Discovery

CHILDWISE

Ofcom

Children's Online Safety Tracker (COST)
Wave 1 – Technical Report

To accompany the COST Wave 1 data tables

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Preface

The Children's Online Safety Tracker (COST) survey is run by Discovery Research Ltd. / Childwise Research Ltd. on behalf of Ofcom. The objectives of this quantitative tracking study were to gain a deeper understanding of UK children aged 8-17's recalled experiences of content that is harmful to them and their use of safety measures overtime.

The research will be used to inform Ofcom's continued policy work under the Online Safety Act, and for use by external stakeholders as a published source of information.

This report gives technical information about the data collection at Wave 1 of the COST. Detailed information is provided for the data collected via the online panel – this data is the basis for the published data tables for Wave 1.

Summary of approach to Wave 1 survey

- **Respondents**
  - UK children aged 8 to 17.

- **Content of survey**
  - *Core and wellbeing (asked to ALL)* – demographics, overall happiness/satisfaction in life, happiness in online situations, safety online, apps used in the last four weeks, and time online.
  - *Module 1: Safety measures (asked to approximately half of the sample)* – On apps used in the last four weeks: setting up accounts / profiles, use of terms and conditions, participation in group chats, posting content, disabling comments, blocking and muting, reporting and complaining.
  - *Module 2 – Online harms encountered (asked to approximately half of the sample)* – Online harms seen in the last four weeks or six months, how seeing these made them feel, where they saw these harms, what they were doing when they saw them, what action they took, and what action the service took.

- **Method**
  - An online panel of adults was used to reach parents and recruit their children if aged 8 to 17.

- **Interviews**
  - 3,142 interviews were carried out via the online panel.

- **Fieldwork dates**
  - Online panel fieldwork was conducted between:
    - Core plus Module 1 – 14th March to 8th April 2025.
    - Core plus Module 2 – 14th March to 9th April 2025.

Wave 1 survey Technical Report

Discovery Research Ltd. interviewed a sample of 3,142 UK children aged 8 to 17. Interviews were carried out across the UK and all interviews were carried out between 14th March to 9th April 2025.

Details of the research methodology, consent process, sample design, data integrity checks and weighting procedures for this study are outlined in the following pages.

A note on statistical reliability is also included.

Trend reporting

Wave 1 presents the first set of data from this COST. From Wave 2 onwards, it will be possible to make comparisons between data collected at different waves, to draw conclusions about changes over time. Two waves of research will be carried out each school year from Wave 2 onwards (Autumn / Spring).

Methodology

This study was designed from the outset to follow a hybrid methodology - combining children's participation via an online panel provider (recruited through parents) and in-school settings (with parental consent).

However, at Wave 1 the in-school element was instead conducted as a large-scale pilot to test the functionality of the online panel within a school environment and address any potential issues ahead of the full rollout. Therefore, the Wave 1 fieldwork was conducted exclusively via the online panel.

Please note, data from the in-school pilot is not included in the Wave 1 published tables.

Interviewing children and obtaining consent

- Prior to data collection, informed opt-in consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians via the online survey, and from children themselves within the survey.
- Additional consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians for the provision of sensitive data – ethnicity and health conditions for all ages, and sexual orientation, specifically for those aged 13+. Children were then asked for their own informed consent for these questions (if appropriate) during the survey.

Sample design

The survey was conducted online and was scripted and hosted by panel provider STRAT7. Members of STRAT7's proprietary online panel (SurveyBods) and panel partner (CINT) were invited via email to take part. All panellists are aged 18+ and were approached to identify those with children aged between 8-17, who were then invited to take part in the interview. The sample was stratified by UK nation / region, gender, age and socio-economic group.

Age groups of children

Age groups used in the data tables are split into four bands – 8-9s, 10-12s, 13-15s, and 16-17s; plus two broader age bands – 8-12 and 13+ to represent pre-teen and teenage groups. This is to align with Ofcom's ages and developmental stages for online safety work.

