming

Boys are more involved in online gaming than girls are.

Most participants involved in gaming would do so with friends. It's also possible to log onto a server to game with 'randoms'. If the participant doesn't like the group of gamers, they can simply drop out of that game and start a new one – this is important since gaming culture was described by some participants as 'toxic'.


 *You can sit, realise what the game will be like after about a minute of playing it. People constantly abusing each other. It's like, it's not for me.* (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)



### Using other apps and sites

4Chan and Reddit (anonymous message boards) were discussed in boys' groups, but not in girls' groups. These are not used extensively by the participants, and are perceived to be harmful, particularly, for example, 'subreddits' – showing videos of people dying.

Ask FM was raised in a girls' group as a platform that had previously been used. Participants mentioned that it was used to explore other personas, but could also be used to bully others.

 *It's not really as popular now. You can still use it but it was, you'd have an account and people could ask you questions. You could either add your name ... or it could have anonymous. An anonymous person asked you a question and they could be from: how's your day, to nasty stuff ... you're a bitch, like saying heaps of stuff like that.* (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)

Social media platforms such as Twitter and Pinterest were mentioned in passing, although not widely used.

Participants also engage in online activities such as online shopping, email, reading the news, and doing schoolwork/research.




## Online and offline worlds are closely woven together for both boys and girls

Table 2: Relationship between online and offline worlds




Girl		Boy
Offline/online communication interwoven	=	Offline/online communication interwoven
Conflicts escalate <b>online</b>	≠	Conflicts started online tend to escalate <b>offline</b>
Slightly greater <b>disconnect</b> between what happens online/offline	≠	Slightly greater <b>overlap</b> between what happens online/offline

Participants' online lives are woven into their offline lives. Boundaries are complex and depend on the individual, platform, and environment. The relationship between online and offline worlds is also gendered.

Some feel it is easier to communicate online, while others report they are just as confident in their offline worlds and therefore comfortable saying the same things in the two different contexts.

-  *M: Would you guys personally say the same things online as you would in real life?*
-  *I would coz I'm pretty careful not to do stuff that I wouldn't say in person.*
-  *Because if you're Messaging someone, sometimes it's easier to say stuff online, you wouldn't be able to say in person. (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)*

A number of factors affect participants' online communication. Some reported feeling more confident and safer online because they did not 'see' the reaction of the other person. Some said the online environment gave them time to compose and think through their 'position'. Some participants reported that it is easier to say extreme things to their peers online, or share their private problems and feelings.

-  *If you say something really mean and you can hide behind the screen so you don't have to see that person really upset or crying. You can just hide. So, you don't feel bad.*
-  *It's a lot easier to have a conversation now on social media as opposed to real life because you can just type it up, there's no mistakes because you can read it through first whereas it's often kind of hard to put things into words.*
-  *It's easier to get into arguments online.*

- 🗨️ *Everyone's more confident online. It's like you have the chance to re-read it, make it perfect and then just post it and be like, yeah there's no consequences now. Because no one is going to come up to you and confront you, why did you say that on my profile?* (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)

Some feel the need to react immediately in face-to-face interactions which can lead to more harm occurring offline.

- 🗨️ *The roast can be more brutal face-to-face.* (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)
- 🗨️ *M: How come?*
- 🗨️ *You have to think on your feet. You have to return something back.*
- 🗨️ *In real life, you don't have that excuse: I was off my phone, whereas you've gotta reply with a roast immediately.*
- 🗨️ *Sometimes you just blurt it out, whereas when you're on your phone you're typing it and then you're like: hang on, that's probably a bit far. Remove it. Face-to-face, you've just said it and then you can't take it back.* (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)

Due to the crossover between their online and offline lives, some found it wasn't useful to distinguish between cyberbullying and bullying.<sup>12</sup>

- 🗨️ *I feel like also the internet is more ingrained in society now, so it's weird to categorise [cyberbullying] as a different thing.*
- 🗨️ *Because everyone uses social media very often, so often, it's a part of everyone's daily lives, it sort of has become like a normal thing. There's no separate cyberbullying or bullying, it's straight up bullying.* (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)

Participants' comments indicate that they see bullying-type behaviours (whether labelled as such or not) are pervasive and widely experienced.

- 🗨️ *I think everyone's been bullied online at some point.* (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)

Interestingly, girls perceived boys as more likely to say the same things online as face-to-face, or to play out online conflicts in real-world violence. Boys perceived girls to say more extreme things online than they would face-to-face.

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<sup>12</sup> One all-girls' school group was an exception. The students reported there would be no mention at school of bullying that had occurred the night before online. They would go home and the bullying would continue that night.



## 4.2 Online worlds and identity formation

Table 3: Identity formation at a glance

Girl		Boy
Online life central to identity formation	≠	Online life not as important for identity formation
Do consider audience of posts	=	Do consider audience of posts

### Uploaded content is the expression of an individual's online identity

Girls are particularly concerned with cultivating this identity.

 ...we do use social media to express ourselves.

 You want to be the perfect version of yourself online.


(SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)


Different platforms can represent different facets of young people's identities. For example, girls with multiple accounts upload pictures from their day-to-day lives without too much thought (using 'spam' profiles), whereas their deeper thoughts about themselves and their friends are restricted to their private/personal profile. They report these profiles as all being different elements of their true, yet fluid, selves.

### Young people consider their audience when uploading content online


What they put up varies based on who they know can see it. For example, many are more careful about what they put on Facebook because their family members are able to see their Facebook page. In contrast, girls with private/personal Instagram profiles who share screenshots of messages and post rants, closely regulate their audience, and there are strict criteria for who is able to see this content.

The social rules for what is posted, and where it is posted, are complex and depend on the individual, the platform, and the audience.

 The rule for posting anything online is: Would my mother cry if she read this? No? Okay.

 Certain platforms you prefer your friends only. Facebook most of the time people have their family members so you'd probably filter it more to make it appropriate for your family members, you may be a little bit different in front of your friends. (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)

While online platforms are used to cultivate online persona, participants are also aware that the media they see online can influence how they see themselves.

