Children's Online User Ages Wave 2 Quantitative Research Study

Technical Report

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Introduction

Background and objectives

Ofcom's ethnographic research into the 'Risk factors that may lead children to harm online' found one of the key risk factors were children bypassing age assurance measures in social media apps/sites. For example, by using a false date of birth to gain access to online platforms and the content within, while under the minimum age requirement for that platform (usually the age of 13).

Social media profiles with user ages of 16+ and 18+ are the point at which some apps/sites grant access to certain features and functionalities to their users. This can include the ability to use direct messaging and the ability to see adult content. Therefore, the research reports on:

- Those aged between 8 and 12 with an online user age of at least 13;
- Those aged 15 or younger with a user age of at least 16;
- Those aged 17 or younger with a user age of at least 18.

The research focused on ten apps/sites, which were the most used among children aged 8-17 in various Ofcom research studies.

The research reports on:

- Children's user ages at an overall level and by app/site;
- Usage of each app/site among each age group (8-12s, 13-15s, 16-17s);
- Profile ownership on these apps/sites, i.e., whether respondents had their own profile or used someone else's, by each age group;
- Whether respondents had multiple profiles
- Whether respondents changed the date of birth since the setting up of the profile;
- Whether respondents were required to complete any age verification processes;
    - If so, what age verification methods and tools they used.

Prior to the 2023 survey, which should be referred to as Wave 1, a pilot survey was undertaken in July 2022 to assess children's user ages at that time. As a result of conducting the survey in 2022 and reflecting on the caveats and findings from the study, changes were made to the 2023 survey questionnaire, laying the foundation for the Children's User Age survey. Some minor changes were also made for Wave 2 (conducted in January 2024). A summary of the changes is included in the chart pack.

More information on the previous wave's approach and methodology is available on Ofcom's website: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/online-research/protection-of-children-online-research

The objectives of this quantitative tracking study, is to estimate the proportion of children who have their own profile on social media apps/sites, with a 'user age' that make them appear older online than their actual age and therefore, exposed to features on the apps/sites they use which they should not be exposed to.

Summary of approach

YouGov is a professional research and consulting organisation, focussed on collecting high quality, in-depth data for market research and has extensive experience of youth, television and radio broadcasting sectors, as well as on-demand services, policy research.

Our approach to conducting this study and the final deliverables were as follows:

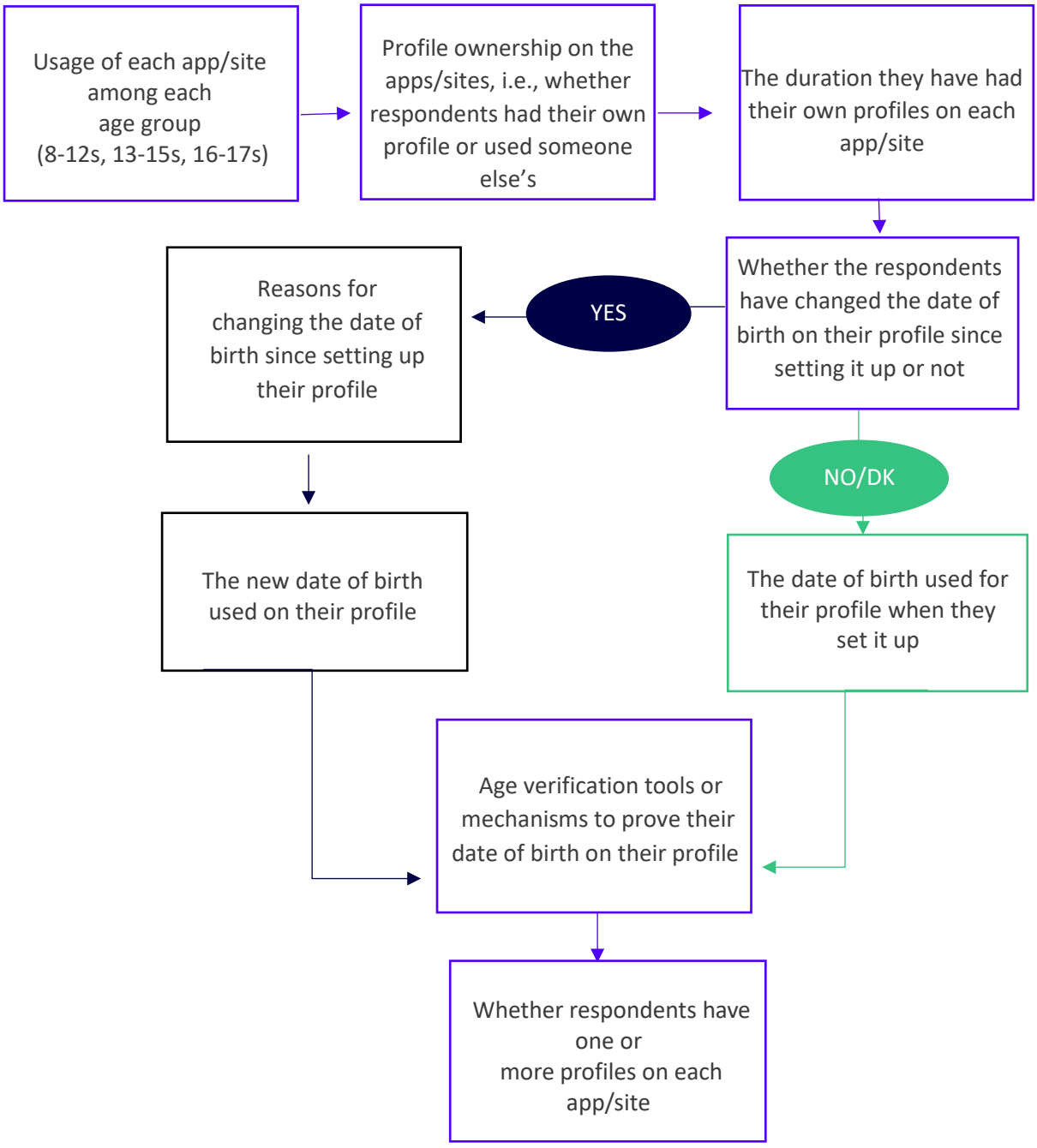
- The Children's User Age survey is a multi-wave study with research taking place in August 2023 and, most recently, January 2024. It builds on previous work with a similar focus (Children's Online User Ages 2022);
- To estimate the proportion of children with a social media profile that is older than their actual age;
- To conduct an online survey with a sample of at least 1,500 (50 per age group per app/site) young people aged 8 to 17 in the UK, recruited via the YouGov panel; and
- To provide summary data tables, SPSS/ CSV data files, and a chart pack report for publication.

Questionnaire design

Wave 2 survey

The questionnaire for the Children's User Age survey was designed by Ofcom – using the 2022 questionnaire as a foundation - and reviewed by YouGov to ensure the questions would translate successfully online. The below illustrates the routing of the questionnaire. Only a single additional question was added to the Wave 2 questionnaire, about the number of profiles children have on each app/site, which had originally been included in the pilot survey. The next section contains further information regarding the changes made to the Wave 2 questionnaire.

Figure 1: Questionnaire flow



Changes from Wave 1 survey

- Q2a asks whether respondents have multiple profiles on the app/sites they use. This question was reintroduced in the Wave 2 survey, after initially being included in the Pilot survey and will be tracked for future surveys.

- Q3 asks how long respondents have had each of their social media profiles. The 'Less than one year' category from Wave 1 was divided into two codes for Wave 2: '0-5 months' and '6-11 months'.
    - The implementation of the split aimed to improve the accuracy of collecting the initial setup date.
    - Participants who answered that they held their profile for '0-5 months' were assigned a profile length of '0'.
    - Participants who reported that they held their profile for '6-11 months' or ‘1 year’ were assigned a profile duration of '1'.
    - During Wave 1, participants classified as 'less than a year' were allocated a profile code of '0'. Therefore, the time users spent on the site was underestimated rather than overestimated.

Fieldwork and Sampling

Fieldwork method

The survey was conducted using the YouGov bespoke online survey platform. Fieldwork ran from 22nd January-5th February 2024.

Only respondents who were invited to take part could do so; the survey could not be undertaken in any other way. The median survey length was 8 minutes and 55 seconds.

Sample design

The sample was drawn from the YouGov online panel comprising over 3.3 M adults across the UK. YouGov maintains engagement with communities of panellists who have specifically opted in to participate in online research activities and provide demographic details such as their parenthood status. As a result, the panel provides access to a responsive audience, who have already provided information on important demographic, attitudinal, and lifestyle attributes. Members of the panel consent to completing surveys for YouGov in return for a modest financial incentive.