Data integrity checks

A number of important data quality/integrity checks were conducted by the STRAT7 Quality team, to ensure the data collected was of bona fide panel respondents, and of the highest possible quality.

Standard checks

- A comprehensive net which on average looks at both respondents' behaviour and their survey responses, to ensure their responses are relative and sensible within the context of the survey environment whilst ensuring, beyond a reasonable doubt, they are legitimately entering and completing the study.
- Speeders and interviews with poor verbatims are automatically disqualified.
- Verbatim checks are carried out by default on all surveys.
- Standard deviation tests on flatlining are carried out with thresholds at 0 and < 0.5. Number of grids where the standard deviation equals 0 and <0.5 is recorded and shared with the Discovery Research team to review.

Detailed quality checks

Quality check	Supporting information
RECAPTCHA	Google API RECAPTCHA to help screen out bots.
Digital Fingerprinting	A 3rd party piece of software that happens via a 5 second API call, unbeknown to respondents that checks 100+ unique parameters at a device level; this will create an average fraud and duplicate score per respondent.
Fraudulent	Identifying and flagging bots and AI on more than 10 different parameters
Speeder	Standard check - Half the median - flag respondents 1 min below, and check data
Poor verbatim	• All open-ended questions to be checked • Disable copy/paste function on open-ended questions • Any gibberish, N/A, none, don't know, DK, etc. as well as irrelevant answers to the questions • Flag as `Poor verbatim DK` if a respondent answers only with none, don't know, dk, etc
Multicodes	Question C21_1 / C21_2 – flag if 6 or more items selected, and check data
Plausibility	• Cross reference question responses that could lead to contradictory or implausible scenarios within the data set. This is contextual, and taken into account against the other checks. • D2 vs D4 - check if possible to have children at that age • M1Q23 - if selects both *'They took it down' and 'They left it online'* (codes 1 and 2) or *'They took it down'* and *'They told me there was nothing wrong with it'* (codes 1 and 7)
Honey pot	A question overlaid onto the screen, invisible to the human eye. Should any participants provide an answer here it means we can satisfactorily assume they're a bot, as only automated software would be able to detect the question/answer field. Will be flagged automatically in the survey and removed. • qName – if there is any data in this variable it's a bot • Qstars - If it is the wrong answer, then it's a bot • PressAndHold - Used to confirm a respondent is human by requiring a longer press to interact
Duplicate	Identifies and flags duplicate responses which are bots and AI by applying 80+ different parameters for the check

How to interpret the data

For full details on how to interpret the data, please refer to the tab labelled 'info on specific data tables' in the data tables file.

We identified the following anomaly in the data:

- If at question A1 (apps/websites used in last 4 weeks) a respondent has selected a pre-coded option (e.g. *'Facebook'*), and also *selected 'Another app, website or online games not shown here'*, and when asked to type in the name of the app, website or game, incorrectly types *'Facebook'* at question A2, we have discounted this answer at A2, to remove any duplication in the data. This anomaly affected 10 respondents.

- For one further respondent, we have recoded their *'Another app, website or online games not shown here'* response (they typed in: *'Roadblox'*) back into the *'Online Games'* pre-code (as effectively, this is the pre-coded answer for their response, which has been duplicated).

We have also redacted the open-ended responses *for 'Another app, website or online games not shown here'*, throughout Module 1 and Module 2 (except for M2Q5).

The reason is to do with the way the data is stored at the data collection process:

- All of the data shown in the tables shows data at a respondent level (i.e. per child).
- Where individual tables are shown by app/website, the netted data for the open-end responses are also shown at a respondent level (i.e. per child).
- But, for tables where there is an app/site summary with these codes shown across the table crossbreak/banner, the netted data for the open-end responses then show the answers at a response level (i.e. per answer per child). This means the data is not comparable with other data in the tables.

Weighting

The data are weighted to the correct profile of age and gender, SEG profile, and region / nation based on the available ONS Mid-Year Estimates 2023 data and the NRS survey. The following table shows the initial unweighted and weighted sample profile for the final sample, with a weighting efficiency of 84.6% (which is within our threshold for statistical reliability of 70%+).