 Having social media accounts, you're easily influenced, you're easily westernised, especially by Instagram. (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)

## 4.3 Participants feel in control but don't know how information is used

Table 4: Control at a glance

Girl		Boy
Feel in control	=	Feel in control
Don't know how information is used	=	Don't know how information is used

### Participants generally feel that they have control over their online lives

Participants talked about feeling in control, exerted through their choices about what content they engaged with (e.g. uploaded, liked, followed, etc.). However, they feel they do not have an accurate understanding of what happens to their information and online content. They are unconcerned and accepting of this lack of knowledge.

 M: Do you feel in control of your online world?


 To an extent.

 Most of the time.

 Yeah.


 What you like determines what you get in your newsfeed.


(SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)

 M: Do you reckon you have an accurate understanding of how far your information is going?

 No.

 No.


 Definitely not. (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)


 M: Is that something you think or worry about?

 Nah.

 No. (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)

This could be interpreted as participants having control over what they see in their newsfeeds, which constitutes much of the online world, but not of how platforms then use their content (e.g. for targeting advertising) which is beyond the individual's online world. It is interesting to note that some participants prefer specific platforms (e.g. Instagram) over others (e.g. Facebook) because they feel that these platforms allow more control over what they see.

 *You can do it on Instagram. This one is not that bad. You can put it on private, and it's easy to manage.*

 *I've been exposed to so many different things on Facebook, there's so, so many sex videos on there now, and honestly, Facebook is so slow at reacting to them ... there's so much room for improvement.*

(SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)

### **Tensions between young people's online behaviour and their reported behaviour**

Gendered differences are apparent in the way that young people use online platforms and the way they use these platforms to form their identities. There are tensions between how young people view their online lives and their reported behaviour. For example, they feel their online and offline lives are deeply interwoven, but that does not mean behaviour online is the same as offline.

# 5

## Harm

### 5.1 Introduction

In this section we consider young people’s understanding and experience of digital harm. Gender differences are summarised in the table below. Participants reported that online attacks that came from people they knew were much more harmful than those attacks that were random and impersonal.

Table 5: Harm at a glance

Girl		Boy
Sexual harassment discussed often	≠	Sexual harassment rarely discussed
Know people who have suffered serious harm	=	Know people who have suffered serious harm
More invested so more at risk	≠	Less invested so less at risk
Less roasting	≠	More roasting
Unwanted nude images of boys received by girls and high awareness that images of girls can be shared beyond intended recipient	≠	Boys share images of girls widely*
Personally targeted harm worse than random and impersonal harmful material	=	Personally targeted harm worse than random and impersonal harmful material

\* Boys reported knowing that sharing these pictures is wrong.

#### Young people described harm using words like ‘bothered’

We asked participants about their experiences of online harm. Young people used different words to describe harm. They noted that harmful communications from people they knew were much more hurtful than those from ‘randoms’.

Figure 1: Words used to describe harm



'Harm' may not be the best word to engage young people with this concept. Participants were less responsive to discussion questions focused on the word 'harm', but engaged better when their own words were used. Some of the language used by participants is illustrated in Figure 1.

## 5.2 All know someone who has suffered serious digital harm










Although participants note that 'things don't often get out of hand', they all know someone who has suffered serious digital harm and they recognise that harm is common and serious.

Because participants were having some trouble critically reflecting on their own digital harm, researchers asked them about people younger than themselves, referred to in this report as 'children'. Interestingly, participants were much more concerned about the harm that children were exposed to than harm to themselves.

## 5.3 Participants were aware of digital harm in a wider context

### Participants are aware that digital harm occurs within a social context

This awareness is gendered. Girls in particular identified sexual harassment as a problem that affects their lives both online and offline. However, participants were not always aware of the contradiction between criticising sexual harassment, and implicitly endorsing it at other points in the discussion.

-  *I feel like the main issue still is the cultural, like, sexual harassment of young women is just taking hold in a different way through the internet, and that's like the root cause of what we should be looking at.* (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)
-  *One of the girls was getting [undetermined word in transcript] every day.*
-  *She enjoyed it though. She loves it.*
-  *She loves the attention.*
-  *It went to her school though.*
-  *It went to her school and the police got involved.*
-  *Like she probably felt like a bit bad with some of the stuff.*
-  *No she would have liked it.*
-  *I mean she loves the attention but like you know?* (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)

Boys claimed to know what girls think and how they behave online, while girls were less certain about boys' thinking and behaviour.

## 5.4 The impact of harm

### Harm ranged from personally targeted to random and impersonal

Digital harm that is personally targeted, especially from the target's peer group, can have a high impact.

Participants reported random and impersonal harm – harm that is not targeted directly at one person and often occurs to a wide group of other people – is more likely to have little to no impact.







- 🗨️ *I think the fact that you're not personally targeted means that it isn't really that big a deal.*
- 🗨️ *It's not harassment.*
- 🗨️ *If it's directly targeted, like someone sends you a photo of the outside of your house or something, that's terrifying. But if someone that you don't know sends you a picture of their penis, you're like: okay that was gross, but okay. I'm done now, bye. (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)*

Examples of personally targeted digital harm include:

- personal attacks, bullying (in direct messages, group chats, or social media comments)
- being pressured to send nude photos, or having consensually-sent nudes spread beyond their intended recipient(s)
- strangers targeting a person and finding out a lot about them from the information they have online (e.g. stalking)
- hate pages created on Facebook or Instagram to share negative content about an individual
- catfishing (when an individual creates a false identity on social media in order to deceive others)
  - 🗨️ *I feel like even if some teenagers get the feeling that this person might not be real, they still sometimes choose to ignore it and hope that they are. That's when it becomes pretty dangerous I think. It's like catfishing. (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)*
- vague posting (passive aggressive posting, directed at someone but putting it in the guise of a general comment).
  - 🗨️ *And someone posts something that's like: don't you hate it when your friends do this, and this, and this, and they're really specific, so you know that this is aimed at someone, no names are mentioned. (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)*


### Participants feel that things don't often get out of hand

Participants feel things in their online lives don't often 'get out of hand'. They said that most of what might once have been considered harmful (perhaps by those in older generations) does not have as great an impact on young people today. They talked about a certain amount of harm preparing them for the real world.

