The following report contains unedited content, which some readers may find offensive or upsetting.

Young People, Internet Use and Wellbeing;

A Report Series

What Causes Upset Online

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Contents

Executive Summary

This report, the second in a series related to the relationship between digital technology and young people's wellbeing, draws from a survey sample of 8,223 young people from year 4 to year 13 across over 100 schools in the UK. The focus of this report is 'What Causes Upset Online', as disclosed by our survey respondents.

Key findings from this analysis centre on what "upset" means for children and young people going online and challenges our strategies to protect them from this upset. While prohibitive strategies might work with specific content types, and this has been the focus of much policy effort (for example prevention from access to pornography), in reality what causes upset is broad, and prohibition from some kinds of content we are told cause upset would significantly impact children's rights to access relevant educational material and information that will help their development.

What causes upset online is broad and variable depending upon both gender and age of respondents. In general, upset is most commonly caused by:

1. Abusive comments from peers and others they interact with online
2. Stories in the news and media that can be upsetting (for example, terrorist incidents, child suffering, and natural disasters)
3. Animal abuse – videos that show animal cruelty, images of harm to animals, upsetting stories related to animals, etc.
4. Upsetting content, such as shocking videos produced by YouTubers, content showing people being hurt, acts of self-harm, etc.

Younger children are more likely to be affected by things such as:

1. Swearing
2. Abuse from peers

Older children are more likely to be affected by content such as:

1. News and media
2. Animal abuse
3. The behaviour of peers

What is clear from these findings is that we need to develop critical thinking and digital literacy that goes beyond whether content is "good" or "bad" and explore how it makes people feel and how we might counteract how upset is caused. We need to move beyond "online safety" to better understand how we develop resilience in young people so they can deal with what they see and do online, rather than hoping they avoid it completely.

Introduction

SWGfL is a charity who works to understand how children and young people use technology, deliver effective resources to support schools in ensuring they can use technology in a safe and risk free manner and provide thought leadership around education policy and practice related to online safety.

As part of its work with schools across the UK, SWGfL regularly embarks on survey work with schools with whom they are working, in order to collect baseline data on pupils, and also to compare the young people at the school with a national perspective.

In a series of reports, of which this is the second, we will explore specific aspects of the survey and the implications for these findings for educators and policy makers.

In this report, we will consider upset – what children and young people tell us it is about their online experiences that has caused them to be emotionally upset. There is currently much policy discussion around protecting children and young people from upsetting content and conduct, with the focus of this prohibition being around access to pornography[1] and screen time related to device use[2]. However, in our experience as professionals who work with many stakeholders (teachers, parents, policy makers, the wider children's workforce and young people themselves) we have experienced much dialogue with young people around a broad range of "upsetting content and conduct", from friends "being mean" to upsetting news reports and animal cruelty.

We have commented upon discrepancy between policy direction, "solutions" and actual harm before[3], however, this report presents an analysis of a newer data set and presents more of a deep exploration of the descriptions of upset young people tell us with this survey tool.

Please Note

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[1] BBC(2018). 'Online porn age checks delayed in UK'.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-43370999
[2] The Times (2018). 'Time limits for children hooked on social media'.
https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/time-limits-for-children-hooked-on-social-media-3s66vwgct
[3] Phippen, A. (2016). *Children's online behaviour and safety – Policy and rights challenges: A case study of child online safety in the UK 2010–2015*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

This analysis is based upon authentic youth voice – young people are given the opportunity to tell us what causes them upset without any filter or control. As such, some comments can be startling. However, they are genuine and we should not shy away from understanding the sort of content and conduct young people are exposed to online.

Methodology

The survey tool can be seen here:

https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/ypinternet

The survey was constructed to collect basic information on:

- online usage (devices, kinds of activity, time online),
- upsetting content (both frequency and type of upset),
- issues related to abuse (saying or receiving abusive comments),
- the sorts of things that cause upset online,
- views related to online safety and wellbeing and
- controls of their internet use.

The survey was initially piloted with a primary and secondary school to determine the effectiveness and how understandable the questions were. While there were early revisions to the survey, it was launched in October 2012 and has had a stable question set since then. While there have been new questions added since inception, there have been none modified or taken away.

Since launch we have collected responses from over 20,000 children and young people from over 100 schools. The current version of the survey can be seen here:

https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/ypinternet

The survey is disseminated to schools prior to visits, and the schools run the survey in class so a broad cross section of respondents is reached. Since commencement of the latest version of the survey in February 2016 we have collected data from 8,223 responses and it is from these responses that we present this analysis.

