

Understanding older children's (13-17s) experiences of using online communities

Beano Brain

24 June 2026

Foreword from Ofcom (1 of 2)

This report sets out the findings from our research into UK children's (aged 13-17) experiences of, and opinions about, online communities.¹ This mixed methods research explored how online services can support flourishing in online communities through design, governance and community features, not just content moderation. Our aim in conducting this research was to understand more about what users of online communities gain from them, where they encounter problems, and which service levers help or harm participation and wellbeing.

Why Ofcom carried out this research

We have statutory duties to promote, and to carry out research into, media literacy under the Communications Act 2003.² The Online Safety Act 2023 ('OSA') expands our existing media literacy duties. Amongst other things, it requires us to build public awareness about a range of media literacy and online safety issues, and to encourage the development and use of technology and systems that provide protection to online users.

Our [media literacy strategy](#) sets out our desire to better understand how users think platforms can promote their media literacy, so that they can protect themselves, function and flourish online. In our strategy we also committed to investigate the impact on children of 'persuasive design', including considering how services can help users make informed choices and mitigate potential harms by supporting the media literacy of their users. This research project delivers against our media literacy duties by examining how children who use online communities are impacted by persuasive design and platform design more broadly, and by exploring what those users expect from services to support positive experiences in online communities.

This research was commissioned and conducted prior to the government consultation, [Growing up in the Online World](#), and the announcement of the outcome. The findings should be read in this context. The views expressed are those of the participants and not of Ofcom or Beano Brain.

¹ See slides 8 and 72 for further context about online communities

² Ofcom's statutory duties to promote, and to carry out research into, media literacy are set out in sections 11(1A) and 14(6) of the Communications Act 2003. Section 15 of the Communications Act 2003 requires Ofcom to publish the results of research it conducts under section 14.

Foreword from Ofcom (2 of 2)

What 'persuasive design' means in this research

Persuasive design refers to the design features of an online service that can influence user behaviour. Examples of the behaviour that can be influenced include making a purchase, signing up for a service, increasing engagement, or viewing support materials or safety settings. These features are often distinct from, but can be embedded within, core usability elements of service design intended primarily to enable access and navigation, such as filters, login processes and information architecture.

In this report, we use the term persuasive design as a way of describing the various elements of service design that were discussed in the research as shaping participants' experiences of online communities. The term persuasive design was not used with participants during recruitment or fieldwork.

Service responsibility for user safety

Some of the negative experiences that children describe in this research, such as being exposed to hate and abuse, and bullying, fall under content harmful to children in the OSA. Empowering children and adults to make more informed choices and have more control over their online experiences is an important element of improving users' experiences online. However, we are clear that when it comes to protecting all users from illegal content and children from content that is harmful to them, regulated services are responsible. Under their duties in the OSA, regulated services must, among other things, address the risk of harm identified in their most recent illegal content and children's risk assessment for the service. Our [Illegal Content](#)³ and [Protection of Children Codes of Practice](#) set out recommended measures that providers of regulated services can take to protect users and meet their duties under the OSA. Some suggestions made by the children in the research are already recommended in our Protection of Children Codes of Practice⁴.

³ There are some additional duties on some categorised services (category 1 services specifically), which are some of the most widely used online services in the UK. Those services that are required to offer features that help adult users control how likely they are to see specific categories of content – suicide, self-harm, eating disorder and hate and abuse content that is not illegal – on their service and have more control over who they can interact with.

⁴ For example, PoC Codes measures (PCU J3) recommends that services provide children with an option to accept or decline an invitation to join a group chat.

Report contents

This is a report into the research conducted by Beano Brain on teenagers' (aged 13-17) engagement with online communities

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Research Objectives

Overall Objective

This research project aimed to explore teenagers' (aged 13-17) use of online communities, focusing on the reasons for their engagement with them, as well as the benefits and challenges they encounter online while using these communities, and the service levers that help or harm participation and wellbeing. Specifically, the research set out to:

Understand what children aged 13-17 gain from involvement in online communities, and the role persuasive design plays in shaping these experiences

Explore whether there are aspects of online communities, such as content, behaviours, or persuasive design features, that they don't enjoy.

Explore with children aged 13-17 how online services could:

- leverage persuasive design to support the fostering and growth of healthy online communities and encourage positive engagement among young people and/ or,
- disrupt persuasive design mechanisms that could draw young people into potentially harmful online communities

While the research did not aim to explore harmful experiences in detail, it did seek to identify both the positive and negative features and experiences of teenagers across different online communities. Researchers followed due process and safeguarding procedures with regards to researching teenagers to minimise the risk of participants being upset or harmed by their participation in the research.



Research Methodology

A combined quantitative and qualitative approach to explore teenagers' engagement with online communities.
This involved four stages of fieldwork:

Stage 1
Quantitative Survey
*n=1,535 teenagers
aged 13-17*

Fieldwork:
November
2025

A short (10-minute) online survey of parents and teenagers (aged 13-17), focused on teenagers' use of online communities, to measure prevalence, frequency, and types of online community engagement AND inform sampling and structure for the discussion elements of the qualitative phase. A few questions were asked of those who have stopped using or have never used online communities, but the majority were asked of current users

Stage 2
7-day Digital Community
n=30 teenagers

Fieldwork:
December
2025

30 x 13-17 year olds joined a moderated digital space hosted on the research platform Indeemo to respond to multi-media questions and creative tasks across 7 days (taking 30-40 minutes/day). This included an ongoing diary task, alongside separate tasks to meet key objectives

Stage 3
EHCP / Impacting
Conditions Depths
n=15 teenagers

Fieldwork:
January
2026

15 x 60-minute Zoom depths with teenagers aged 13-17 who had impacting conditions/ an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). All participants completed a short, written pre-task ahead of the sessions. The depths explored how engagement with online communities might differ for those children with an EHCP or impacting condition to support Ofcom's commitment to research the online experiences of different groups

Stage 4
Co-Creation Focus Groups
*n=24 teenagers
(from Stage 2)*

Fieldwork:
February
2026

6 x 75-minute digital co-creation focus groups with participants from Stage 2 (4 pax per group). The purpose of the session was to be collaborative, with participants working together to create their ideal online community and explore how they would address key challenges facing online communities by responding to different scenarios created by researchers in collaboration with Ofcom

Notes on the report

All participant names in the report have been removed. Gender and age (and, where relevant, SEND/neurodivergence) are included alongside verbatim quotations to provide context

We've included a brief **glossary** in the Appendix of the report, to support understanding of certain terms and concepts referenced by teenagers throughout the research

To provide additional context, we have included **insights from Beano Brain researchers** from other research they have conducted related to online safety. Where this applies to findings in this report, this is denoted with this symbol



Statistically significant differences between demographic groups are highlighted throughout the report using arrows, these are tested at a 95% confidence level



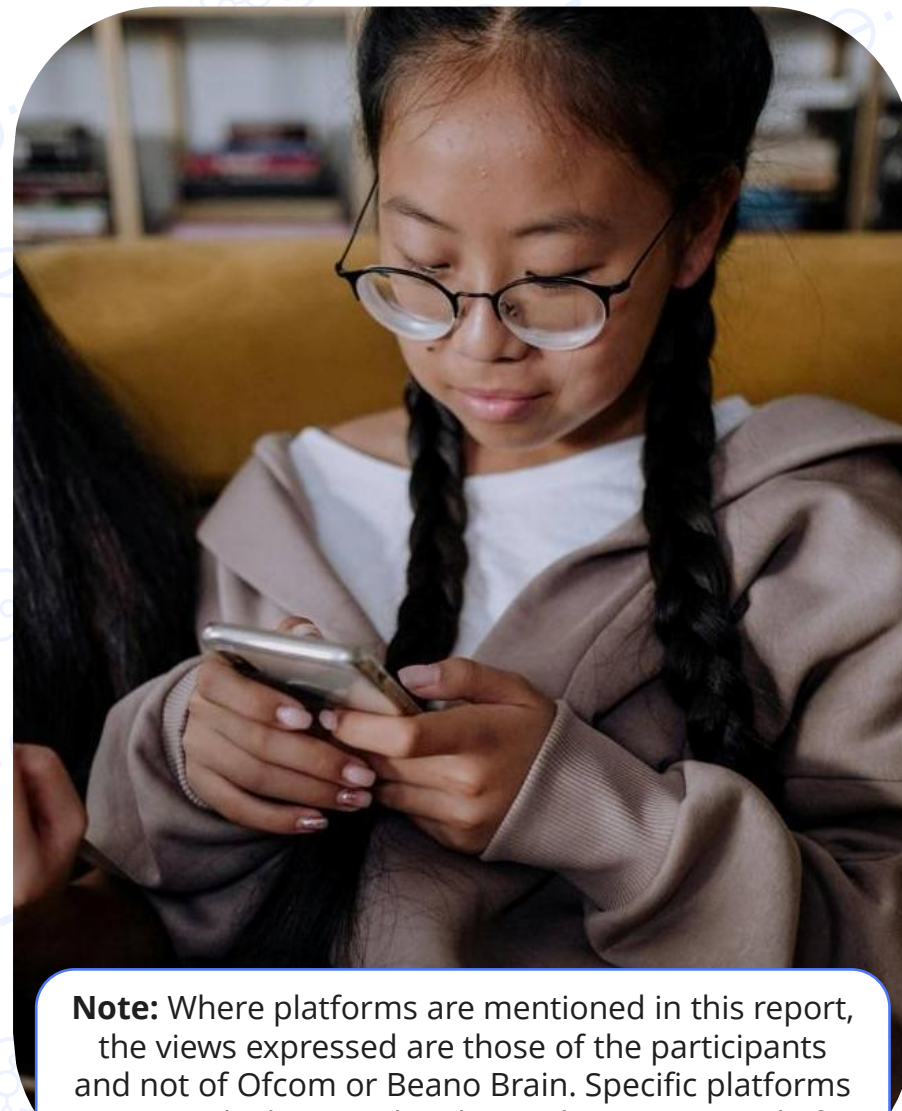
Findings in the report that are derived from the **Quantitative Research** are marked with this icon



Findings in the report that are derived from the **Qualitative Research** are marked with this icon



Note: Where platforms are mentioned in this report, the views expressed are those of the participants and not of Ofcom or Beano Brain. Specific platforms were only discussed in the qualitative research if they were brought up by participants.



How do we define online communities?

By **"online communities"** we mean groups of people who have a shared interest or purpose, sharing information on a digital platform

The members might know each other "in real life" (and may meet up, for example to share a sport or hobby), or they might not

Online communities may include forums, online discussion boards and/or community pages

This definition was used to ensure validity during recruitment, and as a part of analysis and story-crafting to distinguish insights specific to online communities versus other online platforms/ apps or forums. Throughout all stages of the research, participants were reminded of this definition such that responses and discussions focused on online communities specifically, rather than broader use of online services.

Note: We have used 'online community' and 'community' interchangeably in this report for brevity



Key Findings & Considerations



Key Findings

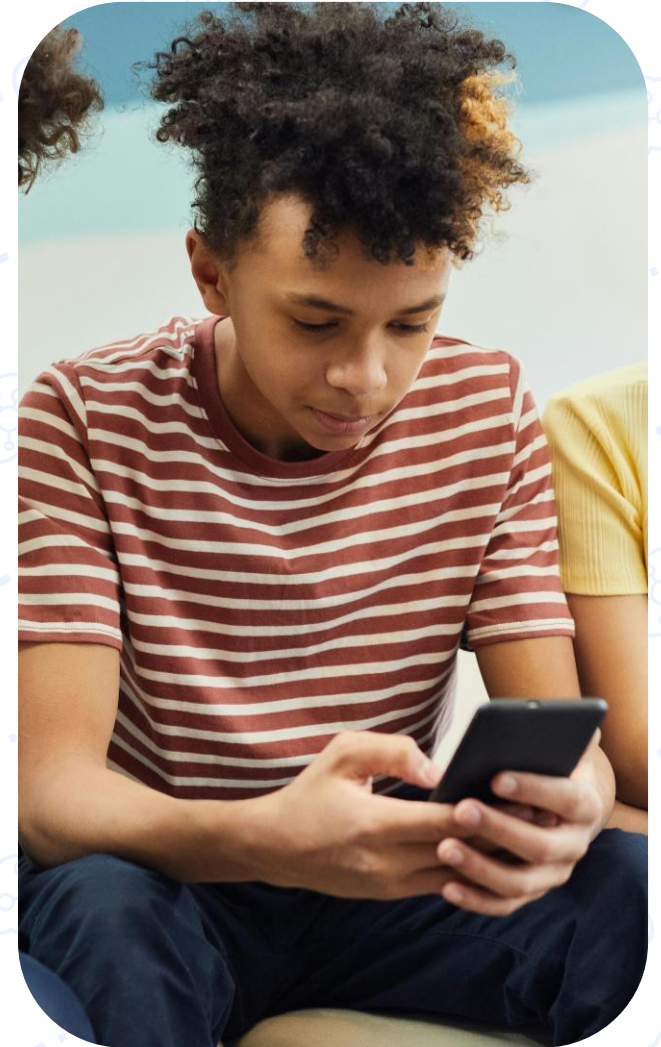
Communities are **used by the majority of teenagers** – with over three quarters (78%) of 13-17-year-olds reporting that they have ever used an online community

Teens in our qualitative sample spoke about valuing a mix of **Connection-Led** (socialising and connecting, personal development) **and Content-Led** benefits (amplifying interests, learning and knowledge) when it came to the online communities they use

Connection-Led benefits are felt to **help teenagers identify and engage with like-minded individuals**, and **build and test their own opinions and perspectives**. 69% say online communities help them socialise or connect, while 65% say they have benefited their personal development in some way. Tools such as liking, emojis, messaging, commenting, voting systems, and reposting support this connection.

Content-led benefits are seen as helping teenagers **discover media and information that supplements engagement** with different hobbies and interests. 50% say online communities help them get greater enjoyment out of their passions or share creative content, while 40% say they help them learn. Tools such as personalised feeds, algorithms, filtering/search, recommendations, and notifications facilitate these benefits.

For those with **EHCPs***, the **personal development** benefits of communities are particularly valued – as they are felt to **remove barriers and enable them to share, discuss and develop their** thoughts in the ways most comfortable to them. 78% of users with an EHCP indicate that being part of their most-used online community has helped with their personal development compared to 65% among those without an EHCP.



Key Findings

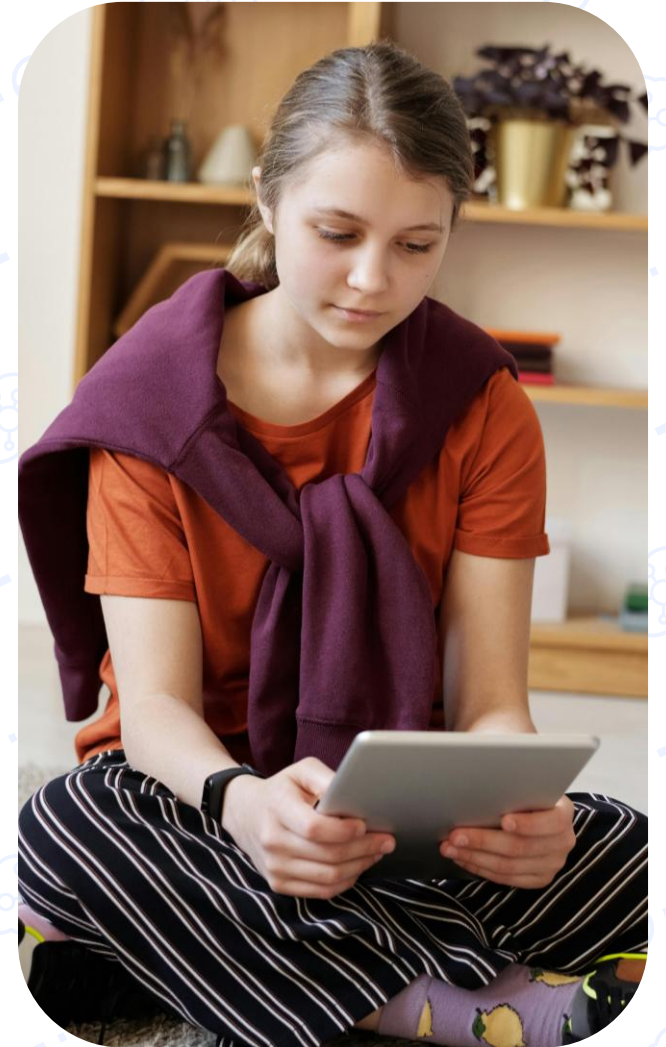
At the same time, teenager users recognise some negatives in online communities - 73% identified at least one downside to being in their most-used community. These elements are felt to **corrupt the connection and content-led benefits that they value**

The **connection-led negatives** that teens identify are seen as **destablising personal development and weakening connections** – through hateful members, irrelevant posts, inauthentic experiences, and/ or a lack of control over how they engage.

