

Annex 3: challenges that young people are facing online

Young people are facing a range of challenges online (see Table 21). Many of them are not new, or not exclusively due to social media, but have been amplified by its presence.

Table 21: The challenges young people are facing online.

Challenges	Description	Impact of social media/the online environment
2.1 Finding community.	<p>Community and finding like-minded people is an important part of moving into adolescence and adulthood for young people.⁴⁹ Having a sense of belonging and people who understand your identity, interests, viewpoints, and ideas are important.⁴⁹ The rise of social media means it is now much easier to find people you relate to and community than it has ever been before, particularly for those outside the mainstream and those seeking to connect in like-minded activities in their local communities. For the LGBTQI+ community, social media can be used to build community, normalise identity, and create connections with peers.^{446,494}</p> <p>Ethnic minorities' online communities can help disseminate information and support each other in periods of crisis⁴⁹⁵ and enhance their sense of belonging.⁴⁹⁶ One study showed how Chinese communities in South Korea used online community to discuss and better understand COVID-19.⁴⁹⁷</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online community allows for people with radical and extremist viewpoints to find one another,^{498,499} with some online communities calling for their radical views to be translated to action offline.⁵⁰⁰ Often the views shared online cannot be shared, or would not be accepted, by the majority of people online.⁴⁹⁹ • Some extremist groups which are able to be readily formed online include those who espouse Islamophobic views⁵⁰⁰ and racist ideologies.^{498,499} There is some evidence that as people are challenged and discredited offline, they lean more into their online identity and beliefs.⁴⁹⁹
2.2 Foreign interference.	<p>Political interference from foreign states into domestic politics is a real challenge. Broadly, the intent is to sow division and subvert trust in democratic institutions and erode societal cohesion.^{455,501} Even the knowledge that foreign interference is occurring can undermine trust in officials and democratic institutions.^{502,503} Foreign interference leverages existing tensions within a country, often through real harmful information, or simply false information, or more often a disorientating mix of both.^{92,504} Foreign interference</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can easily reach people during election periods, seeking to influence the outcome and undermine democracy.^{455,505,506} • Occurring on a much larger scale than before the internet.^{92,505} • Can occur with a relatively small investment and small numbers of people involved.^{92,501}

	<p>occurred long before the internet and social media, but has been amplified by the digital age.^{92,504}</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can amplify the polluted information environment on social media to create further chaos, including through bots and deepfakes.^{92,504} • Can utilise social media advertising to spread divisive messages and polluted information to key areas.⁴⁸⁵
<p>2.3 Polluted information.</p>	<p>Polluted information occurred long before the internet, but has been amplified and made more complex by social media.⁹² Polluted information which is hard to identify as false or misleading is the most effective,⁹² occurring through foreign interference, corporate interests, civil society organisations, and the wider public.⁵⁰⁴ Conspiracy theories come under the umbrella of polluted information.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not filtered through journalists or newsrooms.⁹² • Quantity of polluted information has increased.⁵⁰¹ • Fringe conspiracy theories can be pushed more into the mainstream.⁵⁰⁷ • Social media has democratised platforms, meaning that any individual can create and spread polluted information, with many falsely posing as experts.⁵⁰⁸ • The polluted information environment has the potential to impact offline actions, especially in terms of health,⁵⁰⁸ including COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy.^{473,509} • Reliable information struggles to achieve cut through in the polluted information environment.⁵¹⁰
<p>2.4 Radicalisation and extremism.</p>	<p>Radicalisation and extremism may lead to issues of national security. Although the vast majority of people who are influenced by conspiracy theories will never go on to commit physical violence,^{511,512} the potential for radicalisation and extremism online to translate into offline actions is of particular concern, since if it does occur the results may be catastrophic. Extremist views can be wide-ranging but tend to include a mixture of xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, racism, misogyny, religious intolerance, antisemitism, and conspiracy theories.⁵¹³</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposure to extremist views can lead to radicalisation.^{512,514} • Social media platforms allow organisation of extremist groups.⁵⁰⁷ • The online environment has been used to plan and broadcast terrorist attacks.⁴⁵⁵ • Only in a few cases does extremist online activity lead to police taking action.⁵¹⁵ • Polluted information and conspiracy theories can help fuel radicalisation and extremism online.⁵¹³ • Online communities are places to espouse fear and othering of minority groups, often affording 'safe' places for people to share their extremist views.^{500,515} • Groups on platforms allow for more extreme views to be espoused. If groups are moderated or reported on