The survey is "live" and subsequent reports will analyse data from the most current data set to ensure the analysis is as up to date as possible. The data for this report was drawn at the end of April 2018.
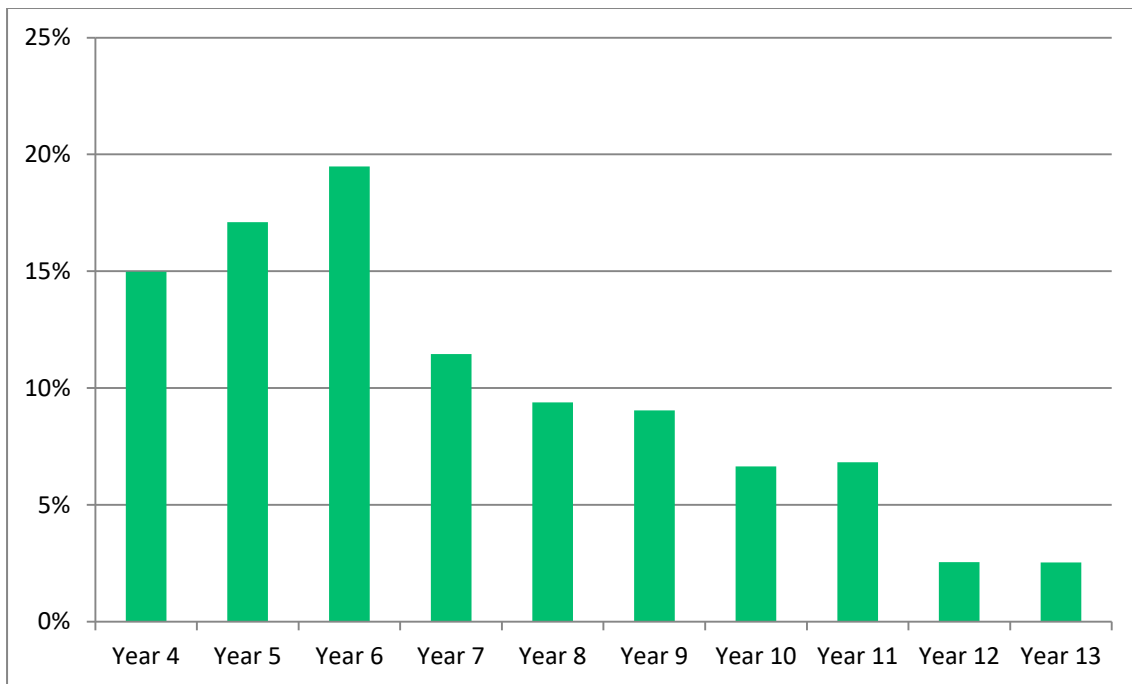
Respondent Demography

Figure 1 - What year group are you in?

Approximately 50% of respondents are of primary school age, from year 4 to year 6, aligned with Key Stage 2 in the English education system. While there are fewer responses from older children, the size of the data set means we still have significant numbers of respondents at Key Stage 3 (years 7 and 8) and Key Stage 4 (years 9, 10 and 11). However, due to the low numbers in years 12 and 13 these responses are omitted from this analysis.
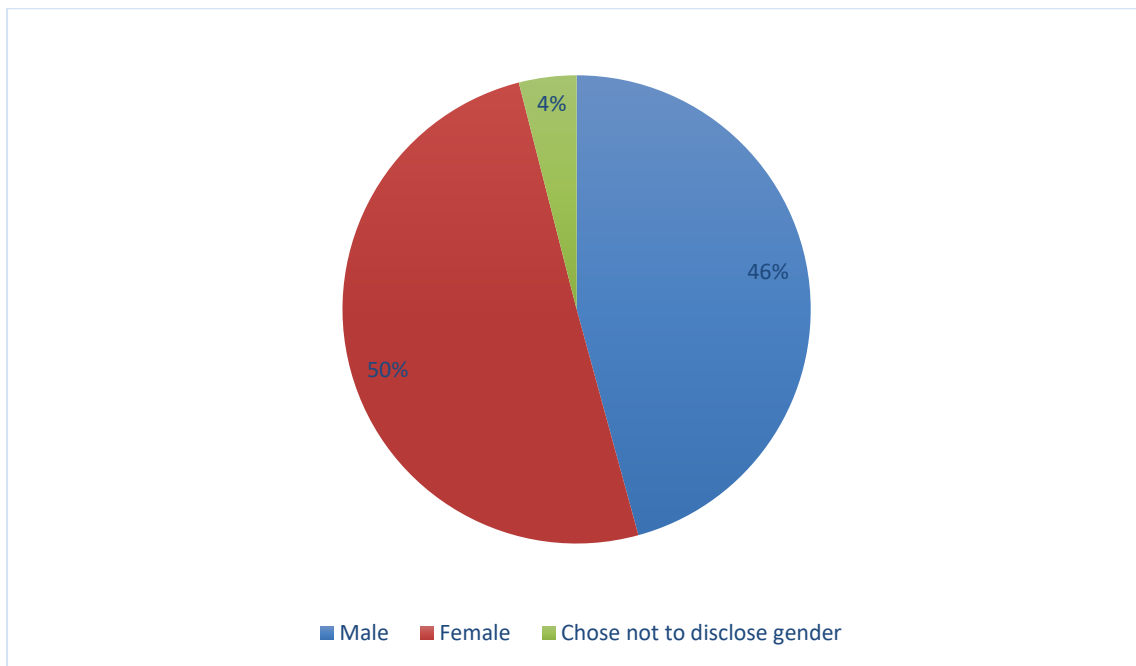
Figure 2 - Gender of respondents

Gender was well balanced in the respondents, with 50% female, 46% male and 4% choosing not to disclose. When we consider gender differences in this analysis we do not consider the responses of this 4%.