Content-led negatives disrupt teenagers' engagement with their interests and hobbies – such as exposure to inappropriate and unwanted content, information overwhelm, or exclusivity (limiting access). 39% of teenaged users claim to have been **exposed to inappropriate or unwanted content** in an online community.

13-17 year old users with an **impacting condition** are more likely to feel negatives associated with **anxiety, pressure, or fear** when using their most-used online community (48% list at least one of these as a downside vs 26% of those without such a condition) and are also more likely to claim that they have seen **inappropriate or unwanted content** in these spaces (45% list one of these as a downside vs 37% of others)

Many teenagers in our qualitative research said that persuasive design features, such as notifications and streaks, could be negative because they may encourage more time spent in online communities. However, they generally viewed these features as less harmful than other perceived negatives.



Elements of platform design that teenagers either already value or would like to see in online communities



A **positive, welcoming atmosphere** is the foundation of a good community – and teenagers would like to see **more nudges** for members to act positively across different touchpoints

Teenagers want **clear rules and real consequences** to maintain a safe environment. They want **tools to create their own positive environment** – but expect **platforms to step in to stop more harmful experiences**

Teenagers need tools that help them manage interactions with harmful users, but there is a clear preference for approaches that reduce escalation. Rather than defaulting to banning or reporting, **teens favour temporary restrictions that encourage de-escalation** - such as reminders of community guidelines or opportunities to pause and cool off - giving others a chance to correct their behaviour first

Teenagers recognise the potential dangers/ downsides of oversharing personal information, but **expect a level of reassurance/ verification when it comes to knowing who they are communicating with**

Children in this research emphasised the importance of online community experiences feeling relevant and focused. They identified personalisation tools (such as “For You*” pages, recommendations, and search filters) as key mechanisms for achieving this, as they help tailor content to their interests on online communities

Other elements that teenagers either already value or would like to see in online communities



The best communities should **recognise teenagers' content and connection-led needs and help power them up** (and support teenagers to manage the potential negatives that emerge as well)

Children feel strongly that whilst it is helpful, **AI should be used to enhance, not replace, human context** when it comes to moderation or censorship

Teens also told researchers that platforms should **reward more engaged or experienced members** but need to also **respect the democratic nature of these spaces as well**. Equal footing matters to teens – and it is important to them that platforms avoid creating or facilitating hierarchies between members where possible

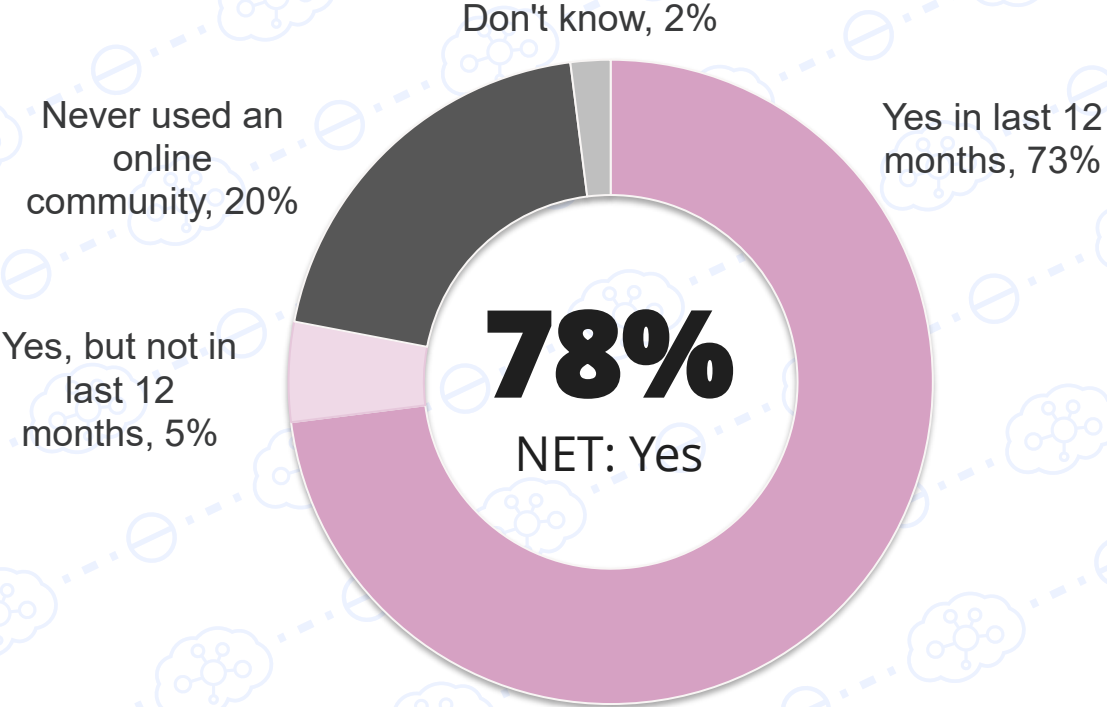


Contextual Findings:
Teenagers' engagement with
online communities

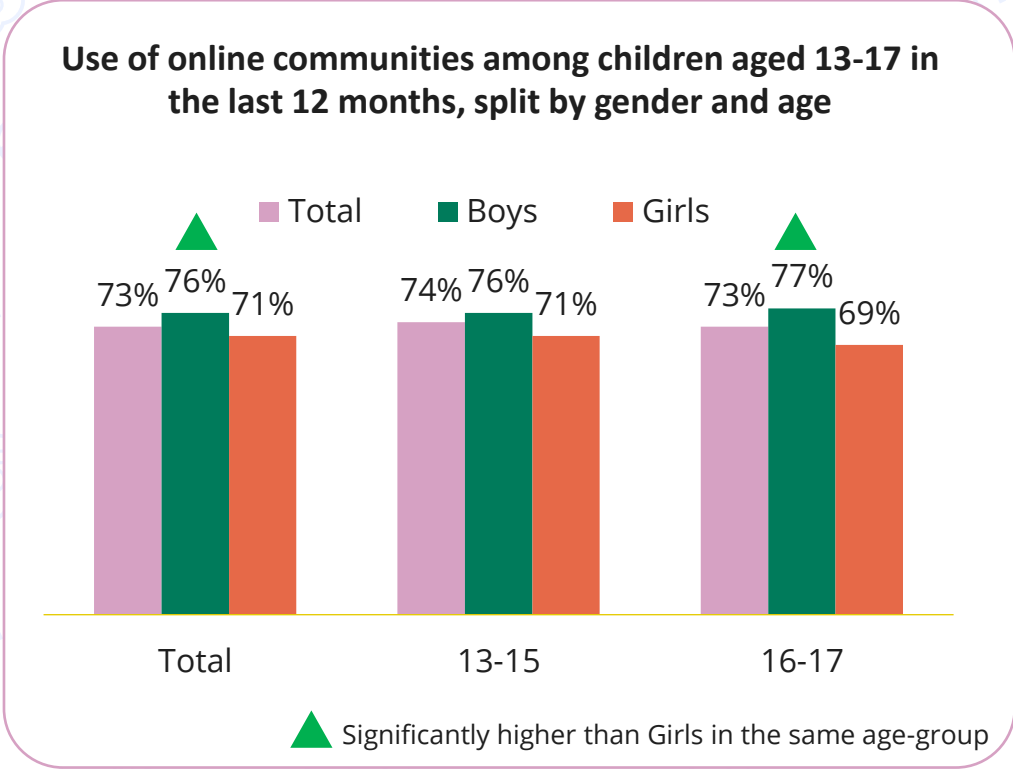


Over three quarters of 13-17 year olds have ever used an online community – with boys more likely than girls to use them

Percentage of 13-17-year olds who have ever used an online community



Boys are more likely to be a part of online communities than girls. Younger and older teenagers are just as likely as each other to be users.



Source: Research Conducted by Beano Brain, November 2025.
 Q1. Have you used or visited an online community or online communities? Base: 13-17 year olds: 1,513. Boys: 756, Girls: 757, 13-15-year olds: 921, 16-17-year olds: 614, Boys aged 13-15: 473, Girls aged 13-15: 459, Boys aged 16-17: 283, Girls aged 16-17: 283. Never used an online community includes those who do not go online.



The most commonly used types of online communities for teenager users focus on Gaming, Fandoms, Sports/Fitness or Fashion/Beauty

Types of online community most-used or visited

Those who have accessed an online community in the last 12 months

		Boys	Girls
Gaming	43%	59% ▲	25%
Entertainment/Fandom	14%	9%	19% ▲
Sport/Fitness	11%	15% ▲	7%
Fashion/Beauty	10%	1%	20% ▲
Creative	6%	4%	8% ▲
Lifestyle, food, travel and hobbies	4%	2%	6% ▲
Social or political discussion	3%	2%	3%
Communities for people with shared identities	3%	2%	4% ▲
Advice/Support	3%	1%	4% ▲

- **Gaming is the most-used community type**, for both boys and girls (though it's over twice as likely to be cited by boys)
- **Girls show a wider range of interests overall**, between a fifth and a quarter of their most-used communities sit across three distinct types of online community: gaming, entertainment/fandoms and fashion/beauty
- **Boys' interests skew more heavily toward gaming** with the next most commonly cited communities – sports/fitness (15%) and entertainment/ fandoms (9%) being selected by around one in seven boys or fewer
- There are no statistically significant differences in most-used community types by **age**
- Online community users from socio-economic group **ABC1** households are more likely say sport/ fitness communities are their most-used (13%), compared to C2DE users (8%), conversely, **C2DE** children are more likely to say fashion communities are their most-used (13% vs 6% for ABC1)

Source: Research Conducted by Beano Brain, November 2025.

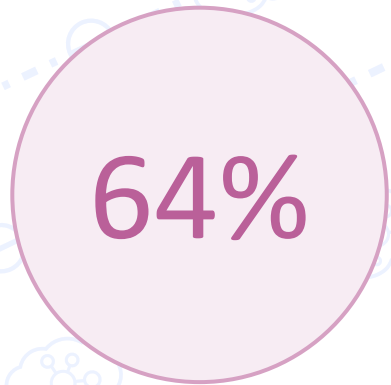
Q5 - Which category best fits the online community you have used most often in the last 12 months?

Base: 13-17-year-olds who have visited online communities in the last 12 months: 1114. Boys: 577, Girls: 537, ABC1: 657, C2DE: 421



Over six in ten 13-17 year old users say their most-used online community has a mix of genders, but a quarter of these teenagers say they are part of the majority gender in their most-used community

Gender-mix of most-used community



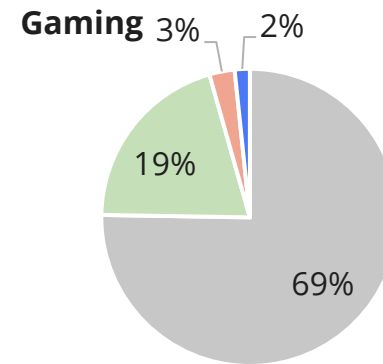
Say their most-used community is a mix of genders



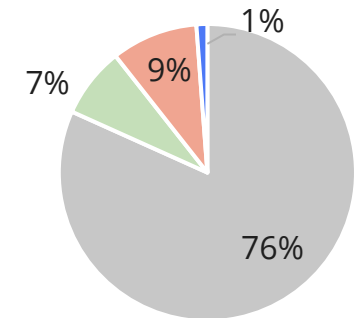
Say their most-used community has a majority gender that matches their own (equal across boys and girls)

By type of community (four largest community types used)

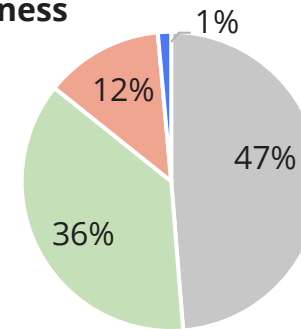
- A mix of genders
- Majority men and boys
- Majority women and girls
- Majority gender non-conforming



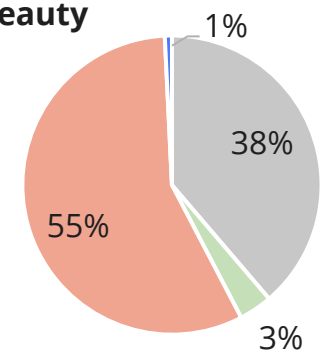
Entertainment/ Fandom



Sports and Fitness



Fashion / Beauty

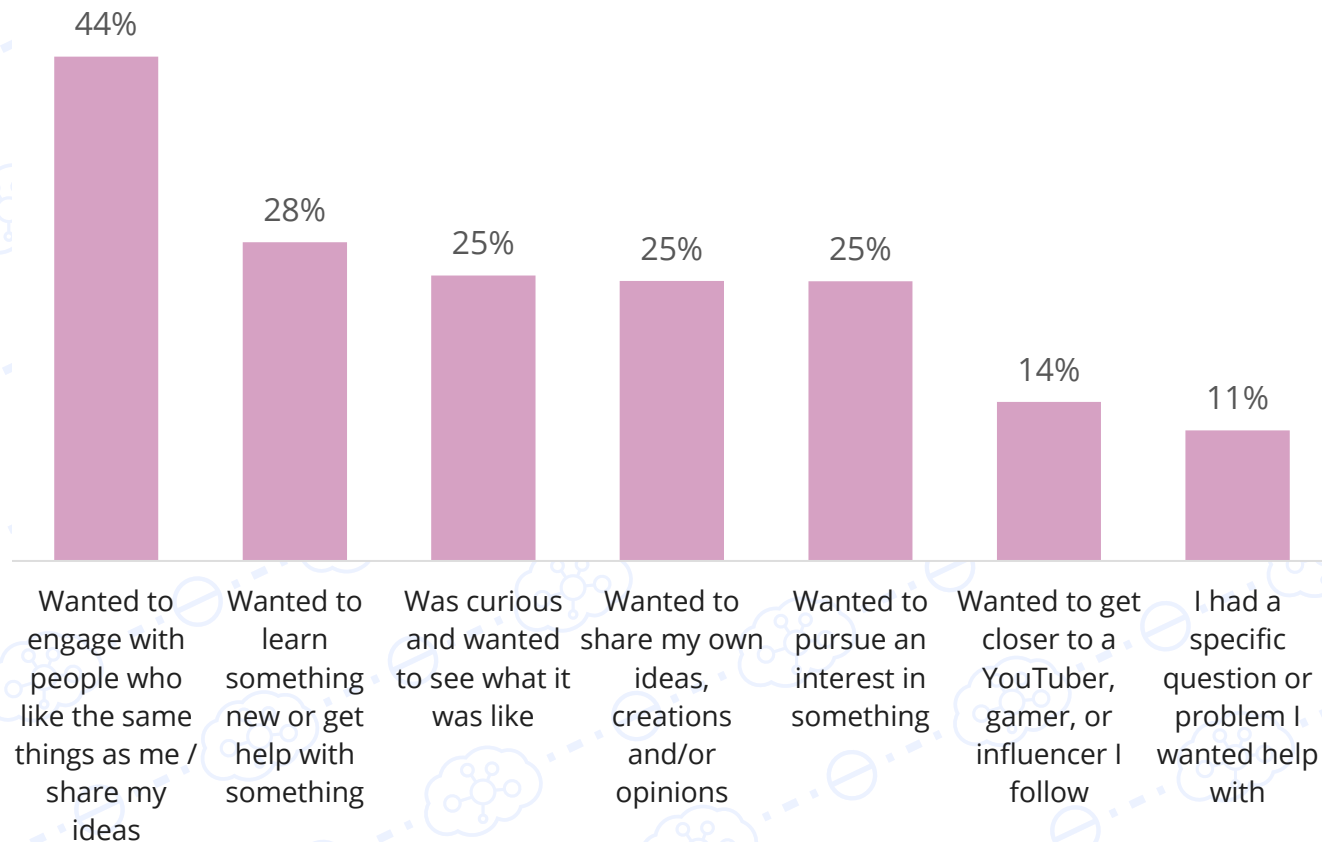


Source: Research Conducted by Beano Brain, November 2025.
 Q8 - Again, thinking about the online community that you use most often... From what you have seen, are those in the community..
 Base: 13-17-year-olds who have visited online communities in the last 12 months and have a most-used community: 1,078. most-used community is - Gaming: 473, Entertainment/fandom: 154, Sports/Fitness: 125, Fashion/Beauty: 112 (Only communities where Base > 100 shown.)



