DIGITAL ROMANCE

A research project exploring young people's use of technology in their romantic relationships and love lives

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Digital Romance is a research project led by Brook and the CEOP command of the NCA that set out to explore how young people are using digital technologies in their romantic relationships. We were interested in how young people use tech as they flirt, meet new partners, start relationships, communicate in relationships, negotiate pressure, break up and survive post break up. We also wanted to know what support young people might like from others to enable them to have enjoyable and safe relationships.

The project is based on a collaboration between Brook and CEOP-NCA. Brook is the UK's leading sexual health and wellbeing charity for under 25s. Brook supports 235,000 young people each year through clinical services and education and wellbeing work. CEOP is a command of the National Crime Agency. Its education programme 'Thinkuknow' offers a wide range of information and support for children, young people, parents, and adults in the children's workforce, with the aim of reducing sexual abuse and harm, and more broadly building young people's skills in navigating relationships, digital technology and online platforms.

Led by researchers Dr Ester McGeeney (Brook) and Dr Elly Hanson (NCA-CEOP), the research took place between January and May 2017 and used a mixed methods approach involving an online survey, in person focus groups and one-to-one interviews. The project was motivated by the desire to evolve online safety education by providing an in-depth insight into young people's views and experiences. The project was influenced by US research conducted by the PEW Research Centre (Lenhart, Smith & Anderson, 2015) that explored the digital romantic practices of young Americans.

Arguably, up until now, much of the focus of online safety work has been narrow – exploring the risks of online communication such as the unsafe sharing of personal details, the loss of control of material (especially images), and the facilitation of abusive and bullying behaviours. At times this approach has been at the expense of acknowledging the positive role of digital technology in young people's lives and the complicated ways in which young people experience and negotiate risk.

Our project aims to understand young people's everyday use of technology within their relationships, and the ways in which the pleasures, harms and risks of interpersonal relationships may be influenced by technology. In doing so it aims to understand vulnerabilities in tandem with agency and participation (YouthNet, 2016; Nielsen, Paasonen & Spisak, 2015). Our hope is that a deeper understanding of both the positive affordances of technology as well as areas of risk and harm will enable us all to deliver relevant, nuanced education that speaks to young people's dayto day experiences.

This report provides a high-level overview of the research methodology and the key findings and themes. It will be useful to educators and policy makers working to support and enable young people to have positive and safe relationships online and offline.

Our hope is that the research will be used to inform the development of new educational approaches and to update existing materials. It should be acknowledged that some of the findings are open to diverse interpretations. However for us this is not a 'negative', rather we see reflective debate as being an important part of the evolution of education.

In Appendix A we signpost readers to existing resources that provide more information about common practices and technologies, and those that are 'toolkits' for useful conversations and approaches with young people. We invite others to draw on the findings from Digital Romance to develop interventions and strategies in this space.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW: SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

The project used a mixed methods approach to explore young people's everyday use of technology in their relationships with peers, partners and potential partners. As noted, the aim of the research was to gain in-depth understanding of young people's experiences, needs and desires with regards to their use of technology, so as to inform the development of education and support strategies. To address this aim we developed the following research questions:

- How do young people flirt and start, maintain and end romantic relationships using digital technologies?

- What support do young people receive and what would they like to support them in enjoying relationships, online and offline, without harm?

To answer our research questions we used the following three research methods:

- An online survey
- Focus groups
- Individual interviews

The following sections of the report detail the findings generated using these methods. Part one addresses our first research question relating to young people experiences, practices and preferences and part two our second research question about young people's views and experiences of education and support. Part three draws together our observations, thoughts and conclusions.

For further details of the project's methodology and its limitations please refer to appendices.

RESEARCH SAMPLE

UK wide online survey:
2,135 young people aged 14-24
Interviews: 10 young people aged 14-25
Focus groups: 13 focus groups involving 69
young people aged 11-20

DEMOGRAPHICS

Survey sample demographics:
- 72% of the sample were aged 14-17
- 64% were female, 31% male, 3% non-binary
- 3% identified as transgender and 3% were unsure of their gender identity
- 18% were bisexual; 6% gay / lesbian;[1]
  71% heterosexual[2]
- 85% were White British;[3] 5% Asian / Asian British; 3% Black / Black British;
  4% mixed / multiple; 3% other

Qualitative sample
- 49% female, 46% male, 4% non-binary gender young people
- 18 (23%) identified as bisexual, gay, lesbian or other sexual orientation;
  52 (67%) as heterosexual
- 82% aged 16 and under
- 88% White British
- 10 young people identified themselves as having a disability
- Rural / suburban locations in south-west and south-east England

NOTES ON THE FINDINGS AND THEIR PRESENTATION

- All quantitative analyses were conducted using Survey Monkey analytical tools
- Qualitative data was analysed using open thematic coding
- When the term 'significant(ly)' is used in this report, we are always referring to statistical significance at a minimum of a 95% confidence level (p < .05)
- Quotes and stories in this report are anonymised using the fake names that young people chose for themselves. Some details (not relevant to the findings) have at times been changed so that participants, schools or others are not identifiable
- Where quotes are not attributed to specific people, this is because the specific person was not identifiable from the audio recording of the focus group

1. Higher numbers of young people in this survey identified as LGB than the national average. An ONS survey in 2015 found that 3.3% of 16-24 year olds identified as LGB (and 1.7% of population as a whole)
2. Percentages for sexual orientation and gender demographics are of those who were happy to say
3. This is close to the national average. An ONS survey in 2011 found that 86% of the population of England and Wales was White British in England and Wales (all ages)

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Part One: Digital technology and young people's sexual and romantic relationship practices

The research found that digital technologies are an integral part of how young people 'do' their romantic relationships from flirting, through to ending relationships. However, rarely did the use of technology replace face-to-face relationship work. Rather, digital and in-person contact and communication were interwoven in ways that were variously exciting, life-changing, fun, intimidating, risky and mundane.

This section of the report details how young people told us they were using tech in their relationships alongside other forms of contact and communication by following a rough trajectory through the possible relationship 'lifecourse': flirting; getting together; relationship communication and intimacy; breaking up and post-breakup experiences. It explores what young people are doing, how they are feeling and what concerns them.

Flirting

Most young people flirt online and offline

Most young people reported that they have flirted at least once or twice – both online and offline.

flirted at least once or twice online

flirted at least once or twice face-to-face

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

% of young people who have flirted
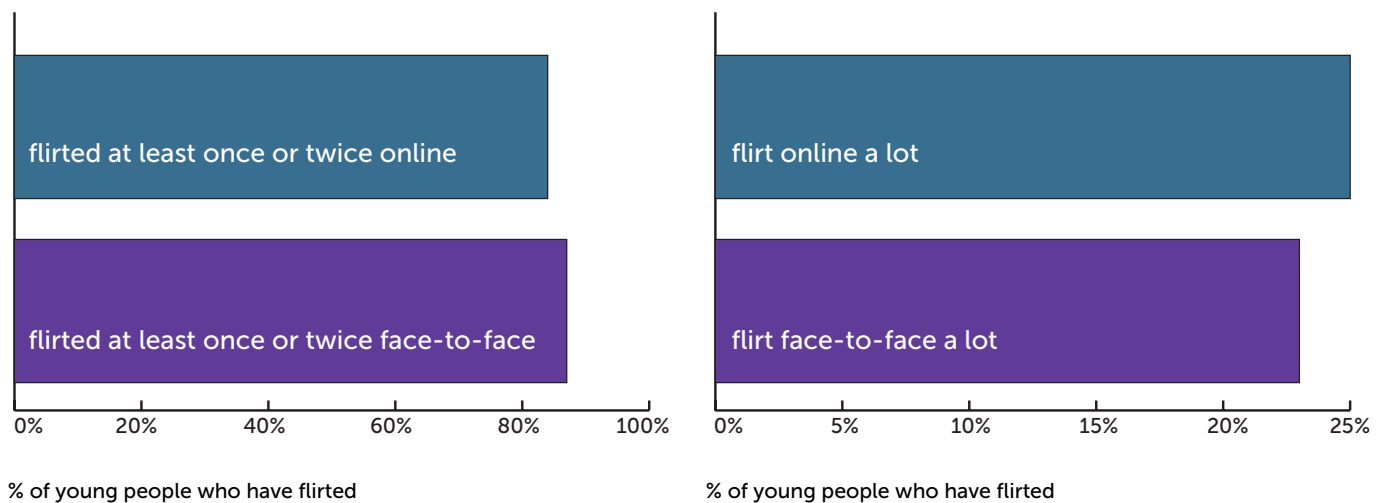
84% of young people have flirted at least once or twice online and 87% face-to-face

flirt online a lot

flirt face-to-face a lot

0%   5%   10%   15%   20%   25%

% of young people who have flirted

25% report that they flirt online a lot and 23% report that they flirt face-to-face a lot

In contrast to stereotypes of the British being somewhat reserved and perhaps even prudish, comparison of our findings with the US PEW research suggests that UK young people flirt more than those in the US (although a direct comparison was not possible due to slightly different age samples) - See Table I.

Flirting practice	Our UK sample (aged 14-17)	PEW US sample (aged13-17)
Flirting face-to-face	84%	55%
Befriended someone they are interested in on social media	75%	50%
Liked/commented on the social media of someone they are interested in	73%	47%
Shared a funny video with someone they like	72%	46%
Sent a sexual or nude photo to someone they like	26%	10%

Forty-eight per cent of 14-17 year olds had at some point chatted online about the kinds of sexual things they would like to do with someone they were interested in, and 44% of this age group had done this in person (54% and 52% respectively in the whole sample)[4]

Digital flirting takes many forms

Young people described using a range of digital platforms to flirt and meet new partners, ranging from dating apps such as Grindr or Tinder, to meet up apps such as Lovoo and Yellow, to gaming platforms and all social media communication platforms, in particular Snapchat.

Responses from the survey suggested that young people use tech to flirt in a range of different ways, from sharing a funny video to commenting on someone's social media – many of the practices they describe would not, at least to an observer, seem sexual or containing innuendo.

In focus groups and interviews young people talked mainly about using messaging platforms or video-calling to chat, flirt and get to know potential partners, away from the gaze of the peer group.

" In real life it's, sort of, most of the time... it's around other people (John, 14, interview participant)

" Online... you can, like, have a joke and, like, only you and them will hear it, and there's no chance for anyone else to hear it, unless obviously you get hacked or something (Lily, 15, Focus group participant)

Participants, like Lily, recognised however that there were limits to their privacy when flirting online. Whilst it may feel like you weren't 'around other people', there was always the chance that, in one way or another, records of conversations would be viewed by others.