-  *We don't really let stuff get to us.* (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)
-  *Usually, it's not an earth-shattering problem. You can deal with it yourself.* (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)
-  *Some things you can't ever avoid. There's always gonna be people on there like...*
-  *There's always gonna be conflicts.*
-  *You're never kept safe to a degree, but what you're saying on the roasting and stuff, that prepares you for the real world.*
-  *It's always just gonna be people and things that you won't like. Just have to deal with them.* (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)

### Yet most participants knew young people who had experienced serious digital harm

A very few participants disclosed experiences where things had been harmful towards them online. However, most participants know of people at their schools, or in their networks, who have experienced digital harm that has been very damaging for them.

-  *In Year 9 all of the boys used to make fun of this girl I know that went to [School]. They used to call her [word suppressed] because she sent a nude of her boobs or something like that. Apparently she had [word suppressed] nipples or something. They used to pick on her and everyone, like she'd be on the bus and people would call out '[word suppressed]' and post on her Facebook and stuff like that. I don't know how she got through that because that would be ... when everyone knew about it, even people she didn't know. She'd be at the mall and on the bus and stuff like that and they'd call '[word suppressed]' to her.* (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)

Those participants who consider their online lives as fundamental reported the greatest level of harm. Time spent online is likely to play a large role in this.<sup>13</sup> Those who are more invested in their online worlds are likely to spend more time on the internet. Also the more time spent online may indicate the investment that young person has in their online identity.

<sup>13</sup> Although other studies have found that time spent online is not a predictor of harm.


### Some types of personally targeted harm have the greatest impact

Of the types of personally targeted harm, those that were particularly concerning to participants are those that:

- come from close friends
- are deliberately malicious
- show disregard for consent.

A comment is felt to be more harmful as the perpetrator's proximity to the individual increases. That is, participants are less bothered by a stranger saying bad things to them than they are by friends.

For some, however, this excludes roasting (more serious attacks) and banter (generally friendly teasing).<sup>14</sup> Roasting is commonplace both in the offline world and within comments and group chats online. Although participants reported it is not intended to be harmful, harm does sometimes occur. Participants reported that they have learnt to recognise when they have crossed the line with someone when roasting. They reflect that this has been learnt through trial and error, and they were not as aware of these lines and boundaries when they were younger.

 *I know on a group chat that I'm in, some people were roasting this guy and it just got far what somebody did. I felt like it just got a bit too far. Then later on he actually admitted to have some sort of like depression.* (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)

In general, participants feel saying something harmful face-to-face has a much more negative impact than the effect of saying the same thing online.

### Nude, semi-nude, and embarrassing images were often referred to as harmful

Nude images, however, were considered potentially most harmful.

For girls, receiving nude pictures of males is considered normal (although unpleasant) and part of their online experience. In every discussion about the dissemination of a nude image the subject of the image was a female. Boys are more likely to share nude images of girls than girls of boys. However, the image is less likely to be shared when it's of a boy's girlfriend.

Boys reported that sharing images of a girl is 'wrong', and they were more likely to engage in sharing photos when they were younger, and for sharing photos to serve a motive (e.g. revenge) rather than simply as an automatic response. There is a clear understanding that consent around nude photos is very important, and when photos are shared without the consent of the subject this is perceived as very harmful.

<sup>14</sup> As mentioned earlier, this kind of communication occurs more with boys than girls. See glossary, page 44.




- 🗨️ *All of the schools around the city, people would just spread heaps of nudes of people that other people trusted to take. Actually I was on the bus the other day and there were these ... Year 9, 10, 11 around that age, and this guy he was showing, he'd got out his vault and he was swiping openly on the bus showing all these other kids all these pictures he'd collected of all these girls and stuff. He called it the Wank Bank.*
- 🗨️ *That's disgusting.*
- 🗨️ *Oh my God, that's disgusting. Okay, keep them to yourself, all right? Don't open that up on a public place. It's freaking little kids here, old people. No one wants to see that s\*\*t.*
- 🗨️ *I was friends with this girl in Year 10 and she used to collect heaps of them and she'd just show them to everyone. I was like, who gives you the right to do that, other people's...*
- 🗨️ *I don't think that's something that anyone wants to see. In your inbox and you're like: that's a penis. I didn't ask for this.*
- 🗨️ *M: Have most of you guys experienced something like that?*
- 🗨️ *Yeah.*
- 🗨️ *Yeah.*
- 🗨️ *We're women online. You don't have to look for it. (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUPS)*

Participants reported that this kind of behaviour was more prevalent when they were in their early years of high school than it is now, in their final high school years.

- 🗨️ *It was back in like definitely in Year 9 and 10 and a bit of Year 11, there was a lot of that going around. In Year 12, Year 13 you don't hear of it that much.*
- 🗨️ *It could be sent the night before and it could be around six schools the next day.*
- 🗨️ *It's probably kind of sad because, we're kind of like, they kind of trust you probably, and then you abuse them. (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)*
- 🗨️ *I know a few stories of girls' nudes going around and them not knowing about it until they're...*
- 🗨️ *Not knowing about it until everyone's seen it.*
- 🗨️ *That's terrifying. (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)*

Participants in one school suggested that the more popular the female subject of the image was, the wider the audience of her picture would be.

