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Online Grooming: Examining risky encounters amid everyday digital socialization

Findings from 2021 qualitative and quantitative research
among 9-17-year-olds

Research conducted by Thorn in partnership with Benenson Strategy Group

THORN ¹



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Introduction

Online socialization and exploration are, at their base, some of the most valuable offerings of the internet. Young people develop strong and meaningful relationships in online spaces: they connect over shared interests, explore new cultures, and take chances away from the pressure of offline communities. For some, online relationships provide critical support and acceptance, creating a sense of belonging for many who may lack it in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods.

On the other hand, individuals wishing to befriend and manipulate kids for the purpose of sexual exploitation, or “grooming,” capitalize on these same experiences. Interacting with others on the internet offers a level of anonymity that can feel freeing and emboldening to young people. They interact in a way they might not offline, and this creates an opportunity for those wishing to abuse kids to isolate, victimize, and build false relationships with them.

TERMINOLOGY

Online grooming:

The intentional use of the internet to manipulate and/or coerce someone into participating in sexually explicit interactions or exchanges.

This presents a unique challenge for those looking to safeguard young people in digital environments: how do we encourage safe exploration while preventing exploitation? How do we protect one without sacrificing the other?

In recent years, Thorn has conducted a series of surveys to look specifically at the experiences of young people who have shared explicit imagery (“nudes”) of themselves. Sharing nudes is now viewed as normal by more than one-third¹ of teens and many engage in the behavior as a continuation of offline flirtation. Data from that research also showed that nearly half of minors who had shared nudes had done so with someone they only knew online and 40% had shared with someone they believed to be an adult. We are at risk for these trends continuing to rise.

The urgency has never been greater to move beyond all-or-nothing warnings of online dangers and focus on relevant, scalable interventions that reduce online threats and empower young people as they navigate adolescence in a digital age.

¹ Thorn. (2021). Self-Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material: Youth Attitudes and Experiences in 2020. Available at: https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/SGCSAM_Attitudes&Experiences_YouthMonitoring_FullReport_2021.pdf

Thorn's latest research sought to understand kids' online social networks to better disentangle high value versus high risk relationships. In a survey of 1,200 youth (aged 9-17), we explored young people's attitudes and experiences with friendships and flirting online, and how they respond to threats of manipulation, grooming, and abuse. Four key findings emerged:

1. Online relationships can be quite personal and meaningful – and for 1 in 3 young people, their closest friendships formed online.

2. Flirting and dating online are viewed as common, even when it involves an adult or someone much older. While it was more common among teens, still roughly 1 in 3 9-12-year-olds believed it was common to flirt with other minors online and 1 in 5 believed it was common to date a young adult online.

3. Minors are regularly encouraged to leave open forums for 1-to-1 environments by online-only contacts. In fact, two-thirds of minors reported they have been asked by someone they met online to move from a public forum to a private conversation on a different platform.

4. Being made to feel uncomfortable by an online connection does not guarantee a minor will be ready to cut off contact. Nearly one-quarter of kids stayed in contact with someone online who made them uncomfortable, with LGBTQ+ youth more than twice as likely to be in this position.

Methodology & Research Design

Research into the online experiences of youth and subsequent risk for online grooming presents unique challenges. It's essential for researchers to ensure research is safe and rigorous while remaining nimble enough for findings to be relevant within the dynamic digital environment. Survey authors have included here a brief description of some of these challenges and the actions taken to mitigate them, in addition to the final research design deployed.

Challenges

CHALLENGE: The use of traditional peer-reviewed research methods are not nimble enough for the digital landscape and issue at hand: the technologies and platforms intersecting with this issue are in a constant state of change, as are the habits of the kids who use them.

Action: *This research relies on dynamic social research methodologies, which enable faster collection and analysis of data, to ensure it best reflects the current digital landscape. Because design limitations restrict the number of platforms shown to participants, this survey includes a diverse but non-exhaustive list of platforms, with top priority given to social platforms. The final list is informed by historical research, external reports, and expert consultation, and is re-evaluated for the needs of each individual survey.*

CHALLENGE: Attitudes towards sexuality vary widely across demographics.

Action: *This is a universal issue, but the way it impacts minors differs across demographics. This research was primarily aimed at identifying trends among minors overall, as well as within age groups (i.e., aged 9–12 and aged 13–17). A secondary objective was to get a broad understanding of how trends around this issue manifest differently across demographics. Given sample size limitations, some of the identified trends within subgroups are more appropriately viewed as starting points.*

CHALLENGE: Entrenched stigma and sensitivity surrounding the topic may lead to an undercounting of the scale and frequency.

Action: *Asking individuals — especially minors — to open up about a subject as delicate and personal as sharing nude images of themselves likely activates self-report bias where participants lean into more socially desirable responses. It also requires the design of survey instruments that are safe and supportive. Sequence was important in our research instruments so that sensitive questions were prefaced with a note acknowledging the difficulty of*

discussing the topic and reiterating the anonymity of the responses. Questions were also written in a manner that gave the space for individuals to answer generally about “people they know” in lieu of asking them only point-blank about their own online experiences. Resources for additional information and referrals for real-time support were highlighted in all survey instruments.

CHALLENGE: Some survey questions rely on kids’ perceptions which also may influence scale and frequency outcomes.

Action: *This research collected data that captured kids’ perceptions of who their online-only contacts are, including their perceptions of those contacts’ attributes, such as age and gender. These perceptions can be accurate or inaccurate based on the information available to them and what they believe (e.g., “I know he’s 17 because he told me he was”). This research explores how minors interact with perceived demographics, but may not fully capture the experiences of minors’ interactions with adults who are posing as minors to facilitate trust-building and manipulation.*

CHALLENGE: This study captured youth attitudes and behaviors at the beginning of 2021 – during which a worldwide pandemic (COVID-19) was continuing to influence kids, their online experiences, and social relationships.

Action: *The researchers acknowledge the continued and ever-changing pandemic reality inhibits our ability to distinguish the precise role COVID-19 has played in the ways kids explore and interact within their online worlds. That said, the focus of this research was on kids’ online relationships and their intersection with online grooming risk and did not attempt to analyze pandemic impact more specifically.*

Research Design

The resulting research focused on minors aged 9-17.² Both qualitative and quantitative research tools were used to collect data related to minors’ online experiences. Collectively, the research sought to understand youth experiences related to online relationships with a specific focus on online grooming, or the intentional use of the internet to manipulate and/or coerce someone into participating in sexually explicit interactions or exchanges.

PHASE 1 – QUALITATIVE ONLINE DIARIES

The qualitative phase was first and foremost exploratory; it collected data via online diaries which were designed to safely capture a nuanced understanding of a minor’s experiences with, and awareness of, online grooming and to provide insight into how minors view the development of online-only contacts. Insights developed during this phase of research informed the development of research hypotheses and were used to shape the quantitative research process.

² In the context of this report, and unless otherwise noted, the term “minors” is used to describe young people represented in the survey sample (aged 9-17).

A key benefit derived from the use of online diaries is that participants are afforded greater space for privacy to reflect upon and share their experiences. In total, 25 minors aged 13-17³ participated in “online diaries” from November 12-21, 2020.

During the collection period, participants logged onto a secure platform where they were prompted with three sets of multi-layer questions. Each set of diary questions explored a specific theme:

- **Online communities** — An “online community” represents different things to different people; how do kids view their online community, where and how do kids connect with new people, and what role does trust have within their online communities?
- **Online-only contacts** — Are online-only contacts perceived differently from contacts kids also know offline? What possible benefits do kids see in connecting with someone they only know online? What do kids see as some of the perceived motivations of their online-only contacts? Are some of their relationships with online-only contacts considered romantic, and do kids feel comfortable sharing nude images with those contacts?
- **High-risk interactions and reporting** — What circumstances with online-only contacts make kids feel uncomfortable or unsafe, and how do they respond and/or seek support? Are kids aware of online grooming, and if so, what are their perceptions of it?