Findings

In considering the fundamental questions of this report – "What causes upset for children and young people online", we draw primarily from two questions in the question set:

> *Question 8 – Have you ever seen anything online that has made you feel upset?*

> *Question 9 - If you have been upset by something you've seen online, would you like to explain what this was?*

Question 8 is a simple closed "yes/no" response, whereas question 9 provides opportunity for respondents to describe in as much detail as they wish the sorts of things that have upset them online.
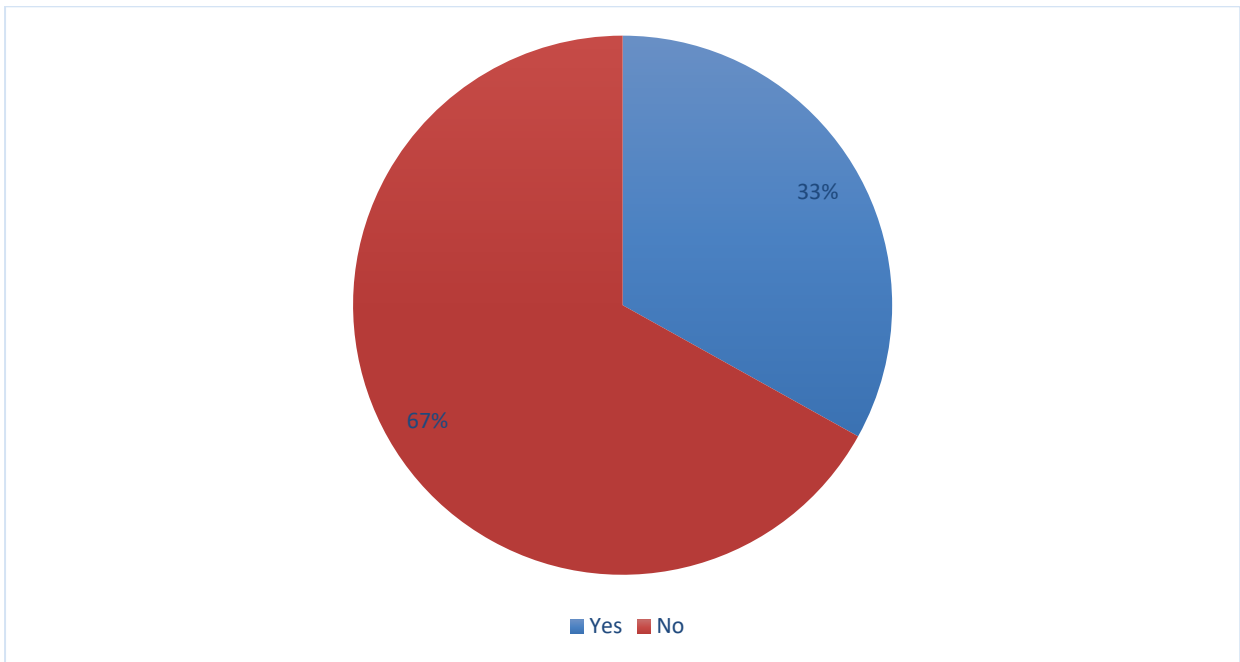
Figure 3 - Have you ever seen anything online that has made you feel upset?

Overall a third of respondents said that they had seen things online that had upset them. In the previous report we have also seen there is a clear link between amount of time spent online and the likelihood of upset. We can also see differences with gender and age.
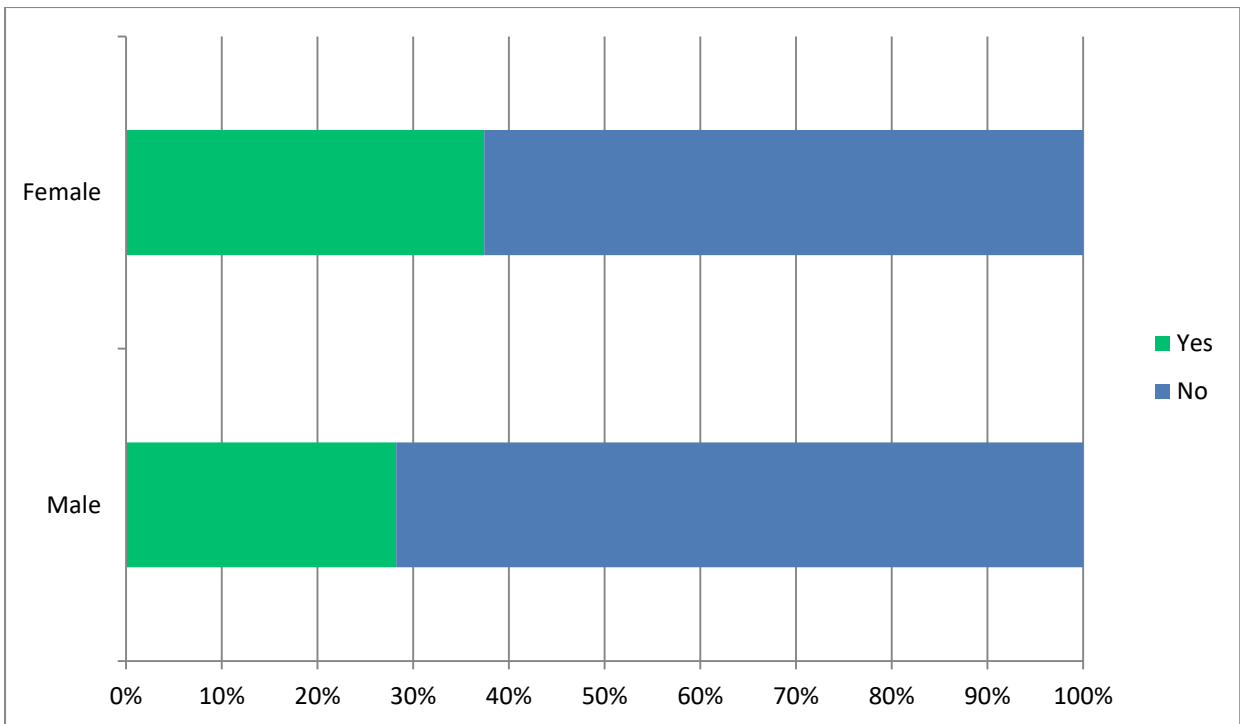