 *It sort of depended on how popular the girl was as well how much worse they'd be. There was this one girl from one of the private schools that sent [a nude image] and everybody knew about it. She ended up on Facebook and everybody saw it. (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)*


 *M: Was she quite popular so it went round further?*

 *Yeah. (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)*


### Random/impersonal digital harm was not seen as having a great impact


Examples of random and impersonal digital harm that participants reported as having experienced include:

- random friend requests from people who are not known to the recipient
- various negative content appearing on Facebook newsfeeds, including graphic and violent videos
- negative or insensitive comments made on Youtube, Stuff and other popular sites

 *In the comments sections on YouTube and Facebook and Stuff, there's a lot of comments like: 'that was worse than cancer', or just making fun of real ... like, trashy stuff. And, personally, it offends me because I've had family members who've suffered from such diseases and stuff, so it's like annoying when you see people that take it so lightly and just talk about it. I don't usually see people posting big statuses or anything, it's usually just little comments by people I don't even really know. (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)*

- spam and viruses received via emails and links on Messenger
- advertisements that follow the browser after having viewed something online, particularly when online shopping

 *It's like especially since Facebook is around, those ads they use like the cookies or logs on the websites you've visited. So if I was looking around on this internet shopping or just to buy something, the next moment I turn on Facebook it will pop up as an ad.*


 *The exact same, say I was looking for a shirt, that exact same shirt would be the ad. It's so scary.*

 *So creepy. (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)*

- extreme conversation in online games (e.g. death threats). Participants reported mostly viewing this as funny.


Participants initially reported that harm that is not specifically and personally targeted at the young person often doesn't have a great impact, and is considered a normal and expected part of the online experience.

For example, graphic and violent videos sometimes appear on participants' Facebook newsfeeds. Participants did report being negatively affected by these videos, but said they scroll past the video quickly and that this content does not have a great or lasting impact on them. They reported that they may seek help from friends if content disturbed them.


 *A couple of weeks back I saw a video and it was up, this dude whose hands got hacked off and I just thought: how the hell did that get on my feed? Like, no-one had commented on it, it just popped up.*

(SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)

 *M: What did you do?*


 *Just turned it off after I saw the knife go through his hand. That was a bit too much for me to watch.*


 *Yeah.*

 *I didn't tell anyone. I just thought: how'd that get on my feed?*


(SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)


 *M: Do other people have those sorts of things pop up?*

 *Yeah, I had this post once, it was a kind of sick video of a guy throwing a goldfish into a frying pan. I don't know why it was there. It was just on my page.*

 *I had ones like ... I click on it, I don't know what it is, but it's 6 seconds of some guy just on the ground and then he gets his head blown off.*


 *What?*

 *I was like: whoa. (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)*

 *M: If you guys never wanted to see that stuff again, do you know how to make it go away?*

 *No.*

 *No. (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)*

 *M: And if something like that happens that bothers you, whether it's that or something else online, who do you guys go to about this? Anyone?*

 *No.*

 *No.*

 *No.*

 *Probably tell your friends what you saw.*

 *Yeah. (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)*

### **Participants at times struggled to engage with what affects or bothers them online**

Given their comments elsewhere this could be because they feel that things don't often get out of hand, and their desire to self-manage anything that does affect them.

We asked participants whether they feel comfortable with younger family members or friends (from here on referred to as 'children') being online.

Most participants do not feel entirely comfortable with their younger family members or other children being online. They perceive these younger children as having grown up even more immersed in social media and their online lives than the participants themselves.

Participants expressed concern about what children may be viewing, uploading, and interacting with online. Some participants were not very concerned about children they know being online, because many participants felt that they were available to support younger family members and friends to navigate their online lives. Several participants reported actively intervening when seeing a younger family member engage in behaviour the participant felt was inappropriate for their age. Interestingly, some of the types of content they described as potentially very harmful to their younger siblings (e.g. violent videos) were also types of content that the participants did not consider harmful to themselves.

### **Conclusion**

Gender differences are evident throughout participants' understanding and experience of digital harm. In the next section we examine young people's views on interventions and supports and what they can do to stay safe online.

# 6

## Interventions and support


### 6.1 Introduction

#### Participants did not find current intervention or support helpful

We asked participants about how they stay safe online, what they do if they experience harm, and what sort of help and support has been useful and what hasn't. They reported finding very little that is helpful, including support provided at home, schools, or within the community.

#### Barriers to help


Participants reported barriers that stand in the way of seeking help. They view themselves as independent and autonomous. They feel that they should be able to deal with online trouble themselves as it presents itself. Their acceptance of digital harm as a normal part of daily life may also contribute to their lack of reporting or help-seeking.

 *It's always just gonna be people and things that you won't like. [You] just have to deal with them.* (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)

Interestingly, while significant gendered differences existed in participants' online behaviours and perceptions of harm, fewer gendered differences exist in their comments on options about help-seeking, interventions, and support, or in proposed solutions.

#### Staying safe online was self-directed and ad-hoc

Participants reported that they learnt how to stay safe online themselves, through trial and error. Some also reported learning from older siblings or friends. In some instances they reported learning from school-based cyber-safety programmes, but noted that they had little or no lasting impact.

 *M: Do you guys reckon that the learning that you've had about online safety [at school] has helped? If you had any?*

 *No.*

 *No.*

 *Not really had much.*

 *You sort of learn more yourself.*

 *Yeah.*


 *Yeah.*

 *Trial and error.* (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)

 *M: Who do you find out from?*

 *Yourself.*

 *Your mates.*

 *Personally, I learned from my older brother, because he put some stupid stuff online.* (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)

Most frequently, participants noted that the best way to stay safe online is through vigilance around what they upload and engage with (that is, what they like and follow).


 *Not to give out too much details about yourself and your life or your private life and stuff.* (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)


 *Don't put it up in the first place.* (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)

Many also noted the importance of keeping privacy settings up-to-date.


### They felt there were barriers to seeking help

Significantly, young people reported that there were substantial barriers in the way of getting help or support for digital harm. This is exacerbated by participants feeling that they should be able to independently manage and cope with experiences of digital harm. Some felt that help-seeking can lead to further harm.