Participants were recruited and screened for participation from online panels. Participation incentives were paid in the form of gift cards or other nominal rewards as per the arrangement with the panels on which they participated. Quotas were set when recruiting participants to ensure a

representative nationwide sample based on age, gender, race, education, and geography, as well as additional requirements to ensure participants had access to the internet.

PHASE 2 – QUANTITATIVE ONLINE SURVEY

The quantitative research was designed to build on the insights surfaced in the qualitative phase. The intention of this research phase was to quantify minors’ perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors related to their online relationships by collecting data through a survey instrument. While the majority of survey responses required participants to select their response(s) from a list of options, the survey also included several “open-ended” questions, where participants were asked to provide a response in their own words. The inclusion of these open-ended questions allowed us to get greater context surrounding the lived experiences of minors than would be possible through a purely quantitative methodology.

In total, 1,200 minors from across the United States participated in a 20-minute online survey from January 27-February 12, 2021. Specifically, sample makeup included:

- n=445: 9-12-year-olds
- n=755: 13-17-year-olds

To ensure a representative nationwide sample, data was weighted to age, gender, race, and geography, based on U.S. Census data.

A Note on Results and Reporting

Due to rounding, many of the figures included in this report may not have columns or rows that add up to exactly 100%. The researchers have also noted where data was influenced by multi-select response options.

³ Online diaries focused on the inclusion of 13-17-year-olds based on an assumption that teenagers are better equipped to engage with self-directed methodologies compared to younger kids.

Regrettably, there was a typographic error featured in three of the survey questions. Where the fifth response option should have read “less often,” it instead read “less often, but have used before.” We believe that respondents understood the intent of the fifth answer choice and answered accordingly. Where applicable we present the data within aggregate categories.

A Note on Privacy and Safety

Ensuring the privacy and safety of those who chose to participate in this research was paramount. Before a minor could participate in each phase of the research, the participant’s caregiver was required to sign a release form detailing the nature of this study. In addition, help resources were provided to participants in the event they wanted to learn more about the topics discussed or needed professional support to talk about these issues.

Makeup of Online Social Networks

"I think it is normal for people to connect with people online that they haven't met in person because social media is such a big part of people's [lives] that people will start to meet people online and form bonds."

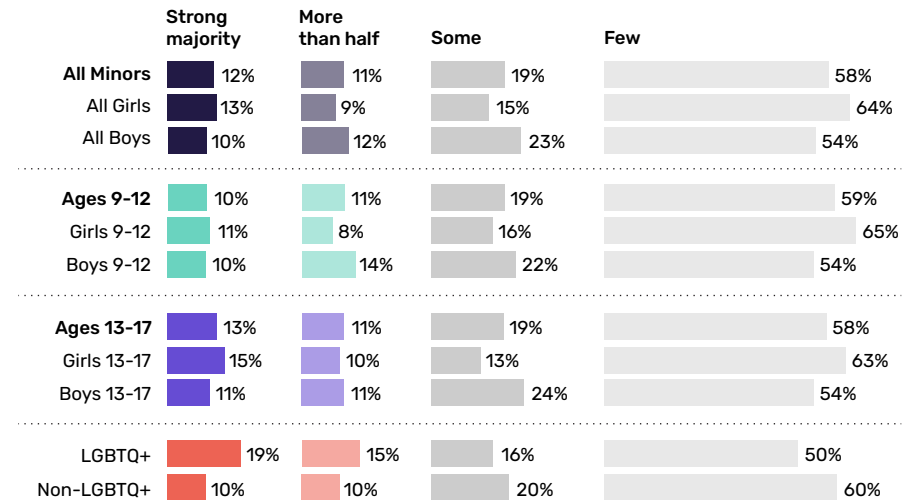
CIS FEMALE, 17, WHITE, SOUTH

While meeting new people online is a common part of being on the internet, for most minors, offline friends make up the majority of their online social networks (Fig 1). Overall, 77% of minors reported they know more than half of the people they interact with online from their offline communities, compared to 23% of minors who reported that more than half their online contacts they exclusively know online. Girls reported fewer online-only connections than boys: while nearly two-thirds (64%) of girls stated less than a quarter of the people they interact with online were unknown to them offline, about one-half (54%) of boys reported the same. Boys responded to more messages from unfamiliar people online: 1 in 7 (14%) boys reported they respond to the majority of messages they receive from unfamiliar contacts compared to about 1 in 12 (7%) girls (Fig 2).

LGBTQ+ minors' online communities appeared to have the most online-only connections (Fig 1) and LGBTQ+ minors were more responsive to messages from unfamiliar contacts (Fig 2). One-third of LGBTQ+ minors

Fig 1 | Proportion of minors' online contacts who they only know online

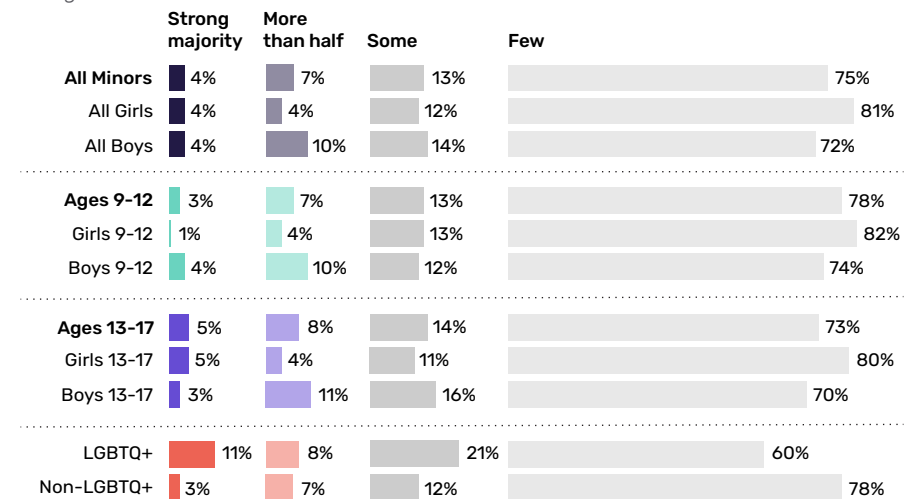
Q9. Overall, if you had to say, roughly what % of the people you interact with online are people you only know online and have never met in person?



Note: Strong majority (76% or more), More than half (51-75%), Some (26-50%), Few (0-25%)

Fig 2 | Proportion of messages from online-only contacts that minors respond to

Q16. Overall, if you had to say, roughly what % of the people who message you that you do not know offline, do you respond to? Don't worry about calculating it exactly, just give your best guess.



Note: Strong majority (76% or more), More than half (51-75%), Some (26-50%), Few (0-25%)

reported at least half of their online contacts are only known to them online, including 1 in 5 (19%) who reported that more than 75% of their online contacts are people they only know online. Additionally, 1 in 5 (19%) LGBTQ+ minors reported they respond to a majority of the messages they receive from people they don't know offline, compared to just 1 in 10 (10%) of non-LGBTQ+ minors.

Friends vs. Strangers

Despite offline connections making up a large, if not majority, portion of their social networks, minors do not view online relationships as fundamentally superficial or fleeting. They reported a wide range of topics – such as gaming, current events, and flirting, to name a few – over which they connected with new people in digital environments. Most (74%) minors reported that the typical online relationship lasts more than one month (Fig 3). For 1 in 3 (32%) minors, the friends they make online were considered among their closest confidants (Fig 4).

"[My online community is] LGBTQ+, because I am bisexual and am seeking out people with similar experiences."

CIS FEMALE, 17, WHITE, MIDWEST

1 in 3

Minors consider a connection they made online among their closest friends

"Because you feel lonely and want a friend. Or because you feel like no one else understands you."

CIS FEMALE, 13, WHITE, WEST

"I get to choose how to connect and talk to people on my own terms."

CIS MALE, 17, AFRICAN AMERICAN/BLACK/CARIBBEAN AMERICAN, SOUTH

Overwhelmingly, the leading topic most minors reported connecting online over was shared interests (Fig 5). Across demographic groups, more than 2 in 3 minors (70%) reported they talk about shared interests like gaming, pop culture, and/or hobbies with their

online-only connections. This was followed by having a friend in common: 44% of minors reported a mutual friend as a point of connection and conversation between them and their online-only connections.