Among 13-17-year-old users, the most commonly cited reasons for joining their most-used online communities are engaging with people with the same interests/ hobbies and learning something new

Reasons for joining their most-used community – 13-17-year-olds who use online communities (prompted list of reasons)



- **Engaging with people with similar interests** is the top reason teenagers give for joining their most-used community
- Those who use fashion/ beauty communities are more likely than average to say they joined because they wanted to **learn something new** (39%)
- Those in international communities are more likely to say they joined because they wanted to **engage with others who like the same things** (49%)
- Boys are more likely than girls, and 13-15-year-olds are more likely than 16-17-year-olds to say they have joined a community because they wanted to **get closer to a YouTuber, gamer, or influencer** (16% vs 11% for both)

"It helps me because I can learn new stuff from them and the way I play is similar as well. So, like, we have similar play styles in the game" – *Boy, 17*

Source: Research Conducted by Beano Brain, November 2025.

Q11A - Again, thinking about the online community that you use most often... Why did you decide to join this community?

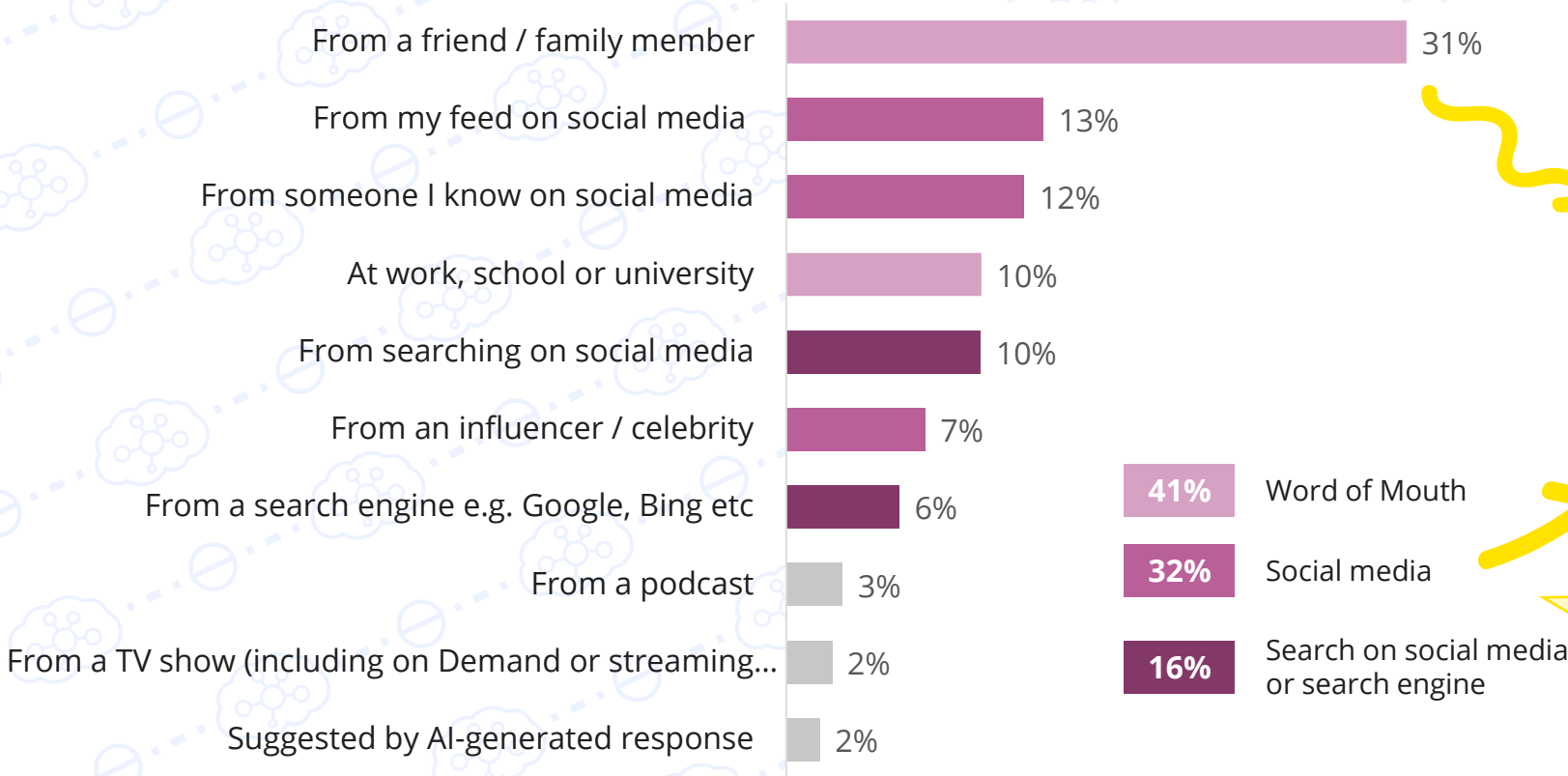
Base: 13-17-year olds who used a community in the last 12 months and have a most-used community: 1,078, Boys: 558, Girls: 520, 13-15s: 670, 16-17s: 408, Those answering about international communities: 432.

Answering about Fashion/Beauty: 112.



Word of mouth and social media tend to be the key pathways for discovering new online communities among 13-17 year old users

How users first discovered their most-used communities – 13-17-year-olds who use online communities (prompted list of reasons)



- **Boys aged 13-15** are most likely to learn about new communities from friends/ family members (36%, vs 31% of **girls** of the same age and 25% of **boys aged 16-17**)
- 38% of users whose most-used community related to gaming found this community via **friends/ family members**, higher than the average for all communities
- Almost half (49%) of users whose most-used community relates to fashion/beauty found it via **social media**, higher than the average for all communities

"I just saw a link in Instagram Reels to join the group chat [for the online community] so I joined" – *Boy, 16*

Case Study: Joining an online community due to word of mouth



Girl, 13

Case Study: A teenage girl in this research has been part of a gaming online community for 3 years; initially joining because many of her peers were talking about it and she wanted to see what made it appealing.

The community quickly became a space where she could extend her social life beyond school hours. She especially values being able to talk and play with her real-life friends there, keeping their connections active after school.

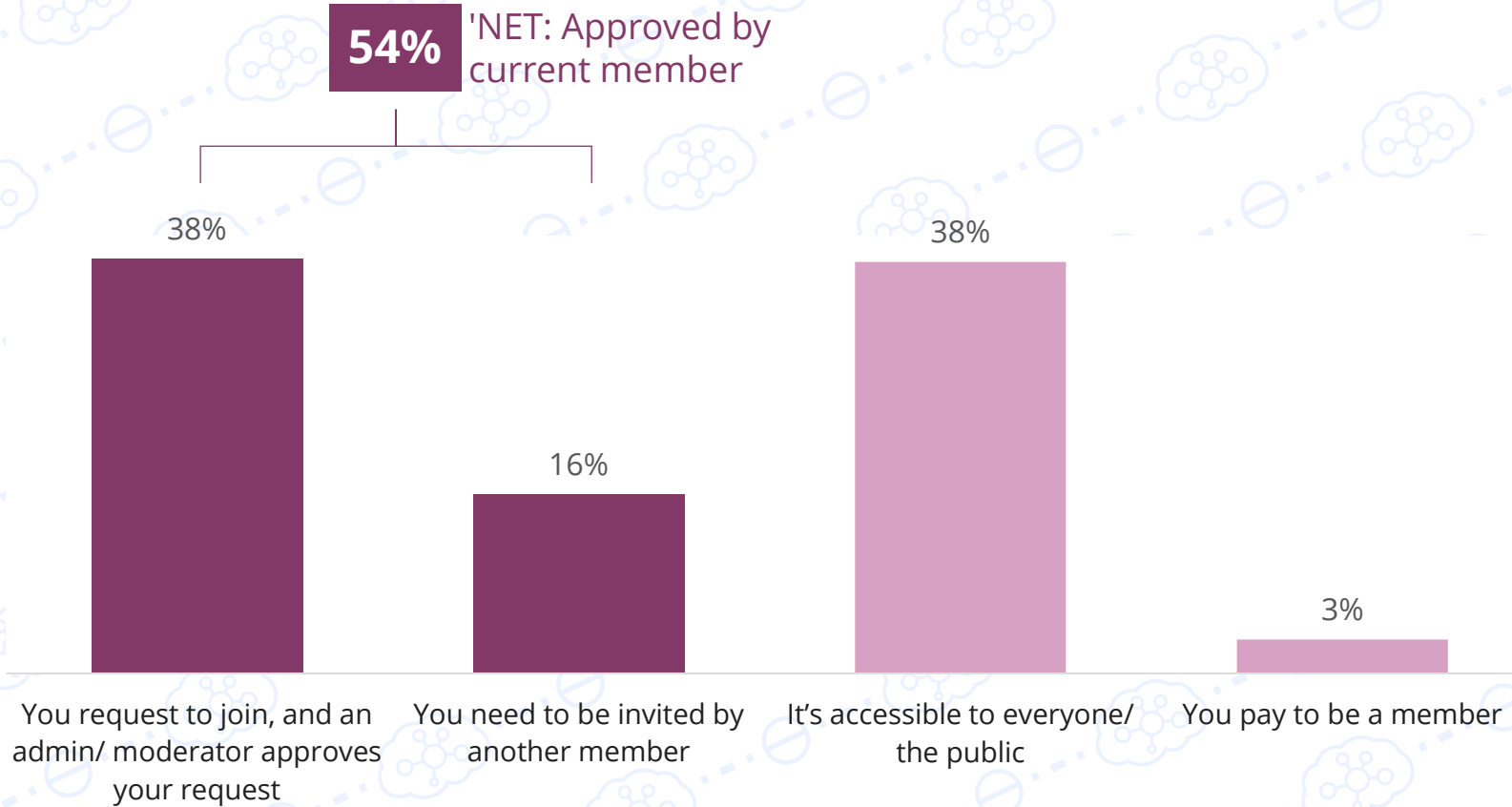
Researchers observed that her long-term engagement highlights how online communities can function as meaningful extensions of offline friendships for young teenagers.

“Loads of people started talking about [a Roblox online community] it and I wanted to see how fun it was (...) I can talk to my friends from real life and play with them on there, even after school” - *Girl, 13*



Over half of teenagers' most-used communities need an existing member's approval or invitation to allow new members to join, but many are accessible to everyone

How people join, view content or contribute to discussions in the online communities most-used by 13-17-year olds

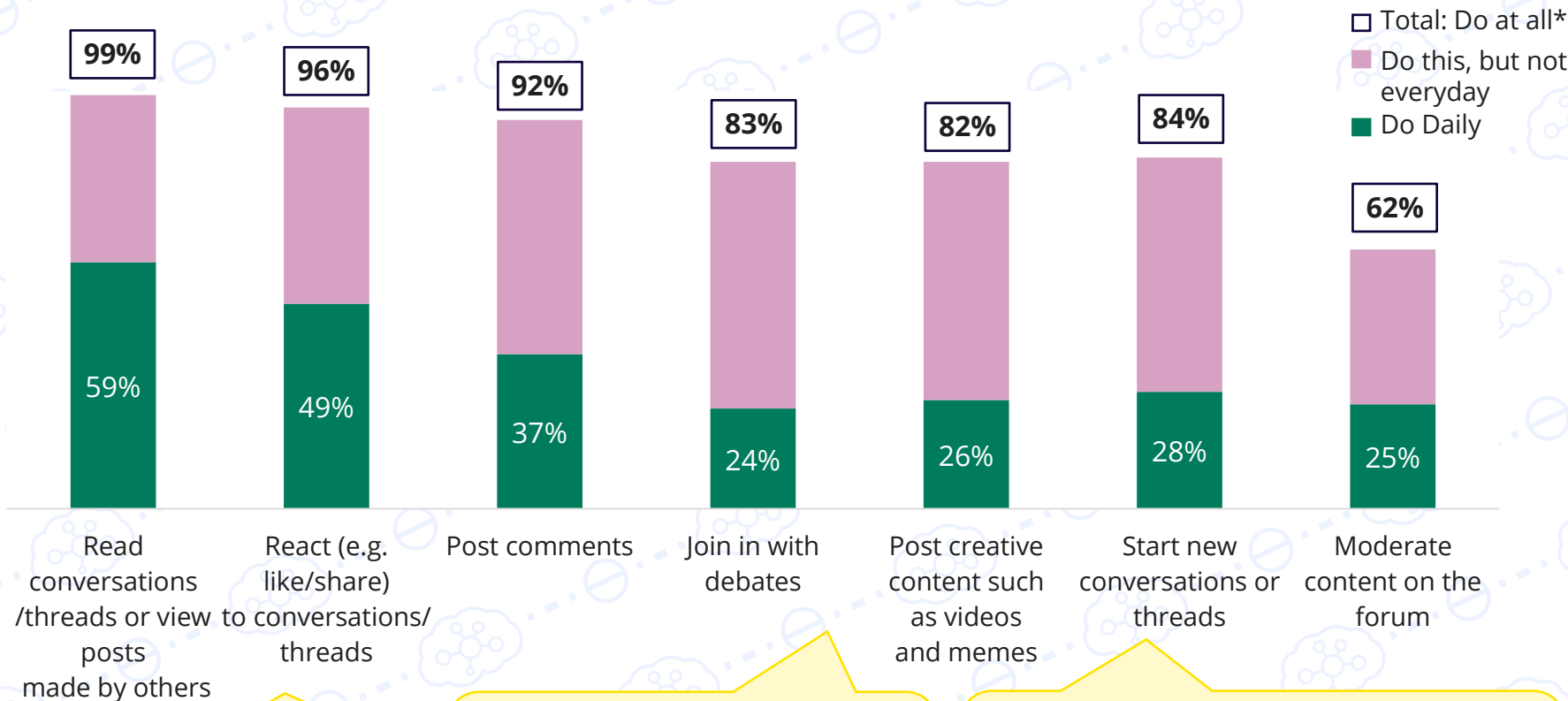


Children from **ABC1** households are more likely than their counterparts to use communities that need approval from admin/moderators (43% vs 31% of C2DE children)



While more passive actions such as reading content and reacting are the most common forms of engagement, many 13-17-year-old users are also playing an active role in their most-used communities through posting comments and content

How teenagers who use online communities engage with their most-used community



Teenagers' backgrounds are linked to how they engage with their most-used online communities

- Teenagers from **families that are 'doing well' financially** are more likely to post comments, join in with debates (92%), post creative content (93%), start new threads (95%) and moderate content (81%), compared to those who are from **families 'struggling' financially**
- Teenagers with **EHCPs** are more likely to post comments (99%), join in with debates (95%) and moderate content (75%) than those **without**
- 13-15-year-olds are more likely to post creative content (84%), compared to 16-17-year-olds (79%)
- Teenagers from minority ethnic groups are more likely to be moderators (70%) than **white** teenagers (61%)

"If I'm interested in the content a bit more, I would comment in the comment section!" – Girl, 17 [Creator/ frequent user]

"The posting part helps me take part in my subreddits as I can ask people for tips and tricks when gaming mostly." – Boy, 15 [Creator/ frequent user]

"[I give people] a warning and tell them you are not doing it right [if they cause issues]. I feel helpful because most people deserve a second chance and like sometimes a warning is what they need" – Girl, 16 [Moderator]

Source: Research Conducted by Beano Brain, November 2025. Q12 - Again, thinking about the online community that you use most often... How often do you engage in the following ways?
 Base: 13-17-year olds who used a community in the last 12 months and have a most-used community: 1,078, Boys: 558, Girls: 520, 13-15s: 670, 16-17s: 408, White children: 849, 200, Children with EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plan): 83 (caution - low base), Children without EHCP: 1968, ABC1: 657, C2DE: 421, Doing well: 290, Struggling: 261.

*Select any frequency, from Use at least less than once a month to multiple times a day (excludes Never).





