Understanding online communications among children: Qualitative findings

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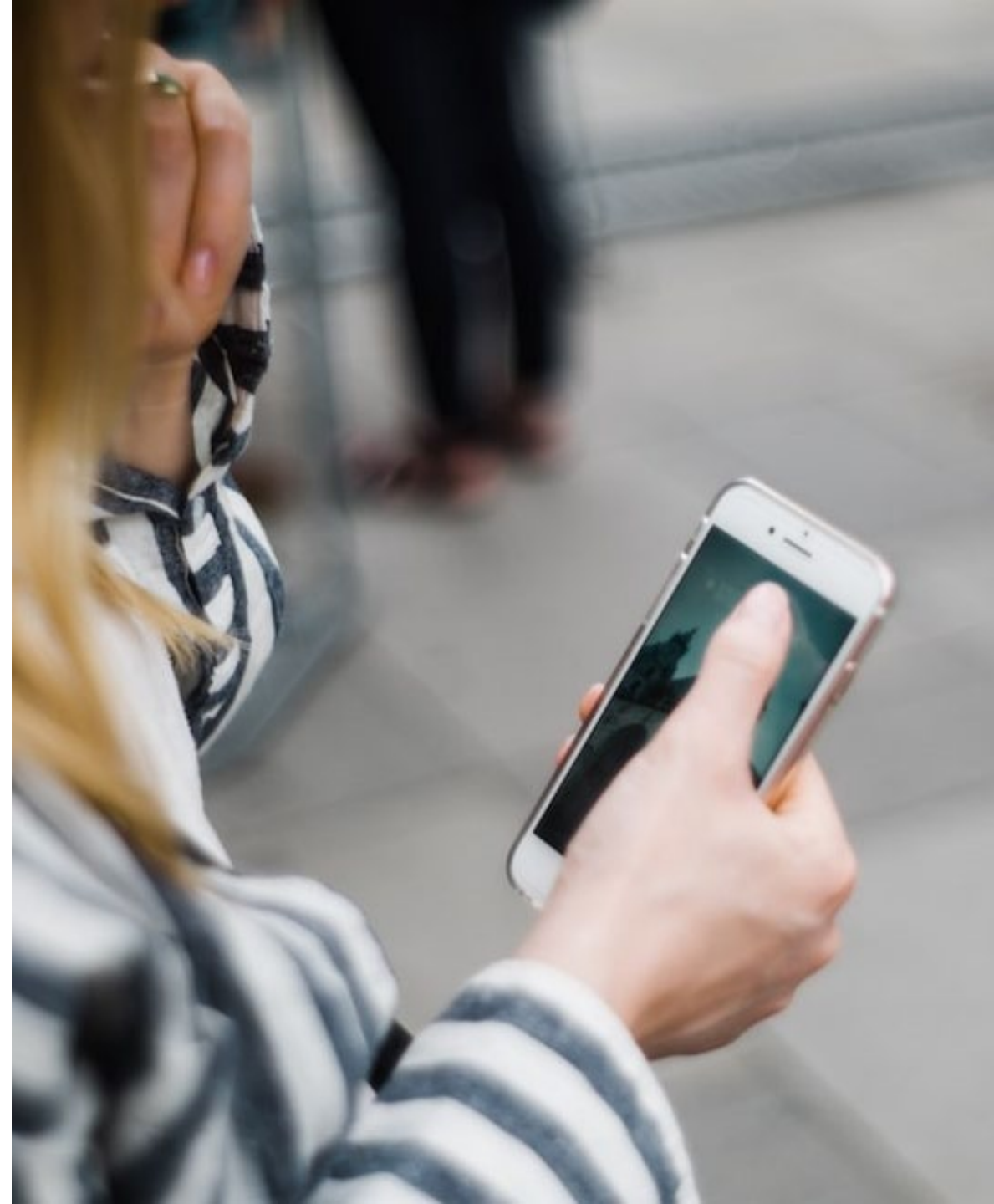
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⚠️ *Content warning: This slide deck contains material that some readers may find distressing, including content of a sexual nature and abusive language*