The sample for the survey was designed to be representative of UK internet users aged 8 to 17 years old and was organised by the following cross-breaks: 8-12, 13-15 and 16–17-year-olds.

For our user age calculations, respondents needed to have their own social media profile on at least one of the following social media apps/sites: YouTube (not including YouTube Kids), Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Discord, Pinterest, Twitch, X/Twitter, Vimeo, and/or any other apps/sites specified by the child.

'Boost' interviews were conducted where fewer than 50 interviews were achieved per age group per app/site in the initial round of 'main sample' recruitment.

Once the sample had been drawn, an invitation was sent by email with a link to the survey embedded within it. All respondents participated in the survey in exactly the same way and the YouGov panel management team ensured the invitations to the survey were consistently and professionally managed.

Sample approach

YouGov holds information on the number and the age of children that a panel respondent has, and this information was used in order to contact children under the age of 18. These children took part in the survey via their parent's YouGov account. Eligible panellists (i.e., the parent) were contacted by email and taken to a landing page containing the subject matter, the purpose of the work, and how the anonymous results will be shared and used. The panellist can then consent or decline (screen out) their child participating in the survey. If the parent has consented, the first survey page for the young person is a tailored version of the landing page and, again, a specific opt-in box to consent to take part in the survey.

Sample size

A target of 1,500 interviews was agreed with Ofcom prior to fieldwork, with the aim of achieving a minimum of 50 respondents per age group per platform to ensure robust analysis. During the

fieldwork period, and taking into account a lower number of responses for certain apps/sites, the initial sample size of 1,500 was extended to 1,662 to ensure at least 50 interviews among all subgroups of interest (i.e. via boost interviews – see below).

- A total of n=3,429 respondents, including the boosts, started the survey (i.e., clicked the link within the email invitation).
- A total of n=1,514 were screened out as either the parent or child did not consent to take part in the survey, or they did not meet the survey criteria. (Respondents could also be screened out of the survey because the quotas they fitted into had already been filled.)
- With n=1,514 being screened out at the start of the survey, this meant a total of n=1,915 respondents participated.
- Among the n=1,915 who participated in the survey, a total of n=74 respondents subsequently dropped out (i.e., started, but did not complete the survey). Therefore, the final number of completes achieved was n=1,841 (including boost interviews).
- After the data cleaning process, the final sample size was 1,808. (Details on the data cleaning process can be found in the 'Analysis and quality assurance' section of this document.)

Boost interviews

Sample boosts were applied after the main fieldwork had been completed to allow for base sizes to be robust enough for analysis for each age group per platform.

Additional boosts were applied to following age groups:

- 16-17-year-olds: to achieve a minimum of 50 Twitch profile owners within this age group;
- 8-12-year-olds: to reach a minimum of 50 X/Twitter and 50 Twitch profile owners with this age group. However, due to the low incidence rate of X/Twitter usage amongst 8-12-year-olds, the fieldwork achieved a total of just 40 completes for this subgroup.

The final number of completes achieved during the boosts was n=179.

Analysis and quality assurance

Data cleaning

To ensure accuracy and quality of the data, respondents were 'cleaned out' of the data if they could not provide the necessary demographic information or indicated that they gave false answers for example, if they provided an open-ended answer which was not relevant.

Prior to data cleaning, the total number of completed responses was n=1,841. A total of n=33 respondents were cleaned from the final data.

Table 1. Response overview

	Target (N)
Number of participants approached*	3,429
Number of participants screened out*	1,514
Number of participants dropped out*	74
Number of final nat rep interviews	1,662
Number of final boost interviews	179
Number of final sample (Nat rep plus boosts)	1,841
Total participants removed after QA checks*	33
Core sample size used for analysis*	1,808

**Including boosts interviews*

Data weighting

Weighting adjusts the contribution of individual respondents to aggregated figures and is used to make surveyed populations more representative of a project-relevant, and typically larger, population by forcing it to mimic the distribution of that larger population's significant characteristics, or its size. The weighting tasks happen at the tail end of the data processing phase on cleaned data.

In this respect, the data (excluding boosts) were weighted to ensure the data represented the national profile of young people aged 8 to 17 across the UK by age crossed by gender, and region. The main sample has been weighted as described then merged with the boost data.