**Perceived
benefits
of most-used
online
communities**



Personal development and socialising are seen as the main benefits of being on their most-used online community – but engagement with interests and learning are also key

In the quantitative research, teenagers (13-17) identified key areas where they felt being a member of an online community **has helped them**



69%

Socialising & Connecting

Elements of online communities that help connect teen users with different people

Significantly more for children from **urban areas** (70% vs 59% for rural)

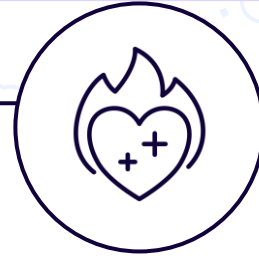


65%

Personal Development

Benefits that help teenagers build confidence and evolve their opinions

Significantly more for children from **urban areas** (67% vs 48% for rural)



50%

Amplifying Interests

Teenagers recognise benefits that help them get closer to the topics and issues they love

Significantly more for **users from minority ethnic groups** (58% vs 49% white users)



40%

Learning & Knowledge





These benefits are seen to help teen users learn more about favourite topics or the world

Significantly more for **children with no identified need or impacting conditions** (43% vs 33% with an identified need or condition)

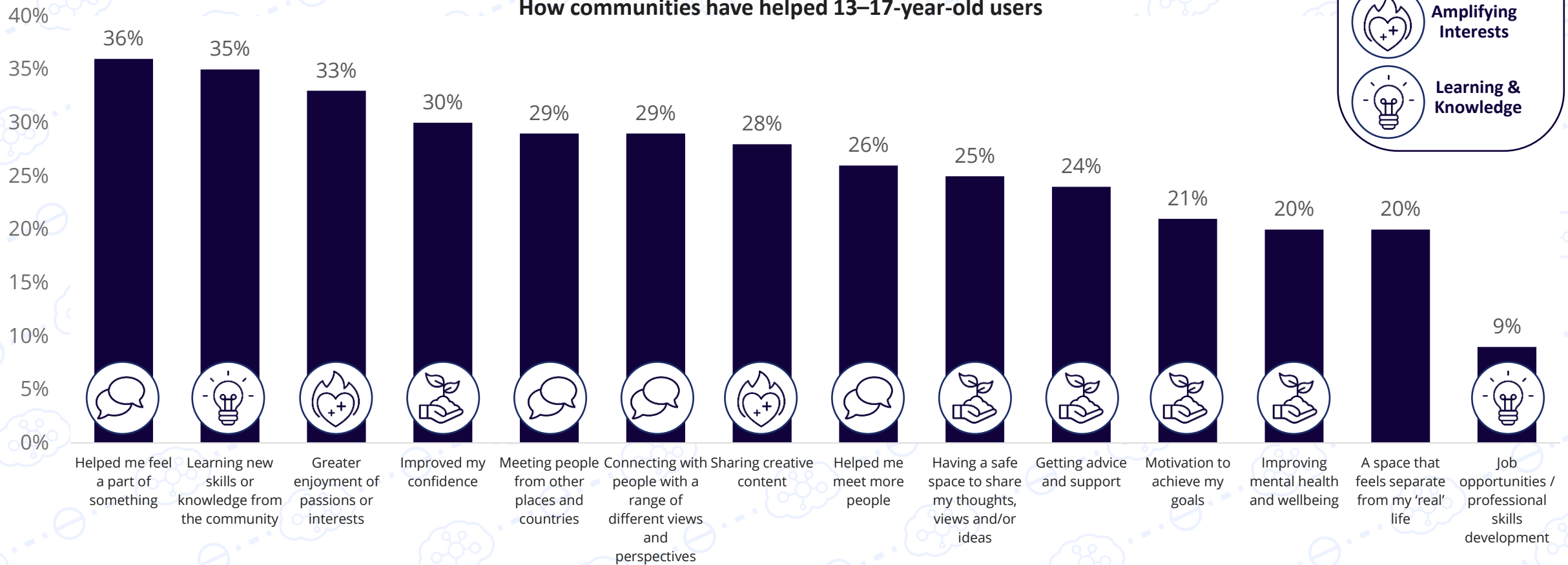


Feeling a part of something is the most commonly cited way in which teenage users of online communities feel that their most-used communities have helped them

In the quantitative research, teenagers (13-17) who used online communities identified key areas where they felt being a member of an online community **has helped them**

-  **Socialising & Connecting**
-  **Personal Development**
-  **Amplifying Interests**
-  **Learning & Knowledge**

How communities have helped 13–17-year-old users



Source: Research Conducted by Beano Brain, November 2025.

Q15 - Again, thinking about the online community that you use most often... Has being part of this online community helped you with any of the following?

Base: 13–17-year-olds who used a community in the last 12 months and have a most-used community: 1,078



Broadly, researchers observed that the benefits teenage users mentioned during our qualitative research could be divided into either connection-led or content-led benefits

These benefits can be broken down into two different groups:



Socialising & Connecting



Personal Development

Connection-led

These benefits are all about the connections with other members that teenagers make in the online communities where they are spending time: these connections enable them to share and validate opinions, or let them socialise and make new friends

"I like the community and closeness that comes with the [Snapchat] platform" - *Girl, 13*



Amplifying Interests



Learning & Knowledge

Content-led

These benefits focus on the content that teenagers are exposed to in their online communities: whether that's content that unlocks more engagement with their interests, or information that helps them learn more about key topics (or the world around them)

"I like scrolling through Facebook... [It's] interesting as I'm seeing content from my friends and my hobbies" - *Girl, 17*



Teenage users described online communities as bringing them together with like-minded people and making them feel like they belonged



In the qualitative research, teenagers shared a range of **social benefits** they felt they got from being a part of online communities:

Lively

The best spaces, in teenagers' minds, feel alive – with members regularly posting thoughts on a shared topic of interest

"If I was to describe it in three different words, I'd have to say informative, enjoyable and lively... [Reddit's] such a lively community with so many different people, you could just go on there, ask a question and it will get sorted out instantly" – *Boy, 16*

People Like Me

Communities help build connections between teenagers and others in the world who care about the same things they do

"I feel happy because [my Snapchat community] is a good way of communicating with friends" – *Girl, 13*

Authentic

There is a desire for authenticity from interactions in this space: a sense that teenagers are engaging with real individuals

"One part about using YouTube to visit online communities that I find frustrating is that in the comments on channels some of the comments are written by bots and they don't add anything and it can take away from the sense of community" – *Boy, 14*

Exclusive

Teenagers discussed the positive feeling that comes from being a part of an in-group; feeling special by being welcomed into an exclusive space

36%

of teenagers say that their most-used community has helped them feel a part of something



The most highly valued communities are perceived by the teenagers in our qualitative study to help them feel connected in the ways in which they feel most comfortable



In the qualitative research, teenagers described how their favourite online communities **enabled them to connect with people in the ways that they wanted**

This can be a
Lean-In Activity

Actively forging new connections (or powering-up existing ones) through comments and messaging – most commonly seen, in our research, among active users and moderators

“What I gain from my community is that I make friends and can socialise in a different way than in person” – *Boy, 17*

“I really like how I can use emojis within the app when I don’t always want to use words about how I’m feeling” – *Girl, 14*

This can be a
Lean-Back Activity

For more passive users, communities provide a sense of ongoing connection and presence, even without constant participation (such as browsing forums or social media)

“I really enjoy scrolling through football content on Instagram and reading people’s opinions on different things. However, I never post or comment I just like to read” – *Boy, 15*

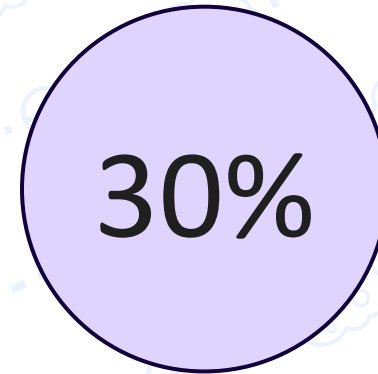
Whether active or passive, teenagers also valued having **a range of different ways to connect with other people** – messaging, commenting, emojis, reactions, etc



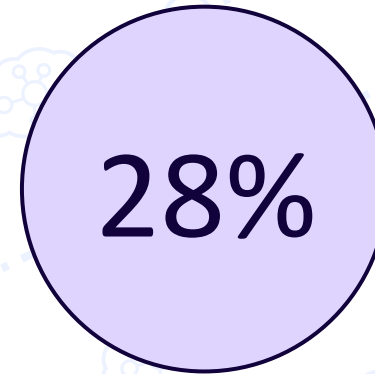
Teenage users feel the best online communities act as constructive spaces where they can share and validate their opinions and feelings



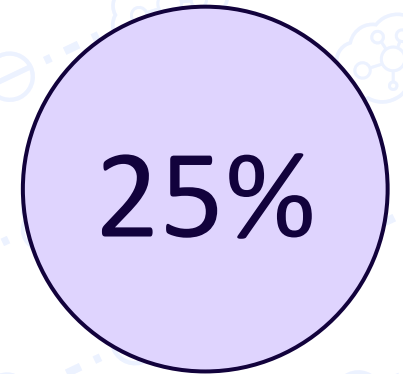
- Online communities act as spaces where teenagers have the **opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings**
- This sharing might be through **words or more creative expressions** (art, written responses, memes, etc)
- It's also where they can have those **opinions validated** by other members



Feel that joining an online community improved their confidence



Say it helped them share creative content



Say it provided a safe space to share thoughts, views, or ideas

“Being a member of an online community [on Reddit] is one of my favourite hobbies and pastimes. This is because it feels like a safe outlet and you feel like a valued member in these conversations even if you don’t partake in them. I know it sounds strange to say that but simply reading others’ conversations really gives me different outlooks on different topics” – *Boy, 15*



Teenagers from minority ethnic groups are more likely than white members to claim that an **online community improved their confidence** (37% vs 29%)



At the same time, teenage users value online communities' ability to stress test their opinions – and expose them to new points of view



Online communities were seen to both validate teenagers' identities and also to challenge them (in constructive ways)

- Exposure to diverse perspectives can be felt to introduce **new ways of thinking** and challenge new perspectives
- Teenagers claim communities introduce them to **perspectives from other countries** as well
- In the qualitative research, teenagers claimed to want these different opinions shared in a **positive and constructive** way

29%

Of teenagers feel an online community has helped them connect with people with a range of different views and perspectives



CONSIDERATION

Different perspectives were appreciated – though teenagers recognised this could sometimes result in a more negative experience when disagreements get heated (see Slides 38 and 39)

"I like that I can learn peoples' perspectives on certain topics that I may not have thought of"
– Girl, 13

"Last night was the World Cup 2026 draw and this was a big night for all the online communities I'm part of... I enjoyed the most reading about Scotland's group and this was very fun because everyone had different opinions but mostly people came together which I liked to see"
– Boy, 15



For most teenage users, there is a general expectation that most interactions in these communities will be positive, constructive, and helpful



The majority of teenagers in our research expect most of the interactions they have with other members of an online community to be positive

63%

of teenagers who use online communities **have not come across anything that made them feel uncomfortable, upset or negative** in any way

Almost two-thirds of teenagers say they feel safe sharing their thoughts 'Always/Most of the Time' (62%) and that their opinions are respected (61%) in their most-used online community

"I get a feeling of inclusion and positivity from being a part of online communities as everyone is so nice and positive to encounter always. This encourages me to help other people out as well in whatever way seems necessary" – Girl, 15

CONSIDERATION
While there is an expectation of positivity, this does not mean that teenagers are not experiencing negativity from members in these online communities (see Slide 37)

Online communities are also valued by teenage users for helping them to more closely engage with their favourite topics and interests



33%

of teen community users feel that a key benefit is unlocking greater enjoyment of passions or interests

Online communities help young people get closer to the ideas and interests that matter most to them. This includes:

Access to **online events** and exclusive **updates** from creators

Unique loot/skin* drops in their favourite games

Engagement with **fan discussions and theories** about their favourite shows, films or games

General inspiration on how they can continue to build their own relationship with a hobby

"Blue Lock is a show. It's anime and a sports manga series (...) the general chat is, it's usually people talking in there because they're discussing what they like about it, or what they don't like about a chapter"
- Boy, 14

"When I watch them [creators on an online community], it helps me because I can learn new stuff from them (...) it can help improve the skill level you're at" - Boy, 14



Some teenage users also reported a strong educational element from being exposed to new people, ideas, and content in online communities



Teenagers in the qualitative research described various learning moments in their favourite communities:

Learning **tips and tricks** (e.g. guitar tutorials, gaming tutorials)

Hearing how **like-minded people** addressed different problems (e.g. lifehacks, discussing mental health)

Keeping track of **how the landscape was changing** (e.g. video game updates, sports results, news/ current affairs, etc)

Seeing **people who they felt were experts** in action (e.g. professional sportspeople)

Discovering **content that inspired** them to learn and grow (e.g. Irish dancing posts that inspire new moves and sequences)

Some longer-term members (+1 year) also enjoy **teaching and imparting their wisdom** to newer members

"Something which I gain from being in the community is seeing how people go about their day-to-day life and dealing with stress, and different types of methods which they use" - Boy, 16

Observer 😊

What's New?

- On the Red Bull community there is a lot of talk on what happened in last weekends Abu Dhabi grand prix.
- In my opinion I think I gain a sense of knowledge and creativity due to the fact you see other people's views on the topic of interest and can help you grow your knowledge on how to answer back and help create friends.

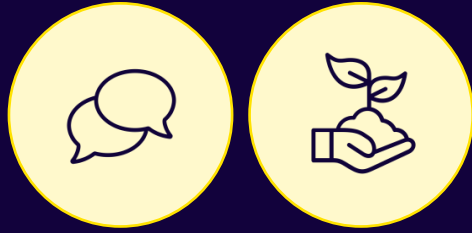
👁️ - Watching
📄 - Forums
➡️ - Share

Indeemo Task - Boy, 14

"I'm just a member and a helper as well (...) I help players who need, like, assistance, in terms of those newer members or less advanced ones. The day before yesterday, there was a free reward, but it was hidden and people were like, people were saying that there's a free reward, do you know where it is?" - Boy, 15



Teenagers in our qualitative research shared their thoughts on the tools that at times helped them access the **Connection-led benefits** of online communities



Connection-led tools

Personal Development & Socialising

Some of the most valued tools were felt to at times **reduce friction for communicating and connecting** – teenagers told us they wanted seamless ways to engage and feel part of online communities

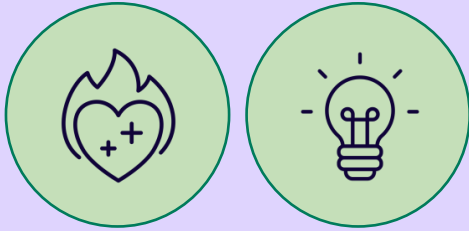
Liking / Reacting	These tools are felt to help teenagers engage with others' thoughts and posts, sharing their perspective in a light touch way
Emojis / Memes	Emojis and memes are seen as easy and fun ways of communicating feeling and emotion to other members
Voting Systems	These tools are seen as helping teenagers filter out the most important or useful opinions from members
Commenting	Directly enabling teenagers to share their opinions
Reposting	A feature that teenagers say they value for helping them easily share others' opinions they agree with
Messaging	Seen as a key way of socialising within these different communities explored in the research

"The positive features I discussed... improve user experience by making Discord feel like a lively, organised space where people can easily talk, share interests, and build close-knit communities"
– Boy, 17

"What helps me take part in the community is the fact that it is so easy to post and comment etc. And that anyone can do it due to how straight forward it is"
– Girl, 14



These teenagers also shared their thoughts on the tools that at times helped them access the **Content-led benefits** of online communities



Content-led tools

Amplifying interests & Learning

Teenagers also talked about **tools that helped them engage more easily** at times with the topics at the heart of these communities

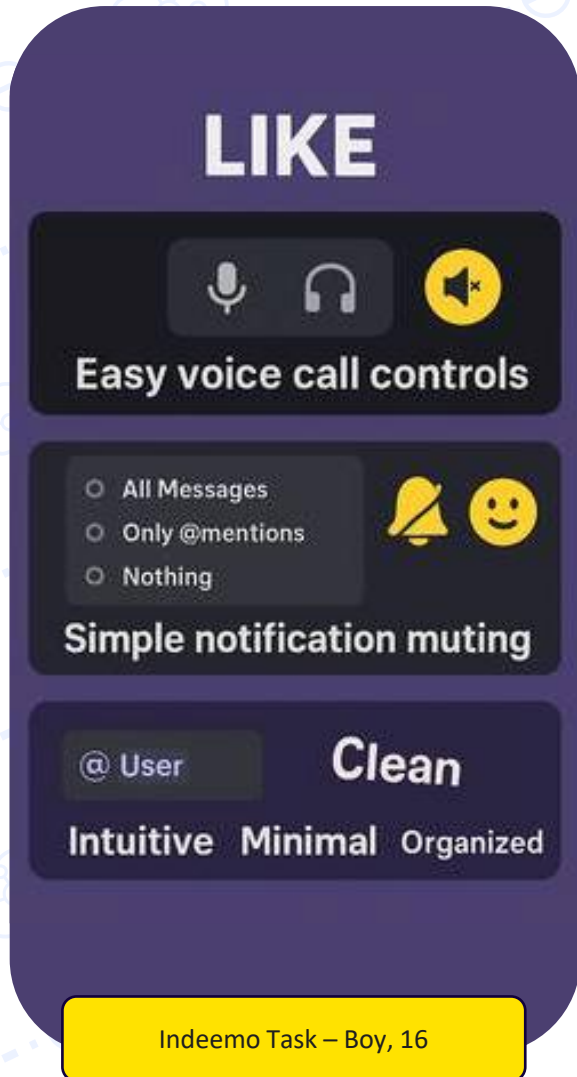
Scrolling	Felt by teenagers to be a fairly straight-forward and fun way of discovering content around topics of interest
Personalised Feeds	Teenagers recognise that the algorithms on their home pages can help drive discovery of relevant content
Filtering, Search, Hashtags	These tools are viewed as important for helping teenagers parse the huge volume of content they are exposed to
Notifications	Some teenagers describe notifications as helping them stay connected to their hobbies/interests, via updates
Recommendations	Suggested posts, communities, or conversations help teenagers discover more content efficiently
Pinning Content	This tool helps teenagers keep track of content in a community that resonates with them and their interests

"I like how easy the search tool is and that it loads answers quickly and efficiently, I don't like how the filters work - they are hard to understand"
- Boy, 15

"They keep me drawn in with the notifications about other players' posts, they pull me in" - Boy, 15



Beyond these specific needs, there was a broad desire among teenage users of online communities for a 'clean' user interface



Young people regularly praised community experiences that felt easy-to-use and straight-forward – and which weren't visually too cluttered

Teenagers experienced annoyance when they got familiar with a space and it then changed – requiring them to re-learn how to use and get the most out of the platform or app

“There isn't really any features that I dislike as YouTube is a super clean and easy to use app where all the features help you out”
– Boy, 14

“One thing I don't like about Discord is the cluttered interface... I think if they redesigned the interface to be more spaced out, it would look better and you would be able to navigate easier”
– Boy, 14

Beano Brain Consulting

We know from previous research that this cohort of teenagers (13-17yo) are design literate, and used to navigating sleek and seamless user interfaces. When platforms do not meet their expectations, they experience frustration.