Sub-group	Module 1		Module 2	
	Interviews unweighted	Interviews weighted	Interviews unweighted	Interviews weighted
Boys aged 8-9	14%	10%	0%	0%
Girls aged 8-9	12%	10%	0%	0%
Boys aged 10-12	19%	16%	11%	15%
Girls aged 10-12	16%	15%	10%	14%
Boys aged 13-15	11%	16%	22%	22%
Girls aged 13-15	10%	15%	21%	21%
Boys aged 16-17	10%	10%	18%	14%
Girls aged 16-17	9%	9%	18%	13%
Identify in another way	0%	-	0%	-
SEG - AB	47%	28%	40%	28%
SEG - C1	20%	26%	20%	26%
SEG - C2	15%	22%	18%	22%
SEG - DE	18%	24%	21%	24%
SEG - Other	0.4%	-	1%	-
East of England	8%	9%	9%	9%
East Midlands	6%	7%	7%	7%
Greater London	20%	13%	21%	13%
North East	4%	4%	4%	4%
North West	11%	11%	11%	11%
Northern Ireland	3%	3%	2%	3%
Scotland	8%	8%	6%	8%
South East	12%	14%	13%	14%
South West	8%	9%	7%	9%
Wales	4%	5%	5%	5%
West Midlands	8%	9%	9%	9%
Yorkshire and the Humber	7%	8%	8%	8%

Ensuring a robust sample across online harmful content experienced

Module 2 of the survey questionnaire included a 'least-fill quota' based on the online harmful content experienced at question M2Q2. This was to ensure that we maximised the potential sample size for each harmful content experienced, for subsequent questions M2Q6 to M2Q14.

There are two important issues with this least-fill quota allocation that need to be addressed in our analysis:

1 – Error in least-fill allocation survey programming

Our data analysis identified a minor survey scripting error in this least-fill quota, where two codes for question M2Q2 Block 5c (*'Someone telling others to do hateful things to disabled people'* and *'Someone telling others to do hateful things to neurodiverse people'*) were not included in the least-fill grouping with the other seven codes for the harm group: *'Someone telling others to do hateful things to any of the groups of people below, because they are ....'* .

This meant that a disproportionate sample of respondents were asked questions M2Q6 to M2Q14 around harmful content relating to *'Someone telling others to do hateful things to any of the groups of people below'*. This is because more respondents were allocated *'Someone telling others to do hateful things to disabled people' or 'Someone telling others to do hateful things to neurodiverse people'* than would have occurred had these two codes been correctly included in the least-fill quota design.

2 – Unrepresentative distribution of respondents asked about each online harm in detail

There is also a wider issue with least-fill quota allocation that should be addressed, to ensure the data is as representative as possible of the population. Although question M2Q2 provides a representative measurement of the prevalence of each online harm experienced, the least-fill allocation (applied to ensure as robust a sample size across the different harms) creates a distorted distribution of online harms asked about in the later questions: M2Q6 to M2Q14.

This distortion is further compounded by an uneven number of specific harms within each harm group. For example, the code *'pornography'* (from M2Q2 Block 6) gets equal weighting in the least-fill allocation as *'people being hateful to others'* (from M2Q2 Block 5b), which is based on nine individual harms. Whilst results at questions M2Q6 to M2Q14 are accurate for analysis in isolation, any analysis undertaken on these questions for online harms combined will therefore be skewed, based on the least-fill allocation.

Our solution to this imbalance is an additional layer of data weighting, which is only applied to data for questions M2Q6 to M2Q14. These weights reflect the true distribution of online harms recorded at M2Q2, and thus correct the skew created by

the least-fill allocation. (NB: at each subsequent wave of research these additional weights will be updated, to reflect the proportion of online harms recorded at M2Q2 at that point in time).

The table in Annex A shows the initial unweighted and weighted sample distribution for online harms questions M2Q6 to M2Q14.

