

# Ofcom's Understanding of Online Communications Among Children - Technical Report

This report details the methodology and technical specification for the 2023 'Understanding Online Communications Among Children' study, which BMG Research has delivered on behalf of Ofcom. The objective of the survey is to understand children's use of online communications, particularly their usage of social media platforms and to a lesser extent, gaming platforms. The survey also aimed to understand how young people used these apps to connect to new people and expand their online networks, the factors that influence their decision-making, and their experience of potentially uncomfortable contact.

## 1.1 Approach

Fieldwork for the survey took place using an online methodology whereby panels invited respondents to participate. There were two methods of inviting respondents.

1. **Via-parent:** Recruitment for children between the ages of 11 and 18 took place by inviting their parents to take part in the survey, who would answer household demographic questions, before handing the survey to the child to answer the rest.
2. **Direct:** Some respondents aged between 16 and 18 were recruited directly, given they are old enough to consent to participate themselves.

BMG Research interviewed 2,031 children aged between 11 and 18 across the United Kingdom<sup>1</sup>. Each interview took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Recruitment approach	Number of completes	Proportion of sample
Via parent	1640	81%
Direct	391	19%

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<sup>1</sup> Sample did include 18-year-olds, however, in the last section concerning their experience of potentially uncomfortable contact, 18-year-olds were asked to think back to before they had turned 18

Completes	Via parent	Direct
11–13-year-olds	702	0
14–15-year-olds	515	0
16–18-year-olds	423	391

Representative quotas were set by government office region (GOR). Within each region, quotas were then applied so that each is representative by age, gender and socio-economic group (SEG). After fieldwork, weights were also applied to ensure representative of the UK population by age, gender, SEG, region and ethnicity. Further details of the sampling frame, research methodology, weighting procedures and reporting are outlined in the following pages.

A panel blend approach was taken, using a blend of respondents from Panelbase, Savanta, Lucid and Cint. This approach was taken to increase the sample's quality, scope and speed. This method aided the quality of the sample because using multiple panels mitigates against potential recruitment-related biases which can arise from using a single panel. Using multiple panels also ensured that capacity would not be an issue and that all quotas would be met even when a sample from one panel was exhausted.

## 1.2 Sample design

Fieldwork was conducted via the two online approaches outlined above, amounting to a total of 2,031 completed interviews.

### 1.2.1 Fieldwork

Fieldwork was conducted between 7th and 22nd December 2022, using a blend of the three panel providers mentioned in Section 1.1.

Quotas (detailed in Section 1.2.2), were monitored daily, with invites sent accordingly. The survey was soft launched for 100 completes, after which quality checks were carried out on the initial data. This was completed to ensure that respondents were seeing the correct questions, that the questionnaire length was accurate and that respondents were not dropping off because of specific questions. After these quality checks were completed, fieldwork resumed in full.

### 1.2.2 Quotas

The sample was designed to be representative of children living in the UK. To ensure more scope for analysis by nation, the devolved nations were slightly oversampled (see table below). Individual quotas were then set by child age x

gender and ethnicity for each nation, with sub-regional quotas also in place for England.

Quotas for fieldwork were set using a range of different ONS population estimates. These were as follows:

- Age x gender: 2020 mid-year population estimates
- Region: 2020 mid-year population estimates
- Ethnicity: 2019 population estimates for England and Wales (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/populationestimatesbyethnicgroupandreligionenglandandwales2019>)
- Social grade: 2011 Census

The targets incorporated oversampling for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland was the only area where the final sample size was significantly below the desired target, due to issues with sample availability for this audience. The table below outlines the final unweighted base size achieved for each nation.

Nation	Unweighted base size
England	1,654
Scotland	155
Wales	147
Northern Ireland	75

The below table shows the targets for this project. A degree of tolerance was included to allow for flexibility when conducting fieldwork.