 *Last time I did that, I was the one that ended up getting upset and bullied too.* (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)

 *There's also like perceived fear of punishment as the victim which can be really hard as well and stops people from reaching out.* (CO-ED BOYS' GROUP)

Overall, participants reported that they should be able to handle digital harm themselves. Some went as far as to say that they would never discuss digital harm with anyone. They said this was because they did not want to appear weak, or feared that it may escalate matters. Pernicious gender stereotypes may exacerbate this barrier to help-seeking.

 *You can't always be on someone's wing throughout life and be continually guarded. You've gotta fend for yourself.* (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)


 *There's a stereotype, be a man like tough it out, be a man, get over it.* (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)

 *I'd probably just learn to ignore [being affected by being insulted in a game] and accept it and distract myself. Put on a single player game, just try and get away from it. Don't really complain, because it's just online, it's just banter.* (CO-ED BOYS' GROUP)


There were some participants, however, who viewed barriers to help-seeking as important to overcome.


 *In most cases though people keep it to themselves and it just makes it worse.*


 *That is a lot of the problem.*

 *They keep it to themselves because again it's not something they want anyone else to know.* (CO-ED BOYS' GROUP)


Participants reported that if they did seek help it would be from friends who they know and trust. While some felt strongly that they could go to their parents, others felt strongly that they could not.

 *If it gets really bad, I might just tell a few of my trusted friends.*  
(CO-ED BOYS' GROUP)


 *Mates are quite a big influence. People are more inclined to listen to a mate telling you that something's wrong, that you were taking it too far, then that may help.* (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)

 *The thing is though, your friends understand you and they have a fresh perspective on the issues so they're not like over-thinking it like you are.* (CO-ED BOYS' GROUP)

For some, a liked and trusted teacher could be a point of support.

 *I think it's probably like you said probably a close teacher is better anyway. You're probably more comfortable. You're not necessarily comfortable around a counsellor anyway.* (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)

However, most participants reported that they would not go to teachers or counsellors, as it would mean disclosing something that they are not necessarily proud of.

 *I feel that's kind of the problem with the whole go to teachers, go to your parents thing. Often when you get into these situations it's already at the point where you definitely do not want anyone to see that.* (CO-ED BOYS' GROUP)


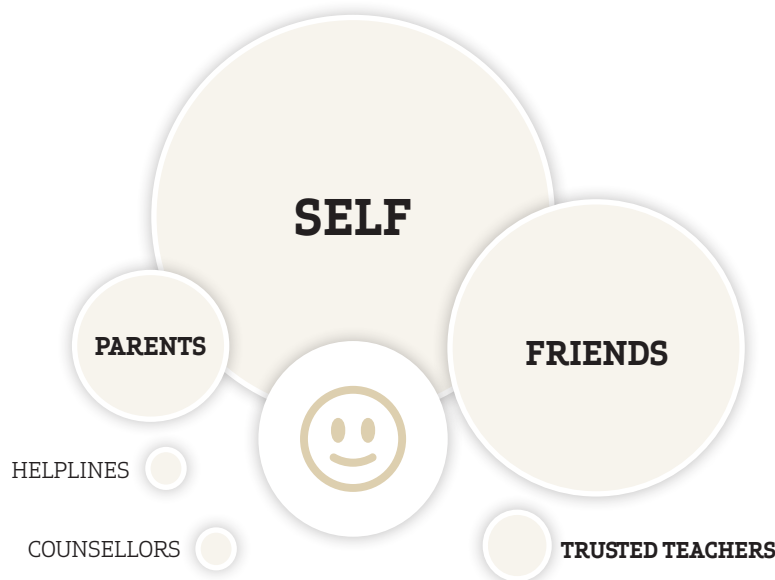
 *I feel like a big issue around cyber-bullying, though, when it comes to teachers and stuff, is they don't really get there's banter and there's cyberbullying. They act too serious.* (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)

Figure 2: Where respondents turn to for help



### What helpful support has been received?

We asked groups whether they had received any support that had been helpful. A few groups noted that guest speakers had visited their school to speak about cyber safety. These had made a moderate impact, although the impacts did not appear to be long-lasting.

One group reported an engaging talk given by New Zealand Police that used real-world examples to show how far a person's data can travel.

*I think it was just his enthusiasm towards it. He was funny and he related to us. It wasn't just like some guy coming in and saying don't cyberbully people, this is what could happen. It's more like showing us if you send this, here's the entire road it could go down.*

(CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)

Again, others reported that it was older siblings' advice that had been most helpful, as they had been through similar experiences and therefore understood. This suggests that prevention efforts could be led by slightly older peers.

### What's not helpful?

When asked, participants said that the few available formal supports were not helpful.

They reported that, for the most part, helplines were not considered a useful support mechanism. This is because the helpline counsellors don't have a personal relationship with the young person, and they are therefore perceived as not genuinely caring. Participants did not feel that phoning in is useful; however, they did note that they might consider messaging an online service for support.



- 🗨️ *But yeah so they don't know you and they can't really relate. They sort of try to be all understanding but I think like they just sort of sound all sympathetic and stuff and it doesn't really help.* (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)

### Formal mechanisms put in place by schools were seen as unhelpful

A common perception was that teachers can't take meaningful action. This presents itself as a barrier to approaching them for help.

- 🗨️ *I still have a bloody bone to pick about how the school handles things though.*
- 🗨️ *Yes.*
- 🗨️ *The school does not do things well.* (CO-ED BOYS' GROUP)


Tighter controls and blocks on access at schools (e.g. blocking certain sites on the wi-fi during school hours) were perceived to be inadequate. Young people are likely to find a way around these controls, and then pass this knowledge on to their friends. In the same vein, age restrictions are of limited use; many participants had Facebook before they reached the minimum age threshold according to the app's terms and conditions.