As a consequence of this additional stage of data weighting applied to the data at questions M2Q6 to M2Q14, the weighting efficiency for these data is 79.2%, which is also within our threshold for statistical reliability.

Guide to statistical reliability

The variation between the sample results and the 'true' values (the findings that would have been obtained if everyone had been interviewed) can be predicted from the sample sizes on which the results are based, and on the number of times that a particular answer is given. The confidence with which we can make this prediction is calculated at the standard 95% confidence level - this means that the chances are 95 in 100 that the 'true' values will fall within a specified range (the confidence interval). However, as the sample is weighted, we need to use the effective sample size (ESS) rather than actual sample size to judge the accuracy of results.

The following table compares ESS and actual samples for selected analysis groups within the main sample:

Analysis group	Actual sample	ESS
Total sample	3142	2590
Module 1	1746	1407
Module 2	1396	1186
Gender - Male	1636	1331
Gender - Female	1498	1252
School stage - Primary	902	775
School stage - Secondary	2240	1854
Pre teen age 8-12	1339	1109
Teen age 13-17	1803	1485
Age 8-9s	447	382
Age 10-12s	892	751
Age 13-15s	968	808
Age 16-17s	835	723
Male 8-9s	241	205
Female 8-9s	206	178
Male 10-12s	476	394
Female 10-12s	416	357
Male 13-15s	494	411
Female 13-15s	471	395

Male 16-17s	425	363
Female 16-17s	405	356
Nation – England	2704	2212
Nation – Scotland	219	192
Nation – Wales	138	118
Nation – Northern Ireland	81	72
Social grade – ABC1	2023	1646
Social grade – C2DE	1105	1004

The table below illustrates the confidence limits for different sample sizes and percentage results at the 95% confidence level, for selected analysis groups within the main sample:

Effective sample size	**10% / 90% +/-**	**20% / 80% +/1**	**30% / 70% +/-**	**40% / 60% +/-**	**50% +/-**
Total (2590)	1.2%	1.5%	1.8%	1.9%	1.9%
Module 1 (1407)	1.6%	2.1%	2.4%	2.6%	2.6%
Module 2 (1186)	1.7%	2.3%	2.6%	2.8%	2.9%
Males (1331)	1.6%	2.2%	2.5%	2.6%	2.7%
Females (1252)	1.7%	2.2%	2.5%	2.7%	2.8%
Age 8-9s (382)	3.0%	4.0%	4.6%	4.9%	5.0%
Age 10-12s (751)	2.2%	2.9%	3.3%	3.5%	3.6%
Age 13-15s (808)	2.1%	2.8%	3.2%	3.4%	3.5%
Age 16-17s (723)	2.2%	2.9%	3.3%	3.6%	3.6%

For example, if 30% or 70% of a sample of 2590 gives a particular answer, the chances are 95 in 100 that the 'true' value will fall within the range of +/-1.8 percentage points from the sample results.

When results are compared between separate groups within a sample, different results may be obtained. The difference may be 'real', or it may occur by chance (because not everyone has been interviewed). To test if the difference is a real one – i.e. if it is 'statistically significant' – we again have to know the size of the samples, the percentages giving a certain answer and the degree of confidence chosen. If we assume a 95% confidence level, the difference between two sample results must be greater than the values given in the table below to be significant.

Some example differences required for significant at or near these percentages are shown in the table below:

Effective sample size	**10% / 90% +/-**	**20% / 80% +/-**	**30% / 70% +/-**	**40% / 60% +/-**	**50% +/-**
1331 vs. 1252 (Boys vs. girls)	2.3%	3.1%	3.5%	3.8%	3.9%
775 vs. 1854	2.5%	3.4%	3.8%	4.1%	4.2%

(Primary vs. secondary)					
751 vs. 808 (10-12s vs. 13-15s)	3.0%	4.0%	4.6%	4.9%	5.0%
411 vs. 395 (Boys 13-15 vs. girls 13-15)	4.1%	5.5%	6.3%	6.8%	6.9%

Annex A

The table below shows the initial unweighted and weighted sample distribution for online harms questions M2Q6 to M2Q14.