Nation	Male – 11-13		Female – 11-13		Male – 14-15		Female – 14-15		Male – 16-18		Female – 16-18	
	Quota	Achieved	Quota	Achieved	Quota	Achieved	Quota	Achieved	Quota	Achieved	Quota	Achieved
Wales	30	20	29	24	19	19	18	29	28	27	26	28
Scotland	30	23	29	35	19	15	18	24	28	22	26	32
N. Ireland	26	14	24	21	16	8	15	9	23	12	21	11

England	320	264	304	295	201	187	191	218	287	296	271	366
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Region	Targets	Achieved
North East / West combined	277	314
Yorkshire and the Humber	155	177
East Midlands	134	150
West Midlands	172	202
East of England	176	191
London	249	231
South East	264	252
South West	149	137
Wales	150	147
Scotland	150	155
Northern Ireland	125	75

Ethnicity	Targets	Achieved
White	1,559	1,632
Asian or Asian British	215	210
Black or Black British	106	69
Mixed or multiple ethnicities	74	106
Other ethnic groups	46	10

SEG	Targets	Achieved
AB	444	670
C1	617	542
C2	419	356

DE	521	449
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## 1.3 Questionnaire

Two identical scripts were set up; a primary script to recruit young people via their parents and a secondary script to recruit those aged 16-18 directly. The only difference between the two versions was the screening section, with initial household demographic questions asked to parents before they handed the questionnaire to the child taking the survey via parent approach. The rest of the questionnaire was the same, divided into four sections structured around our research objectives. The sections are:

1. Screening and Profiling
2. Section A: Understanding how children are connecting online (proactive / reactive)
3. Section B1: Exploring initial contact and conversation starting (proactive/reactive) – platform specific
4. Section B2: Exploring initial contact and conversation starting (proactive/reactive) – general questions
5. Section C: Responding to inappropriate / unwanted messages

### 1.3.1 Cognitive testing

After the first full draft of the questionnaire was created, BMG conducted ten cognitive interviews with children aged between 11 and 18 who used a range of social media platforms, and a mixture of those who had and had not experienced any potentially uncomfortable contact online. Cognitive testing was carried out to ensure the questions were relevant and understandable, that it was fit for purpose, and that the language was appropriate for young people. This was especially important considering the last section asked sensitive questions around potentially uncomfortable contact.

A traffic light approach was taken when feeding back findings – green questions had no issues, yellow questions needed minor wording changes, and red needed major revisions. Participants were given an incentive as a thank you for completing the interview.

### 1.3.2 Least-fill approach

The questionnaire needed to be a maximum of 15 minutes (including the screening section), in order to be an appropriate length for young people. As such, to limit the length of the questionnaire, a least fill approach was taken so that young people were asked about their use of only one platform during platform-specific questions. A

total of ten online platforms were asked about in the questionnaire, alongside a general code for dating apps/sites.<sup>2</sup> Within the section about usage, respondents were allowed to state in a free text response box other platforms they used. The ten apps were selected for the survey based on two main criteria; how widely used they were by children (based on existing Ofcom research), and their primary purpose and main messaging functionalities. For example, YouTube was not chosen because even though it is a popular platform among children, it does not have direct message functionality, and is therefore less likely to be a platform used by children for online communications.

Ofcom needed to understand in-depth experiences and pathways for each platform. A 'least-fill' methodology was used to ensure a more even distribution of responses, including more niche platforms and to ensure a suitable base size for the smaller platforms. Doing so meant that young people who used less popular platforms were more likely to be asked about them.

The least fill approach was based off a question in Section A, asking which platforms young people used and the frequency with which they did so. Respondents were allocated at random to a platform they had used within the last month with the following important caveat - if they made use of one or more lower incidence platforms, then those platforms were given priority in that individual's allocation until quotas filled. During Section A, respondents were then asked a series of questions about their use of this platform when communicating online and expanding their online networks. Note that the least fill approach applied only in section A and B1, with later sections asking about experiences on platforms more generally (see Section 1.3.3 for more information).