- 🗨️ *The school believes they're helping because they tried to lock as much social media as they can on the wi-fi and things like that...*
- 🗨️ *That's so retarded.*
- 🗨️ *Yeah, it's just not really helping.* (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)
- 🗨️ *I don't know, you can access it anywhere pretty much. Even though they've blocked it at school, everyone uses VPN.* (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)

Teaching that does not understand young people's current use of and attitudes towards their online lives was also not considered helpful. Neither are 'lectures' from teachers on cyber safety (especially when that same teacher then struggles with technology in the classroom). This suggests a disconnect between generations, where participants feel that their online lives are not understood by those older than them.

- 🗨️ *It seems weird to me that when I was in intermediate school, all the cyber safety we got taught to us was by our home room teacher. But our home teacher also couldn't open Word documents. That's clearly someone who's ... not tech-savvy. Why are they teaching us? Why have they decided this is the most qualified person to teach us? It is something that needs to be seriously taught.* (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)
- 🗨️ *We're all like 100 percent connected so we're like raised by it basically. The stuff we've been taught came from people that came across this like half way through their life.* (CO-ED BOYS' GROUP)

Nearly all participants said that school counsellors were not a viable option for help-seeking. Participants reported that counsellors tended to be much older, lacked a personal connection with young people, and that counsellors' style of communication was out of touch with how young people communicate. It was often mentioned that it was difficult to remain anonymous when accessing school counselling services.

 *And the school counsellors aren't really an option, in my experience, they are not scary but just unwelcoming.* (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)

 *You get a note sent to your class and it used to be on a pink slip so everyone knew.* (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)

However, there were some exceptions regarding the usefulness of helplines and school counsellors. There were one or two individuals who were open to accessing helplines, or knew of people who had found them useful. And, there were some who found counsellors both accessible and effective.

 *Organisations like Youthline are really good. I've used them.*

 *The counsellors are great. One of them's my rugby teacher.*  
(CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)

# 7

## Solutions

Given the gendered differences in their online lives and experiences of harm, we suggest that the range of solutions consider and include gender differences. This is despite the fact that the solutions participants suggested were largely not gendered (consent was the exception).

### Prevention was seen as more important than support after harm had occurred

Participants noted that solutions to digital harm are complex. Participants' comments strongly suggest a focus on prevention: they considered prevention (particularly preventing harm before it ever occurs) to be more important than support or intervention after exposure to risk or harm. Participant ideas about prevention can be characterised as:

- building the 'whole person' (healthy relationships, e.g. understanding concepts of consent and respect)
- dealing with some of the more technical aspects of keeping themselves safe online (e.g. restricted access to harmful content)

Participants also commented on who should help. For example, trusted adults may be more suited to leading discussions on healthy relationships, while younger, 'relatable' and tech savvy people are more suited to leading discussions on how to stay safe online.

Participants commented that solutions must not only assist young people, but also inform those in older generations around them about how young people build, maintain, and interact with their online worlds. There is a sense that everyone is learning, but that participants – young people, adults, online specialists – recognise and play to their strengths.


Figure 3: Solution brainstorming



## 7.1 Whole-person solutions

### Participants talked about future solutions that developed and supported them as people

Different groups used different words to illustrate this idea: 'maturity,' 'kindness,' 'empowerment,' and 'resilience.'

 *It's one of those things where it goes a lot wider than – it's like a societal kind of thing. If you want to make it better you're going to have to start out more wider kind of thing. (CO-ED BOYS' GROUP)*

Participants want to have the resources to support themselves, their friends, peers, and younger family members. A desire for a shift in culture about opening up about feelings and experiences was also often raised.

Many participants reported that being involved in discussion was both interesting and beneficial because they had the opportunity to reflect on their own and their peers' experiences online.

Participants discussed the idea of young people mentoring children (e.g. senior high school students mentoring intermediate-aged children). They also discussed helping parents learn how to put in place restrictions around the use of the internet. However, participants also noted that young people are likely to find their way around these kinds of restrictions (e.g. schools banning Facebook during class time is overcome with VPN<sup>15</sup>).


The following paragraphs illustrate participants' support for whole-person approaches.

### They saw online harm connected to issues such as rape culture, consent, poverty, mental health, and resilience to online (and offline) harm

For example, participants were often acutely aware of the link between digital harm and mental health. The impacts of online harm, including suicide, self-harm, depression, or mental illnesses, were raised in almost every focus group.

### Consent was raised far more often in girls' groups than boys' groups

For example, respecting a person in a photograph and considering whether they would give their consent to having it shared. Some participants also discussed consent in relation to the issue of rape culture in New Zealand.

 *Are people consenting to me posting these photos? This person consenting to receiving this photo of me? That is the biggest problem with interactions online is people don't understand that boundary of where, it's like not understanding this person might not want you to do this. But it's like because it's online it's okay. (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)*

<sup>15</sup> See glossary, page 44.

- 🗣️ *It's about teaching consent and self-respect, and if you want people to respect you, you should respect them and what they want. It's a little bit of ... it's a hard thing to teach. It comes down to a person's thoughts and views on different things, and if one person's okay with it, that doesn't mean everyone else is. Everyone's spreading photos around of you, but that doesn't mean you can spread photos around of other people, because you don't know if they're okay with that. You can't teach that.*

*It's a hard thing to teach, because it's just about respecting other people for being people and equal to you and you respecting their opinions and what they want. That's a very hard thing to teach.*

*It does come down to looking carefully at consent. You can teach that from a young age, a really young age, you can teach them in primary school. (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)*

The following quotes illustrate participants' views about mental health, male norms, empowerment, and kindness.