Figure 4 - Have you ever seen anything online that has made you feel upset? Gender differences

Figure 4 shows that female respondents are more likely (37%) to say they have been upset by things they've seen online compared to males (28%).
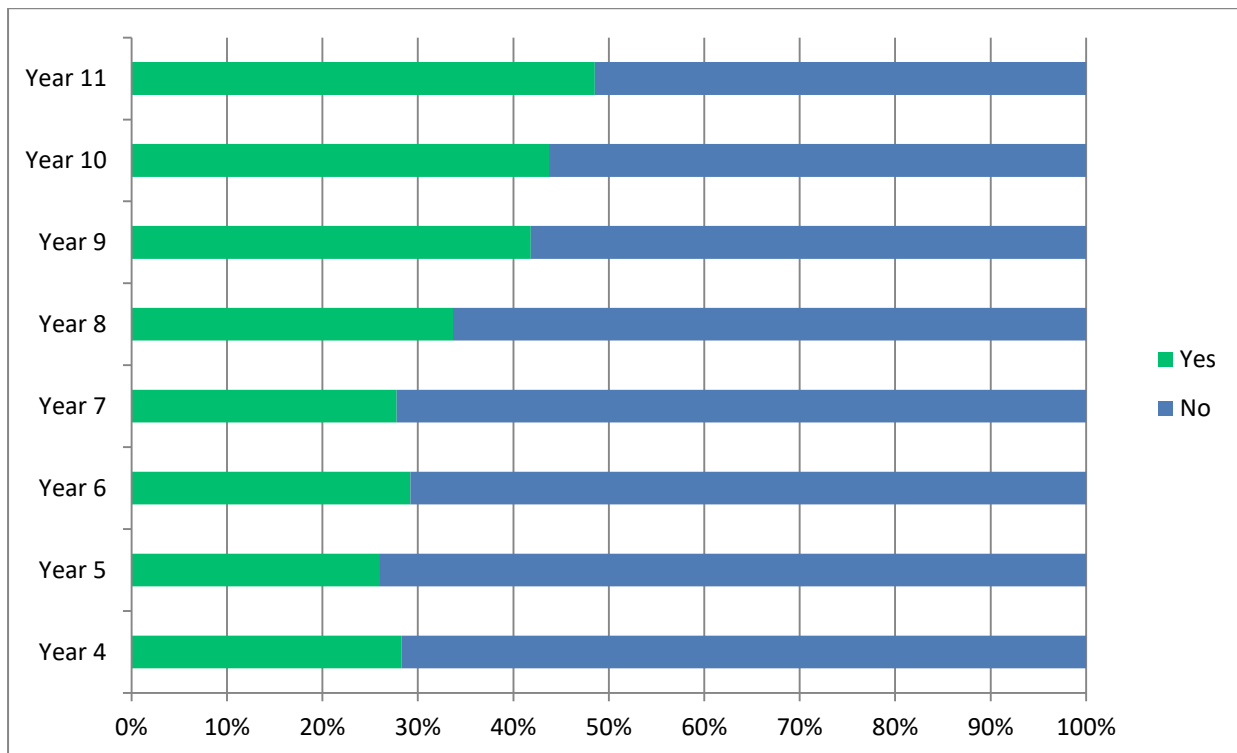

Figure 5 - Have you ever seen anything online that has made you feel upset? Age differences

Perhaps unsurprisingly, once our respondents are at secondary age the likelihood of seeing upsetting things online increases. Up until year 7 the proportion is just below 30%, with a little variation per year. However, there is year on year increase from year 8 onwards.

What Causes Upset Online?

Moving on to question 9, where the detail of this investigation resides, we have a number of levels of analysis to conduct to better understand what young people are telling us causes upset for them online. Initially we look at the frequency of terms, to highlight common themes from the descriptions provided by our respondents, using both word clouds and also frequency tables for the most common terms identified.

Word clouds provide a strong technique to visualise the frequency of terms in a large, unstructured, set of responses (in total there were 2705 responses to question 9). While we have touched upon these responses in our first report, we have a more detailed exploration here:

Figure 6 - Word cloud of all responses

From this response we see three dominant words – "Video", "People", "Someone" and "News", with "Animal" almost as prevalent. So we already have an indication that both content and behaviour have a contribution to causing upset online for our respondents. It starts to highlight a key issue in understanding young people and online technology – they use it for communication, they do not merely consume content with these platforms.

In table 1 we have a breakdown of the frequency of the 20 most used terms in all of the descriptions, which again illustrates this. It might seem unusual that "Friend" is such a frequently occurring word if we approach this analysis with the belief that content causes upset online for children and young people. However, once we begin to understand, as clearly illustrated in figure 6, that "People" are one of the main causes of upset online we can see how friends might also contribute to this. We can clearly see, from this frequency table, that both content and conduct play a part in causing upset online.

Term	Occurrences
People	261
Video	163
Someone	161
News	133
Animal	127
Upset	116
Being	110
Bully	101
Friend	91
Sad	90
Thing	90
Picture	89
Comment	88
Call	83
Online	69
Rude	68
Game	68
Dog	65
Message	62
Mean	62

Table 1: Term frequencies - all respondents

Figure 7 - Breakdown of terms from male respondents

Figure 8 - Breakdown of terms from female respondents

If we split responses to male and female respondents, as shown in figures 7 and 8, we can see that there are many parallels with the dominant themes, however there are some differences, with "Game" being more dominant for boys and "News" being similar for girls.

