

How young people are managing reliability and misleading content online

A summary report by the [UK Safer Internet Centre](#) for [Safer Internet Day 2021](#)

About the UK Safer Internet Centre

The UK Safer Internet Centre is a partnership of three leading online safety organisations: Childnet International, Internet Watch Foundation and South West Grid for Learning, with a shared mission to make the UK the safest place in the world to go online. The UK Safer Internet Centre coordinates Safer Internet Day each year, reaching millions of young people, parents and carers, and educators across the UK, giving them the vital information and support they need to keep young people safe online.

Young people want an internet they can trust

Being online has been a lifeline for most young people during the pandemic, in terms of their education and social lives, and also as a form of emotional support. While enormously important and useful to young people, the internet also presents challenges around trust and reliability. This research shines a light on young people's experience of unreliable content, highlighting how they are making decisions all the time about the trustworthiness of content they see or receive online, as well as showing the impact this has on them. This research also reveals the strategies young people are using when they encounter misleading content, the support they want to navigate online content more safely and reliably and the changes they want to see.



Will Gardner OBE
Director of the UK Safer Internet Centre



What is misleading content?

In research with young people, misleading content was defined as content that is: "inaccurate, unreliable or not true, which can cause confusion or manipulate and influence people. This can include things like sneaky or hidden sponsored ads on social media, clickbait and fake news, online gaming scams, altered and filtered images, chain messages, false profiles, things that people might say or ask for, misinformation, and more".



The internet has allowed me to do everything that I would normally have done prior to the pandemic and even more, which I think is pretty cool!

Cosima, 14

77%

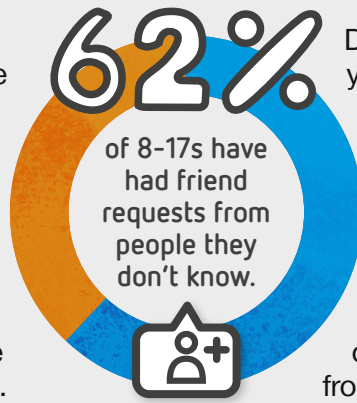
of 8-17s felt being online had been a more important part of their life in 2020 than before



How do young people navigate misleading content?

Misleading content is an increasingly significant feature of young people's online experience, with 51% agreeing that they see more misleading information online than they did before 2020. 48% of young people are seeing misleading content every day and more than 1 in 10 are seeing it more than six times a day. 60% also report seeing either their peers or influencers, bloggers, celebrities or people in the public eye share misleading content.

Young people understand they need to approach some online content critically. Only 25% trust content they see online more than what they see offline and 53% assume that images online, for instance on social media, have been filtered or edited. However, age was key here, with only 40% of 8 and 9 year olds saying they would assume images had been edited or filtered versus 63% of 16 and 17 year olds saying they would.



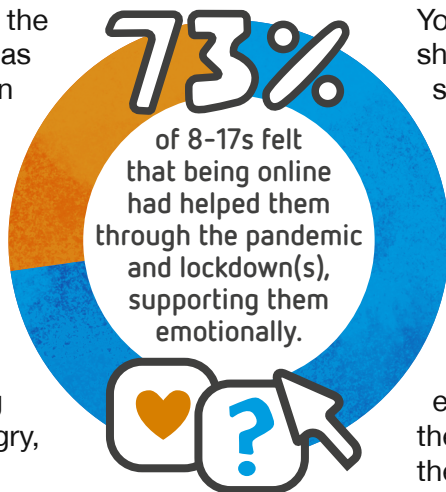
Despite this critical approach, young people are aware that misleading content is not always easy to spot. 63% report being likely to 'fall for' things like gaming scams, sneaky or hidden sponsored ads, filtered or edited imagery on social media, and stories from unofficial sources. Young people must also use their judgement to deal with unsolicited interactions online. For example, 62% have received friend requests from people they don't know. This highlights how young people are having to make decisions online that impact their own safety.

When I see something online that I don't know is necessarily true or false, I go to a number of different media outlets and sources of news to form my opinion on the matter and see what's happening. [Niah, 16](#)

The emotional impact of misleading content

Young people value the online space highly as somewhere they can build emotional resilience in difficult times. However, misleading content also presents challenges for their emotional well-being, often leaving them feeling annoyed, upset, angry, attacked or scared.

In fact, 91% of young people feel either annoyed, upset, sad, angry, attacked or scared at encountering various misleading interactions. Our evidence suggests that most young people do not worry about being endangered or harmed as a result of misleading content. However, up to 8% of them across ages 8-17 say it makes, or would make them feel attacked or scared specifically.

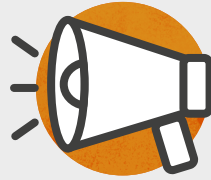


Young people are paying attention to who is sharing misleading content online. 43% have seen either their friends, peers or people their age sharing such content and 35% have seen influencers, bloggers, celebrities or people in the public eye doing this. However, younger children, age 8 to 11, were less likely than average to have seen any of these people sharing misleading content. Only 25% of young people say they have shared misleading content themselves, saying, for example, this was for harmless fun, or because they didn't realise the content was fake or that they shared it because of how unrealistic it was.

Many young people understand the toll that sharing misleading content can take on the emotional well-being of others. 58% agreed sharing misleading content could be harmful and 55% that it could cause upset or hurt.

Seeing misleading information online makes me extremely worried. It concerns me whether I am learning and spreading the correct information, as I would never want to cause myself or others harm because I am misinformed. [Aimee, 16](#)

Young people are taking responsibility and call on others to take action



When asked about the numerous actions they are most likely to take when they come across something online that they think might be misleading, young people have varied responses. While 48% are likely to ignore misleading content or not do anything in response, some are likely to take a variety of actions. 28% talk to a parent or carer about it, 21% block it and 16% report it. 53% of young people feel they have a responsibility to educate their friends and family about sharing misleading content online, and 'call them out' as and when they share it.

Some young people are actually putting this into practice; 17% have noticed a friend sharing misleading content and spoken to them about it and 6% have done the same with a family member. Young people show high levels of concern over potentially harmful misleading content; 59% agree they have a responsibility to report it if they see it. Crucially, they want to be better equipped to navigate the online space reliably, with 61% wanting to learn more about how to spot misleading content online.

As well as taking responsibility themselves, young people are clear in their demands for government and online platforms to do more. As lockdowns continue to disrupt education and everyday life and young people spend more time online, this is more urgent than ever before.



78% think that online platforms should do more to tackle misleading content online

72%

think the government needs to get more involved in promoting safer internet use and tackling misleading content online



The Young People's Charter

The UK Safer Internet Centre (comprised of Childnet, Internet Watch Foundation and SWGfL) has worked with young people to create the Young People's Charter that it will put to the government, calling on them to:

- Establish better protection online
- Ensure that young people and schools have access to high quality, relevant educational tools and resources for safe internet use
- Hold industries and online platforms accountable
- Allow young people to help shape the internet
- The full youth charter will be launched on 9th February, Safer Internet Day 2021



About this research

A quantitative survey was conducted online by Censuswide in December 2020, with 2,021 parents and young people aged 8-17, (4,042 in total). Childnet also consulted with over 50 young people aged 8-18.