 **Participants'**
concerns about
their most-used
online
community 

The elements that teenage users in our qualitative research consider to be 'negatives' in online communities often feel like a corruption of the connection and content-led benefits they value

73% of teenage users identify at least one downside of being in their most-used community

CONNECTION-LED NEGATIVES

Weakening the connections that users are building and destabilising the personal development that teenagers hope they'll discover through online communities

CONTENT-LED NEGATIVES

Disrupting teenagers' engagement with their passions and interests, limiting their exposure to knowledge, and exposing them to content they don't want to see



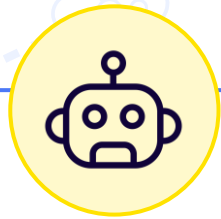
Hateful / Less Engaged Users

When community members are hostile, unkind, or disengaged, which discourages healthy participation



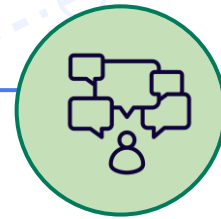
Lacking Agency in Comms

Teenagers sometimes feel powerless when they cannot control how they communicate or how others interact with them



Inauthentic Experiences

Teenagers can become frustrated when online interactions are diluted and feel fake, rather than genuine connection



Information Overwhelm

The sheer volume of posts, messages, and updates can leave young people feeling overloaded, stressed, or unsure what to focus on



Inappropriate / Unwanted Ideas

Teenagers can be exposed to content or suggestions they do not ask for / do not feel comfortable with



Exclusivity (e.g Paywalls)

When key features or content are locked behind status or payment barriers, young users may feel excluded



Both hateful or less engaged members within communities are perceived by teenage users to undermine the social benefits of taking part in these spaces



Other members

Teenagers in this research described some community members as either **'hateful' and/ or 'less engaged'**, and indicated that both contributed to a noticeably more negative overall experience within the online community – albeit for different reasons:

Hateful Members

Members condemned 'hateful' users who **actively sought to make the experience worse for others**

This could be **targeted attacks, mean-spirited comments, bullying, or 'rage-baiters'*** looking to get a reaction from others

Although some users claim to want their thinking and perspectives challenged, **they wanted other users to do so in a constructive and helpful way**

"I think people kind of have an impact on the community as well... if they have hatefulness... I feel like if you post something you want to feel good about and then people just start hating on it, then that's not great" – *Boy, 15*

Irrelevant or Less Engaged Posts

According to some teenagers in our study, when members seemed to be less interested in and/or passionate about an online community's core topics (or shared irrelevant comments/posts), it **broke the feeling of a collective** that teen users valued in these spaces

Children **perceive hateful members as more disruptive** than those who feel less passionate or are making posts/comments that are irrelevant to the main focus of the community – but these members are still described as being a source of negativity

"If it's a community, usually you're passionate about something for the community. So, you don't want to be talking about something unrelated all the time, or else it kind of takes away the sense of community you're all sharing" – *Girl, 15*

Not feeling safe when sharing and/or engaging on online communities can be enough for children to stop using an online community.

After growing out of interest (51%), the second most common reason ex-users give for stopping online community visits is that **they don't feel safe or comfortable sharing online (24%)**

*Please see 'Glossary' in Appendix



Socialising is seen as a key part of the community experience, but teenagers disliked it when they did not feel in control over how they are being engaged with



Lacking Agency

Teenagers described **feeling sometimes blindsided by social interactions** that they do not want. From friends and strangers alike, examples children provided in the research included:

Messages

Users seeing when you have viewed a message (but have not responded to another user)

Calls

Being called out of the blue

Online/Offline

Other users knowing when you are on or offline

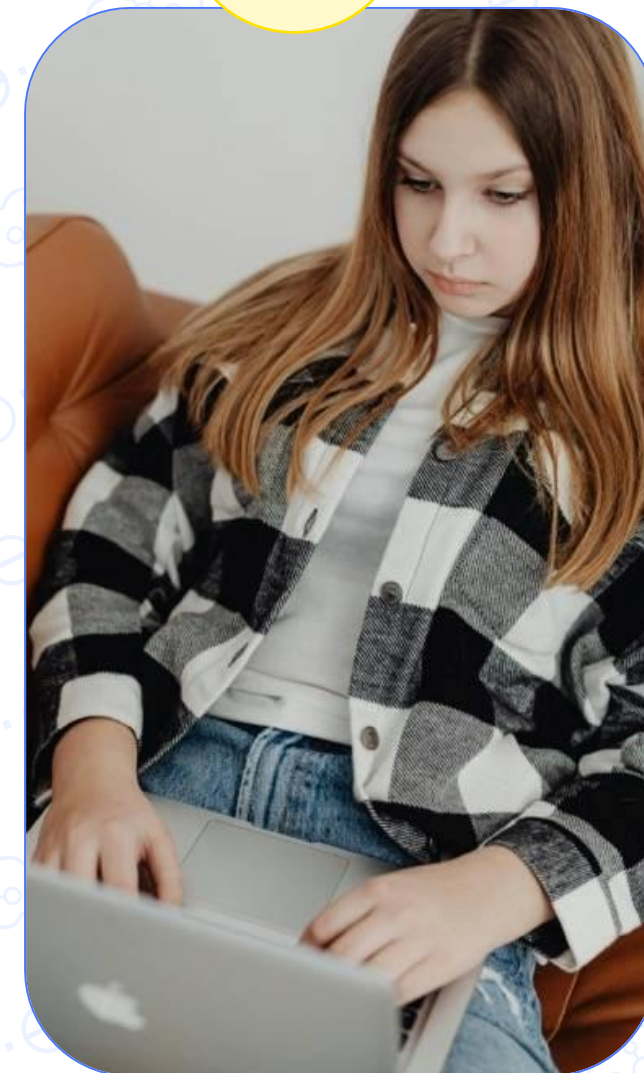
Activity

Users being able to see your activity logs, timestamps, or even location

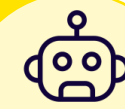
Groups

Being added to groups without permission (and needing to be the one who leaves – which they felt could seem rude)

“I don’t like Snap Maps because it gives anyone your location as long as they are on your friends list”
– Boy, 13



Teenage users wanted to feel that they were building real connections with other members – and disliked it when this authenticity felt diluted



Inauthentic Experiences

For online community users, perceived authenticity was central to community cohesion, but there were elements that could dilute that feeling and **disrupt a positive experience**:

Bots and Automated Accounts

These were disliked by members for **creating a false front of realness**; this could undermine trust, disrupt natural interaction, and detract from the “vibe” or emotional tone of a community, **weakening members’ sense of connection**

“What I find frustrating is that in the comments on channels, some of the comments are written by bots and they don’t add anything and it can take away from the sense of community” – *Boy, 17*

Spam and Irrelevant Content

High volumes of repeated or low-quality content reduced vibrancy for members, reducing serendipity and diluting shared purpose; while low overall activity could make communities feel inactive or unwelcoming

“Some people will go out of their way to check when the moderators have gone to sleep so they can start posting bad stuff, or spamming” – *Boy, 14*

Too Much Anonymity

While teenagers understood the need for caution online, some were put off by **too much anonymity**. Anonymous or random usernames reduced transparency and made it harder to know who they were interacting with, which in turn was felt to weaken trust and authenticity

“If I could change Reddit, I would add a username system, so people know who is who instead of their randomly generated ones” – *Boy, 15*

See Slide 67 for more information on this topic

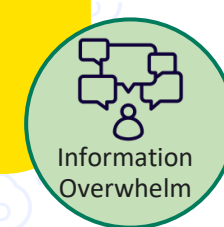
Ads and Sponsored Content

Children in this research told us that ads and sponsored content **broke the flow of engaging with content that centers on their interests** or with speaking with other members meaningfully

“Adverts on these apps can be annoying and pointless - wasting my time” – *Girl, 17*



While online communities were valued for helping users stay informed, too much information could quickly become overwhelming



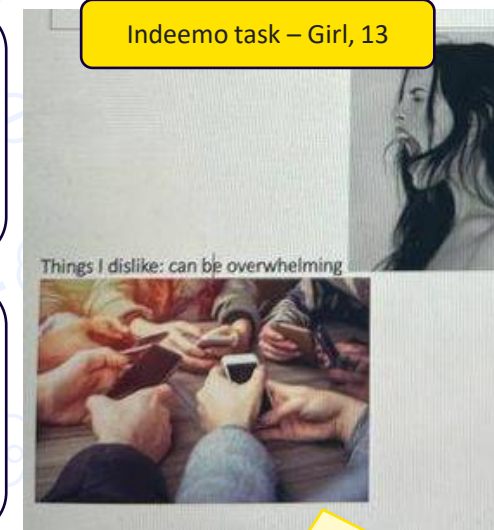
Teenagers enjoyed how different elements of online communities helped them stay up to date with their friends and interests, but they also felt that this could easily tip over into **feeling too overwhelming at times:**

Lots of notifications and pop-ups on their device(s)

Updates that are dauntingly long after periods of inactivity

Too many posts or messages from members in a feed or channel, coming in quick succession

Messages/ posts accumulating overnight when members log back in the next day



"I don't like that it is easy to be spammed by people and/or groups" - Boy, 14

"Members chat a lot. A LOT. So it'd be a bit annoying having my phone go off [notifications] that much" - Girl, 16

"Channels can often overload, making it overwhelming at times" - Girl, 13



Case Study: A young user reports how her community was spammed with stickers, causing disruption



Girl, 13

Case Study: A teen girl described to researchers how an online community she is part of has in the past been spammed by hundreds of stickers sent by multiple users. The stickers* themselves were generated by using a photo of someone without their permission.

This incident disrupted normal and more positive conversation in the community and created discomfort among members who felt the misuse of personal images crossed a clear boundary.

This teen girl told researchers that one of her worries was just how easily things like this can happen in communities – and that she felt there was little recourse when faced with a negative experience like this.

“In group chats people can be mean and they like they can create like stickers of you... it’s really not a nice feeling when they add this. I don’t think that [this community] really does anything about it” – *Girl, 13*



Exposure to others' opinions is a core part of the community experience, but some teenage users observed that at times this may result in exposure to inappropriate or unwanted content



A significant number of teenagers have been exposed to inappropriate or unwanted content in online communities, and one in three users has come across something that made them feel uncomfortable, upset, or negative

39%

of teenaged users claim to have been **exposed to inappropriate or unwanted content** in an online community

More likely to be reported by **13-15 year olds** (42% vs 35% 16-17)

28%

of **current or ex-users** of online communities claim to have come across **something that made them feel uncomfortable, upset or negative**

INAPPROPRIATE

Explicit Imagery/Language

Racist or Misogynistic Language

Hate Speech

"I hate that there is unwanted [content] that can be disturbing and having to report or block to prevent seeing more" - *Girl, 15*

UNWANTED

Escalated Arguments

Spamming

Promotional Material/Ads

"I don't like that it is easy to be spammed by people and/or groups" - *Boy, 14*



Many teenage users in the qualitative research saw paywalls as a block on the open and democratic exchange of ideas which was an ideal they valued



Many teenagers in our qualitative research described paywalled content / monetised barriers as inherently unfair.

- **Limited access to communities was spoken about as unfair and creating inequity between users**, undermining the sense of shared participation
- Requiring payment to join certain communities was felt to be exclusionary or unfair, **particularly for younger users**



"It costs money to subscribe to accounts, and I feel like this sort of keeps people separated in a way which I don't like as accounts will do exclusive posts to the subscribers which the non-subscribers can't see and give them perks which I feel is unfair"

– Boy, 15

Examples of paywalls shared by teenagers in the research:

Pay-for-access content from creators

Expensive gaming add-ons

In-game currencies unfairly benefitting players

Subscriptions to tiered content

Tools/features that require paid access

Giving gifts and/or rewards to creators



Many teenagers in our qualitative research said that persuasive design features, such as notifications and streaks, could be negative because they may encourage more time spent in online communities. However, they generally viewed these features as less harmful than other perceived negatives

Some teenagers in the qualitative research noted that **they believed online communities were designed to keep them engaged**

"The scrolling feature [the platform] can be addictive making me spend a vast amount of time on the app" - *Girl, 17*

These teenagers spoke about how **personalised feeds** delivered a stream of compelling content that kept them coming back

"They [the platform] put things similar to what I've interacted with into my algorithm so I want to go back and scroll through more which makes me constantly looking on the apps" - *Girl, 15*

Teen users felt other elements such as **notifications, rewards, streaks, and badges** could also encourage users to keep coming back to online communities

"I always go on to look at my streaks, I have to keep them going or my friends might get mad!" - *Boy, 15*

However, when explored explicitly in co-creation workshops, most teenagers in our qualitative sample **did not feel this was an important issue** - a feeling further underscored by findings from the quantitative survey

9%

of teenagers feel that a negative element of online communities is how much time they take up

This is more likely among **ABC1s** vs C2DEs (11% vs 5%)

Case Study: A teen felt pressure to respond to messages in online communities quickly because his status and activity were visible



Boy, 15

Case Study: A teen boy in this research explained that he did not like how when he logged into his favourite online community, friends or fellow users could see his activity (i.e. the fact he is online but not responding to messages quickly enough for them).

He described a pressure to appear or be constantly available to his friends because of this, which led him to avoid opening the app altogether, even when he wanted to use it just to spend time with enjoyable content (beyond just interacting with friends).

As a result, he reported to researchers feeling stressed and monitored when on online communities.

Researchers observed this as an example of how online status indicators could create pressure and contribute to stress for the children we spoke to.