		mainstream platforms they can move to more fringe platforms where their views aren't moderated in the same manner. ⁵⁰⁷
2.5 Child safety.	Children's safety has always been of significant concern. Grooming and exploitation are key issues, and the internet has continued to amplify the importance of young people being aware and equipped to avoid these potential dangers. One study found that even professionals in this area need more skills to support young people effectively, particularly those who have suffered online abuse. ⁵¹⁶ There is a limited but growing research into online grooming. ⁵¹⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groomers can pose as a young person, setting up a fake profile when talking with young people online or through social media.⁵¹⁸ • Abuse and exploitation can occur from any place in the world.⁵¹⁶ • Groomers may blackmail young people to intimidate and control them, preventing them from seeking help.⁵¹⁸ • The impacts on young people online are sometimes viewed as less serious than those offline, but research has shown the same enduring and devastating impacts on young people.⁵¹⁸
2.6 Data sovereignty.	Data sovereignty broadly refers to the right to determine what happens to your data, including how and whether it is collected. Indigenous data sovereignty refers to indigenous control of indigenous data. ⁵¹⁹ In New Zealand, Māori have experienced over-surveillance resulting in more data being collected about them. ⁵¹⁹ Data may be asserted as an asset or resource which is implicitly extracted; this goes against indigenous understandings and is seen as part of the broader process of data colonisation. ⁵²⁰ Data sovereignty is about the collective, and ensuring that groups, not just individuals, have the right to privacy and protection of data. ⁵²⁰	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A significant rise in the amount of data being collected, both on social media and online generally.⁵¹⁹ • Data being used for advertising. • Government can use social media sites to target specific groups with advertising and messaging. • Use of social media and the online environment for surveillance by the government.⁵²⁰ • Data is increasingly seen as a commodity to be used or harnessed, rather than something with protection and rights attached to it.⁵²⁰
2.7 Privacy.	Privacy is the right to keep information to yourself, or to people close to you, and spend time out of the public sphere. The digital age has meant that the issue of privacy has been expanded due to the constantly accessible online environment and the high volume of data which is collected and available. ⁵²¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people having images shared online by their parents, caregivers, and whānau without their consent.⁵²² • The issues of privacy have become more intrusive, penetrating, and frequent.⁵²¹ • The amount of information available with which privacy can be breached has increased substantively.⁵²¹

<p>2.8 Sexting.</p>	<p>Sexting refers to sharing texts, photos or videos with sexual or erotic content.⁵²³ It often occurs between people who are dating, interested in dating, or in a relationship.⁵²³ It is common practice and for many young people is seen as an essential part of relationships.^{524,525} Discussion around the risks and dangers of sexting is most productively focused on when it goes wrong, namely forwarding images and harassment, rather than labelling the whole practice as wrong.⁵²⁵</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snapchat is often used for intimate pictures, due to images being able to disappear after set periods of time (although they often are screen-shotted).^{526,527} • Sharing images without consent can readily occur, leading to image-based abuse.⁵²⁴
<p>2.9 Image based abuse.</p>	<p>Image based abuse is the broad term for sharing intimate photos and videos without the consent of the individual or individual within them. Revenge porn is included in this term, although image based abuse is the preferred term among activists and academics.⁵²³ Image based abuse is a form of dating and relationship violence and is gendered, with research showing higher incidences of men sharing content without consent.^{523,524} There are some diverging views about the extent to which it is gendered.⁵²⁸</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media has allowed for the proliferation of image-based abuse to occur. With many incidences of former or current partners sharing photos without permission, and pervasive slut shaming narratives.⁵²³ • A systematic review into sharing sexual images found that non-consensual sharing/forwarding of these images was potentially commonplace, with rates likely higher for adolescents.⁵²⁸ • Has allowed for the sometimes viral spread of these intimate images, meaning abuse occurring at a large and un-ending scale.⁵²³ • Women are often seen to be held responsible if images are shared, even when this occurs without their consent. Future research is needed into the gendered nature of sharing images.⁵²⁸
<p>2.10 Cyberbullying.</p>	<p>Bullying is a pervasive issue young people face, particularly in a school environment. The impacts of bullying are wide ranging, but can lead to poorer mental health and lower grades in school, as well as other behavioral concerns.⁴⁹ Minority groups are disproportionately impacted, with LGBTQI+, Māori, ethnic, and Pacific communities all facing higher rates of bullying in New Zealand.^{44,529,530} Research into bullying has traditionally focused heavily on the victims, identifying those things that connect them</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature shows that offline and online bullying are connected, meaning that young people who are bullied in person are also facing this online.⁵²⁹ • Young people can't escape their bullies, even in their home environment, meaning that young people may be on edge around the clock.⁴⁹ • There is a growing body of evidence that time online doesn't alone dictate whether a young person experiences bullying.