Targets were set for each of the platforms used in the least fill so that general usage could be captured. Below is a table with the base sizes of each platform. Caution should be taken when using data for platforms with smaller base sizes, particularly Discord (40), Kik (43) and dating sites/apps (44) which all have a base size of below 50. In slides 6-8 of the quantitative research report, the effects the least-fill approach may have had on overall averages and platform-specific averages are covered in more detail.

Platform	Base	Platform	Base
WhatsApp	323	Reddit	106
Snapchat	320	Twitch / Live.me	54

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<sup>2</sup> The code 'Dating sites/apps' was only shown to respondents over 14.

Facebook / Messenger	315	Dating sites / apps	44
TikTok	313	Kik	43
Instagram	310	Discord	40
Twitter	111		

Section A also asked respondents briefly about their use of gaming platforms but this was not part of the least-fill approach. Respondents who said they used a gaming platform on a monthly basis had these platforms piped through to the rest of the gaming section, whereby they were asked whether they communicated with others as they gamed and how.

### 1.3.3 Questionnaire content

The initial section was used to screen and profile respondents. Initial demographic questions included gender, age, disability, SEG and ethnicity. Section A included questions to understand how children communicate online and how they expand their online networks. Questions included the frequency with which children use certain social media platforms which were used to form the least fill approach above. This platform was piped through to the remainder of the section, with young people asked about the size of that platform, their reasons for using it, and how they communicate with others. Respondents were also asked about their use of gaming platforms.

Section B1 explored initial contacts and how young people start or react to conversations, using the least-fill approach to ask about one specific platform that the respondent used at least monthly. Questions covered how young people expand their online networks, whether they speak to people they do not know in real life and their decision-making process when approached online by people they have not spoken with or messaged before. Section B2 then explored general non-platform-specific questions on this topic (least fill approach not used).

Section C also did not use the least fill approach and instead asked questions about responding to inappropriate or unwanted messages more generally. Young people were asked whether they had experienced potentially uncomfortable contact online, how often they had experienced these, and on what platform. Those aged 11 and 17 were asked to think about their experiences in the last year, and those aged 18 were asked to think about before they turned 18. Other questions covered which platforms they experienced these contacts on, their response to this contact, if they had communicated on more than one platform, and their feelings about this contact.

The questionnaire had four open-ended questions, coded internally using a coding frame signed off after an initial interim set of verbatims had been coded.

## 1.4 Data processing

### 1.4.1 Quality control

Several quality check processes were in place to ensure a high-quality final sample:

1. Several test questions were asked within the survey to ensure respondents were paying attention. Checks on the consistency of demographic information between parent/guardian and child were also added.
2. The fastest 3% of respondents who did not choose a code at C1 and the fastest 3% who did choose a code at C1 were removed based on overall completion time.
3. Finally, after the coding team flagged poor-quality verbatim responses, the data for these respondents was also removed.

### 1.4.2 Weighting

The survey data used for this report are weighted to ensure the data is representative of the UK population aged 11-18. Data from the direct-to-child and the via-parent approaches are weighted together under one process. Weighting was applied to age x gender, SEG, region and ethnicity. A full unweighted and weighted breakdown of the final sample can be seen in the table below.

Weighting variable	Interviews achieved - unweighted	Weighted sample
Male – 11-13	16%	20%
Female – 11-13	18%	19%
Male – 14-15	11%	12%
Female – 14-15	14%	13%
Male – 16-18	18%	18%
Female – 16-18	22%	17%
SEG – AB	33%	22%
SEG – C1	27%	31%

SEG – C2	18%	21%
SEG - DE	22%	26%
Ethnicity – White	80%	78%
Ethnicity – Minority Ethnic	19%	22%
Region – London	11%	13%
Region – South East	12%	14%
Region – South West	7%	8%
Region – East of England	9%	9%
Region – West Midlands	10%	9%
Region – East Midlands	7%	7%
Region – Yorkshire & Humber	9%	8%
Region – North East	4%	4%
Region – North West	11%	11%
Region – Scotland	8%	7%
Region – Wales	7%	5%
Region – Northern Ireland	4%	3%

