



Northern Ireland
Assembly



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**



**STRANMILLIS
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE**
A College of Queen's University Belfast



**St Mary's
University College**
A College of Queen's University Belfast

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

KESS 2026

Young people's social media use: Experiences of illegal and/or harmful behaviours

Professor Michelle Butler & Professor Dirk Schubotz
School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast
michelle.butler@qub.ac.uk and d.schubotz@qub.ac.uk

20 May 2026

KESS Policy Briefing

...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-informed policy and law-making within Northern Ireland

Key points

For the first time, this research identifies the extent to which young people in Northern Ireland use social media, to what extent they encounter illegal and/or harmful behaviours on social media, as well as how social media use and experiences of illegal and/or harmful behaviours are related to mental health outcomes. The key findings included:

- Almost all 16-year-olds (98%) reported using social media.
- Most 16-year-olds use multiple social media platforms, with over three quarters (78%) reporting using four or more.
- Around half (46%) of 16-year-olds spent 3-5 hours per day on social media, over 1 in 5 (22%) spent between 6-8 hours per day and nearly 1 in 10 (8%) spent more than eight hours per day on social media.
- Higher social media use is related to a higher prevalence of encountering illegal and/or harmful behaviours on social media and to poorer mental health.
- 54% of 16-year-olds had experienced illegal and/or harmful behaviours on social media.
- Being exposed to offensive material, having material shared without consent and stalking were the most common behaviours experienced.
- Females, same-sex attracted young people, those reporting a disability/long-term illness, coming from not well-off families, living in a big city, attending a Grammar school and who spent more than 3-5 hours per day on social media were more likely to report experiencing a greater range of illegal and/or harmful behaviours on social media.
- Two thirds of respondents (67%) stated that the perpetrator of these behaviours was known to them.
- About half (49%) of 16-year-olds felt young people were competent in dealing with the illegal and/or harmful behaviours they encountered on social media while 32% felt young people were not competent to deal with these behaviours.
- More research is required to explore the relationship between social media use, illegal and/or harmful behaviours on social media and poor health outcomes in order to take effective measures to protect children and young people.

More detailed information on these findings is available in the [Screens, Safety and Social Media](#) report and the dataset upon which this analysis is based is available [here](#).

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.

Introduction

Much of young people's lives takes place online and on social media. Technological advances and developments mean that smart mobile phones have become devices with which multiple tasks can be completed; in fact, much of the world around us is increasingly designed around the functionalities of smart mobile phones, compounding our dependency on them. Whilst much of these functionalities can make modern life much easier, there are also increasing concerns about the risks and negative effects that are associated with extensive social media use, much of which takes place on mobile phones. The UK's Online Safety Act (2023) was designed to introduce a level of accountability and responsibility to online platforms to prevent the users of these platforms being exposed to illegal and/or harmful content. However, voices have become louder that demand an age restriction that bans children and young people from using social media altogether.

This KESS Policy Brief reports on research undertaken in 2025 by ARK, Northern Ireland's Social Policy Hub, to establish a baseline on young people's social media use.

Methodology

The 2025 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey was used to capture information about young people's social media usage and experiences of illegal and/or harmful behaviours. The YLT survey consists of a nationally representative sample of 16-year-olds living in Northern Ireland drawn from the Child Benefit Register. All 16-year-olds with January, February and March birthdays were invited to take part in YLT. 2,129 16-year-olds completed the survey - a response rate of 35%. All survey respondents received a £10 gift voucher in recognition of the time taken to complete the survey. While the 2025 YLT survey sample consisted of slightly more females than males (57% compared to 41%), it was otherwise fairly representative of the population of 16-year-olds living in Northern Ireland.