Looking at the most popular terms and their frequencies in table 2, we can see a clear illustration of this, but also some other differences. For example, "Animal" and "Bully" are far more prevalent in girls' responses, whereas there is evidence of both the influence of gaming and violent content ("Kill") in boys' replies.

Boys		Girls	
People	87	People	174
Someone	80	Video	104
Video	59	News	103
Game	44	Animal	91
Online	44	Someone	81
Call	39	Upset	77
Upset	38	Being	77
Animal	38	Bully	73
Being	36	Friend	69
Sad	33	Thing	69
News	30	Comment	68
Dog	30	Picture	62
Swear	29	Sad	60
Bully	29	Rude	51
Picture	28	Message	46
Kill	27	Call	45

Bad	25	Mean	40
Up	24	Dog	36
Seen	24	YouTube	36
Saw	21	Make	34

Table 2 - Term frequencies for boys and girls

In table 3, we have a different breakdown of frequencies, this time based upon the age of respondents and grouped into key stages. Again "People" is the most prevalent term for all groupings, however, we can see some differences between age groups. For example, for Key Stage 2 children (these are all of primary school age), "Game" and "Friend" are fairly common terms, yet they reduce in frequency in the older age groups. Conversely, "News" is only the 16th most common term for Key Stage 2, but the 3rd for Key Stage 3 and 4th for Key Stage 4. "Animal" is not included at all for Key Stage 2 respondents, however it is increasingly referred to by those who are older.

	KS2		KS3		KS4
People	142	People	52	People	72
Someone	116	Video	34	Video	59
Upset	72	News	34	Animal	55
Call	71	Sad	33	News	50
Friend	69	Being	30	Comment	36
Video	63	Animal	30	Abuse	29
Picture	56	Someone	28	Bullied	27
Being	51	Upset	27	Being	26
Rude	51	Thing	24	Sad	23
Bully	51	Bullied	22	Dog	23

Game	49	Online	19	Someone	19
Thing	48	Friend	18	Things	18
Swear	43	Dog	18	Picture	17
Online	41	Picture	17	Racist	16
Mean	40	Comment	16	Getting	15
News	40	Dead	15	Upset	14
Name	39	Game	14	Post	14
YouTube	36	Mean	14	Story	14
One	36	Really	12	Cruelty	14
Message	35	Kill	12	Messages	13

Table 3 - Term frequencies per key stage

Categorisation of Comments

In the final piece of analysis of question 9, we have categorised the responses to determine how upset was caused. Overall, 16 categories were developed from the analysis of the responses which most broadly describe the reason for the upset caused – some related to comments and behaviours, and some relate to types of content.

With this categorisation we can see the prevalence and types of upset reported by our respondents, which helps inform how best to address how upset is caused. We present this categorisation in two ways – firstly by defining each category and providing examples of each drawn from the question 9 responses, alongside the Key Stage of the respondent. Secondly, we aggregate the categorisations overall, by gender, and by Key Stage, to see the most and least common and see where differences lie.

For all examples, the comments are presented as written by the respondents, no editing or sanitisation is carried out on these data. The only cases where modification is made is where someone is referred to by their full name.

1. Abuse – Abusive comments directed at the respondent by others

- *I was told to suck my mum and fuck my dad and i was a nigga (KS2)*
- *A Music.ly user said nasty things to me and my friend he also threatened us (KS2)*
- *Some kid called denzel said he is going to find were I live and kill me (KS2)*
- *Someone told me to die and get cancer (KS2)*

- *I used to get bullied online they used to send mean pictures and mean messages (KS3)*
- *someone called me a fat female dog (KS3)*
- *someone took a picture of me and then said ew and then posted it on snapchat (KS3)*

- *Hate from people calling me names taking the piss. Friendships, strangers, stupid boys (KS4)*
- *I was once told to kill myself (KS4)*
- *Some People where having a dig at me over a video that was recorded of me in Year 8, which i knew nothing about untill a few months ago (KS4)*

2. Animal cruelty – Content related to the abuse of animals

- *Dogs with cancer (KS2)*
- *I fell asleep when watching minecraft videos. As it is always playing different videos, I woke up to videos of people drowning puppies (KS2)*
- *Sad dogs being rescued and i cried because of the condition they were in (YouTube) (KS2)*

- *When I looked up 'dogs' it came up with a picture of a homeless dog wandering the streets which made me feel very upset (KS3)*
- *Yes,i looked up cute animals. and there was images of dead or badly abused animals (KS3)*
- *Yulin Fesival (KS3)*

- *A bull bleeding to death (KS4)*
- *Someone putting a parrot in a blender. (KS4)*
- *Thugs skimming a dog (KS4)*

3. Bystander – Observation of abusive comments directed toward others

- *I haven't been bullied but a lot of people i know have and couldn't tell anyone. (KS3)*
- *People being horrible to a little girl called <redacted> rose as she is disabled and smaller than a normal person (KS3)*

- *People are very rude/offensive to others in the comments of some posts (KS4)*

- *When someone creates something truly meaningful and helpful, and someone else decides to destroy it, write hurtful comments or anything of the sort. It makes me really mad. (KS4)*