“People can see when you were last on the app and can try and challenge you for things. Like, they might ask you a question and you don't respond to it. And they're like, well, ‘why are you not responding to me? You were online 10 minutes ago and I sent it three hours ago’, that sort of thing” – Boy, 15



Tools that teenagers say help them overcome **Connection-led negatives** focus on giving them control over how users engage with other members



Connection-led tools

Helping teenagers overcome Hateful/ Less Engaged Users, Lacking Agency in Comms, and Inauthentic Experiences

Tools mentioned by teenagers included:

Censorship	Stopping certain words from being written (or seen) by teen users of communities
Muting	Teenagers told us they valued the ability to stop seeing posts/comments from other members
Reporting	While there was some hesitation, teenagers felt these tools helped maintain a positive atmosphere <i>(See Slide 53)</i>
Blocking	This was felt to give teenagers immediate control over their interactions with other members
Visibility	Teenagers valued tools that helped them control who knew they were online and the content they'd seen
Comms Controls	Teen users enjoyed settings that helped them limit how users engaged with them
Rules	Teenagers told us they liked community rules for providing broad guidelines around behaviours in communities
Reminders	Some platforms are felt to integrate safety and positivity messages throughout, which teenagers appreciated

"I've seen that some words can be censored, so if you're trying to type something, some words can be censored so that it can't be said, which I feel like that's quite good"
- Boy, 15

"I like on Snapchat you can kind of half swipe and you can see what people are messaging you, but they don't know that you've seen the message" - Boy, 15

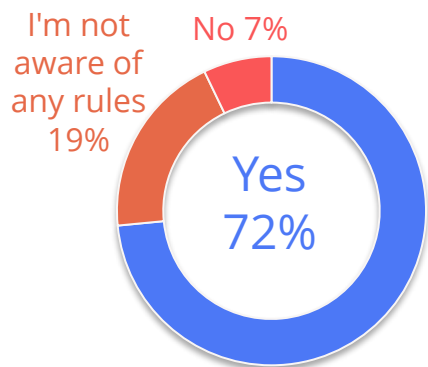
"Snapchat's Safety Center and Family Center help keep me updated, and I see tips through Bitmojis and stickers that remind me to stay safe" - Girl, 13



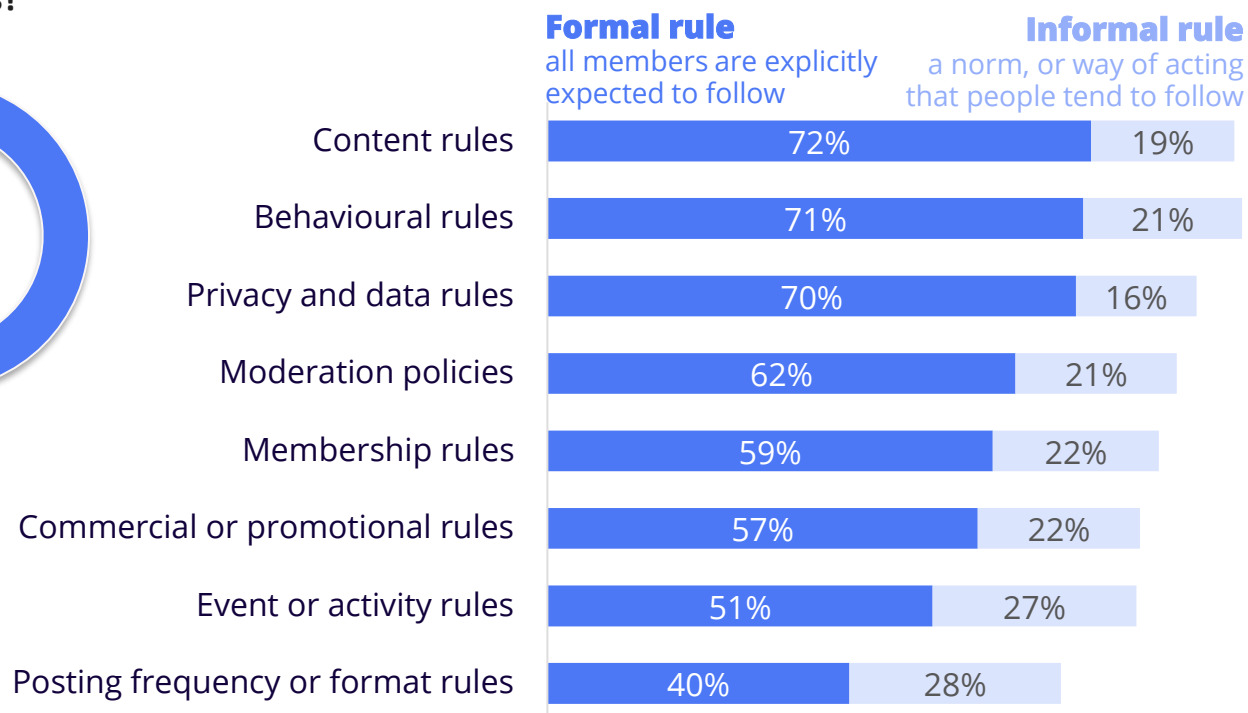
In larger communities, teenagers generally valued having clear member rules/guidelines – although they would not expect these rules to be overly restrictive or draconian

Teenagers said they liked rules which set out expectations of positive behaviours, but did not want to feel overly limited in their ability to share thoughts or engage:

Does their most-used community have rules?



Types of rules communities have



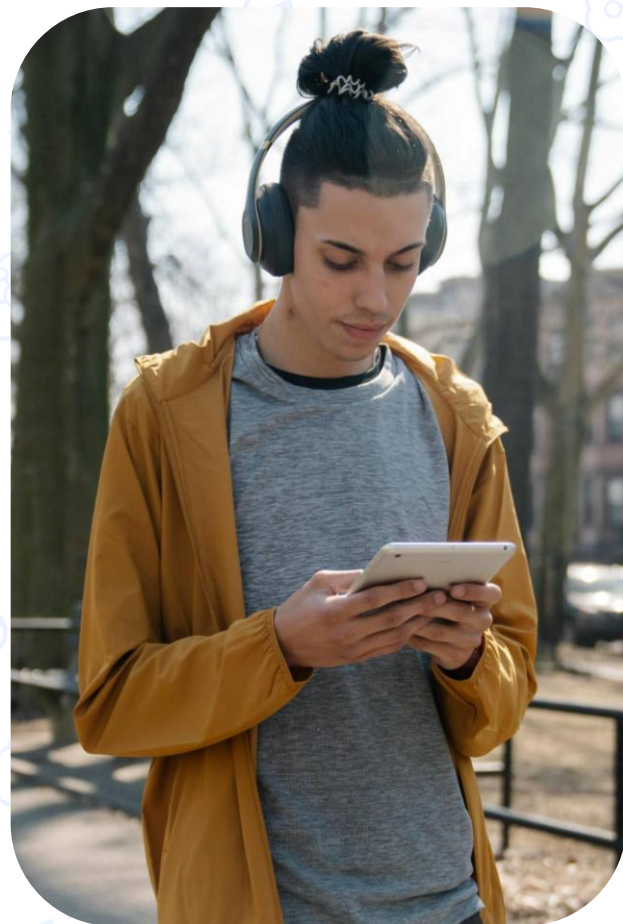
- There is a general expectation that **most larger communities will have some kind of rules in place** about the types of content that members can share, and the respect that users should show each other. This was less expected in small communities.
- **Some platforms were described by members in this research to have such rules or guidelines** shown to all members upon joining, as part of the onboarding process
- While many teenagers in our qualitative research valued having rules, some worried that they **could become too restrictive if implemented in unfair ways**

"The main rules are just be positive and be kind and I think that's kind of like all you'd like need in a community. I don't think you should have too many rules as it limits what people feel they can say" – Girl, 16



Teenage users told us that community members should self-regulate hurtful content but they do expect platforms to step-in when content becomes harmful*

In the research, teenager users drew a line between content and interactions that they considered **hurtful** and those which they considered **harmful**



HURTFUL

Content that makes teen feel bad, or can come across as rude or insensitive e.g. *differences in opinion, negative feedback on content, insensitive one-off comments*

HARMFUL

Content or actions from other members that teenagers feel could cause real harm to them or others in the long run e.g. *more persistent abuse or bullying, hate speech, sharing inappropriate images, or illegal activity*

Teenagers felt that members were most responsible for keeping communities constructive and managing **hurtful** content and actions.

However, they expected platforms to stop content and actions that they would deem **harmful**.

"If people do stuff bad, the members have the choice to report them or block them... But it's also up to the makers to put in the rules and put in disciplines for people who do bad things in the community" – *Girl, 16*

Teenagers in the qualitative research welcomed tools that helped them navigate hurtful content and flag harmful content to the relevant platforms



Teenage users in our qualitative research indicated that tools for engaging with **Content-led negatives** help them craft environments where they can better engage with the content they like (and avoid content they do not like)



Content-led tools

Helping teenagers overcome **information overwhelm** and **inappropriate/unwanted Ideas**

Tools and features mentioned by teenagers in this research for engaging with content-led negatives extended across the content they saw, and the design of communities' interfaces

Notification Management	Tools that teenagers use to customise, reduce, or silence notifications help them stay in control of their attention and avoid feeling overloaded by constant pings
Content Controls	Teenagers sometimes filter or refine what appears in their feed, helping reduce exposure to inappropriate or unwanted content while making the space feel safer and more age-appropriate
Feed Resets	Some teenagers spoke about how they would refresh or reset their feed recommendations, which gave them a way to escape overwhelming or unhelpful content patterns and regain control over what they see
Interface control	Tools teenagers use to adjust the look, feel, and pacing of the platform help reduce visual overload and create a more comfortable, manageable environment for engaging online

CONSIDERATION

No tools were discussed for helping overcome 'Paywalls', as they were felt by teenagers to be an inherent part of some platform designs

"I also enjoy the ability to limit or disable my notifications and pings. But some apps do not allow you to limit them" - *Girl, 13*

"I think something that would be beneficial especially for the TravelTok community would be to have filters such as budget/travel style/ and even destinations to cater videos better to the viewer" - *Girl, 17*



Although teenage users may be aware of these tools*, they may also hesitate to use them – particularly when it comes to those which impact on other members' experiences

Some teenagers who had encountered negative experiences described instances of **not engaging with safeguards** (platform tools). Their explanations as to why were classified into the two following categories by researchers:

22%

of online community users have reported something or someone

***Tools:** These refer to content-led tools: notification management, content controls, feed resets and interface control

I do not want to...

...Impact another member/ user's experience **unfairly**

...**Get involved** or escalate a situation

"I just ignore it. I don't want to get involved or stuck in that sort of thing" – *Boy, 16*

I feel uncertain due to...

...**A lack of knowledge** or understanding around safeguards or that they exist

...A belief that safeguarding measures will **not have a big impact / are pointless**

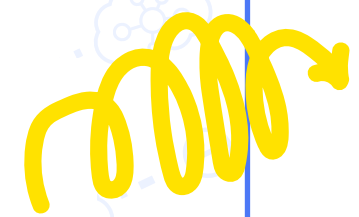
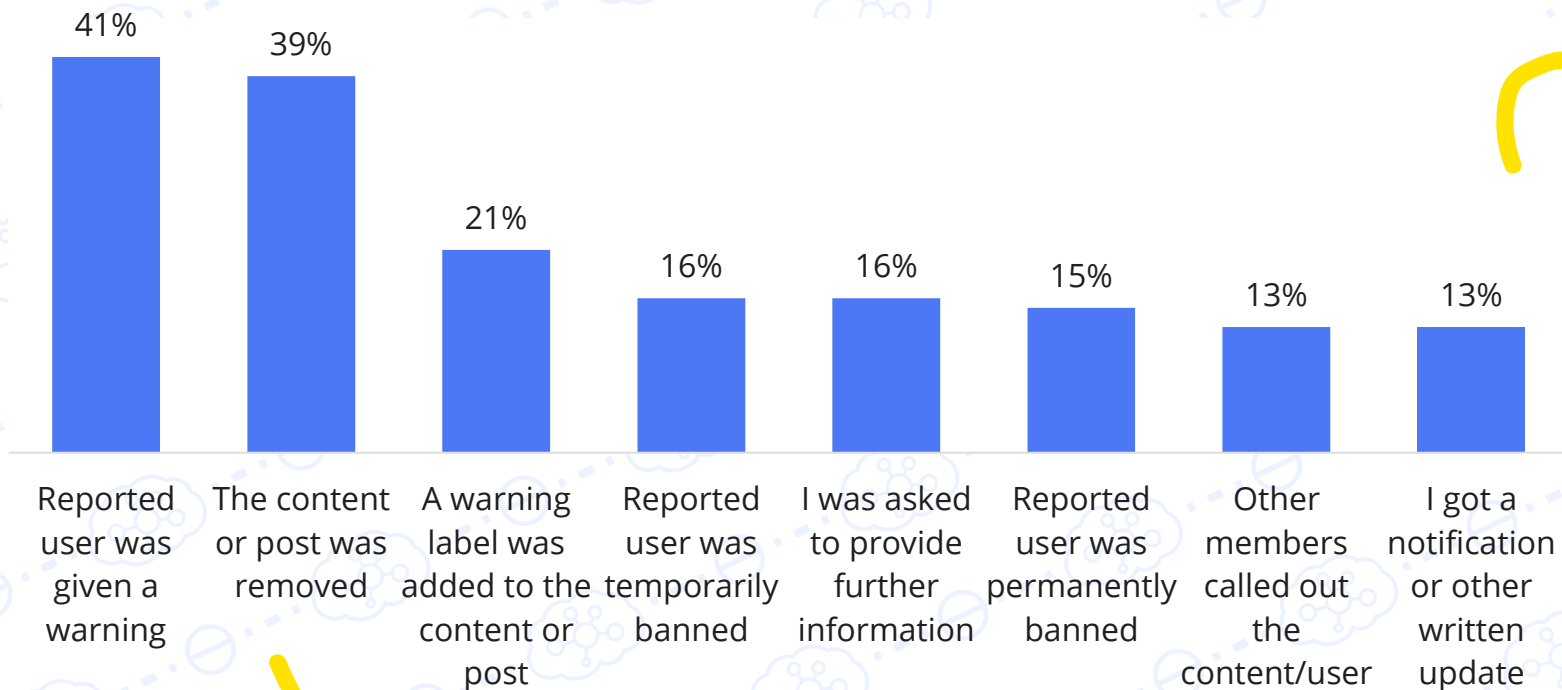
"I'll report something, but I won't get anything back. So I don't know if that actually got to them and that they actually did something about it" – *Girl, 16*



When users have reported something or someone, the most common actions were a warning given to the user or the content being removed; the latter is seen as more effective in reducing the reported behaviour

Resulting actions from children reporting something / someone on an online community

13-17-year-olds who have reported someone/something on an online communities



57%

of users who reported something say the action was extremely or very effective.

Girls are less likely to report that the action was effective, compared to boys (51% vs 64%).

Of the top two most-taken actions, the content or post being removed was seen as more effective (63% reporting extremely or very), than the reported user being given a warning (50%)





Experiences of teenagers with EHCPs and/ or Impacting Conditions

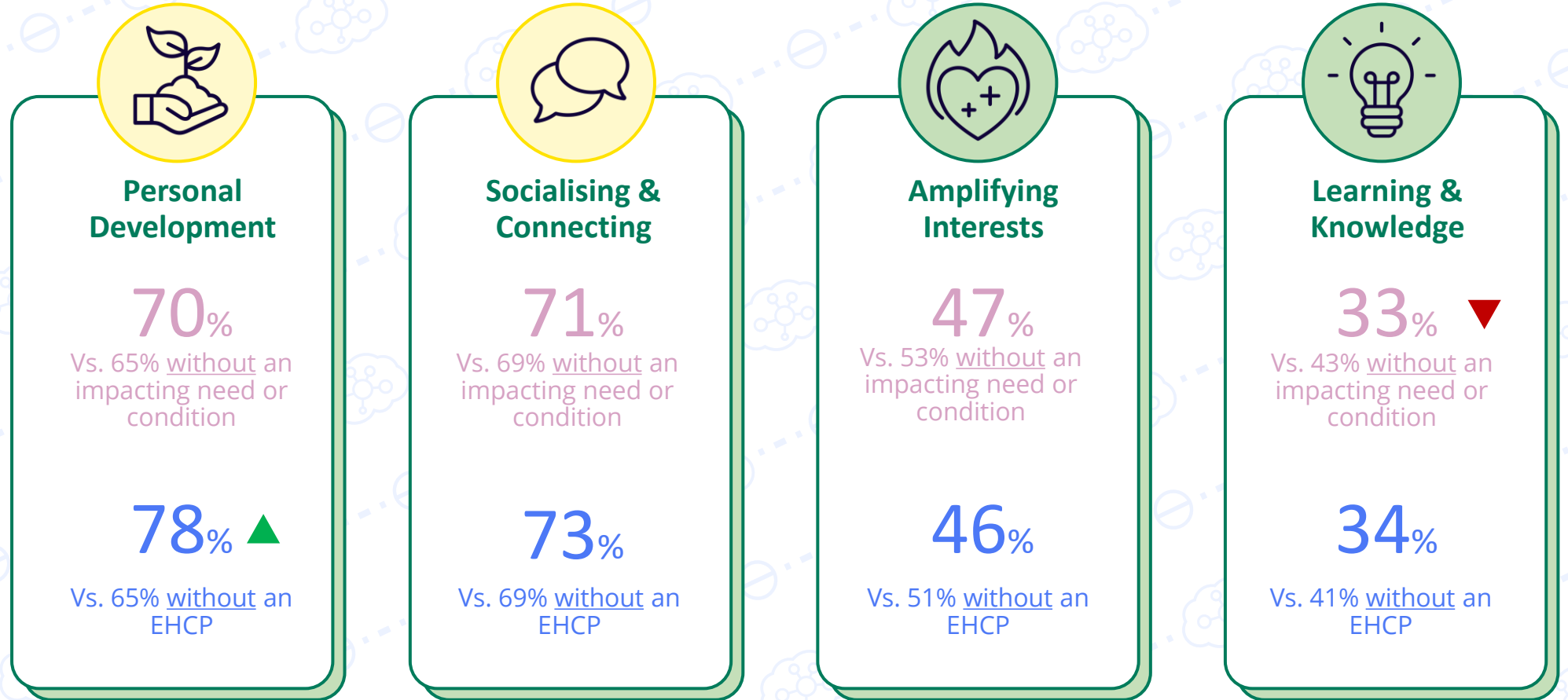


Note on sample: Children recruited had impacting conditions (e.g. autism, ADHD, sensory impairments, physical disabilities) and/or Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). For full list of conditions recruited, see sample breakdown in the appendix

For teenagers with an EHCP and/ or living with an impacting condition who use online communities, 'Personal Development' is seen as particularly beneficial

Ways users of online communities with conditions or needs that impact their lives say being part of their most-used online community has helped them (13–17-year-olds)

In both the qualitative and quantitative research, we spent time exploring how **teenagers with impacting conditions/EHCPs** felt about online communities, and the **benefits** they said they felt from being part of these spaces...