Digital flirting can be 'a good place to start' a relationship

Flirting via message was seen as giving people greater control over communication, affording the time and opportunity to craft the perfect message.

> You can figure out what you're gonna say and make it sound better and, sort of, adjust it to what you want (John, 14 interview participant)

Messaging was also described as perfect for creating the kind of ambiguous, coded content needed for playful flirting.

> Emojis control the context of a message, a wink can change an entire message and give it a flirty feel (survey group participant)

There was a sense for some young people, like Alfie, that once you had developed a bond, close face-to-face communication became more important. For others like Mark their relationships remained online and long distance – with no urgency to meet up with their partner face-to-face.

> We think back on it and we look back on, like, how we actually fell in love, and it was just stupid, we talked about the most randomest things. Like, "Oh, yeah, what do you do?" "Oh, like, I play soccer, I do this." And she's, like, "Oh, yeah, I bet you look really, like, cute in your soccer gear." I'm, like, "Okay, well, fair enough" (Mark, 16, interview participant)

> Cos, like, I think it's easier to talk over Snapchat, like, when the first two, three, two, three weeks over Snapchat and then as time goes on it's easy to speak them in person I think (Alfie, 14, interview participant)

Whilst adult youth workers who took part in some of the focus groups commented that digital flirting seemed strange, or 'less real', young people's descriptions indicated that digital flirting could be an easy and fun way to get know someone, or even a means of starting intimate and long lasting relationships.

> I feel like it's easier to get a relationship for the younger generation than the older ones... if you can speak to somebody all day [by message] and, like, have deep conversations, funny conversations, you sort of, get attached to someone easier (Sam, 14, interview participant)

Digital flirting can be less emotionally risky

Losing control of digital content wasn't the only risk that young people identified in relation to digital flirting; others included your words being taken the 'wrong way' over text; being unable to read whether someone is actually trying to 'get closer with you' or having a 'joke' with friends; the risk of someone 'lying' to you about who they are or what they feel about you.

However despite the challenges of establishing honesty and clarity online, young people frequently described digital flirting as less emotionally risky than flirting face-to-face. For example, they told us that if they were rejected by someone it was easier to manage their embarrassment.

Online there were get out clauses:

> Just block them
> (Focus group participants)

> If he pied me of [face-to-face][5], I'd just be there like, "All right." I'd probably go a bit red and walk away… if he pies you off over text… you don't get as embarrassed because you're not with anyone and, like, nobody's around (Lily, 15)

> You can think through what you're saying and you don't have to see their reaction right there, so it's, like, detaching yourself from the situation a bit which is, like, good and bad (Godzilla, 15, Focus group participant)

Overall young people prefer being flirted with face-to-face

Despite the affordances of digital flirting, 62% of survey participants felt that face-to-face would be the best way for someone to flirt with them, compared to 17% who chose online (and significantly more girls than boys expressed a preference for in person flirting). When asked how they felt flirting face-to-face, survey participants more often said (than when asked about online flirting) that they felt awkward, but they also more often said they felt sexy and turned on (see figure 1).

However, many transgender young people felt differently – only 33% felt face-to-face was the best way for someone to flirt with them (significantly lower than cis-gender young people: 63%). Chiming with these findings, transgender survey participants reported feeling more confident and sexy flirting online than off, and more nervous and uncomfortable offline than on.

Top five emotions when flirting in descending order of frequency	Online	In person
1	Excited	Awkward
2	Awkward	Excited
3	Amused	Nervous
4	Nervous	Happy
5	Happy	Turned on / sexy

Figure 1: Top five emotions young people report experiencing when flirting online and face-to-face (in descending order of frequency).

Flirting and relationships are shaped by sexist online and offline cultures

Digital Romance found evidence of sexist cultures in young people's peer groups at school and online. In particular we found evidence of gendered patterns of pressure and coercion, everyday sexism, and the existence of a gendered double standard in which young women were judged and shamed for their appearance and behaviour both online and offline.

> It's more the girls that get all the bad, like, hate and all for it. [For] how they dress or just look in general, like, things with, like, makeup and all, or weight. Like, a boy and a girl can be the same size and the girl will get more hate for being too skinny or too fat, not even just overweight, just total like, opposites (Kelly, 15, Focus group participant)

> [Boys] will call a girl a slag as a joke…[if they do that] I won't talk to them. That's - no. Even as friends, like, to call… That's so disrespectful. I can't stress that enough. And they don't understand that (Rosie, 15, interview participant)

Some young women in particular criticised these gender norms identifying them as 'sexist' (see Latoya's story) or 'disrespectful' and 'rude' (Rosie, 15). Much of the time they were spoken about as a normal part of heterosexual relationships and peer group communication.

These powerful gender norms shaped young people's experiences of flirting and having relationships with partners, friends and peers. Young women in particular talked about the different 'rules and boundaries' surrounding online and offline communication. Digital communication was seen as less restricted, making it easier but also more risky to flirt and connect with others.

> In, like, person, like, you have to, like, restrict yourself 'cos there's, like, rules and boundaries in place, whereas, like, online there's less. Like, you can say whatever you want or to (Lily, 16)

Some young women, such as Kelly, suggested that digital communication offered some protection from coercion as you could flirt without feeling like you 'have to' do anything in the moment.

> [Online] they can't hurt you, for example, like, be a bit forceful about anything. Obviously if you're, like, saying some stuff, that might put them in, like, a sexual mood, then they're not there, so you don't have to, like… You could say more when they're not around (Kelly, 15)

However she also noted how digital conversations could be used as a contract of sorts, obligating girls to engage in sexual activity at a later date:

> Don't say anything on text that you won't do, because they'll expect it. So, like, even, like… I'd say especially boys more than girls (Kelly, 15)

Because of sexist rules, a girl's comment over text can be translated into a promise, rather than read as it may well have been meant: an expression of desire, flirtatious banter or fantasy. Other young people suggested that online communication could be more pressured as you quickly ran out of things to say or ways to keep the communication going.

Dot: "I think if you was face-to-face and you would only really do that [get naked / have sex] if you trusted them a lot"...

Maple: "I think it's because you don't want them to stop talking to you, like, texting you or..."

Dot: "So you kind of want..."

Maple: "So you'd sort of do what they want... But, like, in person you can stop them from walking away or something... you could do something else, like, change –"

Dot: "Yeah. You don't always have to do that, like, you could do something better. And then you can both agree with it. But if it's online, there's not really anything else to do... Er, once you ran out of things to talk about, then that's when they... They're, like, "Do you wanna play a game, or do you wanna do this?" And it's like... That's when it gets a bit, like..."

Only young women described these pressures and risks, although they rarely identified them as such ("I wouldn't say pressure..." Dot, 14). Rather they were described as difficult situations in which they did not feel safe and in control and in which their rights were not respected by others in their lives (see Latoya's story).

Hot or not?

There are ongoing concerns about the online world contributing to young people's body confidence issues.[6] We found that many young people reported being rated and judged by their peers on their appearance, and this happened frequently both online and offline. More of these ratings were positive rather than negative; however 30% experience frequent negative comments, and girls are more likely to experience all types of judgement, positive and negative.

Positive ratings
- 56% of young people had had their appearance positively rated or commented on quite a few times or a lot online, and 60% had experienced it to the same degree offline

- Gender differences: Significantly more girls than boys had had their looks positively rated. 67% of girls and 45% of boys had received positive comments quite a few times or a lot in person, and 64% of girls and 38% of boys had online

Negative ratings
- More young people had had their appearance negatively judged offline (73%) than online (54%)
- 30% of young people experienced negative judgements quite a few times or a lot offline, and 21% quite a few times or a lot online

- Gender differences: Significantly more girls (77%) than boys (64%) had had their appearance negatively judged online

Transgender young people
- Young people who identified as transgender were significantly more likely to have experienced judgments on their appearance of all kinds: offline and online, positive and negative

Young people discussed how social media could make them feel inadequate.

> " You feel like you're not as good as everyone else (focus group participant)

In tandem, they also explored how online and offline comments are perceived differently - generally speaking, comments made in person were seen as more meaningful.

> " People might comment on your photo, say, "You look pretty," but it won't feel the same if they said it in person, because then they mean it (Rosie, 15)

THE BRIEFEST GUIDE TO THE AFFORDANCES OF A FEW POPULAR APPS

GRINDR AND TINDER:

These 'dating' apps allow users to quickly eyeball images of potential local romantic or sexual partners and geo-locate those with whom there is mutual interest. They are often used to connect with unknown others for casual sex and/or romantic and sexual relationships.

SNAPCHAT:

This app is designed to let users take videos and pictures, to which they can add a filter, caption or doodle, before sending on to others. These and more straightforward written messages are called 'snaps' and they disappear a few seconds after being viewed by the recipient. If a person snaps another at least once a day they get a 'streak' and Snapchat tells them how many days they have kept their streak going (see Alfie's story on page 21). The number and length of streaks a person has are observable to others.

Emojis also appear alongside a person's conversation with another denoting the strength of their connection – for example, if they both snap each other the most a red heart appears, which shifts to a smiley face if one person starts snapping someone else more. In our research, features such as these seemed to contribute to jealousy, insecurity and a drive for seemingly meaningless communication to keep streaks and therefore a sense of status.

INSTAGRAM:

This app revolves around people sharing photos and videos with multiple others, and viewing those of people they are following (often strangers, such as celebrities, and friends). As with Twitter, people can share and view images via hashtags – and this hugely increases the reach of images. It shares with Snapchat the 'story' function – people create a stream of photos and videos, their 'stories', which are viewable by their followers for 24 hours before vanishing.

Sending nude or sexual images

Over a third of young people have sent a 'sexual or nude' image of themselves

Participants in focus groups debated whether 'everyone' sends nudes or whether "It is talked about a lot, and does happen, but I'm not sure if it's as common as people make out" (Kelly, 15). Our survey data suggests that just over a third of young people have sent a 'sexual or nude image'[7] and just over half have received an image of someone else sent by them:

- 34% had sent a nude or sexual image to someone they were interested in

- 52% had received a nude or sexual image of someone else, who had sent it themselves – significantly more girls than boys had received such an image (55% versus 45%)

Adolescence and image sharing

Given that some professionals have a particular interest in levels of nude and sexual image-sharing amongst adolescents, we calculated rates also for the 14-17 year old subsample specifically (the majority of the wider sample). We found generally lower levels[1], though not markedly so:

- 26% had sent a nude or sexual selfie to someone they were interested in

- 48% had received one of someone else, sent by that same person

Young people exchange nudes with a range of people in their peer group

Both the survey findings and the discussions with young people indicated that images are sent to and received from a range of peers, not just partners or potential partners. We also found that the images people send or share are not always of themselves, or anyone they know intimately, but, for example, could be someone from another year group in school.