Findings

Social media use

The vast majority (98%) of 16-year-olds reported using social media, with the most popular social media platforms including Snapchat (88%), TikTok (86%), Instagram (81%), WhatsApp (71%) and YouTube (71%). Most reported using multiple social media platforms, with 78% stating they used four or more social media platforms. Nearly half (46%) reported spending 3-5 hours per day on social media, while 22% stated they spent between 6-8 hours per day on social media and 8% spent more than eight hours per day on social media. A relationship between time spent per day on social media and mental health was observed, with more time spent on social media associated with poorer mental

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.

health, both measured with a standardised tool and self-assessed mental health. It was not possible to identify the causal reasons for this relationship from the survey data. For instance, more time spent on social media may increase exposure to illegal and/or harmful behaviours, negatively impacting users' mental health and/or wellbeing. Alternatively, people with poor mental health may spend more time on social media. However, the results indicate that daily social media use is widespread among 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland, with more time spent on social media associated with poorer mental health.

Illegal and harmful behaviours encountered

Over half (54%) of 16-year-olds reported having experienced illegal and/or harmful behaviours on social media. While they were not asked how often they experienced these behaviours, they were asked to identify the different types of illegal and/or harmful behaviours they had experienced. As is evident from Table 1, experiences of being exposed to offensive material, having material shared without consent and stalking were common, with some gender differences evident. Females were more likely than males to report being exposed to offensive material, stalking, attempts to manipulate them, as well as threatening, intimidating or harassing social media activity (see Table 1).

Further analysis revealed that females, same-sex attracted young people, those reporting a disability/long-term illness, coming from not well-off families, living in a big city, attending a Grammar school and spending more than 3-5 hours per day on social media were more likely to report experiencing a greater range of illegal and/or harmful behaviours on social media than others. Moreover, certain types of illegal and/or harmful behaviours were strongly linked to poorer mental health, such as experiencing attempts to manipulate them, threatening, intimidating or harassing social media activity, social media activity motivated by hostility/dislike of their race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or gender, as well as stalking. Some young people believed that exposure to these types of illegal and/or harmful behaviours could negatively impact on mental health, beliefs and self-image. In the words of one young person:

“Social media in my opinion is very manipulative and younger people who have access to it are believing so much stuff that is completely wrong, e.g. videos created with certain topics, body issues and bullying people into looking a certain way to attract other people. It is making more people develop mental health issues, like depression and anxiety, with a sense of not feeling good enough for anyone. Or even eating disorders in which people may starve themselves because they think they are too overweight, or people eating too much because they feel too thin. Bullying people because of the way they look is never acceptable, people feel like others have to be a certain size or have certain features to be worthy of being seen as a human to them. It’s unreal.”

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series 2026

Table 1: Prevalence of illegal and/or harmful behaviours reported by young people

	Males	Females	All
Someone posting/sharing material which you found offensive, indecent or obscene	19%	29%	26%
Someone sharing your information, photos, videos with others without your consent	21%	21%	21%
Someone stalking your activities	16%	22%	20%
Someone attempting to build a relationship with you to try to manipulate you	9%	16%	13%
Someone posting/sharing material motivated by hostility/dislike towards your race, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender	10%	13%	12%
Someone posting/sharing threatening, intimidation or harassing material about or towards you	9%	13%	11%
Offers to buy or sell illegal or stolen goods	11%	11%	11%
Blackmail	8%	10%	9%
People deliberately being dishonest to you to obtain a financial/personal benefit or cause you to lose something	8%	9%	9%
Someone using your information on social media to hack into your accounts	6%	9%	8%
Someone using your information on social media to steal your identity	3%	5%	4%
I have not experienced any of these behaviours	50%	43%	46%

Perpetrators of illegal and harmful behaviours

YLT respondents were asked who had perpetrated the illegal and/or harmful behaviours they had experienced. Multiple perpetrators could be identified. 42% of young people reported it was a stranger, while 67% said the perpetrator was known to them in their communities. In particular, 63% of young people identified other young people as perpetrators, primarily consisting of friends/classmates, another young person known to them in their community, an ex-girlfriend/boyfriend or a current girlfriend/boyfriend. Of particular interest, was how the young people believed that other young people would be 'very likely' or 'quite likely' to engage in illegal and/or harmful behaviours on social media. For instance, 74% believed that other young people would be 'very/quite likely' to share

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.