		N. responses (at specific harm level)	N responses (by harm block net)	Block relative influence	Within block influence	Total required distribution (what we want)	Least fill allocation (what we achieved)		Additional weights
Block 1	Bullying online	389	658	15.5%	43.3%	6.7%	6.0%		1.12
	Online trolling	510			56.7%	8.8%	6.4%		1.37
Block 2a	Someone being seriously violent	285	406	9.6%	56.4%	5.4%	5.6%		0.96
	A person's serious injuries	220			43.6%	4.2%	5.2%		0.80
Block 2b	Real animals being seriously hurt	214	349	8.2%	53.6%	4.4%	4.9%		0.90
	Animals who aren't real being seriously hurt	185			46.4%	3.8%	5.0%		0.76
Block 3	Dangerous stunts or challenges	454	454	10.7%	100.0%	10.7%	6.3%		1.70
Block 4	People encouraging others to eat, drink or inhale harmful things	240	421	9.9%	49.5%	4.9%	5.4%		0.91
	People encouraging others to eat, drink or inhale things in large amounts	245			50.5%	5.0%	5.4%		0.93
Block 5b	Someone being hateful or using hateful language towards Girls / Women	220	690	16.2%	14.2%	2.3%	0.8%		2.88
	Someone being hateful or using hateful language towards Boys / Men	150			9.7%	1.6%	0.4%		3.93
	Someone being hateful or using hateful language towards Non-binary people	73			4.7%	0.8%	0.1%		7.64
	Someone being hateful or using hateful language towards Queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual or pansexual people	216			13.9%	2.3%	0.6%		3.77
	Someone being hateful or using hateful language towards Transgender people	192			12.4%	2.0%	1.1%		1.83
	Someone being hateful or using hateful language towards People who are part of a particular religion	185			11.9%	1.9%	0.8%		2.42
	Someone being hateful or using hateful language towards People of a certain ethnicity	227			14.6%	2.4%	1.1%		2.16
	Someone being hateful or using hateful language towards Disabled people	179			11.5%	1.9%	0.6%		3.12
	Someone being hateful or using hateful language towards Neurodiverse people	109			7.0%	1.1%	1.0%		1.14
Block 5c	Someone telling others to do hateful things to Girls / Women	132	506	11.9%	14.1%	1.7%	0.9%		1.86
	Someone telling others to do hateful things to Boys / Men	118			12.6%	1.5%	0.8%		1.87
	Someone telling others to do hateful things to Non-binary people	42			4.5%	0.5%	0.1%		5.34
	Someone telling others to do hateful things to Queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual or pansexual people	119			12.7%	1.5%	1.1%		1.37
	Someone telling others to do hateful things to Transgender people	124			13.2%	1.6%	1.0%		1.58
	Someone telling others to do hateful things to People who are part of a particular religion	106			11.3%	1.3%	0.8%		1.68
	Someone telling others to do hateful things to People of a certain ethnicity	137			14.6%	1.7%	1.6%		1.09
	Someone telling others to do hateful things to Disabled people	92			9.8%	1.2%	5.2%		0.22
	Someone telling others to do hateful things to Neurodiverse people	67			7.2%	0.9%	4.8%		0.18
Block 6	Pornography	184	184	4.3%	100.0%	4.3%	5.6%		0.77
Block 7	Showing someone with an eating disorder	179	369	8.7%	42.4%	3.7%	5.5%		0.67
	Extreme eating or extreme exercise behaviours	243			57.6%	5.0%	5.8%		0.86
Block 8	Suicide (taking one's own life): people showing this, giving instructions for this, or encouraging others to do this	89	212	5.0%	35.9%	1.8%	5.1%		0.35
	Self-harm	159			64.1%	3.2%	5.1%		0.63
	TOTAL	6084	4249						