*Illustration using two participants' experiences

Glossary

Terms used by children who took part in this study

A mutual	A "friend of a friend" met online
PlayStation party	Used to voice chat with friends and other players while gaming
Server	A space on Discord, created by specific communities or friend groups. Most servers are invitation-only, but some are public
Squad	A team of four players when gaming. Different squads compete against each other
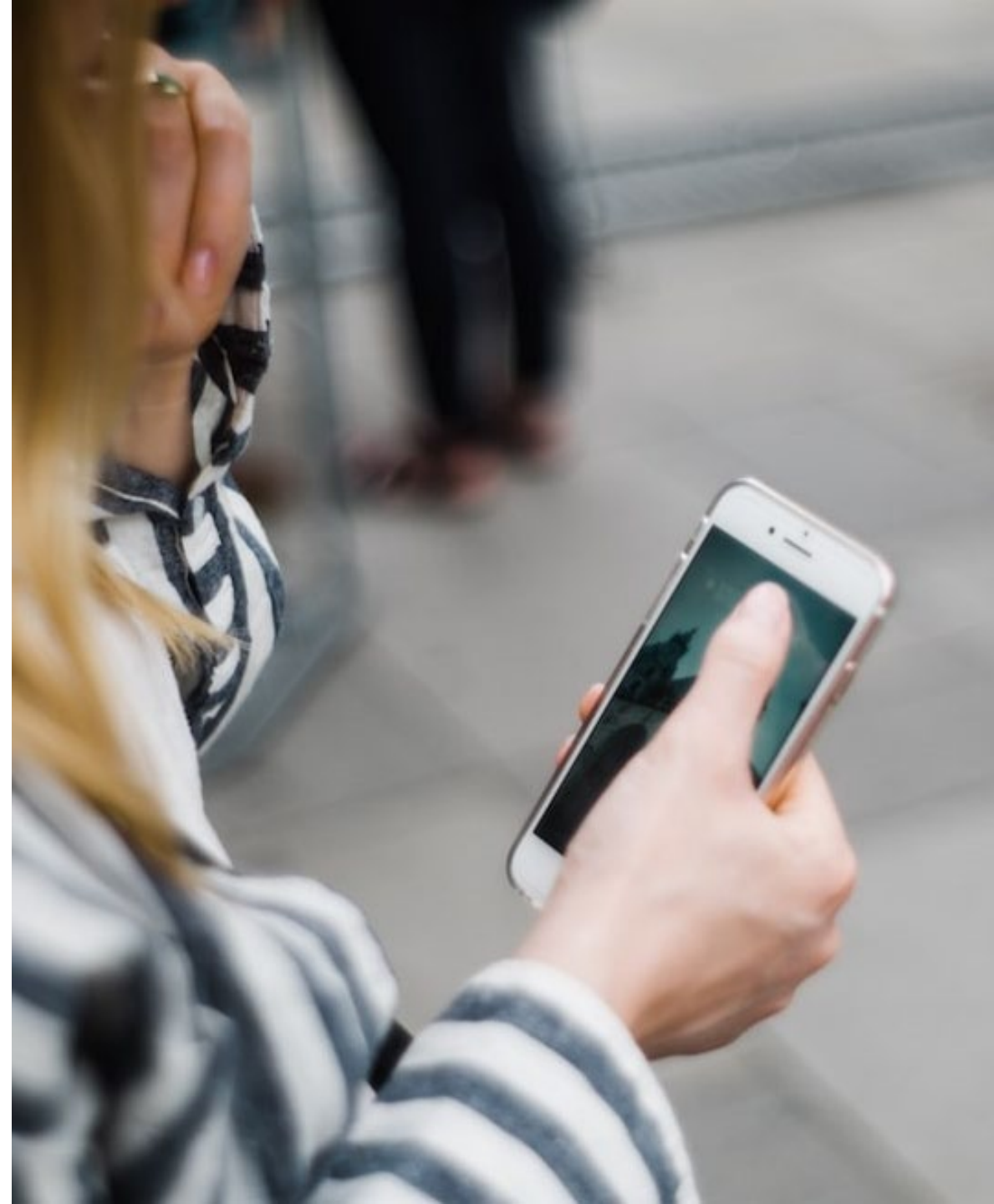
1. Background, objectives and methodology

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Background and objectives

Background

- In February 2020, the Government announced it was minded to appoint Ofcom as the regulator for online safety in the UK with duties under the Online Safety Act. Since then Ofcom has been working to get ready for its new role. Among other things, this has involved undertaking a suite of research studies on online safety and technology which will inform our work under the new regime.