"We both stan the group BTS so we met by either [me] commenting under their tweet about their relatable content or vice versa. From there, we started talking and became friends because of our mutual interests...I treat them as though they are IRL friends since I do not see a big difference between them being online a[n]d my IRL friends being here."

CIS FEMALE, 17, AFRICAN AMERICAN/BLACK/CARIBBEAN AMERICAN, WEST

"The people that I don't know personally are friends of friends or go to my school. I [have] never seen these people before but I know that they are connected to me in some way or another."

CIS FEMALE, 16, AFRICAN AMERICAN/BLACK/CARIBBEAN AMERICAN, NORTHEAST

It may be unsurprising, then, that minors don't inherently view online-only contacts as "strangers." When asked to categorize the people they've only met and interacted with online, only 14% of minors categorized them as "strangers" (Fig 6). In fact, more than 1 in 4 (29%) minors described the majority of their online contacts as "friends," with 1 in 5 (19%) indicating a majority of their online-only contacts were "close friends."

LGBTQ+ minors and boys aged 9–12 reported the highest numbers of "strangers" among their virtual connections. Overall, 37% of LGBTQ+ minors and 36% of boys aged 9–12 indicated they consider at least a quarter of the people they only know online to be "strangers." This includes 22% of LGBTQ+ minors and 17% of boys aged 9–12 who reported that a majority of their online-only contacts are "strangers."

"Everyone's a stranger at some point, you know."

TRANSGENDER/NON-BINARY, 16, AFRICAN AMERICAN, SOUTH

Fig 3 | Perceived length of most online-only friendships

Q26. In your opinion, how long do most online-only friendships last for?

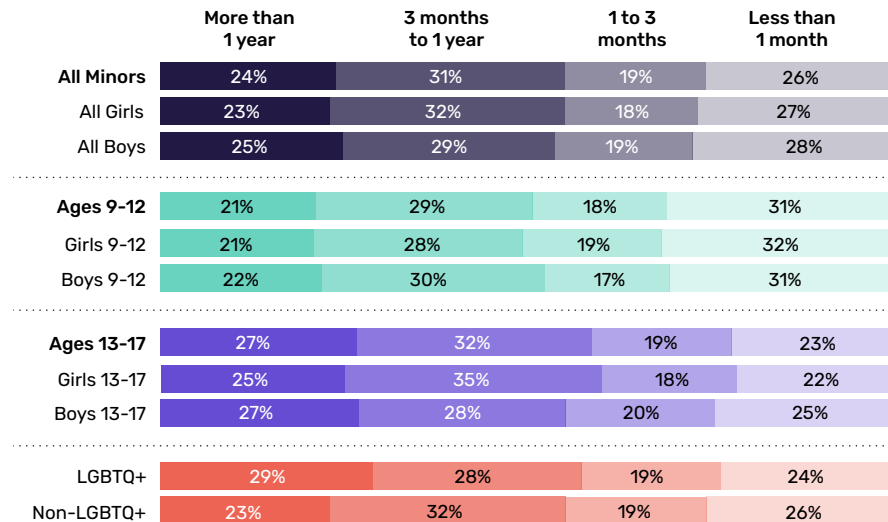


Fig 4 | Distribution of how minors know their closest friends

Q24. In general, if you had to say, are your closest friends the people you know...

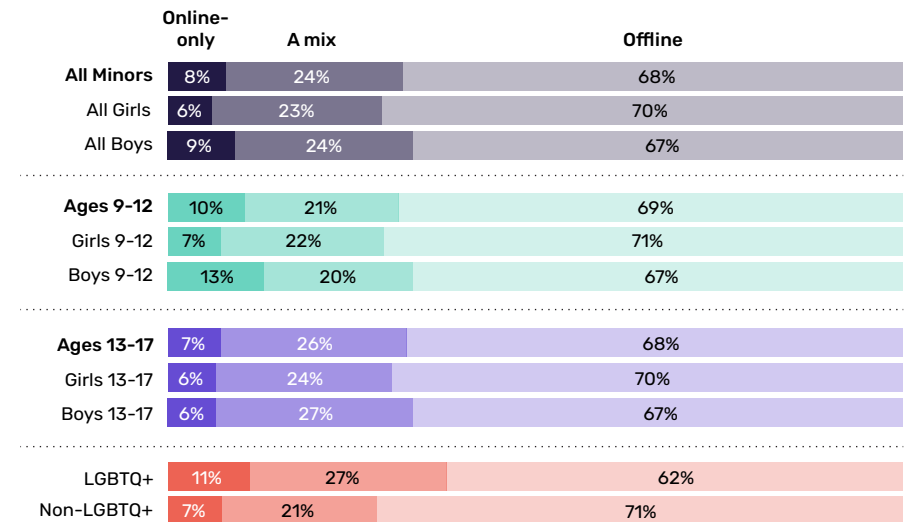
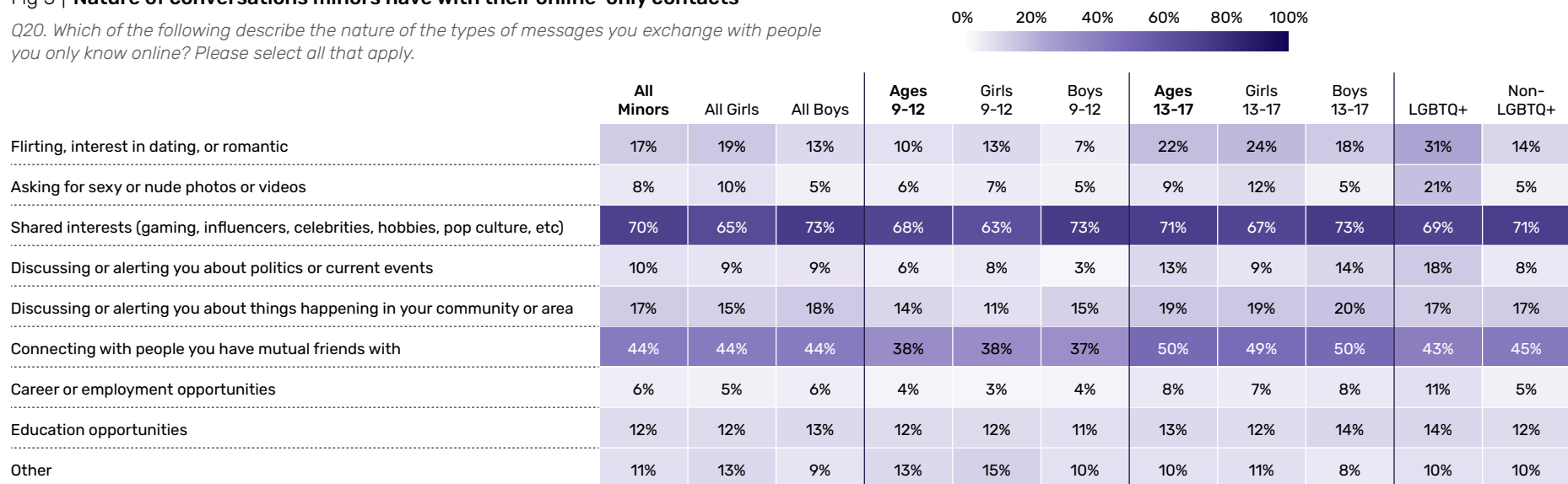