- 9% of respondents reported that they had sent a sexual or nude image of someone (not themselves) on to someone else
- Significantly more boys than girls reported both sending these images (11% of boys versus 6% of girls) as well as receiving them (30% of boys versus 23% of girls)[9]

There are many reasons for sending nudes

Findings from both the focus groups and the survey indicated that young people send nudes of themselves and others for a range of reasons, including:

- Flirtation with someone they are interested in
- Fun with friends – 20% of survey respondents had sent a sexual or nude selfie to their friends for fun (similar proportions of boys and girls)
- Sexual enjoyment and intimacy as part of a relationship
- Body confidence
- Searching for validation due to low body confidence
- Pressure from a friend or a partner
- Getting back at someone

In relation to pressure, 28% had felt pressured to send a sexual or nude image of themselves – and significantly more girls (36%) than boys (11%) had experienced this. Furthermore, 7% had felt pressured to send one of someone else and 26% reported receiving such an image (i.e. of a peer sent by a different peer).

Gendered patterns

These findings indicate a gendered pattern – more girls than boys feel pressured to send an image, and more boys than girls send and receive nudes of a peer sent by someone else (and they chime with findings reported later on gender differences on tech-assisted pressure and threat in relationships – see Table 4). With regard to those young people identifying as non-binary gender[10], they reported significantly higher rates of both sending and receiving nudes, including higher rates of pressurised sending.

In focus groups young women talked about the fact that the 'image' doesn't have to be 'real' or true for someone to get bullied or talked about at school – someone can simply start a rumour that an image of a body or body part belongs to someone else and it has currency and power.

> There's this girl called Jess and she got framed by someone in year 10. Someone put a picture of her password and username on their story, on Snapchat, so that everyone that have got Snapchat can see it. So someone must have, like, got on to her Snapchat, took a picture of, like, off the internet or something. And then sent it to someone and said that it was hers. And then it went round the whole school and she got bullied (Calvin, 12, Focus group participant)

> I shagged three guys in the year above me apparently... I was, like, "Really, when did I do that?" (Maple, 14, Focus group participant)

The sharing of nude and sexual images appeared to take place within cultures in which sexual images of girls had more currency then those of boys and in which young women were shamed and bullied for being associated with nude images or sexual stories, where as young men were not.

> Because boys have a lot more self-confidence because... say if they have, like, quite a big dick say... they don't mind if it gets sent it around because they get kind of.. almost, like, points for it. They get kind of good names for it. But if a girl sends pictures and... She gets called, like, "Slut," or something like that. So we don't... Girls don't really tend to think about boys as much (Dot, 14, Focus group participant)

Latoya's story

"I was really drunk, and this boy that I really liked, like, took advantage of me and got me to do stuff, and I told him, "No," like, quite a few times and it still happened. And then my friends, we was upstairs, and then they video recorded us, and it got sent round the whole school. I could have been pregnant and he found out and he was telling me to kill myself...

And I'd literally walk into a lesson, I'd be getting called a slag, a whore, and I didn't wanna talk about it anyway, because I didn't personally wanna go into it with them. So I was getting called a slag, and everything. And even my teachers were letting them call me a slag, wasn't they? I walked out of his lesson crying, and it was so bad, like, for ages...

I've never liked my body, but the way I look in those photos, and stuff, it literally just made me ill. I stopped eating everything... I've asked the school for counselling four times, and they still haven't given it to me. So I didn't really get support from anyone, I had to cope with it by myself, really." (Latoya, 16)

The need for collective responses

This evidence suggests that we cannot fully understand the sharing of 'nudes' between young people in terms of individual decision-making about whether or not to create and share a photo of yourself with a partner. Rather we have to look at how sexual and nude digital content is created, shared, viewed and discussed within peer groups without consent and within the context of harmful sexist cultures.

This understanding chimes with further survey findings that suggest many young people feel uncomfortable with how others were being treated online:

• 61% had felt uncomfortable with the way someone they know was treating someone else online

• 20% had felt this way either quite a few times or a lot

• Girls were more likely than boys to report this discomfort (64% of girls versus 54% of boys)

Encouragingly a sizeable proportion of survey participants reported having confidence in taking action against such practices:

• 40% had felt confident in stopping people doing hurtful things online once or twice

• And 34% had felt this either quite a few times or a lot

However this also suggests that the majority of young people do not know how to respond to hurtful or harmful things that they see online. Focus group data suggests that there can be a tendency to blame those experiencing online/offline abuse rather than to challenge those in more powerful positions or to forge collective responses to harmful individual and peer group practices (also see Laytoya's story).

The confidence in 'calling out' negative behaviour reported by some might be fruitfully harnessed and developed across the peer group through 'positive bystander' approaches. These initiatives help young people develop their ability, confidence and motivation to intervene with negative attitudes and behaviours that they witness. Other interlocking parts to an effective approach that are supported by our findings include: developing collective responses that challenge both the non-consensual sharing of images and restrictive and negative gender norms; and attending to emotional risks and rewards.

Sophia's story

"We have been going out so long, he's like my best friend as well. So [starting to have sex with him] just felt comfortable. We did it, like, quite a few times and then he was, like, "Shall we video it?" And I was, like, "Okay then." And then he videoed it and he accidentally sent it to his ex-girlfriend. Well, he says it's by accident but I don't think it was.

His ex-girlfriend come up to me and showed me. And I was, like, "Why haven't you deleted it?" And she didn't. And then my so called best friend, grassed to the teachers and said that, like, what had happened. And then the police got involved and he's now permanently excluded from this school.

Me and mum were really close. And it was just, like, she didn't even wanna talk to me. I didn't really talk to the teachers, I just sat there in silence 'cos I didn't really wanna sit in a room and admit that I'd made child pornography to be honest. I don't trust anyone. Like, the teachers, like, were telling me to break up with him. Like, that's not their place. They've, like, made him get all the blame. I was the one that admit-, like, accepted that he could take a video. And he's got no education now from a video...that meant nothing. Apparently it was, like, against the law or something but it was just, like, too much. He had a meeting with the social services about, like, if he's, like, wrong in the head... Everyone was just so angry. Like, they should've gave us support. Not just shut us out." (Sophia, 15)

Meeting up and starting relationships

Over one third of young people have started a relationship with someone they met online[11]

Communicating online provides ways of avoiding face-to-face awkwardness and embarrassment, as we have already seen. So when it comes to asking someone out, we might imagine that most young people would do so online, but in fact more young people reported asking someone out offline (48%) than on (42%).

These figures do still signal a role for technology however, and this is also reflected in the 38% of young people who reported that they had met someone online who they then started seeing or having a relationship with.

> " We found ourselves in the [chat] room, talking to each other.... He asked for my email address and I was like, "Okay, that's fine." So I spoke to my mum about it and she was like, "Okay, that's fine, as long as you get a picture and you kind of... you know that he's okay." And so we exchanged pictures and a few emails and things, and, yeah, and we... Yeah, he was my first love, actually, we completely fell in love with each other, and I still, yeah, I still talk to him. I spoke to him yesterday, we've been talking for almost eleven years now
> (Lucy, 25, interview participant)

Online only

5% of survey participants said that they had never met their partners face-to-face. This was also the case for three of our interview participants.[12] Lucy, Aiden and Mark all described having long-term, emotionally significant, romantic relationships with people that they met online. All three had been experiencing problems with their mental health at the time and described the ways in which their relationship created a safe, caring and supportive place in which they could be the person they wanted to be.

Higher proportions of LGBT young people had met a partner or asked someone out online

Our research suggested that digital technology was particularly important to LGBT young people when it came to flirting (see page 4), meeting new partners and asking people out. LGBT young people were more likely than others to have asked someone out online and to have dated someone they had met online.

Stats on gender, sexuality, and starting romantic relationships

- Significantly more non-binary gender young people (55%) had met someone online who they started seeing compared to cis-gender girls (37%) (38% of boys reported this)

- And significantly more bisexual (42%) than straight (36%) young people had done so

- Significantly more non-binary gender young people had asked someone out (on or offline) (64%) than cis-gender girls (34%); (56% of cis-gender boys reported this)

- And significantly more gay (58%) and bisexual (52%) young people had asked someone out online compared to those who were heterosexual (38%)

The qualitative strand gave a sense of the opportunities that online communication afforded young LGBT people. It opened up access to and connection with other members of LGBT communities that might not exist at school or where they live, countering feelings of isolation or stigma.

Key benefits of using tech to meet new partners and start relationships for LGBT young people:

1. It's easier to meet other LGBT young people online, than offline, particularly in rural areas with small LGBT communities.

> No one I knew around here was basically gay (Anthony, 19, interview participant)

> There's a lot of LGBT groups on, say, Facebook and Instagram, and things like that, that people can join and meet other LGBTQ young people on... you can just look up 'LGBTQ Group' and it's there (Blue, 18, Focus group participant)

2. You can flirt and meet people online without having to come out publicly to family and peers and the related stigma

> It might be slightly easier because of the fact that they, they're not out doing it in public so therefore they don't have the stigma against LGBT people (Luna, 13, focus group participant)

3. Tech offers places to explore and experiment with your gender and sexual identity

> Being able to find people online is, like, an easy way to test the waters. To, like, experiment or to, like, reaffirm your own sexuality and stuff like that (Godzilla, 15 focus group participant)

This preference for and higher use of technology for meeting new partners did not come without the potential for increased emotional hurt, risk and danger; for example non-binary gender young people experienced significantly more pressure to share nudes, and gay young people were more likely to often meet people in person who had deceived them online (see section on 'Catfishing' next).

As outlined in the final section of this report our participants were clear about the need for educators to include and address the needs of LGBT young people when delivering education around online safety and positive relationships.

'Catfishing': 6% of young people had met up with an online contact face-to-face and found they weren't who they said they were

Catfishing is the practice of pretending to be someone you're not when forming romantic relationships online. The practice takes its name from a documentary and MTV series, which investigates and confronts 'catfish' (those pretending to be someone they are not) on behalf of those being catfished (those who have fallen for someone who is not who they say they are).