### Mental health

- 🗣️ *I guess people with social anxiety and already hints at depression and it tends to be overwhelming since it follows you everywhere kind of thing. (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)*
- 🗣️ *Like I said, this whole [digital harm] thing goes out to the wider thing. It's not this school, it's not the schooling system, New Zealand in general like entire mental health system doesn't work. (CO-ED BOYS' GROUP)*

### Male norms

- 🗣️ *But it is hard for boys to talk out about a thing like [their mental wellbeing]. You just kind of just want to bring that message across that it's actually okay to talk about it. (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)*

### Empowerment

- 🗣️ *It's more like self-empowerment. I personally am not fazed when someone says a rude comment about me just because I'm confident within myself. I think that's the underlying thing, you need to have that confidence in yourself that it doesn't matter what people would say about your posts. I think more self-empowerment. (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)*

### Kindness

- 🗣️ *I think being kind to people and feelings should be started really young, as soon as they know how to listen to you, all schools should enforce kindness. You should tell them what could happen. I think because we're exposed to so much, sometimes people go: they're too young for that. But half the time they're not. (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)*
- 🗣️ *We need to sort out the people and everyone and make sure they're all in a place where they can bring kindness to everyone. Especially, like, early childhood, we're looking at kids in poverty and how they were raised, and how what happens can affect them in the future. I feel like we need to sort out bigger issues to be able to sort out this one, as well. (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)*

## 7.2 Online safety solutions

### Efforts to prevent and reduce online harm deal specifically with their online interactions and behaviours

They suggested that guest speakers and workshops are effective ways of teaching young people how to reduce the risk of digital harm. Participants who suggested these options had attended talks that they found engaging and helpful.

Participants emphasised that online safety talks must engage young people and be considerate of their lives online. They suggested it would be helpful for them to learn about specific examples where things have got out of hand online and what could be done about them.

#### Workshops should:



- be led by a relatable young person
- be engaging
  - 🗨️ *Not like lectures necessarily because that just makes everyone feel like, oh I don't want to listen to this.* (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)
- be based on an accurate understanding of young people's online lives
- start early (at intermediate school age) and be refreshed often
- contain real-life examples of personal content and/or digital harm
- consider the actual risks that young people feel are out there rather than simply 'stranger danger'.
  - 🗨️ *That's the big thing with cyber safety ... the only thing that's discussed is 'don't accept messages from old men'. That's what they tell you.* (CO-ED GIRLS' GROUP)

Participants feel it's important that the leader of these efforts is as close in age to the young person as possible. Some suggested they are now in a position to support younger children.

- 🗨️ *M: You reckon [teaching about online content is] more effective coming from you guys, or as part of the school programme?*
- 🗨️ *It's probably from us guys.*
- 🗨️ *Yeah.*
- 🗨️ *Yeah.*
- 🗨️ *The younger kids don't tend to listen to the teachers. Sometimes do, but stuff like that, they'd be like: you don't know what you're talking about.*
- 🗨️ *They look up to [us]. They'll follow [us].* (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)

### There were fewer comments about help after harm had occurred

When participants did comment they talked about helplines and support networks. They thought these must be confidential, and allow the young person to select someone they feel they can relate to and would like to talk to. Participants said it is important to build a relationship with this support person.

-  *M: So some of [the helplines] have Web Chat... Would you guys maybe use that?*
-  *Yeah I think like yeah because you're experiencing the bullying or whatever through that kind of context as well. Dealing with it in that way and getting I don't know help through that could be like, it's different. Talking to a counsellor and sitting down in their room like the stress ball or whatever. It's a lot different to just like someone like yourself. People online is a very different sort of interaction so I don't know. More readily available like helplines through the internet could be effective. (CO-ED BOYS' GROUP)*

If you or anyone you know has experienced digital harm, resources can be found on Netsafe's website: [www.netsafe.org.nz](http://www.netsafe.org.nz)





## 7.3 The checklist

The following were consistently raised by participants as vital in all prevention/early intervention efforts to reduce digital harm against young New Zealanders:






- Efforts to prevent and reduce digital harm must **begin early** (at intermediate)
- There needs to be a two-pronged approach to **prevention**, addressing the person as a whole, as well as technical digital aspects
- Whole-person** preventative approaches could be led by adults
- Technical aspects of digital harm and safety **must** be led by a **young person** or young mentor (aged between 16 and 25)
- The young leader must be **relatable**
- Measures must be **engaging** for the young people involved (i.e. not a 'lecture')
- Must be guided by a **clear and accurate understanding** of how young people engage with their online lives
- Must **respect** young people's use of the digital environment and attitudes towards their online lives (to the same extent that their physical and offline lives would be respected)
- Must **respect** young people's **autonomy** and recognise they're independent agents who feel in control of their own experiences
- Must be **self-empowering**: support them to help themselves and their friends
- Must be age-specific and **regularly** updated.



### Starting early

-  I reckon as soon as they reach the intermediate threshold, because they're out of the primary, they're out of being really kind of cared for and they're starting to find their own independence, find their own maturity, own identity. That's the age you have to target. Because that's the time when they're the most confused. (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)
-  And it's a lot to do with Year 7 and 8 because it's kind of like where you figure yourself out a little bit. You're starting at a point where you try to figure myself out and then at high school you get more of the journey, level one you expect to know what subjects you're going to take and your idea of the world. (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)
-  Year 8 maybe. Like, the first year before high school. (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)
-  They need to teach it younger, they do it at Years 10 for us and it definitely starts younger than that. (SINGLE-SEX BOYS' GROUP)

### Relatable

-  Having someone who is kind of close in your age but just a little bit older, because you might feel a bit more comfortable, so someone at school who's older. If you have a focus kind of group at school you could go to. (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)
-  I think also it's good to have someone who isn't perfect on social media, so who has kind of maybe learned from their mistakes and mistakes happening around them. (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)
-  Someone relatable. (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)
-  Someone just woke up one day and yeah, I'm happy going to be a world changer, just did it. (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)
-  Someone that's overcome something. (SINGLE-SEX GIRLS' GROUP)

# 8

## Suggested directions for policy and practice, and future research

### **Suggested directions for policy and practice**

This research is a tool that policymakers, service providers, the technology sector, educators, parents and caregivers, and young people can use to prevent and reduce online harm.

This research strongly suggests a focus on prevention. Primary prevention activities range from the informal to formal, and usually include activities like population-level education and social marketing campaigns. We suggest that efforts focused on preventing digital harm complement existing activities (e.g. healthy relationship education). We also suggest they need to recognise the context in which harms occur: in schools, at home, in our communities. This also suggests that agencies need to work together to develop and deliver effective interventions.