Fig 5 | Nature of conversations minors have with their online-only contacts

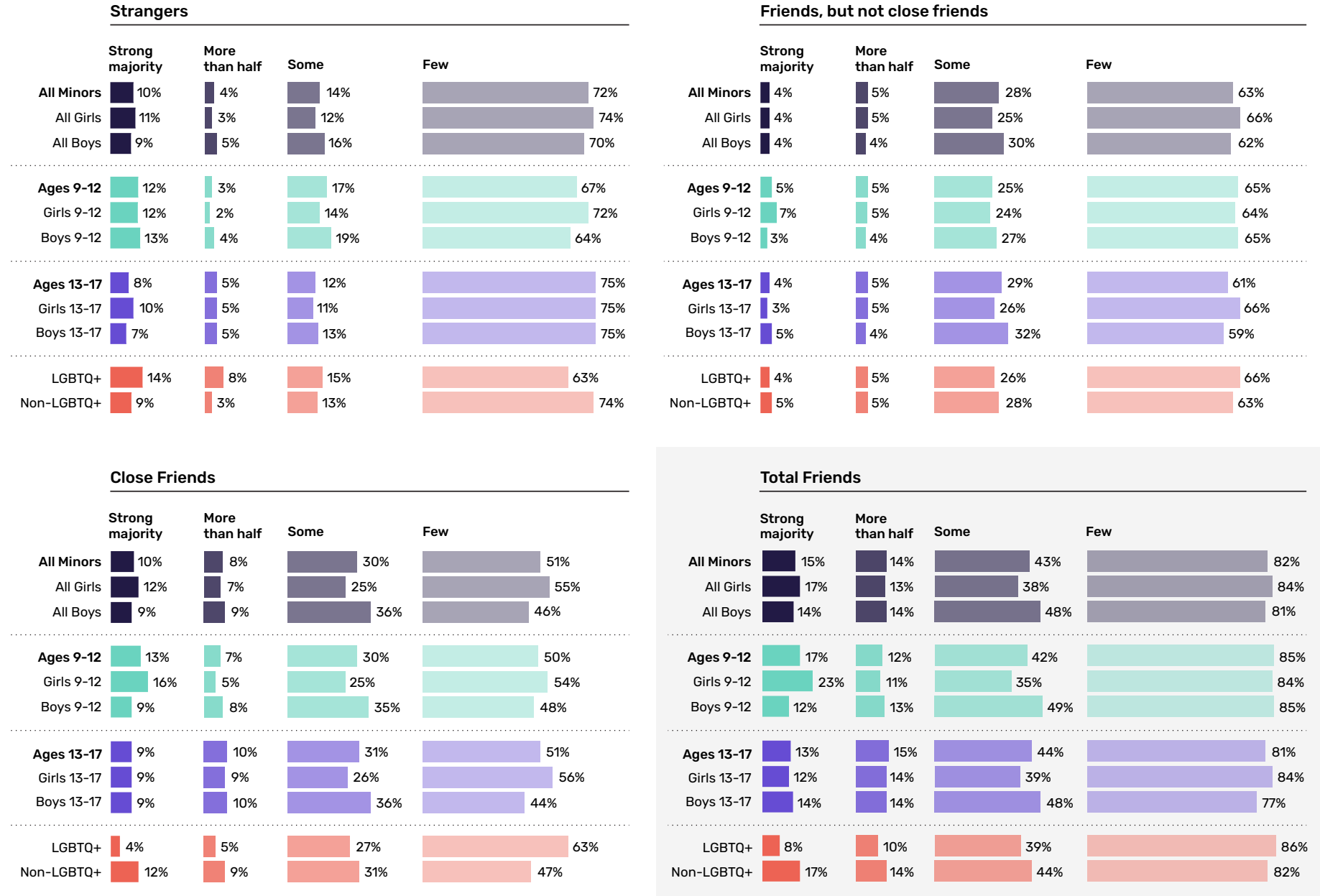
Q20. Which of the following describe the nature of the types of messages you exchange with people you only know online? Please select all that apply.



Note: Columns will total more than 100 because question was multiple select.

Fig 6 | Minors' perceived relationship type with their online-only contacts

Q10. Thinking about the people you only know online, what percent do you say that any of them are...?



Note: "Total friends" data will total more than 100 because the numbers shown combine two response options: "friends, but not close friends" and "close friends." Strong majority (76% or more), More than half (51-75%), Some (26-50%), Few (0-25%)

Qualitatively, some minors reported struggling to classify these relationships in general and settled on “friend” as the best approximation for someone they feel close to but ultimately only know virtually.

“I wouldn’t consider the people I only chat with online to be friends, they’re really just people who I talk to when my real life friends aren’t available. I would say it’s fun talking to them but I wouldn’t describe them as my friends. Although if someone asked me “who are you texting?” And I was texting someone I only know online, I’d say “a friend” just to save time and energy.”

CIS FEMALE, 16, HISPANIC OR LATINO/A, SOUTH

Role of Age

Typically, minors connect with people online that they perceive to be of a similar age to themselves and have a natural hesitation to connect with unfamiliar adults: 1 in 6 (17%) minors reported they would be comfortable connecting with someone they believed to be aged 21 or older (Fig 7).

Fig 7 | Oldest age of an online-only contact minors feel comfortable connecting with

Q60. Let’s say you connected with someone online that you had never met in person. What is the oldest age you would feel comfortable connecting with online?

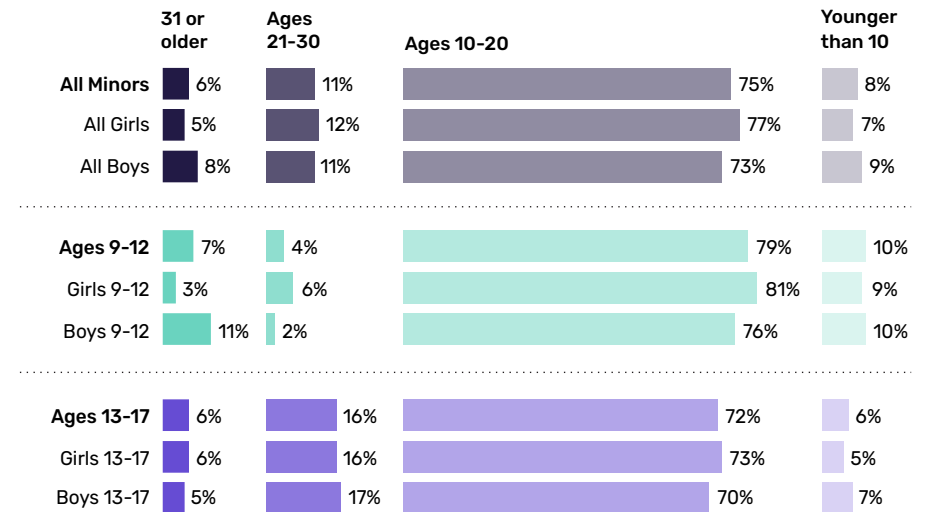
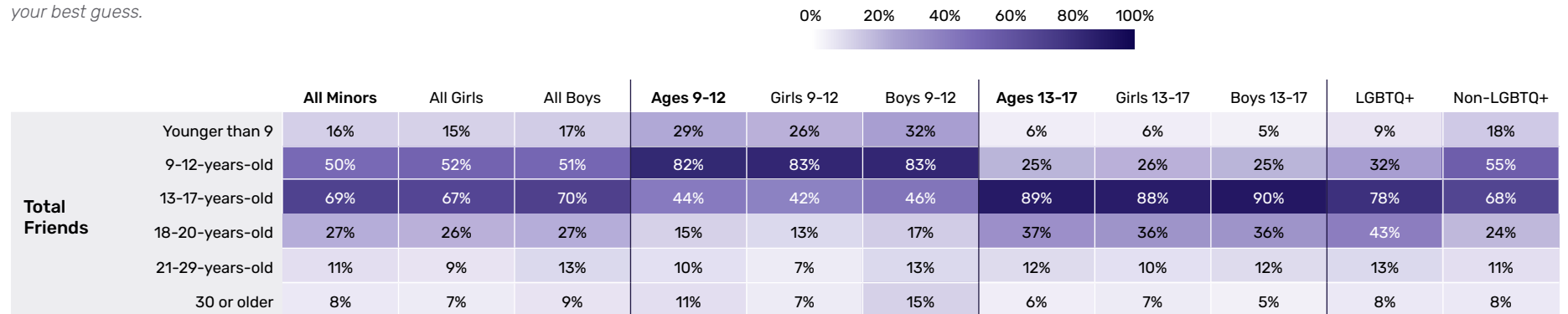


Fig 8 | Minors’ online-only contacts who they consider “friends” by perceived age of the contact

Q13. Which of the following age ranges describe any of the types of people you only know online? Please select all that apply and if you aren’t sure about the age range just give your best guess.