4. Gaming – Upset caused by behaviours in gaming, for example 'griefing', damage to environments in games, etc.

- *A guy destroying my bridge on a game (KS2)*
- *I got kicked out the game (KS2)*
- *I was playing a game called 'Clash of clans' when my village was invaded!! And there was a message in inbox saying:"hahaha"and it was really annoying and upsetting even though they only damaged it for 10 seconds (KS2)*

- *On a game someone Admin Abused[4] me (KS3)*

- *My woolly rhino getting killed by a pack of direwolfs (KS4)*

5. Grooming – Comments directed at the recipient asking them questions related to themselves, (age, sex, location, etc.)

- *A person lied about who they are and tried to meet up and have a relationship when i did not know them. (KS2)*

- *People asking how old i am and what my name is even asking my school and my estate (KS3)*
- *Being a female online comes with creepy dudes, but if you just block them it's fine. (KS3)*

- *Proud pedophiles (sic.)/ "MAPs"[5] on social media normally used by minors(KS4)*

6. Hacking – Incidents of hacking, malware, etc

- *I was on my far-out game and I was almost hacked and I lost the game forever (KS2)*

- *I was gaming on xbox one s and some one was hacking me and getting to my details (KS3)*
- *Someone started to pass round personal information (KS3)*

- *Someone hacked into a friends account and posted her information online (KS4)*

7. Homophobia - Homophobic comments and content

- *People bullying a gay person (KS3)*

- *Homophobia (KS4)*

8. News and media – Upset caused by content from news media, advertising, etc.

- *A person poured acid on someone's face (KS2)*
- *The Manchester attacks that killed an eight year old girl (KS2)[6]*
- *Nepalese earthquakes and other ISIS related crimes (KS2)*

- *News: The Manchester bomb, child disabilities... Things like that. I read news round and bing homepage so I get it a lot (KS3)*
- *Bradley Lowerys death (KS3)[7]*
- *A Muslim lady was stabbed on a train and I take the train every day so that frightened me (KS3)[8]*

- *Terrorism on the news (KS4)*
- *Suicide stories of teens. And the whole terrorist stuff (KS4)*
- *When I heard about the terrorist attack in France (KS4)*

9. Offline related issue – Upset related to something that occurs in an offline context, for example, involving friends/family members

- *I've seen my sister online and I don't see her (KS2)*

- *A post from a relative regarding my uncle (KS4)*

10. Peer behaviour – observations of the behaviour of others in friendship groups and of similar age

- *People getting drunk/wasted at a party when they were only 15/16 (KS4)*
- *I've been upset by how cutting people can be when you don't see eye to eye on a subject.(KS4)*
- *People debating on every goddamn Facebook post, just stop it please.(KS4)*

11. Pornography – Sexually explicit content

- *There were naked pictures of people and it was horrible and i didnt want it to happen i wanted it to go away forever (KS2)*
- *Email from unknown person containing rude pictures (KS2)*

- *Pictures of male parts (KS3)*

- *A man being given oral pleasure by his pet dog (KS4)*
- *Even with child filters on a lot can seep through and you can see some pretty disturbing things you can never unsee (KS4)*
- *Two girls making out and then doing number 2 (KS4)*
- *I saw peppa pig "doing it" with a horse and the horse tore right through poor old peppa (KS4)[9]*

12. Racism – Content or comment that is racist

- *People being racist to black people (KS2)*
- *Someone saying I don't have friends because I'm black skin colour (KS2)*

- *On an online game i was called the N word (KS4)*

13. Scary content – Content intended to scary the recipient, for example, horror movies and certain types of games (e.g. SlenderMan)

- *I was watching a video with my friend in year 7 and we watched a scary video (KS2)*
- *I heard deep voices on my kindle saying get off me (KS2)*

- *Pictures of ghost and others scary tails (KS3)*
- *i was reading and i saw a word i did no understand so i went on internet to see what it was and went on images and saw what it was and came up with scary pictures (KS3)*
- *Scary pictures of clowns (KS3)*

14. Swearing – Comments containing profanity

- *They where useing rude words (KS2)*
- *Rude and strange language on roblox (KS2)*
- *Rude comment I've seen on youtube watching videos (KS2)*
- *Someone said the f word (KS2)*

15. Upsetting content – Content that the respondent discloses has caused them upset

- *it was a really upsetting thing someone did on you tube they tried piecing their ear with a needle and a pin and a hammer and nail and it was completely bleeding (KS2)*
- *Logan paul video when he put the video of someone who hung himself and then he laughed (KS2)*
- *People have sent me scary chain messages (KS2)*
- *A person cut in half calld black Daliha and she was found in the contreey side and now i dont like going to see my grandma because she lives in the countreey side but my mum says its not true (KS2)[10]*

- *One of my emails said would you like to f*ck with me and it was scary and creepy. I also Have got a lot of spam about fitness pills (KS3)*
- *Its the internet - most things are upsetting (KS3)*
- *Yes there is this this video about this guy talking about his mum and i cried (KS3)*

- *Things on google that promote or encourage self harm and using the mental illness OCD like an adjective (KS4)*

16. Violent content – for example violence in movies, terrorist content, some explicit content in gaming.

- *it was someone getting their heart cut out. (KS2)*

- *There was a certain video of two men cutting a blindfolding mans head off (KS4)*
- *I have seen beheadings and suicides mostly (KS4)*
- *Chainsaw beheading (KS4)*
- *you ever seen the site Bestgore[11]? (KS4)*

Distribution of categories

Figure 9 shows the overall distribution of categories across all responses of the whole data set. Abuse, upset caused by peers and others, is the most prevalent, followed by News and media, Animal cruelty and Upsetting content.