	<p>and why they might be susceptible to bullying, without adequately considering the wider culture which allows bullying to occur.⁵²⁹</p>	<p>Even those who spend short periods of time online can still be bullied.⁵²⁹</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A cross-national analysis of young people’s social media use and cyberbullying, found that problematic social media use is a higher risk factor for perpetrators and victims.⁵³¹ • There is a higher level of ambiguity online than in person, which can make it difficult to tell whether interactions are a joke or malicious, this ambiguity can cause stress for young people.⁵³² • The gap in understanding between young people and their parents, caregivers, and whānau’s generation can make it difficult for them to support young people who experience cyberbullying.⁴⁹
<p>2.11 Body image.</p>	<p>Young people are navigating body image, with pressure to fit into the idealised body type. For men, this is generally seen as muscular with limited body fat and the female body is slim and fit but still with some curves; often implicit in this ideation is whiteness and being non-disabled.⁵³³ Research has been conducted into the impact of social media on young women’s body image, with growing work on the impact on young men.^{534,535} Those at higher risk of body image dissatisfaction are those with high levels of social media use.⁵³⁶ There are still gaps in the literature with further research needed, particularly on how social media impact Māori, Pacific, LGBTQI+, and marginalised communities’ body image.⁵³⁴ Research in New Zealand found that a strong connection with Māori culture has the potential to buffer against Western body ideals and lead to greater body satisfaction, including individuals with higher BMI.⁵³⁷⁻⁵⁴⁰ There is research that shows equipping young people with social media literacy could have a mediating effect on body image, as well as reducing the amount of time spent on social media.^{536,541}</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media platforms can allow the glorification of weight loss;²⁷⁴ platforms have failed to adequately moderate content encouraging eating disorders.⁵⁴² • Many young women are comparing themselves with ‘fit’ and ‘attractive’ influencers and peers, which can promote negative body image and potentially impact their mental health.^{534,535,543} • Young men’s body image is also impacted by social media.⁵³³ Research in the Netherlands showed that young male gym users’ comparison of physical appearance with other social media users increases the likelihood of using dietary supplements, with 9.0% of those surveyed using androgenic anabolic steroids. The study found that image-centric social media use (Instagram, TikTok, etc.) was correlated with negative body image.⁵⁴⁴

<p>2.12 Mental health.</p>	<p>Since 2009 there has been a decline in young people’s mental health.⁵⁴⁵ The New Zealand Health Survey shows an upward trend in psychological distress since the 2011 survey; there are groups who are disproportionately impacted, including women, Māori, Pacific people’s, and those facing higher deprivation.^{546,547} This has been parallel to a growth in awareness of mental health issues. A meta-analysis of research into mental health found that the majority of mental health disorders are diagnosed in adolescents or young adulthood, with evidence that mental health disorders that occur in this time often impact young people over their life course, highlighting the importance of support during this period.^{545,548} COVID-19 added to a further decline in young people’s mental health.⁵⁴⁹ A systematic review of young people’s mental health after the pandemic began saw increased depression, anxiety, psychological distress, and increased feelings of loneliness and isolation.⁵⁵⁰ Beyond this, other factors, including climate change, are impacting our young people.⁵⁵¹</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a correlation between the rise in social media use and the decline in young people’s mental health.⁵⁵² Still, the evidence base for causation at a population level is significantly weaker and a point of substantive debate.⁵⁵³ • There is stronger evidence that social media may impact a small portion of young adults negatively and potentially a small portion positively, but not across the board.^{549,553} • Research has shown stronger evidence that excessive use, and use which interferes with sleep, could have the most potential to negatively impact young people.⁵⁵⁴
<p>2.13 Pornography.</p>	<p>The vast majority of young people are accessing or have viewed pornography.⁵⁵⁵ Pornography is being used by some young people as a mode of sex education,⁵⁵⁶ but often gives an inherently distorted view of sex, not necessarily reflective of offline experiences. Pornography has traditionally been through a male gaze and broadly objectified women in this process.⁵⁵⁶ For gender diverse and LGBTQI+ young people, pornography can lack representation, but offers an avenue of exploration of sexual identity and potentially could be the only source of education about their sexual identity.^{555,556} While research shows that young men are accessing pornography at higher rates than young women, some of the literature questions the extent of this, pointing to the potential for young women to under-report, due to feeling and being judged</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free and easy access.^{556,557} • People can easily access material that depicts abuse.⁵⁵⁶ • Young people potentially incorporate online pornography inspired practices, some of which are unwelcome, including violence, into offline sexual interaction.⁵⁵⁵⁻⁵⁵⁷ • Young people can be shown pornography in school settings by peers, stumble across it online, or purposefully search for it.⁵⁵⁶ • Concern that consent is not being displayed in much pornography, leading to offline behaviours that aren’t respectful of consent.⁵⁵⁶ • Pornography may embed gendered assumptions of the man being dominant and the woman being submissive.⁵⁵⁶

	differently for their sexuality. ⁵⁵⁶ More research into the impact of pornography on offline risky sexual behaviours is needed. ⁵⁵⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can perpetuate body dissatisfaction in both young men and women.⁵⁵⁶
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