Note: “Total friends” data will total more than 100 because the numbers shown combine two response options: “friends, but not close friends” and “close friends.”

Instead, online-only connections who they perceive to be their same-aged peers make up the overwhelming majority of the virtual connections they consider “friends” (Fig 8).

While connecting with online-only contacts who they perceived to be same-aged peers was most common among minors, connecting with unfamiliar adults online was hardly rare (Fig 9). In fact, most (82%) minors reported they interact online with people they believe to be adults whom they do not know offline: close to one-half (47%) of minors reported having an online-only connection aged 18-20, while one-third (32%) reported an online-only connection aged 21 or older.

Overall, minors’ interactions with unfamiliar adults online generally skewed toward younger adult contacts. While we can anticipate that older teens may befriend adults closer to their ages (i.e. aged 18-20) – some of whom could be current classmates or recent graduates of their school – the rates of their connections with older adults remains striking: 1 in 3

(32%) teens reported connecting online with someone they believed to be between the ages of 21-29, 1 in 4 (24%) teens reported connecting online with someone they believed to be aged 30 or older.

Yet, online-only connections with adults were not limited to teens alone: 2 in 3 (63%) 9-12-year-olds also reported connecting and interacting online with people they believed to be adults, including 1 in 4 (26%) who have connected online with someone they believed to be between the ages of 21 to 29 and about 1 in 5 (22%) who have connected with someone they believed to be 30 or older. Notably, 9-12-year-olds were almost as likely as teens to have online-only contacts they believed to be aged 30 or older.

While close to one-third of minors (31%) classified at least some of the adults with whom they only have a

1 in 4

Teens interact online with someone they believe is 30 or older

2 in 3

9-12-year-olds interact with unfamiliar adults online

Fig 9 | Minors’ online-only contacts by perceived age of the contact

Q13. Which of the following age ranges describe any of the types of people you only know online? Please select all that apply and if you aren’t sure about the age range just give your best guess.

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

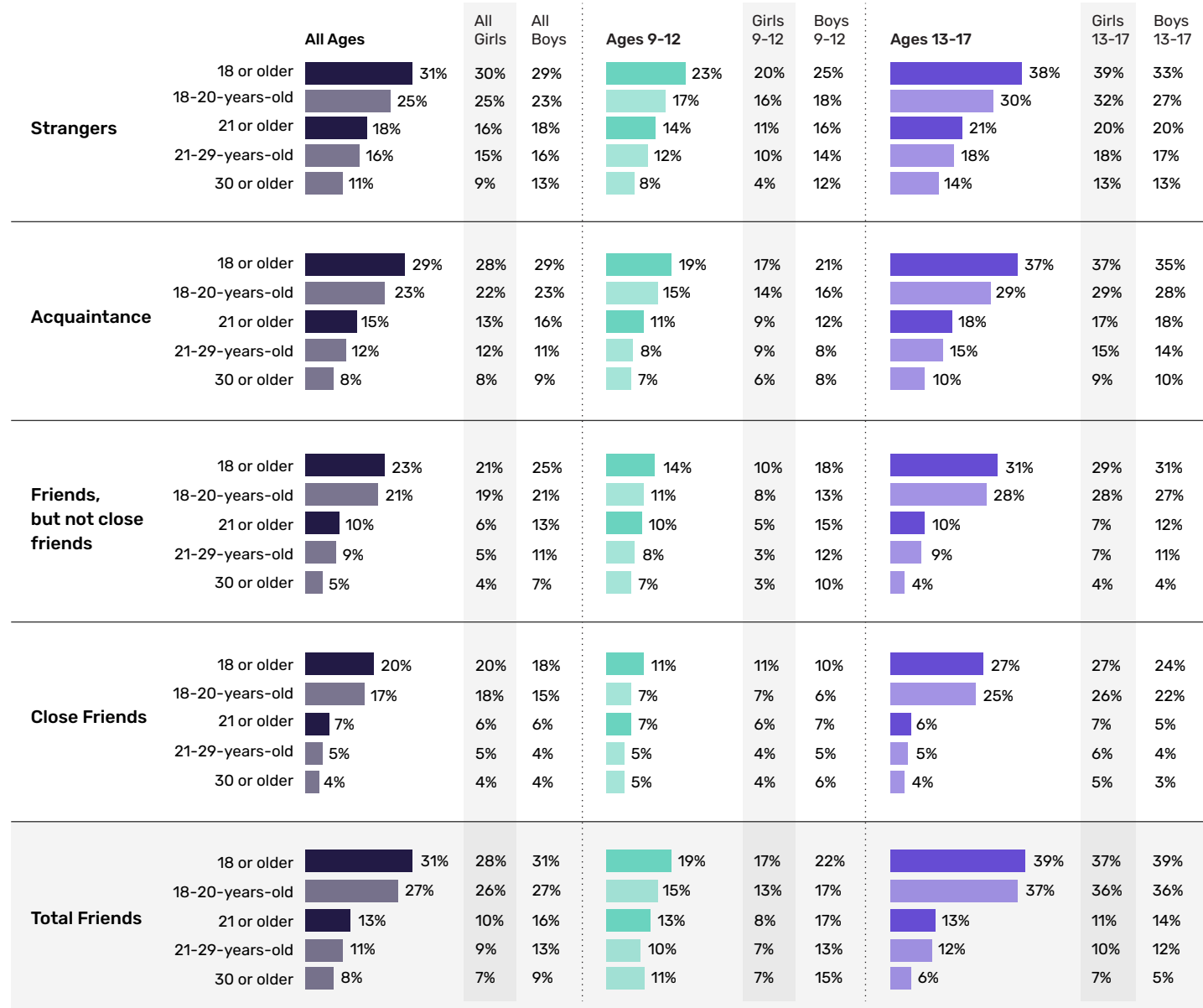


	All Minors	All Girls	All Boys	Ages 9-12	Girls 9-12	Boys 9-12	Ages 13-17	Girls 13-17	Boys 13-17	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
Younger than 9	26%	24%	28%	41%	37%	46%	14%	15%	13%	19%	28%
9-12-years-old	61%	62%	62%	90%	87%	93%	37%	41%	36%	50%	64%
13-17-years-old	79%	75%	82%	61%	54%	68%	93%	92%	93%	84%	79%
18 or older	82%	78%	84%	63%	56%	69%	96%	96%	96%	88%	81%
18-20-years-old	47%	46%	46%	34%	30%	38%	57%	59%	54%	61%	44%
21 or older	32%	30%	33%	28%	22%	33%	35%	36%	32%	41%	31%
21-29-years-old	29%	28%	30%	26%	22%	30%	32%	33%	29%	36%	29%
30 or older	23%	21%	25%	22%	15%	28%	24%	25%	22%	29%	22%

“All online-only connections” data will total more than 100 because the question was multiple select and it combines four response options: “strangers,” “acquaintances,” “friends, but not close friends,” and “close friends.”

Fig 10 | Minors' online-only adult contacts by perceived age of the contact and relationship type

Q13. Which of the following age ranges describe any of the types of people you only know online? Please select all that apply and if you aren't sure about the age range just give your best guess.



Note: Columns will total more than 100 because question was multiple select. "Total friends" data will total more than 100 because the numbers shown combine two response options: "friends, but not close friends" and "close friends."

virtual connection as “strangers,” 39% of teens and 19% of 9-12-year-olds classified an online-only connection aged 18 or older as a friend or close friend (Fig 10). While teens were more likely to have closer relationships with younger adults (aged 18-20) than 9-12-year-olds, both age cohorts had similar rates (approximately 1 in 10) of virtual friendships with adults they only know online who they believe to be aged between 21-29.

Concerningly, 9-12-year-olds were nearly twice as likely to classify adults aged 30 or older whom they only know online as “friends” than were teens. This was driven mostly by younger boys (aged 9-12), who were twice as likely as younger girls to have reported they have one or more online-only “friend” aged 30 or older.

Compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers, minors identifying as LGBTQ+ reported feeling twice as comfortable connecting online with unfamiliar adults: 31% of LGBTQ+ minors reported they would be comfortable connecting with someone aged 21 or older online, compared to 14% of non-LGBTQ+ minors (Fig 11).

Minors identifying as LGBTQ+ reported higher rates of virtual relationships with adults, though this was heavily driven by friendships with younger adults (aged 18-20): 44% of LGBTQ+ minors reported they have at least one online-only adult friend, compared to 28% of their non-LGBTQ+ peers (Fig 12).

Fig 11 | **Oldest age of an online-only contact LGBTQ+ minors feel comfortable connecting with**

Q60. Let's say you connected with someone online that you had never met in person. What is the oldest age you would feel comfortable connecting with online?

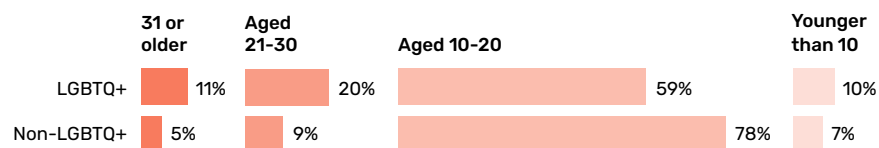
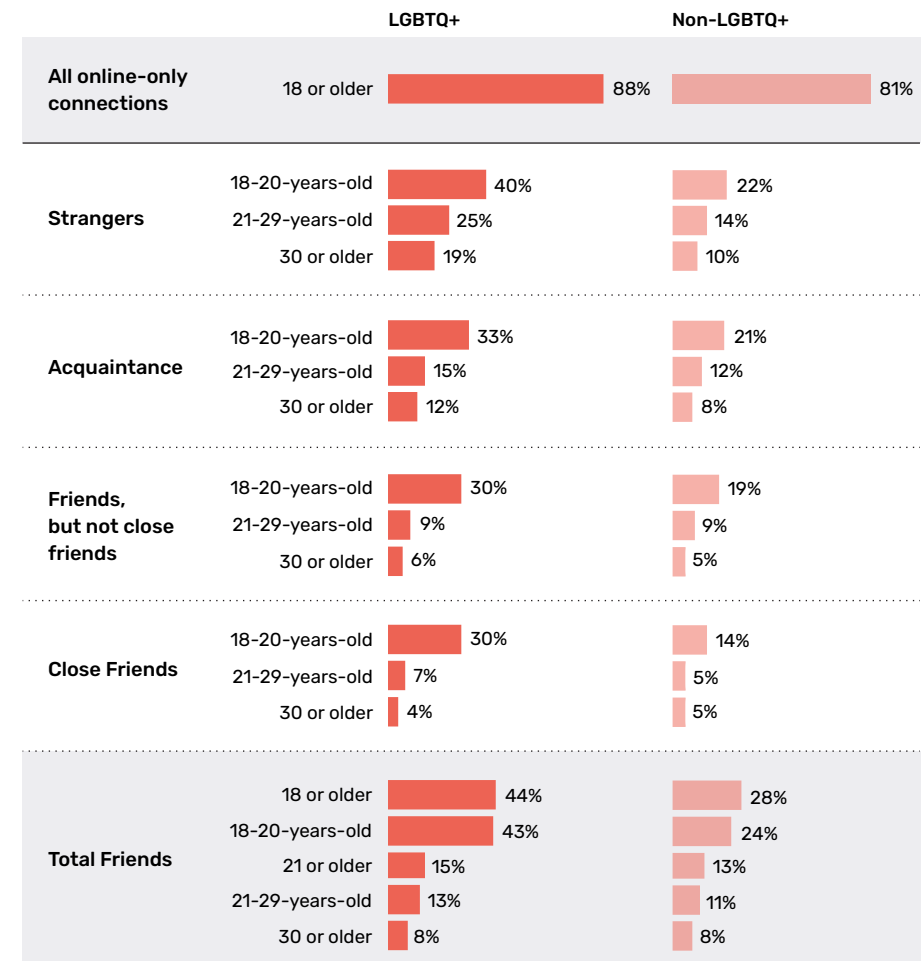


Fig 12 | **LGBTQ+ minors' online-only adult contacts by perceived age of the contact and relationship type**

Q13. Which of the following age ranges describe any of the types of people you only know online? Please select all that apply and if you aren't sure about the age range just give your best guess.



Columns will total more than 100 because question was multiple select. “All online-only connections” data combines four response options: “strangers,” “acquaintances,” “friends, but not close friends,” and “close friends.” “Total friends” data combines two response options: “friends, but not close friends” and “close friends.”

Online Social Interactions & Risks

"I did not know the person in real life so I would not feel embarrassed later on if I said something they did not like or found to be unflattering. It made me feel secure knowing nothing would happen that would make me feel uncomfortable because at the end of the day I could just block the person. It was different because there was not as much pressure to be perfect in every way. It let me relax and be myself rather than stumble over my words and feel insecure."

CIS FEMALE, 17, WHITE, WEST

Most minors understand that developing online-only relationships comes with risks, including manipulation and online grooming. Overall, 2 in 5 (40%) minors reported they have been approached by someone online who they believe was attempting "to befriend and manipulate" them, with LGBTQ+ minors the most likely (63%) to report they have personally experienced this, followed by teen girls (47%). Additionally, 3 in 5 (61%) minors believed this was a common experience for kids like them (same age and gender), with teen girls (28%) and LGBTQ+ minors (27%) the likeliest to report this is a "very common" experience for their peers (Fig 13). Nearly half (45%) of minors reported they were at least somewhat familiar with the term "online grooming" and, after being shown a definition of the term, slightly more than half (54%) reported it was at least a somewhat common experience for kids their age.

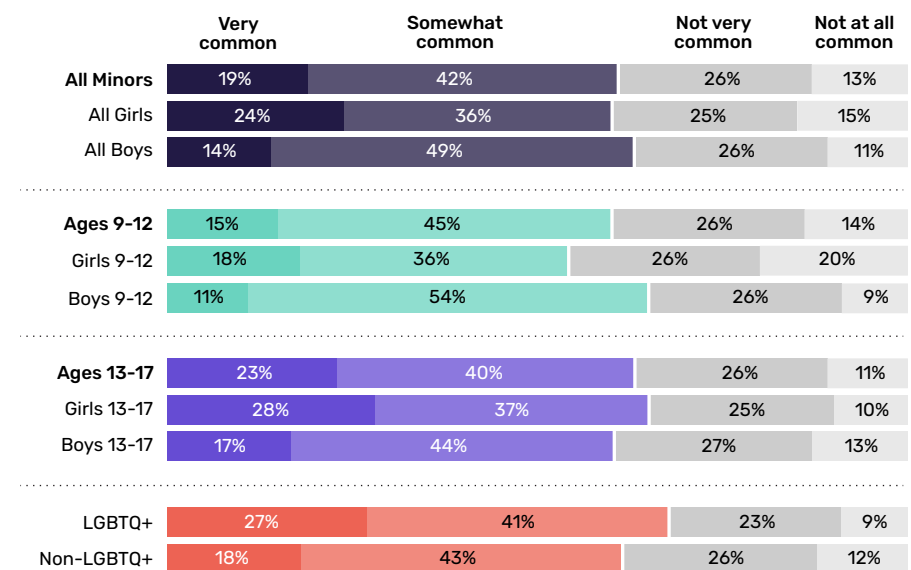
While recognizing possible risks, minors are developing deep and personal relationships with people they meet online and, in some cases, open up with their online-only connections in ways they do not feel comfortable doing offline. For some, the anonymity of the internet

54%

Of minors believe online grooming is a common experience for kids their age

Fig 13 | Perceived frequency of online-only contacts approaching minors to manipulate them

Q68. How common is it among kids your same age and gender to be approached by someone they don't know offline in an attempt to befriend and manipulate them?



is disinhibiting and enables them to explore from the perceived safety of their homes, shielded from judgment by people in their offline communities. For some, as may be the case for many LGBTQ+ youth in particular, the internet may be the only place they feel they can safely be themselves.