information without consent, 71% felt other young people would be 'very/quite likely' to engage in stalking, 61% stated other young people would be 'very/quite likely' to share offensive material, 57% reported that other young people would be 'very/quite likely' to post material motivated by hostility/dislike towards another's race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or gender, while 50% said that other young people would be 'very/quite likely' to post threatening, intimidating or harassing material. It was suggested by some that while young people were taught about online safety, more attention needed to be paid to helping them understand the harm they could cause through their own actions and to tackle perceptions that engaging in such behaviours was 'normal', 'fun' or 'banter'. When explaining who they thought was more likely to commit illegal and/or harmful behaviours on social media, one young person stated:

"Young people who are uneducated about the side effects of these harms. Mainly because they haven't been taught how to behave appropriately online by an adult at home or in School."

As such, it was reported that both strangers and those known to young people in their communities (especially their peers) were engaging in illegal and/or harmful behaviours towards them on social media.

Perceived reasons for illegal and/or harmful behaviour on social media

Figure 1 shows that a variety of explanations were offered by survey respondents for why people might engage in illegal and/or harmful behaviours on social media. These explanations included emotional reasons, situational factors, dispositional characteristics associated with the perpetrator, instrumental reasons and for entertainment.

Moreover, the popularity, user profile and features of different social media applications was believed to influence the occurrence of illegal and/or harmful behaviours. Notably, young people felt that such behaviours were more likely to occur on social media platforms which: facilitated anonymity; had less rules and moderation of content; inadequate enforcement of policies; where fake accounts could be easily created; where content was encrypted; user accounts are publicly visible, searchable and easily accessible; where direct communication with other users is enabled; and where users can control who views their content and content can be automatically deleted (e.g. Snapchat). In this way, the motivations and characteristics of the perpetrator were thought to interact with the features of social media platforms to contribute to the occurrence of illegal and/or harmful behaviours on social media.

Consequently, reducing young people's experiences of illegal and/or harmful behaviours on social media may involve tackling both the motivations and factors driving these behaviours, as well as the social media features facilitating these behaviours.

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.

Emotional	Situational	Dispositional	Instrumental	Entertainment
Anger	Anonymity	Bad intentions	Fulfil sexual desires	Banter
Dislike of victim/retaliation	Easy to commit	Immaturity	To obtain money	Fun
Jealousy	Minimal consequences	Judgemental/feeling superior	To gain popularity	To socialise with others
Insecurity	Peer pressure	Being confident	To manipulate people	To cause mischief between people
To escape/ deflect/ cope with difficult situations	Reaction to content posted	Expressing more extreme views	To mislead/trick people	To relieve boredom
To seek attention from others	Lacking awareness of harms caused	Struggling to socially connect with others	In retaliation for harms caused	
To obtain approval/validation from others	Visible and accessible account	Lacking empathy	To gain status amongst peers	
	Normalised behaviour	Displaying unusual traits/behaviours	To obtain information	

Figure 1: Perceived reasons for engaging in illegal and/or harmful behaviours on social media

Help-seeking and support

Finally, when asked how competent they felt young people are to deal with illegal and/or harmful behaviours on social media, 49% of respondents felt young people were ‘very competent’ or ‘quite competent’ to deal with these behaviours, while 32% felt young people were ‘not very’ or ‘not at all competent’ to deal with these behaviours. Some felt that more work needed to be done to teach young people how to behave appropriately on social media and, in particular, to teach people to consider how their own behaviours may be harming others.

Conclusion

This research provides a baseline for young people's experiences of social media use in Northern Ireland. The YLT survey results show that excessive social media use is related to poorer mental health and higher exposure to illegal and/or harmful behaviours on social media. Overall about one-in-two 16-year-olds had experienced illegal and/or harmful behaviours on social media. The survey identified that females, same-sex-attracted young people, those reporting a disability/long-term illness, coming from not well-off backgrounds, living in a big city, attending Grammar school and spending more than 3-5 hours per day on social media were especially at risk of exposure to illegal and/or harmful content. Further research is required to investigate this relationship between social media use, illegal and/or harmful behaviour and poor mental health outcomes.

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.