Table 2: Sample Representativeness – Child age/gender and Regions:

The following table shows both the initial unweighted sample and the final weighted sample profiles:

	Unweighted counts	Unweighted %	*Weighted counts*	*Weighted %*
Child's age x gender				
Male 8 to 12	486	27	*490*	*27*
Male 13 to 15	258	14	*245*	*14*
Male 16 to 17	200	11	*191*	*11*
Female 8 to 12	422	23	*468*	*26*
Female 13 to 15	247	14	*232*	*13*
Female 16 to 17	195	11	*183*	*10*
Region				
East	157	9	*149*	*8*
East Midlands	160	9	*165*	*9*
London	212	12	*201*	*11*
North East	96	5	*98*	*5*
North West	226	13	*230*	*13*
Northern Ireland	38	2	*39*	*2*
Scotland	118	7	*123*	*7*
South East	235	13	*226*	*13*
South West	126	7	*120*	*7*
Wales	85	5	*89*	*5*
West Midlands	172	10	*178*	*10*
Yorkshire & the Humber	183	10	*189*	*10*

Please note that the sum of Net England is 1557 in the table above, yet in the data tables, the weighted results show 1556. This is due to rounding.

Table 3: Sample Representativeness – Social media profiles by age groups

The following table shows both the initial unweighted sample and the final weighted sample profiles for users with an account for each social media app/site by age group:

Age groups:	8-12 years old		13-15 years old		16-17 years old	
	Unweighted (N)	*Weighted (N)*	Unweighted (N)	*Weighted (N)*	Unweighted (N)	*Weighted (N)*
Apps/Sites						
Facebook	171	*176*	158	*150*	158	*149*
YouTube *	468	*492*	256	*242*	236	*224*
Snapchat	361	*386*	346	*327*	296	*280*
Instagram	247	*258*	266	*252*	309	*292*
TikTok	367	*390*	345	*327*	280	*265*
X/Twitter	40	*41*	64	*61*	69	*66*
Discord	103	*106*	102	*96*	69	*66*
Pinterest	74	*79*	87	*82*	78	*73*
Twitch	51	*52*	64	*61*	53	*51*
Vimeo	6	*6*	5	*5*	2	*2*
Other	73	*77*	12	*11*	9	*8*

**Not including YouTube Kids*

Significance testing

Significance testing is applied at the 95% confidence level for comparisons within Wave 2 and 99% confidence level between Wave 1 and Wave 2.

User age calculations

Due to the complexity of calculating user ages, it should be noted this is an estimate of what we consider the minimum proportions of children with a profile that is older than their actual age

To be included in user age calculations, every respondent must first confirm they use at least one of the apps/sites listed in the survey and then have their own personal profile on the relevant apps/sites they use.

Considering 13 as the minimum age to create a profile on nearly every social media app/site in our study (apart from Vimeo where the minimum age is 16), respondents' user ages were grouped under three age breaks: 13-15, 16-17, and 18+.

If respondents did not have a personal profile for any apps/sites, they were screened out and did not complete the survey.

For an illustration of the user age calculations please refer to the Scenarios document.

The chart pack also lists all the caveats to the user age calculations.

Table 4: Questions used for user age calculations:

The following table shows questions used for the 'user age calculations':

Questions:	Scales/Options:
P3. Real Age	With exact values for year, day, month
Q3. How long have you had your own profile on each of these platforms?	1. 0-5 months* 2. 6-11 months* 3. 1 year 4. 2 years 5. 3 years 6. 4 years 7. 5 years 8. More than 5 years 9. Don't know
Q4. Have you ever changed your date of birth on your profile since setting it up?	1. Yes 2. No 3. Don't know
Q6. What date of birth does your profile have now? Please remember you won't get in trouble for answering truthfully.	1. My actual date of birth 2. A different date of birth to make me older than the previous date of birth entered 3. A different date of birth to make me younger than the previous date of birth entered 4. Don't remember 5. Prefer not to say