"I think its because I don't have to talk face to face and I don't know them super personally its a good way to get [support for] something that may be stressful to you and its usually mutual so you're both helping each other through stressful situations and they're usually nice and supportive of whatever you may be going through or make you feel better and they're also usually always online and there to talk to you."

CIS FEMALE, 16, ASIAN, SOUTH

"I came out to a pretty close friend whom I only know online. I was comfortable talking about it because he was an established adult with a verifiable identity, and he was also gay so it was easy to tell him and not want to be judged. It was quite liberating and he was very supportive."

CIS MALE, 16, ASIAN, NORTHEAST

It is unsurprising, then, that minors are at times sharing personal and sensitive information with the people they meet online with whom they feel close (Fig 14). Sadly, bad actors target this same information to groom, exploit, and extort minors.

Overall, about 2 in 5 (43%) minors reported they have shared sensitive or emotional information where 1 in 7 (14%) minors indicated they have told an online-only contact something they had never told anyone previously. Over a quarter (28%) of minors reported they have shared potentially identifying information with someone they have only met online.

LGBTQ+ minors were considerably more likely to report they have shared sensitive or identifying information with virtual connections.

Nearly 2 in 3 (64%) LGBTQ+ minors reported they have shared sensitive information about themselves, including 1 in 3 (33%) who reported they have divulged information with an online-only contact they had never previously shared with anyone else.

One in four (25%) minors reported engaging in sexual or flirtatious exchanges with an online-only contact, including about one-third (35%) of teen girls. While 9-12-year-olds were the least likely to engage in these types of conversations with online-only contacts, about 1 in 6 (16%) reported they had done so. LGBTQ+ minors were found to be more than twice as likely (49%) to engage in sexual or flirtatious conversations with online-only contacts compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers (20%). Importantly, this does not necessarily represent an increase in desire for risk taking, but instead may represent reduced opportunity to engage in these conversations offline as compared to minors who do not identify as LGBTQ+.

"Well I knew that I would never meet this person so it made me comfortable to talk about anything. It made me feel excited. It was much more convenient for me because I am not allowed to date."

CIS FEMALE, 12, AFRICAN AMERICAN, NORTHEAST

1 in 7

Minors have told a virtual contact something they've never told anyone before

1 in 6

9-12-year-olds have had romantic or sexual conversations with an online-only contact

Flirting and Dating

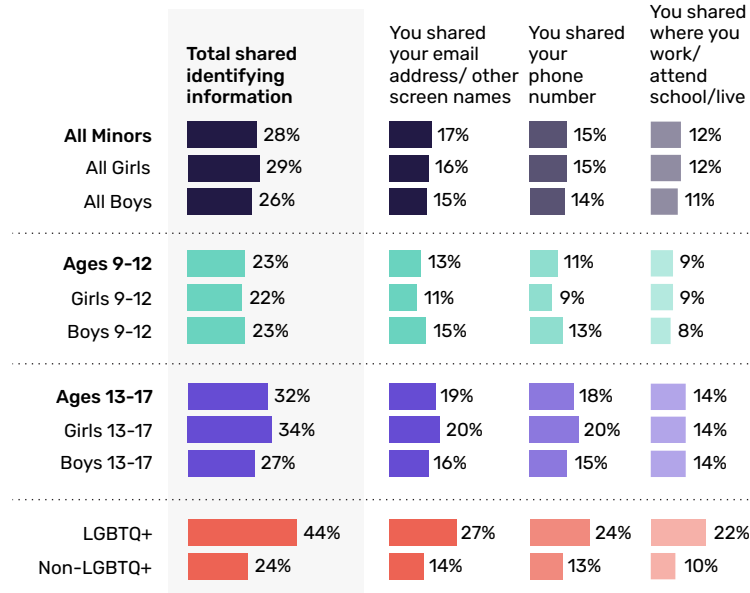
Even for those who haven't themselves experienced it, most teenagers reported perceptions of online flirting and dating with online-only contacts as relatively common, especially between individuals who are similar in age, or at least whom they perceive to be similar in age (Fig 15). Nearly two-thirds (62%) of teens indicated flirting with other teens they

Fig 14 | Types of information minors have shared with online-only contacts

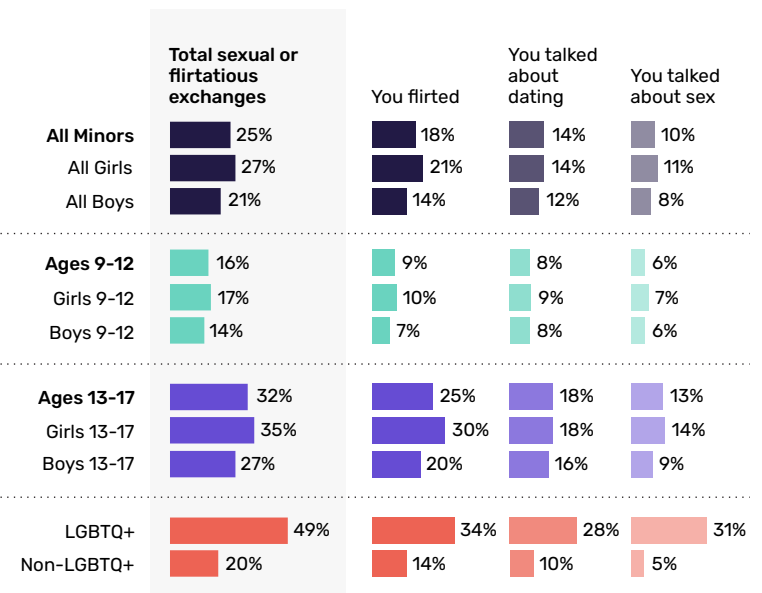
Q50. Have you ever experienced/done any of the following with someone you only know online? Please select all that apply.

Note: Rows will total more than 100 because question was multiple select.