Objectives

- This qualitative research followed a quantitative survey, which focused on how children communicate online and expand their networks

- This study was commissioned specifically to understand how children communicate online while gaming, and when using apps designed to connect them to new people (hereafter known as 'connection sites')

- Specific objectives were to understand:
  - How and why children expand their online networks in these spaces
  - How children communicate with others online while gaming
  - The pathways that can lead to uncomfortable interactions
  - The factors that influence children's decision-making processes around these interactions

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Methodology: Overview

22 online in-depth interviews with children aged 11-18

- 18 year olds were asked to reflect on experiences in the year before they turned 18

Recruited from sample of people who had taken part in BMG's survey about children's online communications, who agreed to be recontacted:

- **Via parent/guardian approach**: Parents/guardians were contacted first about their child taking part. If they were willing for their child to take part then both parent and child gave consent
- **Direct approach**: 16-18 year olds contacted directly

Data analysed thematically, supported by quotations and case illustrations

Robust safeguarding process in place

Please note that other research suggests that some children are less risk-averse online than those included in this study, so this study is valuable in highlighting the behaviours and strategies some children deploy, seemingly relatively effectively

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Methodology: Achieved sample

Sample criteria	Criteria sub-groups	Quotas
Gender	Male	10
	Female	11
	Non-binary	1
Age	11-13	8
	14-15	4
	16-18	10
Platform	Gaming	13
	Connection	7
	Dating	2

- Three participants were 18 at the time of their interview.

- Small numbers of connection and dating platform users agreed to be recontacted, so recruitment of these groups was more challenging.

- Due to only interviewing two dating app users, Ofcom has used these findings for an individual case illustration which has been placed in an annex.

- Connection app users were all Discord users, which limits the diversity of this sub-sample.

- 34 children agreed to take part in total, but there were 12 no-shows. All were contacted about rearranging the interview, but ultimately did not respond.

2. Findings

Children described using a range of online games, platforms and apps where they would connect with others – either friends or people they did not know

Online activity	Games/platforms participants used	Why participants said they use
Gaming (PlayStation, Xbox, Nintendo Switch, Nintendo DS)	E.g. Fortnite, Among Us, Battlefield ('battle royale' games)	- Enjoy immersive nature - Sense of achievement - To distract / relieve stress or anger
	E.g. Minecraft, Roblox, The Sims, Animal Crossing ('sandbox' games)	- Enjoy the building / creation element - To "let my imagination go free"
	E.g. FIFA	- Enjoy that it's a team game
Connection	Discord	- Enjoy chatting to people (known and unknown) with shared interests on servers e.g. gaming, favourite bands, writing - Good for streaming games on - you can see the game from the other players' perspectives - Good for gaming when players have different consoles

"I think that games are a really good distraction from the stresses of everyday life, like school." (Gamer, 16)

"What I like about it [Minecraft] is that you can make anything you want, any time." (Gamer, 11)

"I like that [on Discord] you can be in a semi-public community […], specifically with people you know share this interest with you." (Connection app user, 18)

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Some children communicated while gaming to upskill or for enjoyment, others avoided speaking with people they did not know

Gaming

Children played with friends, siblings, or people they met online (for a small number of participants this had been on connection sites initially, before moving to gaming sites)

- The "teamwork aspect" to gaming was described as enjoyable e.g. squads in Fortnite. Participants would form squads with friends or people they had met online, and talk through headsets in-game, or voice chat on Discord

- Some games do not have in-game chat e.g. FIFA, so children would create a PlayStation party or play on Discord