Questions:	Scales/Options:
Q7. How old does this new date of birth make you now on the app/site? It makes me…	1. 10 2. 11 3. 12 4. 13 5. 14 6. 15 7. 16 8. 17 9. 18+ 10. Don't remember / Don't know
Q8 What date of birth was used when your profile was set up?	1. My actual date of birth 2. My birthday but a different year (making me older) 3. A random birthday (making me older) 4. Someone else's date of birth who is older than me/ my parent/carer's date of birth 5. Other date of birth to make me older 6. Don't remember
Q8a. Do you know how old this date of birth would have made you on the app/site when the profile was set up? It made me…	1. 10 2. 11 3. 12 4. 13 5. 14 6. 15 7. 16 8. 17 9. 18+ 10. Don't remember / Don't know

** Codes 1 and 2 were grouped under 'Less than a year' in Wave 1. For more information, please refer to the section: 'Changes from Wave 1 survey'.*

How current profile 'user age' was calculated:

The total number of respondents included in user calculations was n=1542.

The user age calculations were made based on two main conditions (see Figure 2 overleaf):

1- If the respondents have changed their date of birth since the setting up their profile.

2- If the respondents have NOT changed their date of birth since the setting up profile.

Table 5 – Respondents excluded from the calculation[1]

The following table shows the conditions and the number and proportion of respondents that have been excluded from the calculation:

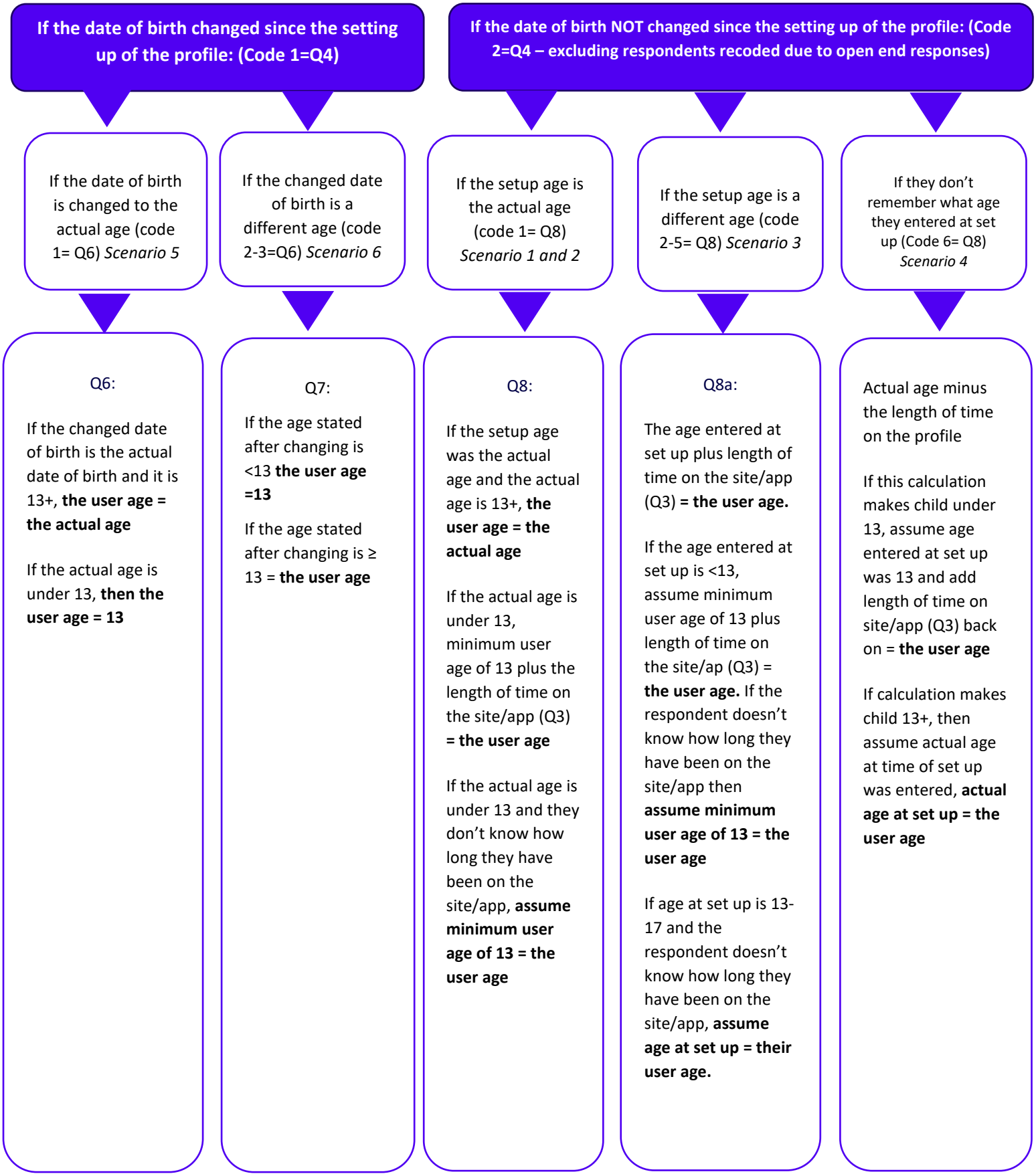
	Counts overall	% of total weighted sample impacted (base: 1808)
If Q3 = 'Don't know' AND if Q8= 'Don't remember'	49	4%
If Q3 = 'Don't know' AND if Q8a= 'Don't remember/Don't know'	11	1%
If Q4 = 'Don't know'	336	19%
If Q6= 'Don't remember' or 'Prefer not to say'	54	3%
If Q7= 'Don't remember/Don't know'	53	3%
Appeared to have misunderstood Q4 after reviewing their open-ended response to Q5	22	1%
User age was lower than the real age	13	1%

