Understanding children's experiences of using online communities

Technical Report

24th June 2026

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Background and Objectives

Background

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.

Objectives

To understand:

- 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

Summary of approach

This study employed a mixed-method, **quantitative and qualitative research design**, using structured online surveys and digital pre-tasks, as well as in-depth interviews and co-creation groups from a nationally representative sample of children aged 13-17. The research was conducted by Beano Brain, a specialist children's and young people research agency.

Further details of the sampling frame, research methodology, weighting procedures and reporting are outlined in the following pages.

Questionnaire Design / Overview

Beano Brain conducted a survey with 1,513 children aged 13-17 (recruited via their parents) as-per the standard CARS[1] approach. The questionnaire was developed in collaboration with Ofcom and Beano Brain to be suitable for the target audience of 13–17-year-olds and to address the core research objectives of understanding their usage of online communities. The questionnaire primarily consisted of closed-ended questions, allowing respondents to select answers from predefined options. The questionnaire can be found here.

[1] CARS (Children's Agile Research Solution) is Ofcom's research platform for ad-hoc, agile studies with children. Developed in partnership with kids and family specialists Beano Brain, it includes robust legal and safeguarding frameworks for all studies with Beano Brain facilitating all research.

Within the total sample, 1,123 had used an online community in the 12 months prior to fieldwork and 1,078 could identify their most-used online-community. Many questions were asked specifically about respondents r most-used community, to help with the clarity of questioning and understanding.

After the survey concluded, Beano Brain ran a qualitative 3 stage study. The first phase involved speaking to n=30 children (13-17 years old) – who engage with online communities in a variety of different ways (passive users, frequent users and moderators) to dig into their behaviours. This included a 7-day Digital Pre-Task, followed by six 75-minute focus groups.

The third part of the qualitative study involved Beano Brain engaging with n=15 (13-17 year old) teenagers with an EHCP and/or an impacting condition. All of these participants completed a short, written pre-task ahead of 60-minute in-depth interviews ("depths"). These depths explored how engagement with online communities might differ for children with an EHCP or impacting condition to support Ofcom's commitment to research the online experiences of different groups.

Age groups for children

In order to align with Ofcom's ages and developmental stages for online safety work[2], the age groups used for the sample profile in the data set, and for breaks in the data tables are as follows: 13-15 and 16-17.

[2] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/online-research/keeping-children-safe-online/child-development-stages-review/child-development-and-online-behaviour.pdf?v=319064

Data Collection and Sampling

Summary

Quantitative data was collected from research participants via an online survey form. Fieldwork ran from (**7th-27th November 2025**). Walr scripted the online form based on the questionnaire designed by Beano Brain and Ofcom. Potential adult respondents (who had signed up to receive surveys from Walr) were emailed the link to the form by Walr and invited to take part. Screeners and demographics identified those who met the sample requirements, and the parents were instructed to hand over the device for their child aged 13-17 t answer the relevant questions.

Only respondents who were invited to **participate** could do so; the survey could not be undertaken in any other way. The median survey length was 11.5 minutes.

The quantitative sample profile for this study was designed to ensure that it was robust and representative of the UK population. For comparability, the profile used for quotas and weighting mirrors that of our children's media literacy trackers, specifically Children's Online Knowledge and Understanding[3].

Qualitative respondents were identified via a network of recruiters and those who met the screening criteria ofr being members of Online Communities were invited to take part. The qualitative research took place between December 2025 – February 2026.

Data Protection and Consent

Screening questions at the start of the survey identified if a respondent was a parent or guardian of a child aged 13 to 17 years. Parents were given the option to consent or decline their child's participation, which included information outlining the subject matter, the purpose of the research, and how the anonymous results would be used. If consent from parents was granted, consent to participate was also sought from children, including a clear opt-in consent box before beginning the questionnaire, and information relating to data protection considerations.