Six per cent of survey respondents reported that they had met someone in person whom they had first met online who was not who they said they were. This had happened to 2.6% of respondents (52 of 2,008 participants) quite a few times or a lot. Some groups of young people were more at risk:

- Significantly more gay young people (9.9%) had met up with an online contact who was not who they said they were, compared to straight young people (4.9%) (6.1% of bisexual young people reported doing so)

- Significantly more boys (7.5%) than girls (3.5%) had experienced this

In the interviews and group discussions, there was a high level of awareness of the practice of 'catfishing' and the difficulties of verifying if people met online are really who they say they are. Young people talked about a variety of strategies they had developed to manage their privacy, verify the authenticity of online accounts and seek support when connecting and communicating with others.

Below we give further examples of these 'online safety' strategies and discuss the blind spots and vulnerabilities that our research documented (see section two).

Participant 1: (Speaking about a fictional case study) "[Videocall] that confirms he's like a real person… And you're not being catfished…"

Participant 2: "Yeah. And even so, I think you shouldn't, like, meet him down a back alley or something"

Participant 1: "Yeah. You've got to be sensible when you're meeting"

Participant 3: "A public place. Once they've video chat then meet in a public place and get his friend to drop him off so that he's not… No, like a friend to walk him there is what I mean"

Participant 4: "Like, there should be other people there" (LGBT Focus group participants)

These findings about meeting people and starting relationships online raise important questions to be explored in further research. For example, we cannot be sure how many of the large number of young people who met a romantic partner online already knew of that person through the 'offline world' (for example, the sibling of a friend from school).

We also do not know the extent to which young people put into practice suggested safety strategies when they met in person someone known online, or the outcomes of relationships and encounters with those who are not who they claim to be.

Notwithstanding this, future educational strategies would helpfully include exploring both the value and potential limitations of such safety strategies with young people.

Communicating in relationships

Young people expect regular and frequent communication from partners

Nearly three quarters (72%) of the young people we surveyed had been in a relationship (including 'seeing someone') at some point in their lives. When asked how often they like to hear from a partner or ex-partner 62% said every few hours or more, and 64% said their partner liked to hear from them this often.

> " We usually Skype or FaceTime, but, yeah, it's like [my phone] is constantly next to me. If, like, my phone dies in, like, public, I'm, like... Or, like, my data runs out, I'm, like, "I need to have data, I need to go to a café (Mark, 16, Interview participant in long distance relationship)

Young people want regular contact with friends via group chats and streaks

Frequent contact was not just expected from partners but from friends too, usually in the form of one-to-one snaps or messages in group chats. Young people told us about the regular 'buzzing' and 'ping, ping, ping' of their phones going off and their frustrations at not being able to keep up with the conversations and unfolding 'drama'.

> " If you're, like, in class or something, and you, all you get is, like, buzzing, little ping, ping, ping... and you don't know if they said something bad or good, you don't, you don't know.... If they text you, like, ten times, and they're getting so annoyed, and then you couldn't, you couldn't avoid...You couldn't take your phone out (Focus group participant)

> " I have so many group chats... I have ones with different groups or... [from] different places I go. Like, if I've gone on holiday I'll have a chat with people that I've met from there. But not many massive ones anymore. Like, maybe ten people-ish, but not - I used to be in ones with, like, 50 people but I'm not really into that anymore. That causes too much drama. You'll never be able to keep up, there's, like, 20 messages all at once! (Kelly, 15, Focus group participant)

Snapchat streaks

'Streaks' are the stream of communication between two people on Snapchat. If you snap each other at least once a day you get a 'streak' and Snapchat tells you how many days you have kept your streak going. The number and length of streaks a person has are observable to others. Young people talked about their desire to keep streaks going and their pride in having long-running streaks.

Such was the desire to maintain streaks that some reported delegating their maintenance to other friends when they couldn't use Snapchat — for example when parents confiscated their phones. When asked about the contents of a streak, young people generally conceded that the communication was virtually meaningless. Whilst streaking was not talked about as a romantic practice, it is useful to understand what's normal, everyday and expected for young people when it comes to digital communication.

Alfie's story

"Streaks - you've gotta send them one time a day. Like, you've got to snap them and they've got to snap you one time a day… when I get up I snap them and then when I go to bed I snap so that I never lose 'em.

But some people they.. do, like, one when they get up, one when they come in from school, one when they, like, have dinner and everything cos they, like, definitely don't, like, wanna lose 'em.

But I've, kind of, realised you only need to do it two times a day, like, maybe even once. So then it don't waste too much time. Cos all you have to do is take a picture of, like, the floor or, like, a black screen.

And then send it, like, just press down on people you wanna send it to. It takes about two minutes, like, less than that.
I've got quite a lot [of streaks] I've got, like, 30, 40. I think it's, like, just a good idea… When you're at school and everything, it's kind of a way to brag as well, like, "Oh yeah, like, my highest streak's, like, 200." .. And then they are like, "Oh, I've only like a hundred" or something

So I've got, like, 200 day streak with my closest mate. It's, kind of like, good, 'cos, like, we speak to each other, like, every day. It just shows that we're tight." (Alfie, 14)

Young people mainly communicate with their partners in person or by message

For matters such as discussing what they want from a relationship, saying I love you, sharing sexual desires, talking about worries, having and resolving arguments, face-to-face and private messaging were both used frequently and to a similar degree. Phone and video calls were generally used much less frequently, and the least common method was public posting on social media (see table 2). Additionally, there were some key things that were much more likely to happen in person than via technology – namely laughing until your stomach hurt, feeling turned on, and having sexual experiences.

Different methods have different affordances, though there is an overall preference for face-to-face

" I think it means more if its face-to-face but you can say more over messages (Sam, 14, interview participant)

Overall, the majority of survey participants expressed a preference for communicating with their partner about most things face-to-face, but, as with flirting, the different methods of communication had different affordances; they were not simply interchangeable.

In general, communicating via technology was seen as particularly easy (for example, it was the preferred method for making practical arrangements), but not always as meaningful.

Table 2: How often young people used different types of communication for different reasons.

	Messaging %	Public post on social media %	Video or audio call %	Face-to-face / in person %	Never %
Discussed with a partner things that are worrying them	85	7	57	82	6
Talked about what they want from a relationship	72	4	42	72	13
Told their partner they love them	77	25	57	77	12
Laughed until their stomach hurt	56	26	60	88	6
Argued	74	8	42	68	14
Sorted out an argument	72	4	46	72	12
Told others how they feel about their partner	73	16	37	82	8
Talked to their partner about the kinds of sexual things they would like to do together	57	3	29	57	27

Overleaf: Table 3: Proportion of boys and girls who had had relationships who had never communicated to their partner about various things[13]

And participants differed in their views on whether messaging or in-person conversations were better for resolving tensions.

> " It's easier to say stuff over text than it is in real life...it can get a bit more like heated and everything...when you're face-to-face it's like, we just spoke about what happened and then like we kind of were all right (Alfie, 14, interview participant)

> " I think a lot of difficult conversations can be easier by messaging. 'cos it's easier to have a bit of time to think...Like, so you're not really on the spot, you can just have a bit of time to think. And you can stay a bit more calm, if you know what I mean (Alexander, 14, Focus group participant)

A number of young people talked about offline as 'real life', suggesting it is seen as separable and qualitatively different from digital communication

Boys were less likely than girls to report communicating with their partner about a range of issues

An important finding was that boys were significantly less likely to report communicating with their partner about a range of issues – see Table 3. Boys were also significantly less likely than girls to have had sexual experiences with a partner, online or offline (Never: boys 27.3%; girls 19.3%). Figures for non-binary young people are not reported due to small numbers making comparisons with the other groups potentially unreliable.

A picture emerges from these communication findings of young people flexibly drawing on a range of tools and methods to interact with one another. A second theme is the ongoing importance of 'face-to-face time'. Relationship skills education might usefully include some discussion of how different forms of offline and online communication might be used to different ends. Such education could also address any unhelpful constraints on boys' communication – these may, for example, include gender norms.

	Proportion of boys who had never done so	Proportion of girls who had never done so
Talked to a partner about something worrying them	85	7
Talked about what they would like from the relationship	72	4
Laughed until their stomach hurt	77	25
Argued with a partner	56	26
Sorted out an argument	74	8
Told other people how they feel about their partner	72	4
Talked about sexual stuff they'd like to experience	73	16
Talked to their partner about the kinds of sexual things they would like to do together	57	3

Sex, romance and intimacy

Young people were most likely to have had sexual experiences with a partner in person, than via technology

Technology played an important role in young people's experiences of sexual intimacy and desire, but it usually came second place to in person contact within relationships. For example, 57% of young people who had been in a relationships said that they had felt turned on when messaging a partner, but 73% reported feeling turned on face-to-face. More young people who had been in a relationship had had sexual experiences with their partner in person compared to via technology (see stats below). And when asked what would be the best way for them to be sexual with someone, 73% expressed a preference for in person, versus only 4% via messaging and 0.7% via a phone or video call.

- 65% of young people (who were or had been in a relationship) reported having sexual experiences in person
- 27% reported having sexual experiences via messaging
- 19% reported having sexual experiences via phone or video call
- 2% reported having sexual experiences via public posts on social media
- 31% of young people had never had a sexual experience with their partner

As discussed, young people described how technology could provide the opportunity for intimacy with a partner away from onlookers and the frequently accompanying 'drama' and gossip. They also talked about how technology could be used to convey affection to their partners with nuance and detail – particularly for those in long distance relationships.

> " [He shows his love] through messages, we always do the little 'X's to symbolise kisses, and the little blue hearts or red hearts, depending on how he feels (Anthony, 19)

As mentioned above some young people lived the entirety of their romantic relationship through technology, and they had a myriad of ways of using tech to show affection and share intimacy with one another. See Mark's story for an example of how one young person enjoyed intimacy in a relationship with a young woman in America.

Conversely technology's affordance of continuous contact without in person contact or intimacy may also contribute to challenges such as feelings of insecurity, intrusion, frustration or a lack of control; Mark's experiences might also illustrate some of this.

Mark's story

Mark is 'dating an American girl' that he met on an online penpal site.

"So we started talking on there, and like, after, I think, a day, we established that there was something.

Three or four days later, we actually FaceTimed. And I was, like, "Okay, nervous, I can do it," We, we literally FaceTimed each other and we both couldn't look at the camera.

We completely fell for each other like that (laughs)... I don't even know how to describe it. It was, like, the connection we actually had, like... When, when people say, "Oh, you've got a relationship overseas, how does that work?" I'm, like, "It's hard. It is hard, 'cos you don't actually get to, like, feel their hand or be able to even...[pause].. Skin contact.