In addition to excluding some respondents, we also considered other caveats. For the full list of caveats please refer to the chart pack.

[1] It should be noted that exclusion requirements are not mutually exclusive. A respondent may be excluded from user calculations on a particular platform based on the rules outlined in the table. However, they may still meet the criteria for other platforms and, therefore, be included in the user calculations for those platforms that are not excluded.

Figure 2: User age calculations scenarios:

A full set of potential scenarios are shown in the Scenario document.



Caveats

General caveats

All findings should be analysed noting that these were **self-reported estimates** from child respondents. Therefore, results should be treated with caution and viewed as indicative because:

- Children may have to admit that they were using these platforms underage, and some may not be willing to answer truthfully in a survey.
- They may not be able to accurately recall certain information, e.g., the age they used when setting up their profile or how long they have had their profile.
- Due to low base sizes (n<50) of those with their own profile, we were unable to report on Vimeo for all age groups, or for X/Twitter for 8–12-year-olds.
- When providing information about which apps/sites they use, respondents were able to select an 'Other' option. The base sizes were too low to report by sub-group on these other apps/sites (97 respondents overall), but they have been included in the user age calculation.

User age caveats

1. For those respondents who said their user age was younger than 13 years, for our calculations we have assumed their user age to actually be 13 when they signed up as per the minimum age limit on most social media platforms.
    a. For this calculation, we have assumed the respondent did not recall their date of birth accurately, as the minimum age requirements on the platforms explored in this study require profiles to include a date of birth making the respondent at least 13. If a child tried to make a profile using a date of birth which showed their age as under 13, the platform would reject the profile.
2. For those who did not know the age they used when they set up their profile, we took their current age minus years on site to estimate their joining age.
    a. For example, if a respondent's real age was 14, and they have used a platform for 3 years, they must have joined the platform at the age of 11, but would have had to state they were at least 13 to join.
    b. Assuming they set their joining age to 13 and they have been on the platform for 3 years, their 'user age' will now be 16, although their real age is 14.
3. If a respondent has a different user age on several platforms, the profile with the oldest user age has been used for the calculation.
    a. For example, a respondent has a user age of 13 on Site A, and a user age of 17 on Site B – we have used the user age for Site B as this is the one with the higher likelihood of seeing or receiving age-inappropriate content or contact.
4. In Wave 1, for those respondents who said they had their profile for less than a year, we had grouped the time they have had a profile as '0' years. Hence, we underestimated the amount of time they were on the platform, rather than overestimated. In Wave 2, the 'Less than one year' category from Wave 1 was split into two codes: '0-5 months' and '6-11 months' in an attempt to improve the accuracy of collecting the initial setup date. This change should also be taken into consideration when comparing Wave 1 and Wave 2 data.
5. A few cases of younger children aged 8 or 9 claimed to have had a personal profile for more than five years. This suggested either their profile was set up by their parents or, due to their young age, they were unable to evaluate time accurately. We still calculated their user age based on the information they provided.

a. Assuming they set their joining age to 13 and they have been on the platform for 5+ years, their ‘user age’ will now be 18+.