Online Data and Quality Measures

Beano Brain took the following measures to ensure a high-quality sample, including:

- Ongoing monitoring during fieldwork to track response rates and sample composition.
- Post-fieldwork validation to ensure data integrity and adherence to sampling targets.
- Logics – catching issues such as missing data, incorrect routing, skipped sections, and any technical errors that could affect the structure or completeness of responses.
- Speeders – Flagged/Removed respondents who completed the survey significantly faster than the rest.

[3]'Children's Online Knowledge and Understanding' data tables: COKU survey 2024 - Data tables

- Straight-liners – Detected cases where respondents selected the same answer across multiple items in grid or scale questions, indicating potential lack of thoughtful engagement.

Sample profile

Quotas were applied to ensure that the survey sample is representative of the UK population across several key demographic dimensions based on the 2021 census and the NRS survey.[4]. These included:

- Age and gender (interlocking)
- UK Region/Nation
- Social grade (based on the parent/carer)
- Urban/rural location

Quotas were imposed on a pro-rata basis to reflect the overall population, except those imposed to ensure that a sample of sufficient size was achieved to allow for analysis for individual UK nations. Further interlocking quotas: Nation and Social Grade, Nation and Urban/Rural were also monitored to ensure a representative spread. Any differences in the profile of interviews compared to the overall population were then corrected using weighting.

Base sizes under 100 should be treated with caution and we have removed data with base sizes under 50 in the data tables.

Weighting

The survey sample was weighted to the UK profile by age and gender (interlinked), nation, and urban/ rural split. Weighting is a standard process to correct minor or planned imbalances in the profile of interviews achieved in fieldwork to that of the population the sample represents. The following table shows both the unweighted sample and the final weighted sample profiles.

Effective sample sizes are also included in the table below, which factor in the impact of weighting on the robustness of the dataset. [5]

Please note that with specific consent from parents of all children, the survey collected data on protected characteristics, such as ethnicity, from parents or children aged 13 or more with parental consent. These are included in the table below for completeness but *were not subject to quotas or weighting.*

Overall criteria	**Specific demographic**	**Unweighted %**	**Weighted %**	**Effective sample size**
Gender	Boys (parent reported)	50%	50%	721

[4] COKU technical report: Technical Report 2024

[5] The overall weighting efficiency was 93.9%. The effective sample size is calculated using this formula: ESS = n * r), where 'n' is the actual sample size and 'r' is the weighting efficiency

	Girls (parent reported)	50%	50%	721
Gender by age	Boys 13-15	31%	30%	433
	Girls 13-15	30%	30%	433
	Boys 16-17	19%	20%	288
	Girls 16-17	20%	20%	288
Nation	England	79%	84%	1210
	Scotland	10%	8%	115
	Wales	7%	5%	72
	Northern Ireland	4%	3%	43
Location	Urban	89%	89%	1283
	Rural	11%	11%	159
Social Grade	AB	35%	28%	404
	C1	21%	26%	375
	C2	20%	22%	317
	D	13%	14%	202
	E	10%	10%	145
Ethnicity	White	78%	78%	1130
	Non-white	19%	18%	264
	Ref/ dk	4%	3%	49
Impacting Condition	Impacting condition - yes	27%	27%	391
	Impacting condition - no	68%	69%	992
	Impacting condition - ref	5%	4%	59

Significance Testing

The data tables include significance testing. This indicates where there is a 95% confidence level that a directional (higher or lower) difference in the survey sample within a demographic or other characteristic (e.g., between children aged 13-15 and 15-17) is a directional difference present in the overall population.

Significance testing examines the variation between the sample results and the 'true' values (the findings that would have been obtained if everyone had been interviewed) which can be predicted

from the sample sizes on which the results are based[6], and on the number of times that a particular answer is given.

The table below illustrates the required ranges for different sample sizes and percentage results to be significant at the "95% confidence interval". The confidence with which we can make this prediction in the data tables is 95%, that is, the chances are 95 in 100 that the 'true' values will fall within a specified range.

Approximate sampling tolerances applicable to percentages at or near these levels

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

[6] Please note that, as the sample is weighted, significance testing is based on the effective sample size which factors the impact of weighting on the data set (see 'weighting' section for more information on how this is calculated).