- For some, playing with people they met online felt risky and so they avoided it. Others did not consider it risky, because of various protective factors (see slides 15 & 19)

Connection sites

Children chatted to friends, siblings and people they met online in Discord servers. From there they sometimes moved to gaming sites to play games

They also played games on Discord e.g. if players had different consoles, or to see the game from the other players' perspectives

> "[Who I play with] really depends who's online, I do both ways really [friends and strangers]." (Gamer, 16)

Children would generally only move to a different platform from a gaming or connection site for a specific reason. Some had not moved platforms and would be cautious about doing so, for safety reasons

- Children said they gave careful thought about whether to move to other platforms when speaking with someone they had met online:
  - The other platform had to serve the purpose of their conversation better e.g. moving from a Discord server about gaming to PlayStation where they could actually play games together
  - They had to have been communicating with the other person for a while (this ranged from hours, weeks and months depending on the participant)
  - Exchanging voice messages was a way of verifying age for some, by assessing the type of voice and whether it was likely to belong to someone older or younger

"Instagram and Discord... you can like voice call and video call whereas... other apps might not have that."
(Connection app user, 18)

"[Moving] depends on the game and whether or not they [people they're playing with] have enough space on their console or PC or if they just find it easier to use Discord instead of PS5 party."
(Gamer, 16)

Where they had moved to another platform, children described a range of different pathways

- Movement between platforms could be bi-directional e.g. when gamers move to Discord or Discord users move to a game
- Sometimes communication on different platforms could be simultaneous e.g. gaming while using voice chat on a server
- In some cases, the platform the child/young person was being interviewed about was the platform they had moved <u>to</u> (e.g. Tumblr → Discord)

Figure 1: Pathways between different platforms
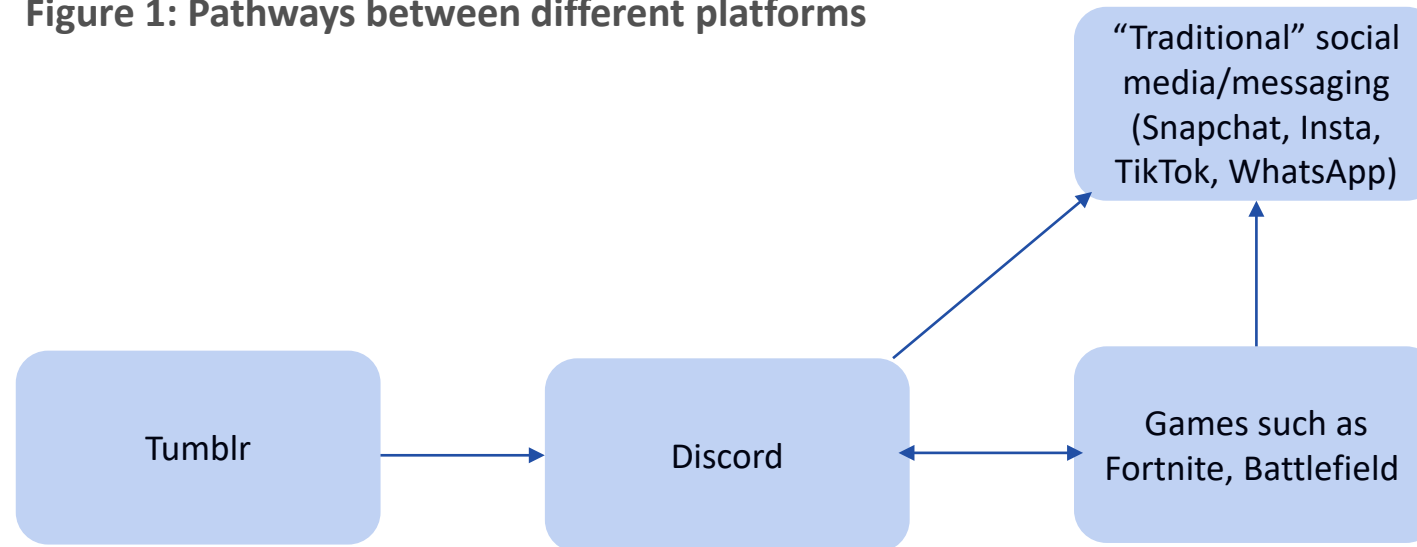
Case illustration – connection sites

Elliot is 15 and enjoys using Discord for gaming and chatting to friends. He found out about Discord through social media, and it's also really popular with his friends from school.