[For her birthday] I, erm, sent her a little package and I sprayed the card with my aftershave so she could, like, you know, smell me. And, erm, she smelt it and she started crying, cos, er, it was something, it was some sort of interaction.

We spend the whole night together. Like, when she's sleeping and she wakes up halfway through the night, she has sleep paralysis, she lies there and she's, like... She's just glad to see me.

At one point, we spent every second in a day with each other, we did a Skype call what lasted over 74 hours..

I feel physically attracted to her. Like there is no-one that could top her [but sex] isn't something that's, like, there for us. When I get there [to the US], I want to be able to hug her and kiss her, and be, like but I don't wanna go any further than that, like.

She doesn't have the most easiest life... sometimes she's just crying, and the one thing I want to do is physically hug her. But it's because we're so far away, I have to be, like... "Take my sympathy." And it's... It isn't an easy thing. ' Like, when, when you have your boyfriend or, like, girlfriend, you, you can just be, like, "Oh, there, there, it's gonna be fine," but when it's halfway across the world, you have to, kind of... You have to, kind of, erm, put it out in a way that they will understand." (Mark, 16)

Control, pressure
and abuse in relationships

Digital technologies are used to monitor and check up on partners

Our research found that digital platforms can be conducive to jealousy, cheating and mistrust. 35% of girls and 30% of boys whilst in a relationship reported checking up on their partner using technology.[14] It's important to note that this 'checking' might involve a number of things ranging from logging into their partner's social media accounts to regularly looking at a partner's Instagram or Snapchat story. Many young people did not appreciate their partner doing this with 16% reporting that they had asked their partner to stop checking on them (similar proportions of boys and girls). Furthermore, twenty-one per cent of young people reported telling their partner to unfollow or unfriend someone online, and 30% reported experiencing this pressure.

> I was on holiday and I was on Facetime to him and then he was, like, "I'm going out" And then on Snapchat, I saw his ex-girlfriend's Snapchat story and they was together (Sophia, 15, interview participant)

In interviews and focus groups young people told us that 'checking up' on a partner was often motivated by jealousy, or a lack of trust. Others were critical of those who were controlling or checked up on their partners.

> Basically, if you don't trust them you shouldn't be in a relationship with them. It doesn't matter if they're Snapchatting or taking pictures of other people, like, if you trust them then I don't

...see the problem (focus group participant)

Some of the young women that we spoke to also talked about the ways in which technology could be used to gather proof of cheating - either to find out if rumours are true or to confront a cheating partner.

> There was loads of people coming to me and telling me, "Your boyfriend's a cheater, you're going out with a cheat," and stuff... And I just got, I started to think, "Oh, I think he is." And then I went to the girl's house, and I asked her and she said 'yeah'. She showed me the messages. And I met up with him, I broke up with him and said, "I'm not gonna do it anymore if you're gonna keep lying to me." And then I blocked him on all my accounts and don't speak to him anymore" (Vetta, 15, focus group participant)

Cheating and subsequent breakups could be a source of anger, distress and feeling low. Sophia for example said that she had been feeling 'not great about myself' convinced that her boyfriend 'wouldn't have cheated on me if I was good enough'. (See also Emily's story).

Girls report more sexual pressure, verbal abuse and threat from partners than boys

High proportions of our respondents reported experiencing online sexual pressure, verbal abuse and threat from their partners during a relationship. Overall more girls reported being victims of this, whereas more boys reported enacting these behaviours.

A fifth of girls who had been in a relationship reported feeling pressurised online to do something sexual they

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14. Again, statistics here, and in all sections specifically about young people's romantic relationships, refer only to the subsample of young people who reported ever having one (i.e. here 50% of those girls who had ever been in a relationship reported checking). We do not always report the percentage of non-binary young people who report certain experiences and practices because numbers were too small to make valid comparisons

were not comfortable with during their relationship (20% of girls vs 6% of boys), and 14% of girls had experienced verbal abuse or threat online from a partner whilst in a relationship, versus 8% of boys.

Both are significant differences. Significantly more boys (8%) than girls (2%) admitted to using technology to persuade their partner to have a sexual experience they were not sure about, and significantly more boys also reported threatening or verbally abusing a partner online during their relationship (6% of boys vs 2% of girls). All these figures are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4: Percentage of girls and boys who report exerting or experiencing various forms of pressure, threat or abuse from a partner whilst in a romantic relationship[15]

Tech-assisted issue	Total %	% of girls	% of boys
Felt pressurised to do something sexual that they are not comfortable with by a partner	17	20	6
Persuaded a partner to have a sexual experience they were not sure about	4	2	8
Experienced threat or verbal abuse from a partner	14	14	8
Threatened or verbally abused a partner	4	2	6

Overall findings suggest that young people often experience surveillance, control, threat and pressure from partners, and that technology frequently plays a role in these dynamics. These problematic behaviours have a clear gendered dimension with girls being more likely to check up on partners, and boys more likely to pressure and threaten.

Breaking up

Messaging is the most common way of breaking up with someone

With the advance of technology there are ever more ways in which people can end romantic relationships. As shown in the table below, our respondents reported a wide range of ways that they have either broken up with someone or been broken up with.

	% of respondents who have been broken up with in each way[16]	% of respondents who have broken up with someone in this way
Messaging (text or private message on social media)	84	67
In person	43	50
Drifting apart	29	23
Ghosting	25	16
Phone or Video call	25	23
Social media status change	7	5

15. All differences between boys and girls reported in Table 4 are significant
16. As noted above, percentages in these relationship sections are of those who report ever having been in a relationship or seeing someone (e.g. 84% of those who have ever been in a relationship have been broken up with via messaging)

By far the most common means of breaking up with someone is by use of a message platform. Interestingly, more young people report being the recipient of this form of break-up, than the one practising it. This pattern is also true of other break-up practices that might be seen as less-than-ideal, including 'ghosting', the practice of suddenly stopping all contact with someone with no explanation: more young people (25%) report experiencing ghosting than practising it (16%).

> "I actually fell in love with someone, like, I'd not met face-to-face cos he lived in a different country, I don't really know what happened 'cos one day he just, literally, just stopped messaging me and I was actually really worried because, erm, I wasn't sure, I didn't know whether something had happened maybe... and closure. When breaking up... its much easier when they can actually say to you face-to-face, "Okay, maybe we shouldn't see each other anymore," or, "I have something going on, maybe I, I'm gonna call it quits," it's a lot easier (Luna, 13, Focus group participant)

Boys and girls report similar amounts of different break-up practices (by themselves or their partners), with the exception of breaking up via changing their social media status. Significantly more boys reported doing this than girls (2.8% versus 1.7%) though overall use of this method is low.

3.5% of survey participants reported that someone had broken up with them in a different way than the options listed, and 2.2% reported using a different method themselves.

The three most common break-up methods described by these groups were: via friends, during sex, or via cheating or starting to see other people.

Overall young people report a range of break-up practices, often involving the use of technology. This breadth of break-up experiences seen in the survey data may reflect the range of 'romantic' relationships young people reported having in discussions. Relationships included 'seeing' or 'talking to' someone for a few weeks or months, to intimate partnerships lasting several years – and either could be anything between solely online to predominantly in-person. In both the survey data and the focus group discussions there was a sense that the ideal way to break up with someone was face-to-face as this communicated more care and respect and gave someone more 'closure'. In reality this didn't always happen – particularly in more casual and online-only relationships.

> "You'll hear people on social media who have been broken up with by text and it's just something like a simple one-liner about - "Oh, I don't wanna go out with you anymore," or whatever, and I think it, kind of, shows they care more if they do it face-to-face, and even if they can get out [a] paragraph more on social media or messaging, I still do feel that it can show that they care for you a bit more (Godzilla, 15, Focus group participant)

Broadcasting my break-up

- 12% of young people who had been in a relationship had used social media to tell others publicly how happy they were to be single post a break-up

- 19% had simply used it to communicate that the relationship was over

Although a proportion of young people use social media to communicate how they feel about a break-up, a number reported to us that they were cautious of doing so. This was linked to their awareness of data re-use and the potential permanence of all digital content. Some young people, such as Emily, just did not want their emotional moments to be out there forever.

Emily's story

> We broke up because he cheated with one of my friends... I was quite angry at first, and then I got a bit upset. Then after, like, a week or so, I was like, "No, over it," but then I got upset again, and it's just difficult.

> [At first I was] like, messaging my friends saying how upset, like, he's made me. Then I, kind of, just... Cos I know that if I look back in the messages, I'm gonna feel really embarrassed, so I just thought, "I'll just stop". I had my friends and my dad spoke to me about it cos I'm really open with my dad and I felt a lot better. Like, rather than just, like, just keeping it to myself, I had someone else to, kind of, get it all off my chest

The post break-up period

The survey and qualitative findings indicated that the post-break up period can be a challenging and preoccupying time for young people. Furthermore, friends and peers often became involved in the unfolding tensions and 'drama'.

Three clear themes emerged from the experiences and practices young people described in the post break-up period.

1. Breaking up is emotionally difficult and technology can freeze emotional moments in time

In discussions, some young people talked about the pain and distress of breaking-up, and said that technology provided the opportunity to quickly gain support from friends and express difficult thoughts and feelings. In the survey, we found that 7% reported using social media to tell others publicly what a bad or horrible person their ex was. However, as Emily's story shows, these affordances of technology also mean that intense thoughts and feelings can be permanently captured and re-used in a time where they no longer felt relevant or appropriate. This, together with other findings from this research, indicate that technology can raise 'emotional risks' for young people in a variety of ways; these risks are different from the risks of encountering harmful behaviours online that are more commonly thought of and discussed in education with young people.

2. The post break-up period can be a time of preoccupation and ambivalence

Whilst the majority of young people (72%) report that they have stayed connected or friends with an ex on social media, this connection does not always feel straightforward. 54% report using social media to see what their ex is doing and 54% also report removing an ex from all of their social media accounts. This preoccupation may have a gendered pattern: significantly more girls than boys reported using social media to see what their ex was up to (53% versus 42%) and checking up on their ex several times a day using their phone or apps (15% versus 6%) as well as, conversely, removing their ex from all accounts (58% versus 27%).

Drama

'Drama' is a word used by young people to describe the kinds of arguments, tensions and aggressions that emerge between young people in a peer group. It involves lots of people and an audience and usually happens on social media, as well as in person. Some argue that the term encapsulates a range of aggressive and harmful behaviours that adults would describe as bullying but are often not seen as such by young people (Marwick & Boyd, 2014).