Significantly higher than those without an EHCP



Significantly lower than those without an impacting condition

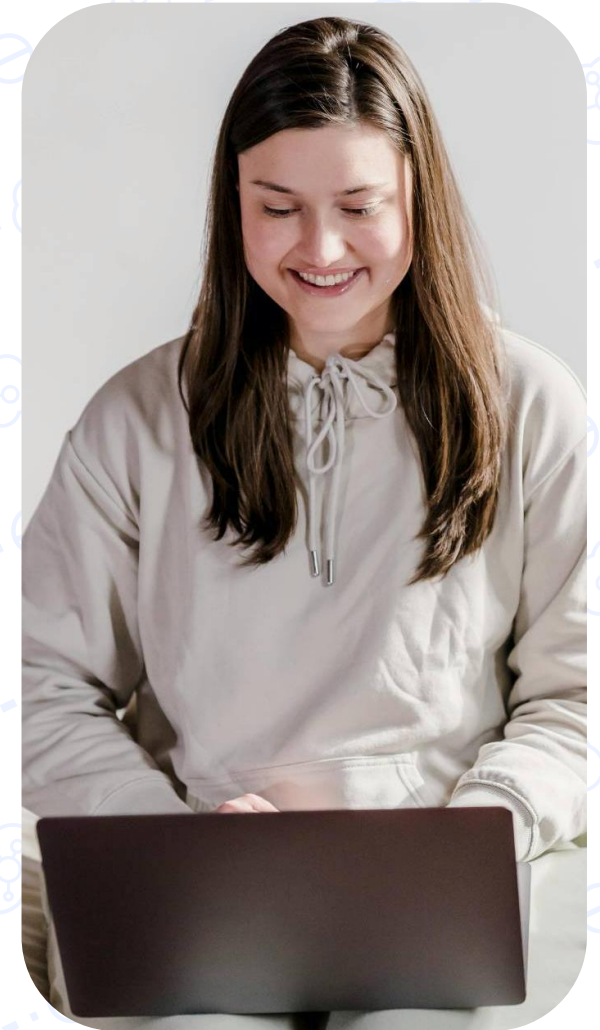
In general, teenage community users with an EHCP and/ or living with an impacting condition place particular value in a community's ability to create safe spaces for teenagers to share their thoughts and opinions

42%

of those with an EHCP identify '**Having a safe space to share my thoughts, views, and/or ideas**' as a benefit of online communities (vs 25% all users)

- Users we spoke with in the qualitative research who had an EHCP or impacting condition spoke about the **support and positivity** they valued in their favourite communities
- A **quarter of all users** said their most-used community created a **safe space** to share their perspectives... but this increases to **two-fifths of those with an EHCP**

"You can put forward your views without kind of facing any immediate criticism sort of thing. [Some platforms] can be toxic... Kind of a lot of hate towards each other and having a go for like, what their opinions are or not being as tolerant of each other's views. It just becomes not a nice place to be on at times" – *Boy, 15 [participant with an impacting condition]*



Being able to share these perspectives in different ways is considered particularly important by some teenage users with impacting conditions/EHCPs



- For some with an EHCP/ impacting condition, there are **perceived barriers to socialising face-to-face**
- Being part of an online community was **felt to remove many of the barriers** that come with socialising in person, and enabled them to share these opinions in the way that is most comfortable to them - whether through video, text, or just emojis

"I just kind of feel awkward talking into [my] phone... Since I've been using [Discord], I've been better at talking to people online now"
- Girl, 16 [participant with an impacting condition]

"I like Reddit because there's no video chat, voice call, involved in it. You just type whatever... Like you don't have to speak to someone in person or actually hear their voice" - Boy, 15 [participant with an impacting condition]

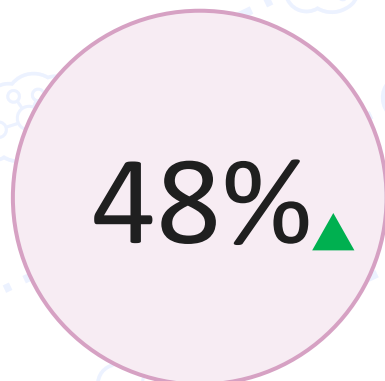
"Whenever people join a community, they [could] pick whatever like represents them or something... and they could add on if they want to communicate or not"
- Girl, 16 [participant with an impacting condition]



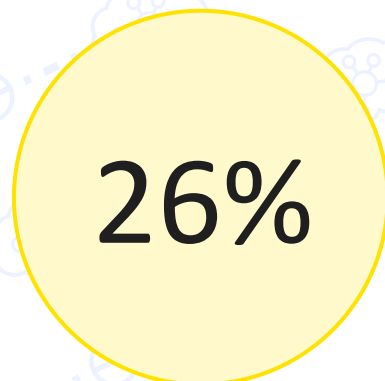
However, this group of online community users is also more likely than their counterparts to feel that communities can create situations where users feel anxiety, fear, or pressure...



Almost half of those with an impacting condition claim that there are downsides to being part of their most-used online community associated with **fear, anxiety, or pressure**



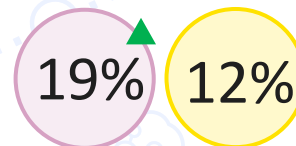
Any Identified Need or Condition



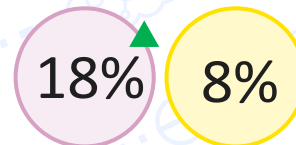
No Identified Need or Condition

Aspects related to **fear, anxiety, or pressure** are identified as a downside by over half of those with an **EHCP** (55%, vs 30% without)

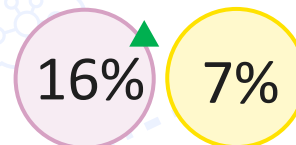
▲ Significantly higher than those without an impacting condition



Fear or being **judged by other members** (25% with an EHCP)



Fear of being **judged by those outside the community** (24% with an EHCP)



Anxiety around having to be active in the community (13% with an EHCP)

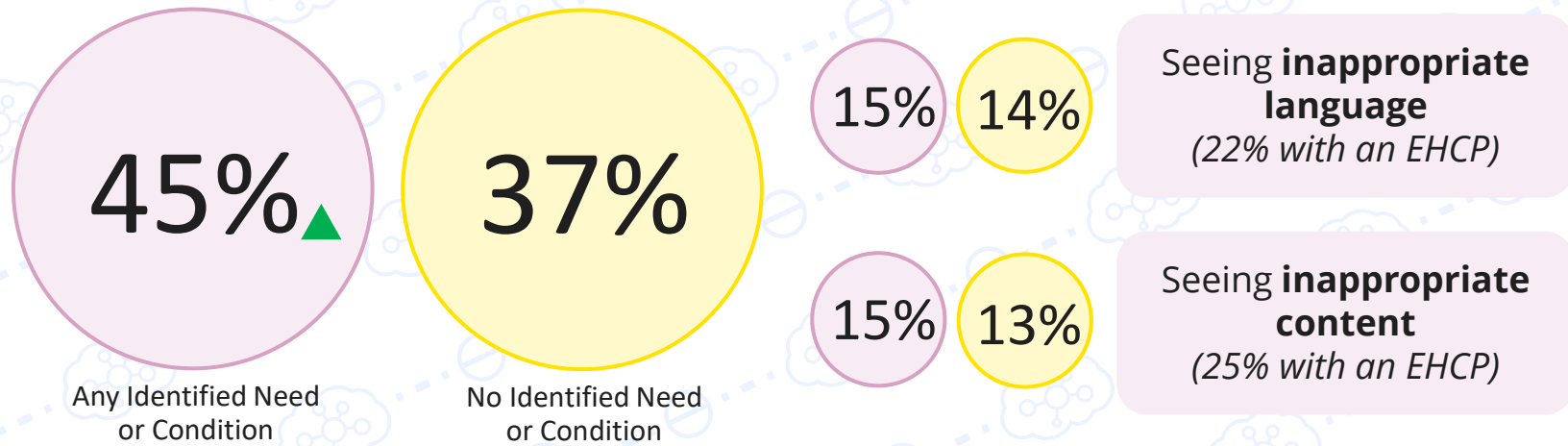
"People can share their opinions confidently and they won't feel like they'll be judged if they do" – Girl 15 [participant with an impacting condition]



...and they are also more likely to feel that their most-used online communities have exposed them to unwanted/inappropriate content

And almost half of participants feel that they have been exposed to **inappropriate or unwanted content** while on their most-used online community

▲ Significantly higher than those without an impacting condition

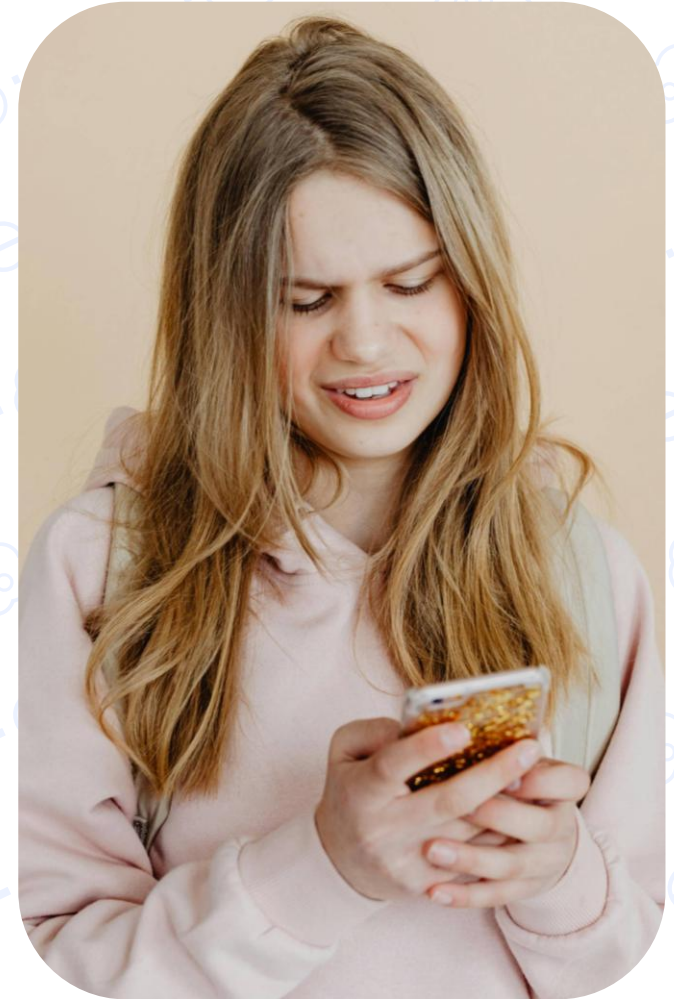


Any Identified Need or Condition

No Identified Need or Condition

Identified as a downside by over half of those with an **EHCP** (52%) compared to 38% of those without an EHCP

"It can get toxic... And they can also be used some of these sites to spread inappropriate things that just aren't great to be on there" – Boy, 15 [participant with an impacting condition]



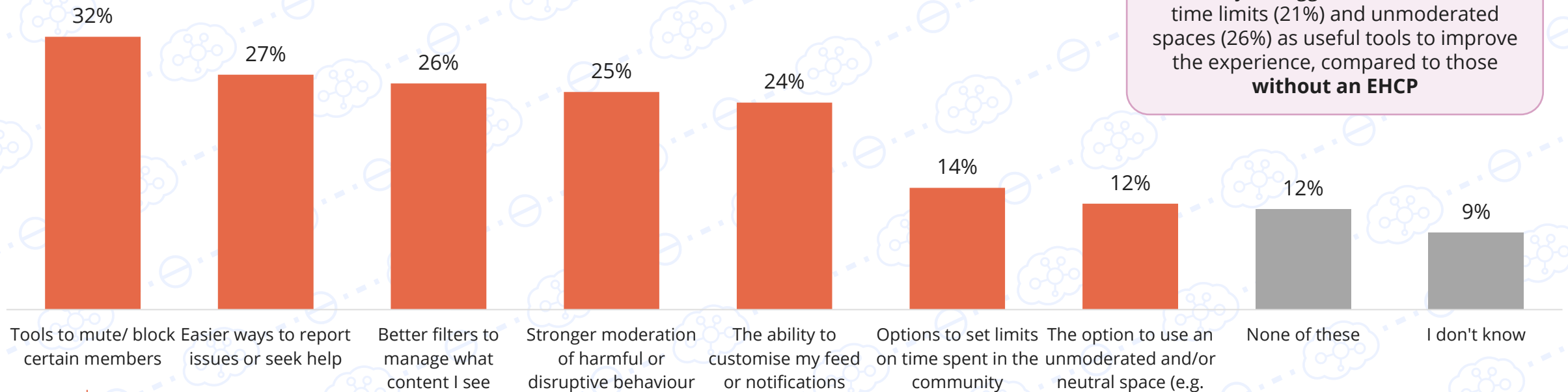


Improving online communities moving forwards

Note on this section: Alongside the quantitative findings, the qualitative insights in this section are drawn from activities conducted in Stage 4: the co-creation groups. In these sessions respondents were invited to share their perspectives on what makes an ideal online community, as well as respond to a series of scenarios designed to help them imagine how they would act if they were responsible for managing one

Quantitatively, the most popular tools recommended to improve online communities (by 13-17s who have ever visited an online community) were tools to mute/block certain members, and easier ways to report issues

Tools which would improve experiences using online communities
13-17-year-olds who have used online communities in the last 12 months or before



Children with **EHCPs** are considerably more likely to suggest better filters (39%), time limits (21%) and unmoderated spaces (26%) as useful tools to improve the experience, compared to those **without an EHCP**

Those who have **stopped using online communities** are more likely to say tools to mute/block certain members would be useful to improve their experience (45%) compared to **current users** (31%)

29% of **13-15-year-olds** suggest better filters would be a useful tool, compared to 22% of **16-17-year-olds**

16% of **boys** suggest time limits would be a useful tool, compared to 12% of **girls**

The option to use an unmoderated and/or neutral space (e.g. direct messaging, external platform without affiliate community moderators)



In our qualitative co-creation workshops, we asked teenage users of online communities what, if any, improvements, they would like to see in the online communities they are part of, alongside how they would respond to a variety of scenarios if they were in charge

Many teenagers supported the idea of platforms doing more to regularly prompt or encourage positive behaviours i.e. keeping a positive atmosphere, removing spam or bots, removing consistent negative or bad language

- Teens told us that while members are expected to set the tone of communities, that doesn't mean that platforms don't have a role to play!
- Many teenagers would like **a clearer presence of rules** designed to keep conversations constructive and regular reminders in feeds to be positive
- Some teenagers in our study were able to **provide examples of platforms** they felt were good at this already

"Snapchat has clear rules against bullying and harmful content. There's an easy way to report anything bad, and they have safety features like the "Here For You" resource for mental health support"
- Girl, 13

Making an Ideal Online Community

What are the key ingredients your ideal online community would need?

Main topic(s): Sports e.g., Basketball, Games

Who is it for: Someone that is interested in these topics. 12/13+. Understanding, Attentive to instructions. Avoid people less interested in these topics (could be a good thing)

Atmosphere/vibe of community: Welcomed (make it accessible for them), Included (people in charge could put out q's to get people to interact), sending notifications - will identify those who are more active vs not.