He's joined a few servers, where he'll chat with friends and with people he's never met about games, including sharing tips and advice. Sometimes he or the other person will suggest moving to a gaming platform, where they'll play together. Before moving to the gaming platform Elliot says he will chat with them first, for around an hour, to find out which console they use, and as a form of safety check.

Part of that check is to establish their age, for two reasons. One, to make sure he's not playing with anyone too much older than him, for safety reasons. Two, to make sure he doesn't use inappropriate language with someone younger. Elliot uses voice messages to help establish this.

Elliot likes using Discord, and he's never felt uncomfortable or unsafe on it. He says it feels safer than social media because if you're in a chat and someone sends you a link, Discord will "pop up a message" to warn you if it looks suspicious. He noted that it's also easy for admins to remove people from servers if "there's anything wrong". Actions he takes to keep himself safe on Discord include not using his real name in his username, using an anonymous profile picture, and leaving his bio blank.

When creating their online profile, gamers and connection site users largely protected their identities

For gamers and users of connection sites, anonymity was key, for safety reasons:

- Usernames – "random", or had (part of) their name within a longer word or numbers

- Avatars – cartoons e.g. Pokémon, photo of their favourite band, or a cartoon image of their face/AI Avatar
  - A PlayStation user said she changed her avatar to appear male when gaming, to minimise "nasty" comments from older men

- Bios – kept blank, or the games they like e.g. "I like to play FIFA" or a quotation e.g. "have a nice day"

Children in the study said that they did not generally accept friend requests from people they did not know at all when gaming, but some described their attitude towards accepting these kinds of requests relaxing as they got older

- Children readily accepted friend requests from real-life friends, and sometimes from "mutuals" too if there was a good reason to connect e.g. liking the same game or band. Participants did not see mutuals as strangers in the traditional sense, and one friend in common was sufficient for participants to consider the other person a mutual

- Some children checked the person's identity with friends first. If they were not a mutual they would reject the request

- They were largely unwilling to accept friend requests from people they did not know at all while gaming, which could happen after playing a game together, or seemingly at random. This was for safety reasons and/or because they could not see the benefit of it, "what would you even talk about?"

- One young person described how strangers would find their username on the PlayStation Leaderboard and send them friend requests. They declined them and made their settings private so that they would not receive these types of requests anymore