### **Suggested directions for future research**

This research contributes to the limited evidence base of digital harm and young people in New Zealand. The quantitative research that follows this qualitative research will supplement these qualitative findings. This quantitative research will provide an understanding of the prevalence of digital harm, and will establish a baseline to measure digital harm over time.

There are some contradictions in the findings from the focus groups that warrant further investigation. For instance, participants reported that they do not often feel that things get out of hand. However, they also reported that they knew people who have experienced serious digital harm. Prevention would benefit if a more detailed understanding of these contradictions could be developed.

They used their own words to describe digital harm, suggesting that young people's conception of 'digital harm' may be different from the definition of 'harm' provided for this research (see glossary, page 44). Future research needs to be sensitive to this difference in language use.

Gendered differences are clear in some aspects of a young person's online life, including in their perceptions of each other's behaviour. The consequences of their differing perceptions could be further investigated.

Although a fundamental aspect of this research is the application of a gendered lens to the findings, it is limited to male and female. There may be differences in experiences of harm for those young people who identify along other points on the gender and sexuality spectrums.

It is possible that regional, ethnic, socio-economic, and co-educational vs. single sex school attendance differences exist. More research would be required to assess this.

Participants perceive those in older generations (parents, teachers, etc.) to be relatively uninformed about young people's online lives. It may be interesting to further explore this perceived generational gap and the implications this may have for preventing and reducing online harm.

It is important to understand how young people in various age brackets view their online wellbeing and digital harm. This research is limited to 16-17-year-old school students; future research should include a broader age range (note, phase II quantitative research will include 14-17-year-olds). This will help to ensure action is appropriate and relevant to the target age bracket.

Online content accelerates rapidly, as does the way young people interact with that content. For example, participants reported that their younger family members, and those in different school years, use the internet in very different ways to the participants, and how they used it when they were younger. Repeating research (perhaps every 2-3 years) into digital harm and how young people build their online lives would provide a rich evidence base against which to track changes in use and experience over time. This would also assist prevention efforts to remain appropriate to young people's current use of their online worlds.

# 9

## Glossary

### 9.1 Guiding definitions

**Accidental versus intentional harm:** Distinguishes between accidental exposure (e.g. pornography popping up on a web browser), intentional harm (e.g. sexting shared beyond intended recipient), and cyber-bullying, and self-harm (i.e. pro [self-harm] sites).

**Digital challenge:** Risks and threats enabled by digital technology. Risk can be present without an individual being harmed by them.

**Digital communication:** Any form of electronic communication that includes text, images, audio and/or video recording.

**Digital harm:** Harm resulting from: a) experiencing negative behaviour online and/or b) exposure to sexual, violent, or otherwise disturbing behaviour.

Examples include, but are not limited to, sending digital communications that:

- encourage someone to commit suicide
- threaten to physically attack someone
- disclose someone's sensitive personal information without their consent (e.g. intimate visual images or video).

**Harm:** A range of negative experiences that could include: a) psychological consequences such as feelings of distress, depression, or anxiety; b) social damage to reputation or relationship; and/or c) limits to educational opportunities through increased absenteeism, dropping out of school, having difficulty concentrating in class, and poor academic performance.

**Prevention:** Prevention includes a wide range of activities – known as ‘interventions’ – aimed at reducing risks or threats to health, including mental health.

**Primary prevention** aims to prevent harm before it ever occurs. Interventions are directed at populations rather than individuals, and can include initiatives to change structures and norms in a particular setting, society, or culture.

**Secondary prevention** is a response immediately after harm has occurred; it can be directed to the victim of the harm, the perpetrator of the harm, or both. Secondary prevention aims to prevent the situation from escalating, and further harm from occurring.

**Tertiary prevention** focuses on long-term care after harm has occurred. In the context of digital harm, this might include interventions such as counselling to help a victim cope with the long-term effects of the harm.

## 9.2 Other terminology (including idiomatic)

**Banter:** Fundamentally friendly teasing between friends.

**Bots:** 'Robots' – or computer-generated profiles, content, etc.

**Catfishing:** Somebody pretending to be someone they're not who uses their false online identity, particularly to pursue an online relationship.

**Deep web:** Hidden parts of the internet whose contents are not accessible from standard search engines. Often thought to contain illegal content.

**Gaming:** Refers to online gaming. The action or practice of playing video games or role-playing games on the internet.

**Group chat:** Messenger-hosted chat between multiple people.

**Hate page:** Social media page or account that is created with the sole purpose of spreading negative content or hate about one specific person.

**Instagram profiles:** Most participants have more than one profile on Instagram. This can be set up under a single login, but each profile has a different name, purpose, audience, and content. May be set to either public (can be viewed and engaged with by any other user without restriction) or private (user must request to follow account before content can be viewed and engaged with).

**Keyboard warrior:** Someone who aggressively posts and comments online.

**Main/public profile:** Primary profile, where owner is mindful of what content is uploaded to cultivate online identity. May be set to public or private.

**Meme:** An image, video, gif, text, etc., typically humorous in nature, which is rapidly spread around the internet.

**Profile privacy settings:** Who can see the profile is controlled by using settings. For example, the terms 'personal', 'private', 'public', and 'spam' settings reflect participants' behaviours and their intended audience.

**Randoms:** Strangers.

**Rant:** To speak in a negative manner about a person/topic for an extended time.

**Roasting:** Extreme banter designed to personally attack an individual, humorously mock or humiliate someone with a well-timed joke, diss, or comeback.

**Screenshots:** A picture captured of a screen. Often contains content that is deemed important to save.

**Streaks:** Number of consecutive days snapchatting the same person.

**Vague posting:** Uploading content about an experience that appears generic, but in fact is highly specific to a certain person and/or situation.

**Vlogs:** Video blogs.

**VPN:** Virtual Private Network. Enables users to share data across shared networks.







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