Even with these four categories, which make up over 70% of all comments, we can see that prohibitive approaches to addressing these issues would be impossible, From the examples above, we can see different "upsetting content" can affect different young people in different ways and would be very difficult to police from an algorithmic perspective (for example using filtering). Equally, animal cruelty can take many different forms, from videos specifically showing cruelty to advertising aimed at raising awareness (and funding) to

protect animals from abuse. News and media is also extremely problematic, unless we are proposing excluding children and young people from being exposed to current affairs. We can see from the sample responses that these are responses to seeing what is happening in the world, something very difficult to stop them from seeing. Finally, the most common category, Abuse, relates to the behaviour of others toward our respondents and, again, can take many forms.
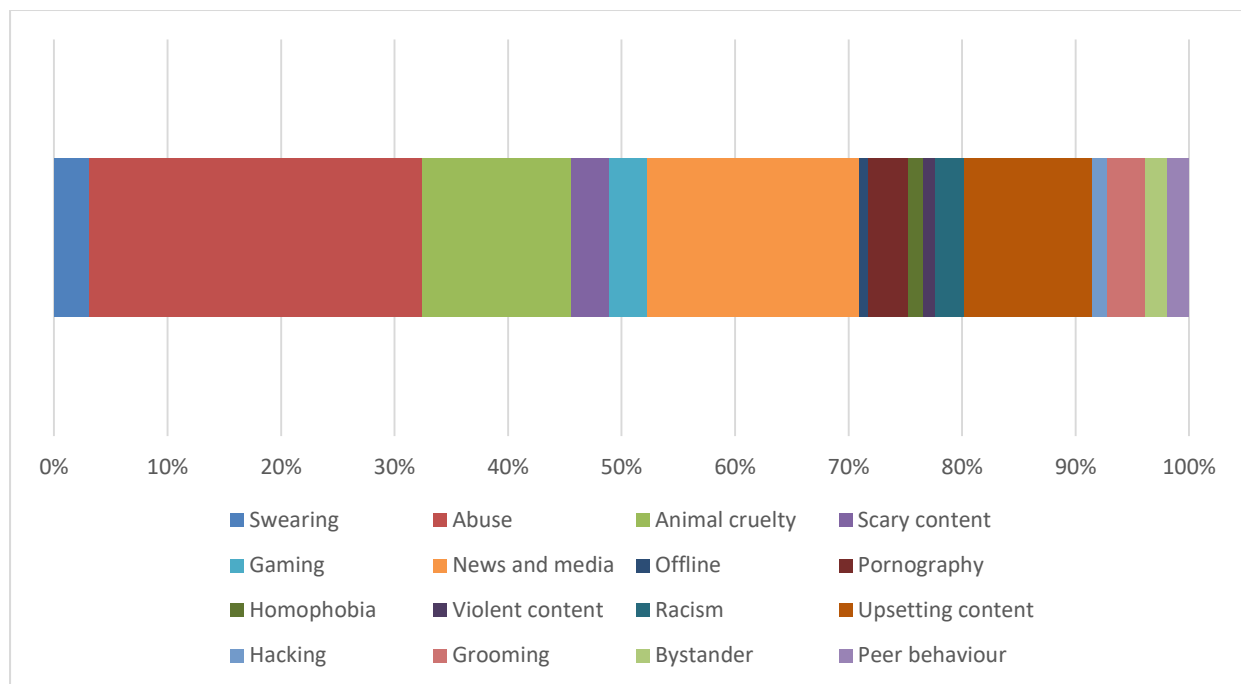

Figure 9 - Distribution of categorisation overall

If we break down the responses based upon gender, we can see some differences, although these are not significant. Males are more likely to be upset by Swearing (which might be due to the fact they are more likely to communicate with each other using swearing), while females are more likely to be upset by animal cruelty (although not significantly so). Unsurprisingly, boys are more likely to be upset by things that occur while gaming (given we know boys are usually more prevalent gamers than girls). Equally, "upsetting content" and pornography are likely to upset girls.
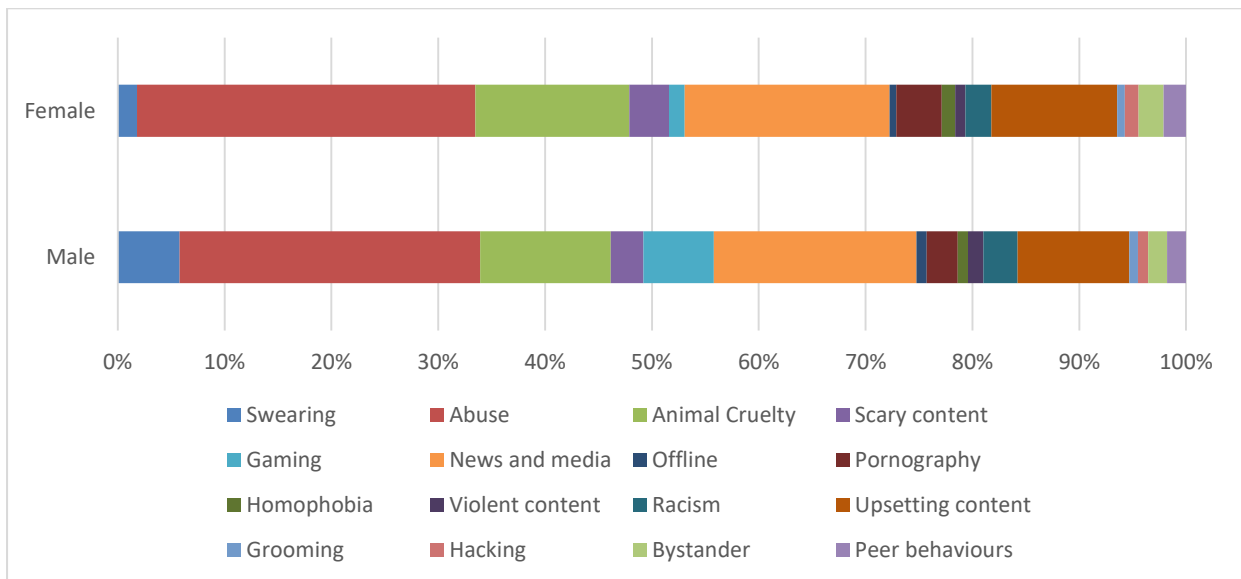
Figure 10 - Distribution of categorisation between genders