- However, some young people described how their attitude towards accepting these requests had relaxed as they got older, but they would still have safety strategies in place
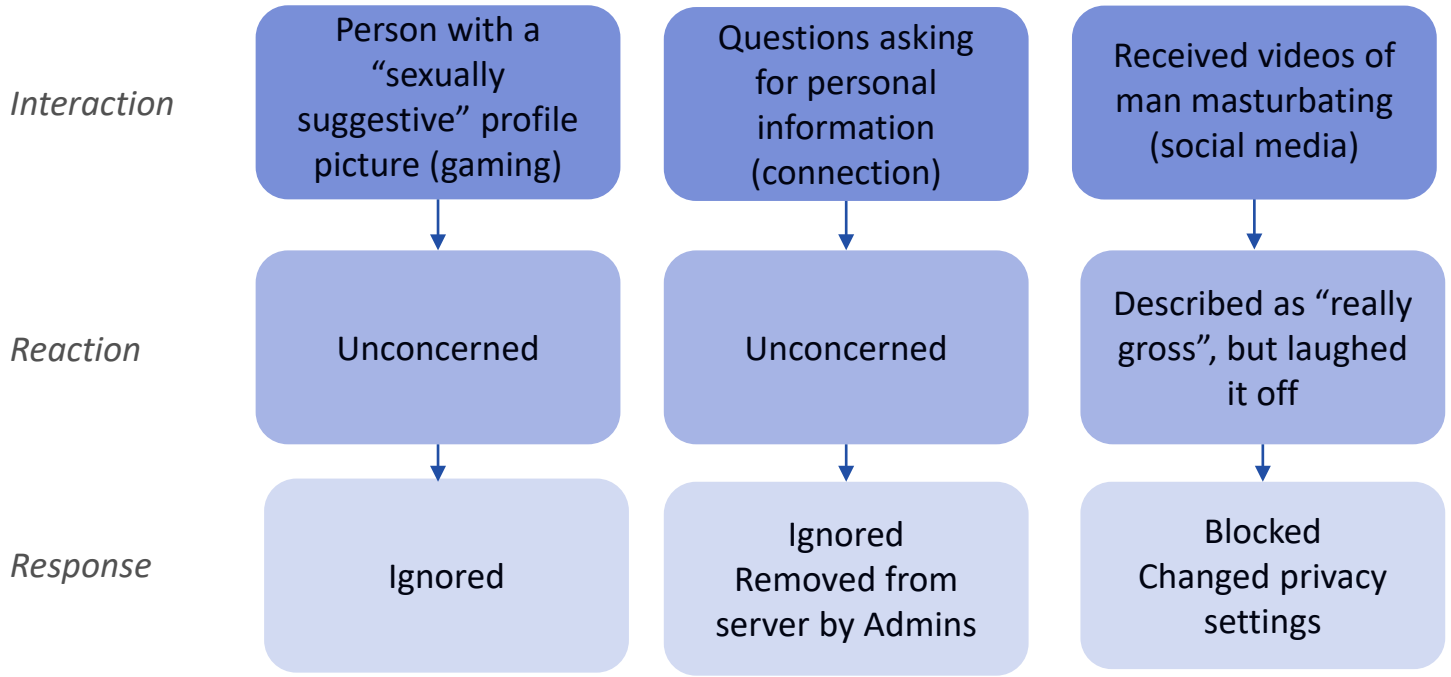
"The only thing that really matters to me is if I know them, and if I know them it's fine."
(Gamer, 16)

"First of all, if I know them, they're my friends and I said in school can you please add me on Discord or something like that, then I'll accept [the friend request] but if it's some random stranger then I won't."
(Connection app user, 11)

"I wouldn't add them if I didn't know who they were because [...] I wouldn't really randomly start playing with someone I don't know because [...] what would you even talk about?" (Gamer, 17)

Children's experiences of 'uncomfortable' interactions varied. Some were unconcerned by them, and would ignore or block the person responsible.

- In the early interviews, we let children define what experiences they considered 'uncomfortable'. They tended to say they had not had these types of experiences, so we changed our approach to ask about particular *types* of experience (in line with the affiliated quant survey)
- **Figure 2** (below) shows experiences that children recognised as inappropriate, but that they said did not concern them a great deal.