The '% Unweighted' column shows the actual percentage of interviews achieved during fieldwork. The percentages described above as '% Weighted' are the targets used to weight the data. The same sources used for quotas were used to weight the data. These were as follows:

- Age x gender: 2020 mid-year population estimates
- Region: 2020 mid-year population estimates
- Ethnicity: 2019 population estimates for England and Wales
- Social grade: 2011 Census

As discussed in Section 1.3.2, the least fill approach ensured that less used platforms had a decent base size for analysis. Given the impact it had on the data, additional weighting on platforms was considered and ultimately, deemed unnecessary. Analysis evidenced that users of more popular platforms such as

WhatsApp and Instagram, were less likely to use a wider range of platforms than the average young person in the sample. Conversely, users of smaller platforms, such as Kik and Discord, were more likely to use a wider range of platforms. Weighting would not have corrected this issue, which is why it was viewed as inappropriate.

Additional weights were also considered for the averages data. The data showed that young people had different experiences on different platforms, meaning that platforms were over- or under- represented in the total sample which could have affected the overall averages. When exploring the extent of which the averages data was affected, it was found that percentages were broadly comparable for the six most popular platforms, and as such weighting was not considered necessary for this either.

## **1.5 Reporting**

Throughout the data tables, significant differences are signified between sub-groups and the total result. Differences to the total and other groups within the cross-break set (e.g., child age group) are signified by letters below the percentage figure – these letters applied to each column appear below the cross-break name. Differences are considered significant at the 95% confidence level, meaning there is only a 5% possibility that the difference occurred by chance rather than by being a real difference. This is a commonly accepted level of confidence.

The data used in this report are rounded up or down to the nearest whole percentage. This is why, on occasion, tables or charts may add up to 99% or 101%. Results that differ in this way should not have a sum-total deviance larger than around 1% to 2%.

## **1.6 Qualitative element**

### **1.6.1 Sampling and recruitment**

Participants (11-18 years old) were recruited through the re-contact question in the quantitative survey. All survey participants who indicated they were willing to be re-contacted, had provided their contact details, and had not triggered a safeguarding concern in the survey, were eligible for participation in the qualitative research. This resulted in 657 contacts across the UK suitable for the qualitative interviews.

Qualitative interviews were designed to focus on how children communicate online while:

- Gaming
- Using connection apps/sites
- Using dating apps/sites

Many participants who met the 'gaming' criteria (653) also used connection apps/sites (201) and fell into both groups. The smallest group were those using dating apps/sites (46), which also overlapped with the other two categories.

34 children and young people agreed to take part in an interview. However, 12 of these interviews were not attended by participants, and no responses were received to the follow-up contacts. This meant a total sample of 22 children and young people were interviewed across gaming (13), connection apps/sites (7) and dating apps/sites (2).

### **1.6.2 Data collection**

22 online depth interviews were conducted between the 15th of February and the 13th of March 2023. They lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. They were carried out on Zoom and audio-recorded with the child/young person's consent (and their parent's/guardian's consent where under 16). Informed consent to conduct the interview was then gathered by reading out statements related to the purposes of the research, confidentiality and how to withdraw consent which the child/young person (and parent/guardian were under 16) responded to. This consent was audio-recorded.

Depth interviews were conducted using a topic guide with different pathways depending on whether the participant was being interviewed about communication online while gaming or when using connection apps/sites or dating apps/sites. The guide was structured using a 'funnel approach', which involved starting the key elements of the discussion with broad, open questions before probing deeper to elicit more detailed, nuanced responses.

### **1.6.3 Analysis**

Data from the depth interviews were charted in a thematic matrix in Excel. This process enabled a case and theme-based approach to the analysis, where individual participants' stories could be explored by viewing horizontally (case-based analysis), and where all data under a particular theme could be compared and contrasted by viewing vertically (thematic analysis). Verbatim quotations and case illustrations supported the data presented in the final output.