In this research young people told us that the main cause of 'drama' on their social media is 'relationship beef' - in particular incidences of cheating. It appeared that the post-break up period is often a period of high 'drama' in which a number of harmful and aggressive behaviours are acted out and involved not just by ex-partners, but their friends and peers.

Richard: "If a couple was having an argument, it sometimes just gets put on social media, like, she'll tell her friends, he'll tell his friends and then they both end up just, kind of, colliding and defending the side of the other, whoever their mate is, and different mates

as well and social media, it, kind of, just gets egged on through that. Then other people start joining in who it's nothing to do with, just because of the sake they want a bit of drama…"

Liam: "Or the best one's when the Mrs gets caught out cheating…and the bloke just whacks it on social media and tags the boyfriend…and the girlfriend, and then literally it's just like a - "

Richard: "Just implosion" (Focus group participants, 16-17 years old)

Speaker 1: "In a group chat of people I'm just sitting there, just watching my phone go, 'Ding, ding, ding'."

Speaker 2: "It's actually quite interesting"

Jason: "If you're in the argument, it's pretty much stressful. But when you're watching it, it can be quite funny" (Focus group participants, 14-15 years old)

These moments of drama post break-up were gendered, with young women in discussions reporting more verbal abuse and non consensual image sharing. In all male focus groups such moments were described as 'stressful', 'funny' and 'interesting', whereas in all female focus groups the concept was not directly discussed. Young women did however talk about the incidences of bullying, abuse and non-consensual image sharing they had experienced and the ways in which friends, peers and adults in their lives had become involved. Latoya and Sophia's stories are two powerful examples of this.

3. Post break-up is a high risk time for harmful online practices

The table below indicates that sizeable minorities of young people report one or more of their ex-partners engaging in harmful online practices towards them after their relationship has ended – and smaller

proportions generally admit to acting in this way themselves (as with discrepancies like this reported above, this may be due to selective memory and reporting, and/or due to a small group being disproportionately responsible for these acts across many romantic relationships). The figures underlined indicate significant differences between the proportions of boys and girls.

Post break-up online practice or experience	% of young people[17]	% of girls	% of boys
Checked up on an ex-partner several times a day using phone / apps	14	15	6
Told an ex to stop checking on them so often	10	9	9
Logged into an ex-partner's account	6	5	5
Felt pressurised to do something sexual that they are not comfortable with by an ex	5	5	4
Persuaded an ex to have a sexual experience they were not sure about	2	0.6	3.4
Ex sent their sexual or nude images onto others	5	4	5
Sent sexual or nude images of ex onto others	2	0.5	5
Experienced threat or verbal abuse from an ex	15	14	11
Threatened or verbally abused by an ex	6	5	6
Ex or their friends sent nasty comments to them	28	28	26
Sent nasty comments to their ex or ex's friends	8	6	9

In focus groups young people identified that the key risk in sending nude or sexual images to a partner was that these images would be screen-shotted and used against the sender post break-up. This was rarely described as a practice between two people, but as part of a hostile group dynamic. In this way digital content was often described as collateral that some peer group members would accumulate to use to threaten and harm each other. Such behaviours were not seen as widespread but as a potential threat to all those who had sent images.

Sammy "It's [images sent to others by an ex-partner] happened a few times... As I said, personalities again. If they're a nice person, they'll delete the image and that's it. If they're a horrible person and they clearly don't actually care about you in the first place, then they'll go around and show it"

Jason "They think it's funny.. But then it accidentally, sort of, spreads" (Focus group participants, 14-15 years old)

> Group chats get nudes put on all the time. Like, quite often vulnerable people, not so popular ones... And there'll be a chat with, like, 50 odd people on or something, and once them 50 people have got it... And then several people will screenshot it or send it on, forward it, just save it, just to... For future, like... They'll have it on their phone and then, when that person says something about them, or to them, they'll go... "Stop chatting, like, if you - Do you want this to go round again?" (Kelly, 15, Focus group participant)

Break-up and post break-up:
difficult feelings and hostile practices

" Sometimes [after people break up], like, there are threats going around... Like, "I'm gonna send this screenshot of something you sent me if you, if you don't do x." It's like blackmailing (Mathew, 15, Focus group participant)

Taken together, these findings suggest that the break-up period is a relatively high risk time: young people appear more likely to act in ways which harm one another.

Relatively high proportions report being on the receiving end of negative practices such as nasty comments online and smaller but notable numbers report non-consensual image sharing by their ex at this time. The gender dynamics around image sharing are not altogether clear – whilst only 0.5% girls report sending an image of their ex to others, 5% of boys report experiencing this – and, exploration of the data indicates that this discrepancy is not due to a large percentage of gay or bisexual boys having images shared by a male ex. Perhaps the most salient point here is that around 5% of both boys and girls are subjected to this practice following a break-up.

Overarching applications to education

Following on from these findings, we suggest that it would be fruitful for relationships education to help young people to:

- Create and sustain the kind of online and offline communities they want to be a part of
- Enhance their ability and self-efficacy in challenging harmful behaviours and supporting one another
- Develop their self-awareness and emotion regulation so they can act in line with their values even during moments of high stress and distress
- Understand and challenge harmful gender norms and inequalities

Such relationships education should also be matched by wider structures, processes and professional behaviour that supports young people and challenges hostility and inequalities.

Part Two: Current education and support strategies: a view from young people

As well as asking young people about their use of technology in their flirtation and romantic relationships, Digital Romance also explored young people's experiences of education and support around relationships and online safety. This section describes these findings, alongside those on the online safety strategies they practice. Part Three is closely related, outlining participants' views on the education and support they feel young people need to enable them to have positive and empowering relationships on and offline.

Young people's education experiences

Most young people receive Relationship and Sex Education in School (RSE)

Eighty-five per cent of survey participants reported that they had received Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) at school. Nearly half felt the timing of this education was about right (48%). Of the remaining 52%, 71% felt that some or all the information should have been given earlier, with 29% feeling that some or all should have been given later.

Young people were more likely to receive education about sex and online safety than relationships

Of all topics we asked about, young people were most likely to have received education on online safety (94%) and sex (93%) and were less likely to have received education about developing relationship skills (76%) or on how to have positive relationships online (72%).

Table 5: Proportions of survey respondents who reported receiving education on various topics relevant to their relationships, wellbeing and safety, and their corresponding views on its quality.

Education topic	% of respondents who reported receiving this education	% of those who received it who rated it as good or very good	% of those who received it who rated it as not great
Positive and equal relationships	84	38	23
Developing relationship skills	76	26	39
How to have positive relationships online	72	29	40
How to think critically about the media	81	40	27
Online risks and online safety	94	63	12
Sex education	93	40	26

Online safety education is rated more highly than education on relationships

Nearly two thirds of young people (63%) rated the quality of their online safety education as good or very good and only 12% rated it as 'not great'. In focus groups and interviews talked about the education they had received in school and what they had learnt about how to keep themselves safe online (see below).

Young people's reports do suggest that there are significant issues with the reach and quality of some areas of education – particularly education on relationships. For example, of the 76% who had received relationship skills education (leaving 24% without it), only 26% rated it as good or very good and 40% felt it was not great. This equates to only 20% of young people feeling that they had received good relationships education. Young people's comments in focus groups, interviews and open ended survey responses provided insight into these ratings; whilst many described education as giving them useful information about online safety, some described RSE as being overly negative and narrow in its focus.

> We call it three 'R's, which was 'Rules, Rights and Responsibilities', and they would teach us stuff like online safety and genuine stuff like that... I always remember three 'R's being painted in a negative light. It was always, like, 'If you drive a car, you're gonna die, you have sex, you're gonna die.' I was, like, 'Okay, so you're not gonna give us any light on the subject, you're just gonna tell us that basically, thanks (Anthony, 19, interview participant)

> They encourage students to not partake in online relationships. Also its a different time so they don't really know about technology these days/online relationships... (Survey participant)

Young people also frequently flagged that issues specific to LGBT young people were not routinely addressed in education, and that RSE was often embedded with the unhelpful assumption that everyone was heterosexual and cis-gender.

> I was only ever told about heterosexual sex and relationships

> Be aware of the LGBT community. These relationships come with a whole new power dynamic and sexual risks that staff are currently completely unaware of (Survey participant)

Young people demonstrated high awareness of many online risks

> I know what the internet is capable of...I know what people are capable of, and it's a case of I've always taken necessary precautions (Anthony, 19)

In focus group and interview discussions young people demonstrated high levels of awareness of the risks of connecting and communicating with others using digital technologies.

Common online dangers that participants were concerned about were:

- Lack of privacy: there are numerous 'weirdos', and 'paedos' online that may try to access information about and connect with young people online

- Inauthenticity: 'weirdos', and 'paedos' use fake accounts and profiles to connect and 'catfish' with young people

- Data permanency and re-use: digital content can be re-used – from sexual and nude images sent to a partner, to intimate messages sent to friends, to emotional rages expressed online during a break-up

- Peer-peer harm and abuse: 'drama', harassment and pressure from peers

As well as identifying the risks associated with online communication, participants also talked about the range of practices that they had developed to manage these risks. These include:

- Keeping account settings private

- Making sure they know everyone in a group chat

- Checking and using perceived indicators of authenticity when judging who to connect with

- Declining requests, blocking and reporting fake accounts

- Talking to a friend, sibling or parent about the person who has contacted them

- When meeting in person a friend first met online, meeting in a public place and taking someone else

"We obviously don't say where we're from or use pictures that are us…I do have some [pictures] on my Instagram but I keep my account private so I know whose following"
(Aiden, 16)

"There's always fake accounts but it doesn't take the people too long to find out who it is… Somebody made a fake account on me ages ago….Like, obviously trying to act like me… and I just got everyone to block the account and it just got shut down. That's normally what happens. Cos if one person gets on board, everyone gets on board to help each other" (Sam, 14)

"I knew it was a fake account because the picture was just so fake, like, you knew it was fake. So I just declined it and he just kept texting me, and I just kept declining it" (Aisha, 13, Focus group participant)

"She [her mother] was always there… She wouldn't ever do anything behind my back, she would say to me, "Who are you talking to?" and I'd be like, "This is who I'm talking to," and she'd say, "Can I have a look at some of the conversations?" or, erm, "Do you have a picture?" and that sort of thing, and I would always be sort of happy to do it. And she sort of trusted my instincts, as well, but I knew that if she had a bad feeling, that I wouldn't carry on" (Lucy, 25, interview participant)

"I only add people that I have mutual friends with. But if I have, like, only ten or so, I wouldn't add them, it's only if I have, like, 200 mutual friends, or something. I don't just add random people" (Slazenger, 15, Focus group participant)