Main rules to follow: Respect people/ others and their boundaries, no bullying - these could be a firm statement shown - with a warning

Key features and tools: [Safety] Reporting tools [last resort], moderators (2 or 3) for warnings, muting and time-outs. Banning, muting, blocking.

Key things to avoid: People feeling targeted / bullied, Ensure user safety, avoid belittling (if not as good/skilled)

Above is an example of an ideal online community from Stage 4: Co-creations

"I wish they [online communities/ platforms] [had] more protective guidelines in place making the environment feel safe... [such as] identity verification to limit the numbers of fake accounts" - Girl, 17



Many teenage users in our qualitative research said they temporary restrictions and 'cooldowns' over immediate banning when it came to responding to other members who broke the positive atmosphere of a community (at least at first)

- Many teenagers believed that temporary restrictions was key to resolving many disputes – suggesting that disruptive members be blocked from engaging (with each other or the platform more widely) for a set period of time (e.g. a 'cooldown')
- There was a desire among some teenagers for a **'strike system'** as well – a system that recognises that members may make mistakes and gives some leeway. But these teenagers still felt like there should be a limit.
- **Temporary restrictions felt more democratic to most teenagers** than draconian rules and strict limits

"I'd definitely put, like, a time-out part where they can still use the community, but maybe they can't interact with people as easily"
- Girl, 15

"I'd, like, kind of give them a time-out because with certain apps, you can mute their notifications, like, their messages for a bit" – Boy, 16



Beano Brain Consulting:

Based on the age of the users we spoke to, it's not surprising to see the language teenagers use to talk about punishing other members: school reprimanding systems can mirror this language (cooling down/ time outs/ strike systems), and this then may translate into how they talk about dealing with bad behaviour in real life environments

If temporary restrictions fail, many teenagers want platforms to step in and provide a firmer hand when it comes to moderation

- Some teenagers say they are **wary about giving too much control to moderators**, but there was a strong sense in the qualitative research that **platforms could be doing more**
- This was **particularly true in moments when moderators might be unavailable**, and less positive members may have more leeway

25%

of teenagers suggest that stronger moderation would improve their experience in online communities

“Some of the things that makes the experience worse is some of the people which are toxic” – *Girl, 13*

Source: Q23 - Which tools or options, if any, do you think would improve your experience of using online communities? Base: 13-17-year olds who have ever visited online communities: 1,193.
Image sourced: Unsplash, Ella Don



Teenage users in our qualitative research suggested several ways in which they thought AI could be helpful in online communities; however, they indicated that it is not a fix for everything and that it should not be relied upon too heavily

AI Role

How Teens Perceived it Could Help

Summarise lots of community content or information

To save time and / or get up to speed, especially if they've been absent for a while

Verify the truthfulness of content

To help avoid fake news or information

Discover more international content and potentially be more exposed to global perspectives

To quickly understand members from different parts of the world

Detect and prevent hurtful messages

To eliminate negativity, or at least to give members pause before posting negative content

Act as a useful first-pass for moderation

To be a first port of call if moderators were not present



Most teenage users of online communities want platforms to respect their social agency

Teenagers want to have more control over who they speak to, how they engage, and when...

How they are
SEEN

Many teenagers spoke about the desire to control who can see their status (when they're online, when they're active) and setting limits on who knows their activity

How they
CONNECT

Choosing who they want to engage with and how they do it. Setting limits on who can call/connect/message, and changing settings to limit when these interactions can happen (and in which formats)

"I'd implement a feature where the user has to confirm a message to say 'yes, I permit this other user to talk to me' as a means of better safety which could prevent harassment or such, similarly to what TikTok does with their messaging system"

- Boy, 16



Many teenagers in our qualitative research wanted to know more information about other members – but some could be more pragmatic about safety

- Many teenagers felt that there is **less need for anonymity in smaller communities**, where members are more likely to know each other and individuals are more likely to self-moderate their actions, due to social pressures
- Although some teenagers felt there was **still room to know a bit more about other members**, others recognised that some degree of anonymity is safer – especially in larger communities – especially where participants may not be known or trusted (and there's a potential fear of doxxing*)
- Teens' suggested ways of finding out more about other members in a low-pressure, privacy-focused way included **having member profiles focused on their interests, passions and backgrounds** versus any wider personal data
- This would allow other members to **create trust and connection** with those members they feel similar to

"I would say some people are a bit optimistic on sharing a lot about themselves online... Some people don't really want to give out that information, especially if they don't know a lot about the platform and what they're using on it" – *Girl, 15*



While it is useful to hear a mix of perspectives, some teenage users wanted to have communities where they knew that they were talking to people their own age

In the qualitative research, we witnessed a repeated, clear desire for 'Age Verification' tools amongst teenagers

12%

of teenagers value having an unmoderated space to engage with community members

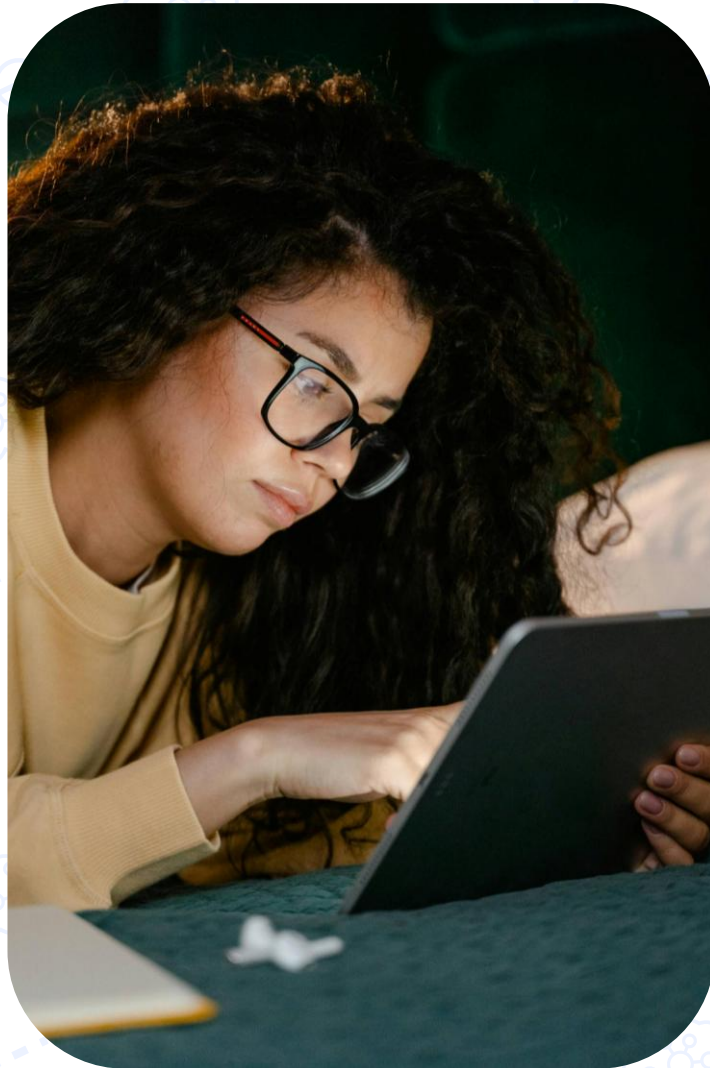
- This was based on them **having a way of making sure that they know more about who they are talking to** and, more importantly, that they aren't talking to adults in disguise
- However, it **doesn't need to be ALL spaces** within online communities
- Many teenagers expressed that there are benefits to engaging with older members, **but with guardrails in place**

"I would introduce stricter age restrictions, like verifying your age on Instagram" - *Girl, 17*

"I would update the age rules to make it so instead of having to be older than an age to use community apps it would be you would have to be older than certain ages to view certain communities on Reddit" - *Boy, 13**

* Since July 2025, Reddit limits access to subreddits classified as "NSFW" (Not Safe For Work) or "mature" by requiring UK users to confirm that they are over 18 years old via facial age estimation or government ID checks.

There are some understandable tensions within teenage users' perceptions of what they want from online communities



While these tensions were **rarely recognised by participants** in the qualitative stages, researchers identified a range of spaces where these teenagers' articulated desires about what online communities should deliver which **often (lightly) contradicted themselves or created some tensions...**

Control vs Discovery

Although teenagers want to be more in control of their content discovery journeys in communities, they also want to leave space for serendipity too

Challenge vs Comfort

Although teenagers want to have their opinions challenged, they don't want to feel pushed too far outside their personal comfort zones and spoke about rejecting those they disagree with

Connection vs Safety

Teenage users want to build real connections with other members - yet recognise that giving away too much personal information can be dangerous



Appendix





Glossary

What are online communities?

This research used the following definition of online communities:

By “online communities” we mean groups of people who have a shared interest or purpose, sharing information on a digital platform. The members might know each other "in real life" (and may meet up, for example to share a sport or hobby), or they might not. Online communities may include forums, online discussion boards and/or community pages.

Common features in online communities include:

- **User profiles** – personal information, avatars and activity history
- **Posting & commenting** – to allow users to create discussions and reply to others
- **Messaging** – private or group chats
- **Reactions & voting** – likes, upvotes and emojis for engagement
- **Moderation tools** – administrators manage content and enforce community rules
- **Search & tagging** – features to help users find topics and organise content
- **Notifications** – alerts for replies, mentions and updates
- **Content sharing** – allowing users to share images, links, files and videos

Features such as personalised feeds and auto-scroll (or infinite scrolling) are commonly used within online communities, particularly those hosted on social media-style platforms.

Glossary of Terms

Term/ acronym	Definition
Doxxing	The act of sharing someone's private personal information (like their real name or address) online without their permission, often to embarrass, scare, or harm them within a digital community
For You Page (FYP)	A "For You" page is a personalised content feed curated by a platform's algorithm, which uses a child's past interactions (e.g. viewing, liking, or searching) to recommend posts and content it predicts they will find relevant or engaging, even if they do not already follow those accounts from which the content comes from
Loot / Skin	Virtual items in online games or communities (such as outfits, characters or upgrades) that children can earn or buy, often used to customise how they appear or to show status to others
Rage Baiter	People who post deliberately provocative or hateful content online to make others angry so they will comment, react, or share more – drawing more attention towards them
Stickers	Visual images, icons or animations that children can send in chats (e.g., on Snapchat or messaging apps) to express emotions, reactions or inside jokes without using words. They can be personalised by using your own/ other people's photos available online, which can then be transferred into a sticker

This glossary brings together terms mentioned by the children that we spoke to, supported by additional factual detail to explain how each term is used

these definitions were created by Beano Brain to aid clarity in the understanding of the research findings.

A decorative border with a scalloped, cloud-like shape, composed of multiple concentric lines in blue and yellow, framing the central text.

Sample Breakdown

Quantitative Sample and Weighting

	Weighting Percentage	Weighted Base	Unweighted Base (once weight applied)	Effective Sample Size
Boys (parent reported)	50%	768	756	721
Girls (parent reported)	50%	768	757	721
Boys 13-15	30%	461	473	433
Girls 13-15	30%	461	459	433
Boys 16-17	20%	307	283	288
Girls 16-17	20%	307	298	288
England	84%	1289	1193	1210
Scotland	8%	123	158	115
Wales	5%	77	99	72
Northern Ireland	3%	46	63	43
Urban	89%	1366	1341	1283
Rural	11%	169	172	159
AB	28%	430	530	404
C1	26%	399	315	375
C2	22%	338	305	317
D	14%	215	206	346
E	10%	154	257	202

Overall weighting efficiency – 93.90%

Effective Sample size – 1441

Degrees of confidence

Sample	Effective sample Size (n)	Estimate (%)	95% Confidence Interval ($\pm pp$)	Estimate (%)	95% Confidence Interval ($\pm pp$)	Estimate (%)	95% Confidence Interval ($\pm pp$)
Children aged 13 to 17	1441	50%	[± 2.6]	25/75%	[± 2.2]	10/90%	[± 1.6]
Girls aged 13-17	721	50%	[$\pm 3.7\%$]	25/75%	[$\pm 3.2\%$]	10/90%	[$\pm 2.2\%$]
Boys aged 13-17	721	50%	[$\pm 3.7\%$]	25/75%	[$\pm 3.2\%$]	10/90%	[$\pm 2.2\%$]
Children aged 13-15	865	50%	[$\pm 3.3\%$]	25/75%	[$\pm 2.9\%$]	10/90%	[$\pm 2.0\%$]
Children aged 15-17	577	50%	[$\pm 4.1\%$]	25/75%	[$\pm 3.5\%$]	10/90%	[$\pm 2.5\%$]
Children aged 13-17 with any identified need/ condition	363	50%	[$\pm 5.1\%$]	25/75%	[$\pm 4.5\%$]	10/90%	[$\pm 3.1\%$]
Children aged 13-17 with EHCPs	106	50%	[$\pm 9.5\%$]	25/75%	[$\pm 8.2\%$]	10/90%	[$\pm 5.7\%$]

Sampling and Feasibility

- Surveys use sampling since full population censuses are often impractical due to cost and logistics. Confidence intervals help us assess the reliability of survey data as an estimate of the population from which the sample is drawn and that the sample represents.
- The interval shows the range within which the true population value is likely to fall. The 95% confidence level is the level of certainty of this interval.
- Larger sample sizes produce narrower confidence intervals, increasing precision and reducing uncertainty in survey results.

How to interpret confidence intervals shown in the table.

For example: in the case of a finding from the survey that relates to 75% of children aged 8-17 providing a particular response, we can be 95% confident that the figure in the overall population (children in the UK aged 13-17) lies between 72.8% and 77.2%.

Qualitative Sample Detail

Stage 2: 7 x day Digital Community n=30 teenagers 13-17yo

Age and number of children	Sample specification
6 x 13yo	<p>All to be engaged with online communities or groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 6 Moderators - 15 Creators / frequent posters - 9 Passive <p>Mix of UK locations and SEG</p> <p>50/50 Gender split</p> <p>Mix of single and multi-child households</p> <p>Mix of family backgrounds, household set-up, income and parenting styles</p> <p>Mix of ethnicity</p> <p>All to be engaged online users</p> <p>Part of a community/online group</p> <p>Mix frequency of how often post/comment or share something in an online community</p> <p>SEND and Neurodiversity captured (as defined by parent/participant), but no quota set</p>
6 x 14yo	
6 x 15yo	
6 x 16yo	
6 x 17yo	

Stage 3: Pre-tasks 60-minute depths with n=15 x 13-17yo with an EHCP or Impacting Condition

Age and number of children	Sample specification
2 x 13yo	<p>All to be engaged with online communities or groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -1 Moderator -7 Creators / frequent posters -7 Passive <p>7 male/8 female Gender split</p> <p>Mix of UK locations and SEG</p> <p>Mix of single and multi-child households</p> <p>Mix of family backgrounds, household set-up, income and parenting styles</p> <p>Mix of ethnicity</p> <p>All to be engaged online users</p> <p>Part of a community/online group</p> <p>Mix frequency of how often post/comment or share something in an online community</p> <p>8 x teens diagnosed with an impacting condition (e.g. physical/sensory, cognitive, mental, emotional)</p> <p>8 x They are neurodiverse (Autistic/ADHD) and have a diagnosis or are waiting for one</p> <p>5 x teens with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)</p>
3 x 14yo	
5 x 15yo	
3 x 16yo	
2 x 17yo	

Platforms: Reddit, You Tube, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Soundcloud, Discord, Whatsapp, Twitch, Xbox Party chat, Steam, Deviant Art, Tumblr, Kooth

Types of communities engaged with: Gaming, Entertainment, Creative, Friendship/Relationship advice forums, Sports, Fashion & Beauty, Fandoms, Social/Political, Support, Fitness & Health, Lifestyle, Food and Travel

Qualitative Sample Detail (continued)

Stage 4: 6 x 75-minute co-creation Focus Groups n=24 teenagers [sample as Stage 2]

Age and number of children	Sample Specification
4 x 13yo	<p>All to be engaged with online communities or groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 5 Moderators - 12 Creators / frequent posters - 7 Passive
4 x 14yo	<p>Mix of UK locations and SEG</p> <p>50/50 Gender split</p>
5 x 15yo	<p>Mix of single and multi-child households</p> <p>Mix of family backgrounds, household set-up, income and parenting styles</p> <p>Mix of ethnicity</p>
7 x 16yo	<p>All to be engaged online users</p> <p>Part of a community/online group</p>
4 x 17yo	<p>Mix frequency of how often post/comment or share something in an online community</p> <p>SEND and Neurodiversity captured (as defined by parent/participant), but no quota set</p>