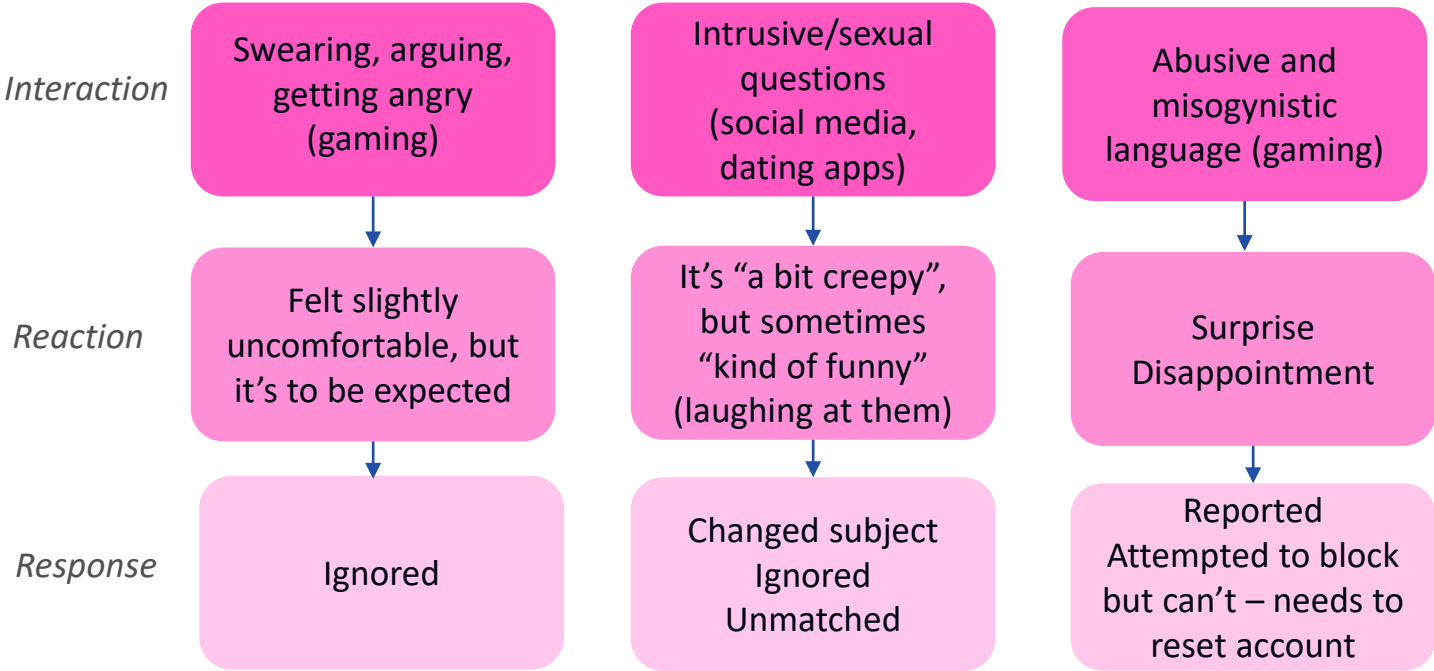|			
Interaction	Person with a "sexually suggestive" profile picture (gaming)	Questions asking for personal information (connection)	Received videos of man masturbating (social media)
Reaction	Unconcerned	Unconcerned	Described as "really gross", but laughed it off
Response	Ignored	Ignored Removed from server by Admins	Blocked Changed privacy settings

"They ask personal questions [on a server] and it makes people think 'woah, lets get rid of you!' [laughs]"
(Connection app user, 14)

Other experiences made some children feel slightly more uncomfortable. These participants were female and the interaction was either unexpected, or they were younger in age

- **Figure 3** shows interactions experienced by children that had left them feeling more uncomfortable, although on reflection they stated this was still not to a great extent.

Interaction

| Swearing, arguing, getting angry (gaming) | Intrusive/sexual questions (social media, dating apps) | Abusive and misogynistic language (gaming) |

Reaction

| Felt slightly uncomfortable, but it's to be expected | It's "a bit creepy", but sometimes "kind of funny" (laughing at them) | Surprise Disappointment |

Response

| Ignored | Changed subject Ignored Unmatched | Reported Attempted to block but can't – needs to reset account |

"[They called me] a fat ugly c*nt [...]. I was surprised they called me that [...] I just felt quite disappointed about how someone could be so mean about someone so much younger than them."
(Gamer, 14)

17

Case illustration - gaming

Jas is 14 and loves gaming – she plays every day. Her choice of game varies according to how she's feeling. If she's feeling happy she'll play Minecraft and let her "imagination run free". If she's feeling cross she'll play Fortnite so she can let her "anger out" on the characters in the game. Sometimes she plays in a squad on Fortnite where you can play in a team with up to three other players. Different squads then compete against each other.

She mostly plays with school friends, as well as someone she met online playing Fortnite – they were in a different squad. Her school friends don't like playing "shooter games", whereas this other friend does. They both checked with their parents whether they could chat with each other on WhatsApp. Their parents didn't do any specific checks but said it was OK.

Once she was playing Fortnite in a squad with three men, who she guessed were in their 20s, because of how they sounded. They'd all died in the game, and she was the last member of the squad left. The men all wanted her to win, so that she could revive them. But she died too. They called her "a fat ugly c*nt" over their headsets and told her to "go back to the kitchen where [she] belong[s]" (her avatar's gender was female). She was surprised and disappointed about this, especially as she's much younger than them.