John: "Cos on Snapchat if it's a picture that you've screenshotted and shared it comes up in a different way than just a picture you've just taken and on the spot. So he [young person in fictional scenario] would have known whether or not…"

Sammy:"He'd be able to tell basically whether it's a real account" (Focus group participants)

"My other mate met someone online and they were, like, talking to each other on PlayStation. And then they went, like, around [town] together. But he, that was fine. Like, he was an actual person and they, like, know each other now. And they're really good mates now. .And, like, his mum, like, drove him up there. So, like, it, kind of, was, kind of, safe" (Alfie, 14)

"I had this [friend request from an] old person and I accepted, just because it was next to someone who I know… I accidentally clicked it… He messaged me and I went, "Hi," and he put, "Where are you from?" and I said, erm, "Around UK," and he put, "Well, I'm from Pakistan." I went, "Oh, okay. Well, I've got to go now." Not being offensive, cos I didn't know who it was. So then he put, "No, don't leave me," I went, "What do you mean?" and he said, erm, "Why don't you come up to Pakistan?" and I said, "Mum, this weird person's messaged me." Mum said, erm, "Let him continue," and then he put something rude. So my mum, er, messaged, being a mum, she, she put, "Can you leave my daughter alone, please, she's only twelve." And then he stopped messaging, and then I blocked him" (Tyler, 12, Focus group participant)

"Me and, and my other friend, we all, like, have a group chat, and then we had some of our other friends in, like, if I don't know them I'll leave, and I'll just have a chat with the people that I already know. [I'm] Just bit wary" (Julie 15, Focus group participant)

Limitations of 'safety' strategies

" But in a way, nothing's private, is it, really? (Rat, 14, Focus group participant)

Despite young people understanding many online risks and the strategies with which to avoid them, our data also suggested that there were three important factors[18] that at times limited the capacity of some to apply knowledge of 'online safety' in everyday life:

- Powerful social norms about what is 'normal'

- Desire for friendship, popularity, status, sex and/or relationship experiences

- Lack of non-judgemental support available to young people

Our research suggests that there are influential social norms and expectations within young people's schools, peer groups and online communities about what is 'normal' and that what is expected of a person depends on their age, gender, sexual orientation and popularity status.

For example, survey findings suggest that young women are more likely to experience pressure to send nude or sexual images of themselves, and appear more likely to have their images sent on to others without consent. The qualitative findings suggest that when this happens there is often a lack of support for young women in managing these situations and responding to the sexist harassment that can emerge (see Latoya and Sophia's stories).

Young people also talked about how the desire for popularity and status could act as a driver for connecting with unknown people online.

Application to Education:
Might these strategies be useful to share with other young people?

Young people value learning from their peers (see Section 3) and many of the practices they described here could be shared within lessons and wider education. In parallel this education should be informed by knowledge from the online safety sector around which of these strategies are likely to be most effective (a question this research did not explore). Whilst some strategies may be consistently helpful (such as keeping account settings private), others may at times create a false sense of security (for example, connecting with unknown people with whom you have mutual friends). Adopting a variety of strategies may be the most useful approach. At the same time, as the 'limitations of safety strategies' section briefly explores, there can be psychological and social costs to implementing some of them (and benefits to ignoring them), so education and support must also be mindful of, and seek to address, the social pressures that drive young people towards more risk.

18. These three are simply those observed in this research (indeed alongside others, such as the high emotions during the break-up period) – in other words, this is not an exhaustive list, and these three sit alongside other issues and vulnerabilities that can limit the application of traditional online safety strategies and messages

> "One of my mates, he don't really care about privacy. He...literally follows everyone if they follow him back... So then he tries to get more followers to make himself look, like, more popular (Alfie, 14)

> "I know a lot of people who have Instagram accounts and they'll have, like, 23k followers and that, and they'll just... They live for their likes....they'll be like, "Yeah, but I have more followers," and I'll be, "It doesn't matter. You don't have friends, you have followers (Rosie, 15)

In these scenarios, knowledge of the risks of connecting with 'weirdos' online is countered by the desire to maximise popularity and status, which some saw as evidenced by numerous online contacts. Others however rejected this version of popularity, or felt it was a view they had bought into only when they were younger adolescents.

> "I've never messaged someone and arranged to meet them, but I would have added people who had friends of friends, but now I, like, as I said, I got rid of my streaks[19] and I deleted people I didn't know off Snapchat (Rosie, 15)

It is also worth noting that for our eldest interview participant (Lucy, 25), connecting with multiple people online as a teenager had had positive effects — for example, she met her partner online and the following she developed online gave her the confidence to later start her own photography business. She felt that there were particular benefits of connecting with unknown people online for those who suffered with anxiety and low confidence, like she had as a teenager.

Other young people talked about how their desire to connect and meet a partner meant that they deliberately left their privacy settings open, heightening risk. This was particularly the case when using dating apps where the aim is to meet unknown others. For the LGBT young people we spoke to this was seen as particularly necessary due to the limited numbers of 'out' LGBT young people that were living in their communities. Nineteen-year-old Anthony talked about his feelings of isolation as a young gay man in a rural area and his experiences of homophobia within his peer group. Against this backdrop, he used Grindr to meet 'hook-ups' as well as his current partner. When meeting his partner, Anthony followed many of the safety precautions detailed above (sending photos and talking on the phone before meeting, meeting in a public place), but when he met up with 'hook-ups' to have sex he did not follow these rules. Instead he met others in secluded places and did not tell anyone where he was going. He described using his intuitive judgement to screen out 'dodgy' men:

> "There have been times when I have been, like, "OK, you look dodgy, you sound dodgy," and if I've seen them, I've just been, like, "OK, yeah, no, going home (Anthony, 19)

Our findings suggest that young LGBT people face more risks when connecting with others online; these are plausibly related to experiences of stigma, isolation and discrimination that some also described.

As noted above, significantly more gay young people had frequently met someone offline who they had first met online who was not who they had said they were – this was the experience for 4.5% of gay respondents, versus 0.9% of bisexual and 0.9% of heterosexual respondents. Examining the data more closely reveals that nearly every gay young person reporting this experience was also non-binary gender.

The relationship between risk-taking and harm is complex and differs across young people and online contexts. The key point in our findings is that when ostracism and prejudice exist offline, this can cause those subjected to it to face more risk online. This and other findings from this research suggest that education on safety, privacy and risk online must be sensitive and responsive to young people's everyday experiences and peer group cultures. They indicate that educational approaches need to look beyond individual decision-making (for example in relation to privacy and data-sharing) and enable young people to think collectively about what kinds of cultures (on and offline) they want to be a part of and support.

Are some apps and platforms exploiting adolescent developmental proclivities?

Insights provided by this research into the affordances, constraints and powers of various popular platforms and apps led to a question about whether some are exploiting young people and their developmental proclivities to drive their business. All platforms and apps are designed to drive engagement, as without this they cannot be successful. Yet some of the apparent strategies designed to increase young people's engagement seemed to be exploiting particular features of adolescence in order to do so (such as increased concern with popularity, and susceptibility to peer influence). However this project did not examine these issues in depth, and whilst other relevant research exists (RSPH, 2017), much more is necessary.

Part Three: Young people's views on future education and support strategies

The survey asked young people open-ended questions about what four key groups (teachers, parents, other young people, and youth services and organisations) could each do to empower and support young people to have good relationship experiences online and offline. This section provides a high-level summary of their responses, alongside views on these questions voiced by young people in the focus groups and interviews. A paper containing a more in-depth analysis will be published in due course.[20]

20. Details of this will be sent to all those who received details of the present report from Brook and CEOP. If you would like details of this paper as and when it is published please email: education@ceop-nca.gsi.gov.uk

What young people would like from adults:

There appeared to be four major 'requests' from participants to adults in general, whether they be teachers, parents or youth workers:

- *Be non-judgmental and have an understanding of 'digital romance'*

The premise that this research project started with, that an understanding of technology's role in young people's love lives and relationships would be invaluable to online safety and relationships education, was clearly expressed by the young people themselves. Many expressed the view that adults should be aware of the positive opportunities technology affords, including for romantic relationships, and not convey a general negativity about all things 'online'.

> " Listen and don't judge. Online is a valid way of sustaining relationships and older people sometimes don't get it / think it's all dodgy old blokes (survey participant)

We hope that this research will contribute to adults having greater knowledge and confidence around young people's use of technology, which in turn will assist helpful conversations and approaches.

- *Impart knowledge and experience about both positive and negative relationships*

A related theme was the desire for adults to talk about what positive relationships involve, not just those that are negative, and to share their own experiences of these.

> " Talk more positively of what is a good relationship

> " Stop being awkward and uncomfortable about it! Be honest. Talk about your own experiences

> " Be completely honest and talk not only about basics or worst case scenarios but everything in-between as well! (Three survey participants)

- *Provide supportive relationships and positive 'spaces'*

A number expressed a desire for supportive relationships between adults and young people, and opportunities to discuss and gain help with difficulties and concerns.

> " Give students a comfortable environment where they can talk about their concerns/problems and help to solve them however big or small

> " Listen and support the young people more than what they already do and give a secure base for them to reach out to (Two survey participants)

- *Address LGBT experiences*

A number of young people expressed dissatisfaction with the heteronormative assumptions in RSE and related education they had received [see section 2]. The corollary of this was a desire for specific reference to LGBT experiences in support and guidance.

> " Cover LGBTQ relationships as well as heterosexual (survey participant)

Summary of what young people would like specifically from teachers, parents and other young people

Participants had a lot to say about what each of the four groups (teachers, parents, young people and youth services) should do to support and empower young people to enjoy positive relationships without harm online and offline. Frequently mentioned requests specific to each of the groups are summarised in Table 6 and will be expanded upon in the aforementioned forthcoming paper.

Table 6: Summary of young people's thoughts on what various groups could do to support young people in enjoying positive relationships without harm

From teachers	Teach media literacy Build young people's confidence Give time and space throughout education on RSE Promote positive relationship norms and challenge negatives Develop support systems Be honest and be respectful
From parents	Develop close bonds with their children to create open and trusting relationships Less threats and punishment Have everyday conversations about relationships
From other young people	Be nice to each other Don't do harmful things such as: - Share others' nudes without consent - Judge or put people down - Make sexist, racist or homophobic comments or jokes including slut shaming of women Call out 'toxic practices' when you see them Talk, support and share experiences, including with younger teens
From youth workers and organisations	Have a greater online presence and advertise services more widely Educate about consent Provide workshops, talks, assemblies and clinics

Online self-help modules are the most popular method for extending support and education

The survey also asked young people to rate a variety of methods that might be used to support and empower young people to enjoy positive relationships. These are listed in Table 7, in order of their popularity with participants.