Finally, in figure 11 we can see differences based upon age group. Younger children are more likely to be upset by swearing and abuse while as they get older news and media plays a far greater role in causing upset, as does animal cruelty and peer behaviour.
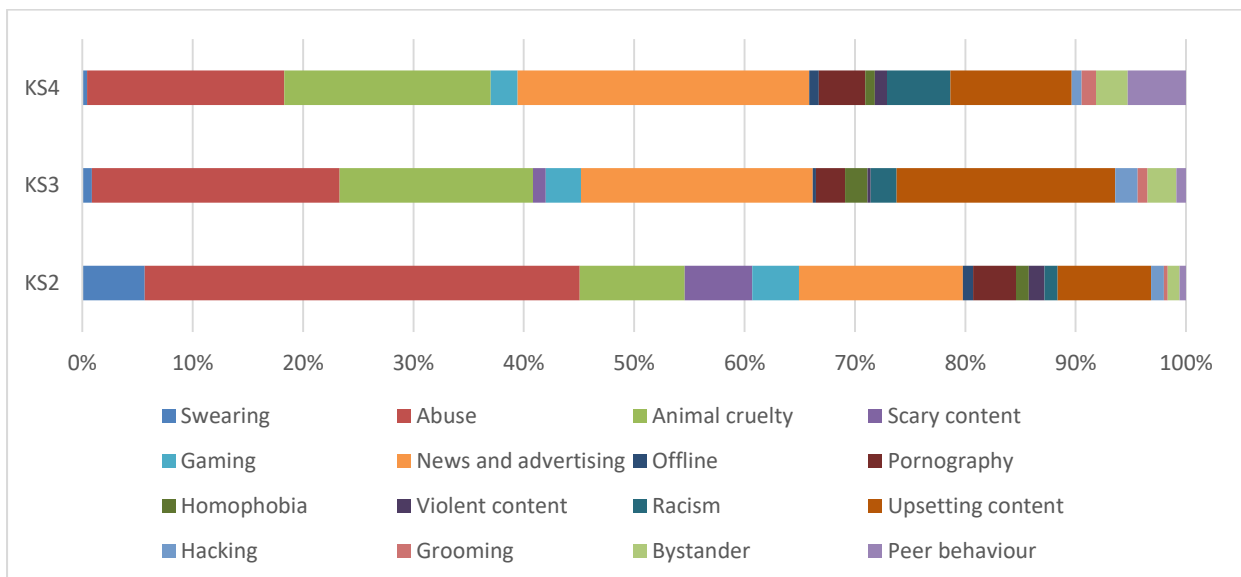

Figure 11 - Distribution of categorisation between key stages

Conclusions and Implications

In this report, we have explored what children and young people, based upon a sample of over 8,000, have told us cause them to be upset when going online. The findings raise serious implications for policy making and also education strategy around online safety.

While the focus on online safeguarding in schools is driven by policy that calls for content to be filtered and monitored, what our findings show is that the range of content that has a likelihood to cause upset while online is so broad, it would be impossible to define a filtering strategy that could catch it all. Equally, would we want to prevent children and young people from accessing content related to current affairs, history, awareness of animal abuse and intolerance? And while we know the focus on a lot of content filtering is around sexual and pornographic content, we can see this rarely causes upset, and when it does, it can be from what we might view as extreme and already considered illegal under legislation. If this is the case, clearly this legislation is no deterrent to access or sharing.

Furthermore, we can see that the most prevalent thing to cause upset online for our respondents is "People" – abuse from peers and others they interact with online. While there has been plenty of research and resources around cyberbullying since the inception of the concept of online safety, we might suggest that given the prevalence of 'upset from abuse', we have not been as successful as we might hope it could be.

In these reports, we present evidence that the whole concept of online safety and safeguarding requires both expansion and more nuance. A lot of the descriptions of abuse reflect a lack of empathy and understanding of the impact of comments upon the recipient.

Equally, the upset caused by some content (for example 'News and media') is not something to be solved through the prohibition of access to this content. We need to develop critical thinking and digital literacy that goes beyond whether content is "good" or "bad" and explore how it makes people feel and how we might counteract how upset is caused – through support and discussion, and the development of emotional intelligence and reliance.

While there are clear "online" elements here, they are way beyond keeping children and young people "safe" from online issues. We need to acknowledge that, just as in the offline world, somethings cause distress or upset. We need to move beyond "online safety" to better understand how we develop resilience in young people so they can deal with what they see and do online, rather than hoping they avoid it completely.