Since this happened, Jas has changed her avatar's gender to male, to stop people saying these sorts of things in future.

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Children generally felt very safe online, owing to platform functions and to a number of strategies they deployed

- Children across ages and platforms highlighted school e-safety sessions as giving helpful strategies about staying safe online

- Strategies that children had deployed included:

  - Setting **gaming and connection accounts to private**, so they cannot get added to groups or receive friend requests from people they do not know

  - **Not accepting requests** or adding people they do not know; sticking with "real life" friends who they can "absolutely trust"

  - **Maintaining anonymity** – anonymous profile pictures and usernames, and not sharing personal information about themselves e.g. where they live, what school they go to

  - Across platforms, **verifying people's identity**, through finding them on other social media, or listening to their voice to check their (approximate) age. Some participants were clear they did not want to talk to anyone over 18

- Strategies were supported by various **platform functions e.g. blocking and reporting people**, and effective moderation by admins on servers

> "[It's not okay] sharing where you go to school. Like it's okay to share what you like and what you dislike, but not personal information." (Gamer, 12)

> "[Safety] is pretty important to me [...] All my accounts are private [...] I only really let my friends follow me [...] or friends of friends [...] Letting some random people follow me feels risky." (Connection app user, 14)

> "Most of my accounts are like private [...] and also on like games [...] it sends you a request before you can actually be added, so you don't really get added by anyone that you don't want to be added by basically [...] So I think its fine, I feel safe online." (Gamer, 17)

3. Conclusions and implications

Conclusions and implications

- Participants described **cautious and risk-averse online behaviours**. They **protected their identities** and generally **did not accept friend requests from people they did not know**. Mutuals were an exception, as they were not seen as 'strangers' in a traditional sense

- Participants generally **did not game with people they met online** because it felt risky, but sometimes with online mutuals so long as they kept **safety strategies in place**

- Platforms were used for specific purposes. **Movement between platforms was carefully considered** i.e. the new platform had to serve their contact/conversation better

- Some participants described **interactions that could be deemed uncomfortable, predatory or abusive**, but were largely **brushed off**

- Other research suggests that some children are less risk-averse online than those included in this study, so **this study is valuable in highlighting the behaviours and strategies some children deploy**, seemingly relatively effectively

- The nature of this sample might in part be a product of our recruitment approach, where over half our sample were recruited via parents/guardians. **Participants generally had close relationships with their parents/guardians** and would discuss their use of various platforms and experiences of 'uncomfortable' interactions with them

- **Participants were also largely engaged with school** – across ages and platforms they **highlighted school e-safety sessions** as giving helpful strategies about online safety

4. Annex – Dating Sites*

Case illustration - dating

Isla joined Tinder when she was 17 to try to meet someone. She'd never had a boyfriend but would've liked one – her friends all had one and she thought it would be "nice". It would also have been a "nice ego boost" and said that it was "exciting" when men chatted to her and said she's pretty.

She said her Tinder profile was very true to her. It gave her general location, and her favourite song. The photos were all of her because she's "not a catfish", but she'd intentionally chosen ones where she's wearing "nice clothes" and make up, because she wanted to look her best. She liked going to gigs, so had included photos of her at those too.

Some of her matches had instigated moving the conversation to Snapchat. Isla didn't mind this as it's easier to verify who they were on Snapchat. But, she'd 'unmatch' them if that was the first thing they'd said, as she assumed that usually meant they wanted to send nude images to her, which Isla did not want. Sometimes matches would ask "dodgy" questions straightaway, like "what are you wearing?" or "want to get into bed?". When that happened she either changed the subject, ignored them, or unmatched them.

She didn't meet anyone in person from Tinder, and felt she "hasn't had much luck" on it. She didn't realise before she signed up that so many people use it just for "hook-ups" and so feels disillusioned by it and uses it less now. She thinks she would rather meet someone in real life, as it's more "natural".