Table 7: Percentage of survey respondents who rated various ideas for supporting young people as good or very good

	% of survey respondents who rated it a 'good' or 'really good' idea
Online self-help for young people with relationship difficulties	87
RSE delivered through online modules	78
Tips and guides about how to use technology safely	78
Peer mentoring	77
Programmes for parents about how to support their children to have good relationships	73
Teacher led programmes about positive relationships online and offline	70
Assemblies in schools giving info about relationships and where to get support	58

As this table indicates, interactive online resources, including those offered as part of their formal education, are popular and there are also high levels of support for guidance for parents and peer-led approaches. A number of respondents further emphasised the rationale and utility of peer education in their comments — often as a complement to teacher-led.

" I know most people ignore their teachers so this sort of thing should be developed through pupil-led learning. We tend to already have reasonable ideas about this, and due to our friends having such a big effect on us we're more likely to listen to them. Teachers should just be there to give discussion points and monitor discussion

" Create more awareness, e.g. get senior pupils to deliver a class or two, to younger children on the online relationships they might encounter at some point
(two survey participants)

Peers should support one another, and avoid and call out harmful practices

When asked how young people could support and empower each other numerous participants were clear on the critical role that they could play in supporting each other when things were difficult, and teaching each other about what's OK and what's not. Sharing their own experiences and connecting with other support were often mentioned as integral to such help – as well as being non-judgmental and empathic. Some noted the value of humour and of challenging rigid and unhelpful gender norms.

> " Share their personal experiences anonymously, all you hear about is the negative stories of meeting someone online, you never hear about the relationships that have worked out and are positive/healthy

> " This is pretty simple. All of us should look out for one another, especially if you've been through a bad relationship online, to help make sure others don't experience that or to help them notice before it's too late

> " Be there! Talk openly, don't judge, just listen and share experiences. Get rid of the stigma around sex/ being 'vulnerable' (especially for guys) and get a conversation going. Also, joking about these topics I think really helps make people comfortable with them!
> (Three survey participants)

There appeared a slight tension in respondents' views on how much young people should get involved in their peers' romantic relationships – on the one hand, some said that gossip should be avoided and people's privacy respected; at the same time, some were clear on the need to intervene if abusive or unhealthy dynamics were apparent.

Young people's views resonate with the idea that education on relationships should focus not just on helping young people achieve positive relationships for themselves, but also on how to help others experience this. This principle underpins, but is not limited to, peer education, participatory youth led, and positive bystander approaches.

When there are close parent-child bonds, parents are a central source of support and knowledge

As noted above, 73% of survey participants thought that programmes for parents would be a good idea. Throughout the research many young people highlighted the positive role that their parents played in their lives and relationships. A number described their parents as influential role models and the people they turn to for emotional support and advice.

> " Just everything that my dad's ever told me, or that he's behaved around my mum, like, he's never disrespected her...I've never seen him mistreat my mum. Boys... There's... It's hard to find... There are... There must be some nice boys, but I've always wanted someone who, like, respects people, like my dad (Rosie, 15, interview participant)

Further indicating the importance of parents, some young people described experiences where judgment and lack of support from parents had considerably contributed to difficulties and led them to feel that they had no-one to talk to.

> " What I would be afraid of if I told my mum is that my mum would get ashamed of me and all that. And, like, some parents take it really hard and might, might even disown you (Tyler, 12, Focus group participant)

In line with what many wanted from education, a number said that they wanted parents to impart their knowledge and experience about both positive and negative relationships and dynamics.

> " Encourage child to talk freely about it, talk about their own harmful experiences and regrets, talk about their own positive ones. Give child hypothetical guidance (Survey participant)

Some highlighted how close parent-child relationships allow for these kinds of discussion:

> " I think parents should be in touch with their children and ensure that they have a positive relationship with them so they can talk comfortably with them about having a good relationship with someone, regardless of whether its online or offline. I think too many parents nowadays don't make an effort to talk to their teenage children (Survey participant)

There was a diversity of opinions expressed about monitoring and restrictions of young people's online and digital 'spaces', reflective of the complexities around this and the wider societal debates. Taken together, their thoughts seemed to generally converge on parents putting in place 'boundaries' whilst not overly monitoring or 'prying'.

There was a diversity of opinions expressed about monitoring and restrictions of young people's online and digital 'spaces', reflective of the complexities around this and the wider societal debates. Taken together, their thoughts seemed to generally converge on parents putting in place 'boundaries' whilst not overly monitoring or 'prying'

> " Make sure that there children are safe when they are using the internet by putting the appropriate security measures on laptops or mobile phones

> " Not be monitoring their every move and be supporting of it (Two survey participants)

Concluding thoughts

Digital Romance set out to explore the role of digital technology in young people's love lives and romantic relationships. We wanted to know about the positives and the negatives of using technology and to better understand the challenges young people faced. We also wanted to use these insights to improve education for young people.

The centrality and affordances of technology

The research revealed that technology enables and facilitates lots of positives in young people's lives such as relational intimacy, connection, friendship and the ability to feel 'more me'.

It was refreshing to hear of the ways in which technology had enabled intimate and supportive relationships that would otherwise not have occurred (especially for those in minority groups and those who had felt isolated or less confident in face-to-face interactions). We also heard about the ways in which technology had supported many young people in flirting, having fun, becoming closer, communicating and expressing desires, and building confidence. Some also described technology as affording them with positive control, some freedom from negative judgements and pressures, and space to be authentic. Furthermore we found that social media is often used in positive ways in challenging situations. There were examples of technology being used to offer public support, to publicly condemn unkindness and discrimination, and to coordinate group efforts against those posing a risk or acting harmfully.

When it came to the negatives, young people's experiences and views demonstrated that technology could exacerbate the 'drama' of their relationships, and that some apps and platforms can be conducive to commenting (at times critically) on others' appearance, interfering in others' relationships and break-ups, as well as cheating and jealousy. We also saw that technology provides opportunities to verbally abuse, control and apply sexual pressure, and can make it easy to hurt others on the back of difficult post break-up feelings. Furthermore it facilitates stranger 'hook ups' (with their attendant risks) and the phenomenon of sharing others' personal images without consent. These harms and risks were not experienced equally by all young people; some disproportionately affected LGBT young people, young women and/or those without supportive and open relationships with peers or adults. Many of our findings pointed to interactions between sexism, restrictive gender norms and technology, leading to harmful individual and group practices in particular towards girls. For example, high proportions reported frequent judgements on their appearance, and pressure to send sexual images and engage in sexual activity.

Education and support: themes and useful directions of travel

The research highlighted that some education (in particular online safety) was generally being done well and having an impact and that many young people felt well supported in their online relationships by parents and youth workers. Alongside this, the majority of young people reported that they were not receiving adequate education on relationships, and some also shared experiences of adults in their lives being judgmental or disinterested, both of which served to increase risk and harm.

Their experiences and views provided many insights into how education and support might usefully evolve. There was a clear rejection of risk-only perspectives that was experienced as failing to engage with the reality that technology has benefits for young people from all communities.

Young people told us that they wanted the adults in their lives to understand the centrality of technology to their lives and relationships and the ways in which this afforded positive as well as negative experiences.

On the basis of the young people's views and experiences explored in this research, we suggest that there are several key areas for educators, youth services and policy-makers to focus attention, and essential themes to include within PSHE and related education – summarised in the two boxes below .

Key areas for educators, youth services and policy-makers to focus attention, based on young people's views and experiences

- Deliver relationship skills education throughout a child's education (not just a few lessons)
- Make use of interactive technology to deliver some PSHE – e.g. online modules
- Promote positive teacher-child; parent-child; and peer-peer relationships
- Build holistic self-esteem and confidence in young people
- Support young people in supporting others
- Create positive school cultures, for example where harmful practices and attitudes are stigmatised within the peer group
- Provide guidance to parents on 'digital romance'

Key themes to include within Relationships and Sex Education, and wider PSHE, based on young people's views and experiences

- What good/positive/healthy relationships look like – online and offline
- Promote equality and respect; as part of this target prejudices and rigid gender norms
- Empower young people as 'positive bystanders' – harnessing and growing their skills and confidence at intervening to prevent harm
- Skills not just knowledge; for example teaching emotion regulation skills, useful in more risky situations such as the break-up period
- Media literacy, including understanding strategies and motives of the tech industry
- Be responsive to emotional risks and rewards (including those around motivations to connect with unknown others, send images etc.)

Building positive peer cultures and supportive communities

In some focus groups and interviews, young people communicated the view that individualised decision-making (looking after one's own interests, minding one's own business, not getting involved in others' situations) was the solution to life's problems, and the corollary of this was less attention paid to solutions that are systemic, cultural and within the peer group. This stance, perhaps supported by some education strategies, can preclude a focus on how 'silent' peers and adults can contribute to shame, judgment and discrimination, and undermine supportive responses to friends and peers experiencing difficulty. Indeed some of the young people we spoke to described experiences where the hurtful actions of a peer were exacerbated by a silent or colluding peer and/or adult community. A key principle emerging from this research is that to achieve positives for all young people over the long-term, education should be harnessing the desire, skills and commitment that many young people express around developing and sustaining positive peer communities. This might be done through, for example, peer education, peer mentoring and positive bystander approaches that include positive as well as negative experiences.

'In real life'

Whilst technology provides so many opportunities and feels essential to the lives of young people, it has not replaced in-person experience and communication, and it does not define young love lives. A number of young people talked about offline as 'the real world', suggesting it is seen as qualitatively different and at times more authentic than online experiences (although this was not the case for all young people). Furthermore, the majority of young people surveyed generally preferred and placed greater value on face-to-face communication.

An implication of this is that, in the rush to recognise the centrality of technology, educators should be careful not to ignore the importance of face-to-face and in-person experiences. Rather education around relationships and online safety needs to be brought together so that young people can apply critical skills, knowledge and values in relationships and communications whether they be online or offline. If educators and others better support young people with 'digital romance', the skills, support, and knowledge gained will have an all-round impact on their ability to enjoy relationships without harm, both online and offline, and both now and in the future.

> " There's a lot of negativity surrounding online relationships and social media, erm, which is, it's true, it can be pretty awful, but I think if children are educated properly, and instead of scaring them away, sort of... Just sort of say, "It's okay, but please be really, really careful, talk to someone you trust, talk to a teacher," you know, because it can be amazing
> (Lucy, 25, interview participant)

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