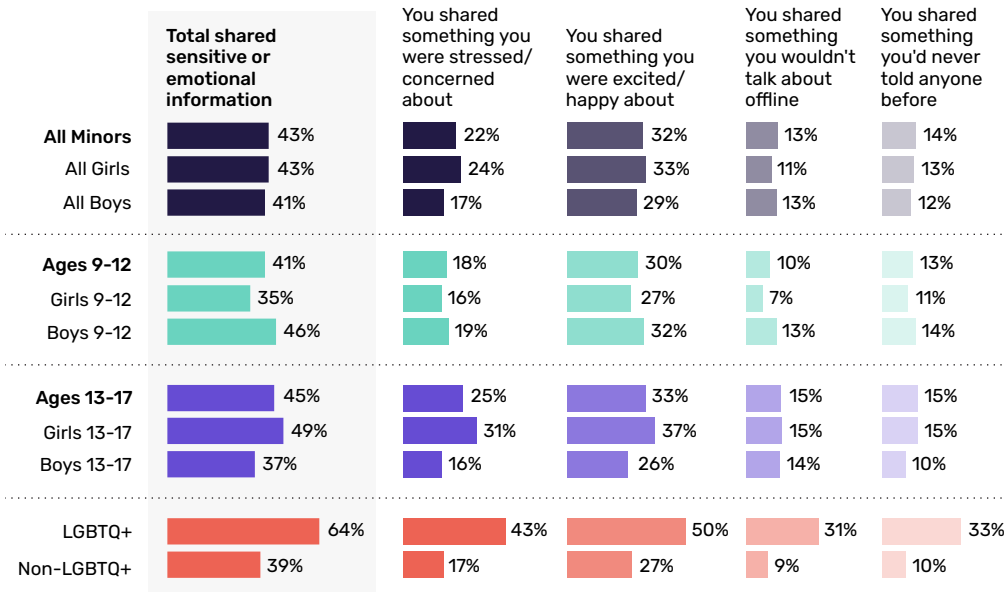
Identifying Information



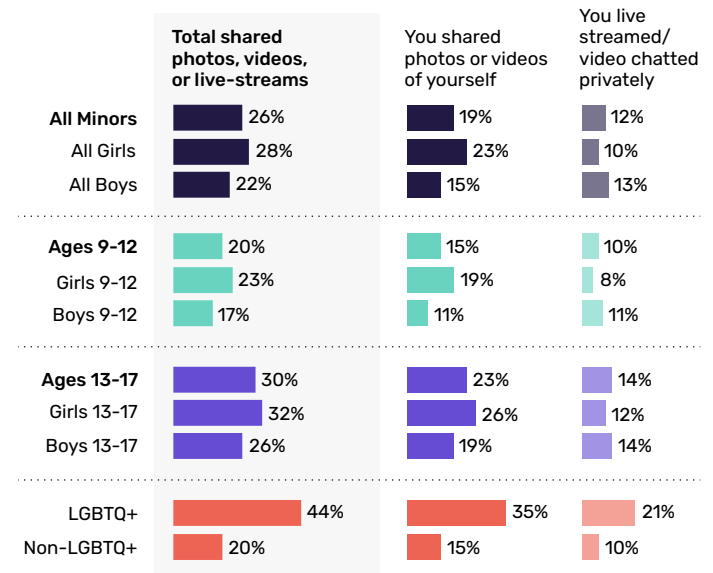
Sexual/Flirtatious Exchanges



Sensitive/Emotional Information



Images, Videos, or Live-Streams



only know online was at least somewhat common behavior. Compared to flirting, teens indicated dating similarly-aged online-only contacts as slightly less common, although half (51%) of teens indicated they thought it was common.

Younger minors (aged 9-12) reported flirting with or dating similarly aged online-only friends to be less common than teens. Nevertheless 1 in 3 (33%) 9-12-year-olds indicated flirting with a similarly-aged virtual contact was common and 1 in 4 (25%) indicated dating similarly-aged virtual contacts was common (Fig 15).

The perceived normalcy of flirting or dating among teens was found to decrease as the age of the online-only contact increased. That said, a notable percentage of teens viewed flirting with or dating adults much older than them – and who they only know online – as common: half

(50%) of teens believed flirting with those aged 18-20 is common for kids their age and nearly one-quarter (23%) reported that flirting with an adult aged 30 or older was common (Fig 16). Like teens, LGBTQ+ minors reported perceptions that online romantic relationships between minors and adults are common: 27% reported it was common for people of their age and gender to be in a romantic relationship with an adult aged 30 or older who they only know online.

Worryingly, younger minors (aged 9-12) also reported flirting or dating adults they meet online as common among their age group. Unlike teens, younger minors showed little decrease in their perception of normalcy for these interactions as the age of the online contact increased: roughly 1 in 5 indicated it was common for kids their age to date someone online aged 18-20 (19%), 21-29 (19%), or 30 or older (18%).

Fig 15 | Perceived normalcy of flirting and dating with other minors who are online-only contacts

Q44. For people you know who are your same age and gender, how normal is it to flirt with people they only know online in each of the following age ranges?

Q45. For people you know who are your same age and gender, how normal is it to date, or have romantic relationships online with people they have not met in person in each of the following age ranges?

Note: Numbers shown as common reflect the net percentage of minors who selected “very common” or “somewhat common.” Numbers shown as uncommon reflect the net percentage of minors who selected “not very common, but happens” or “never happens.”

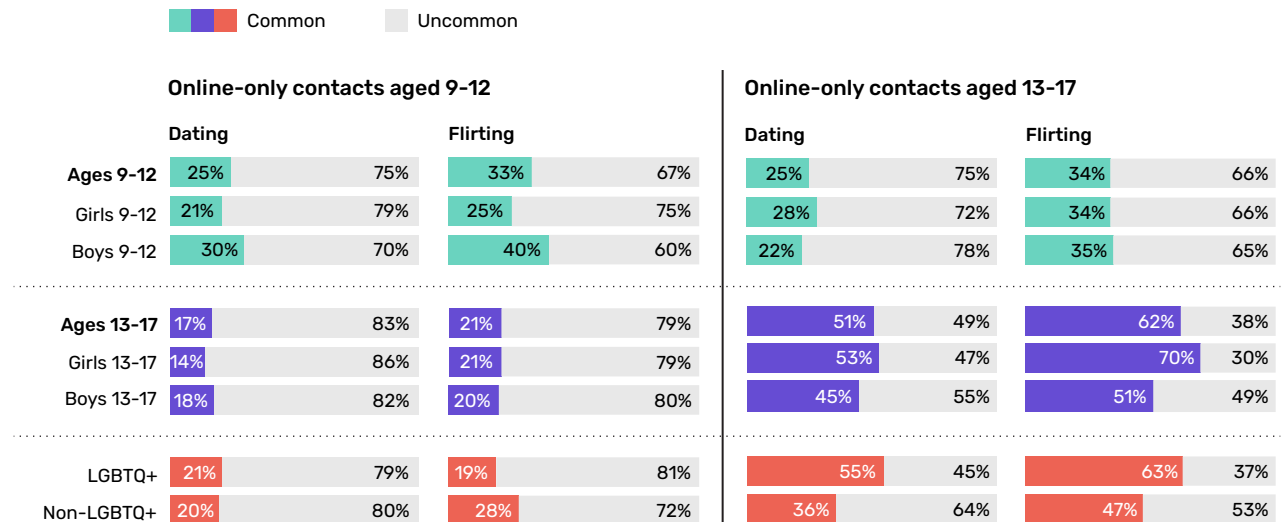
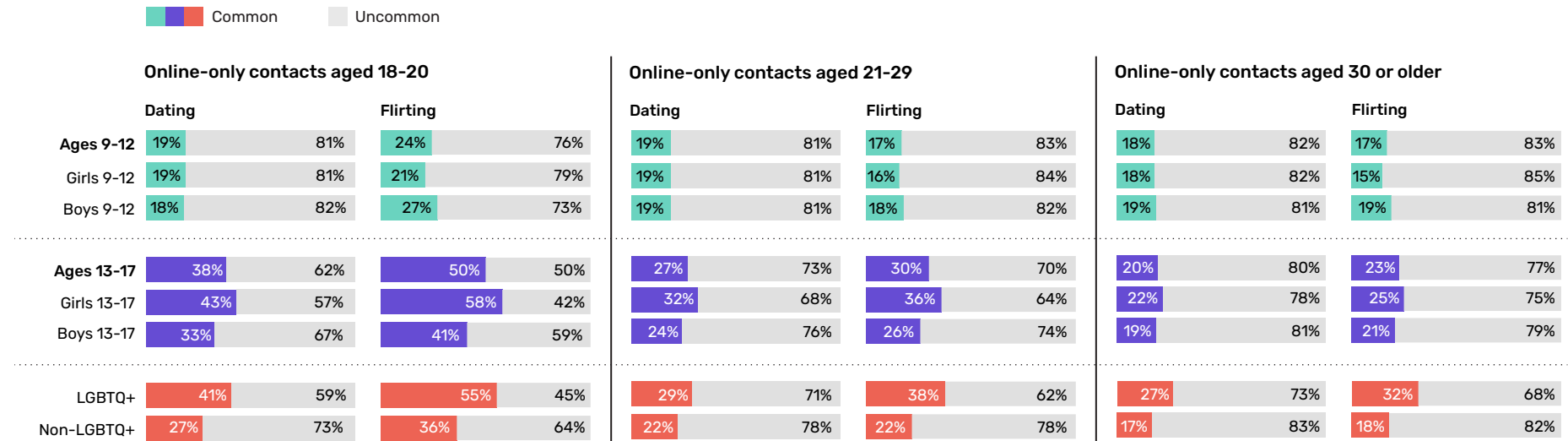


Fig 16 | Perceived normalcy of flirting and dating with adults who are online-only contacts

Q44. For people you know who are your same age and gender, how normal is it to flirt with people they only know online in each of the following age ranges? Q45. For people you know who are your same age and gender, how normal is it to date, or have romantic relationships online with people they have not met in person in each of the following age ranges?

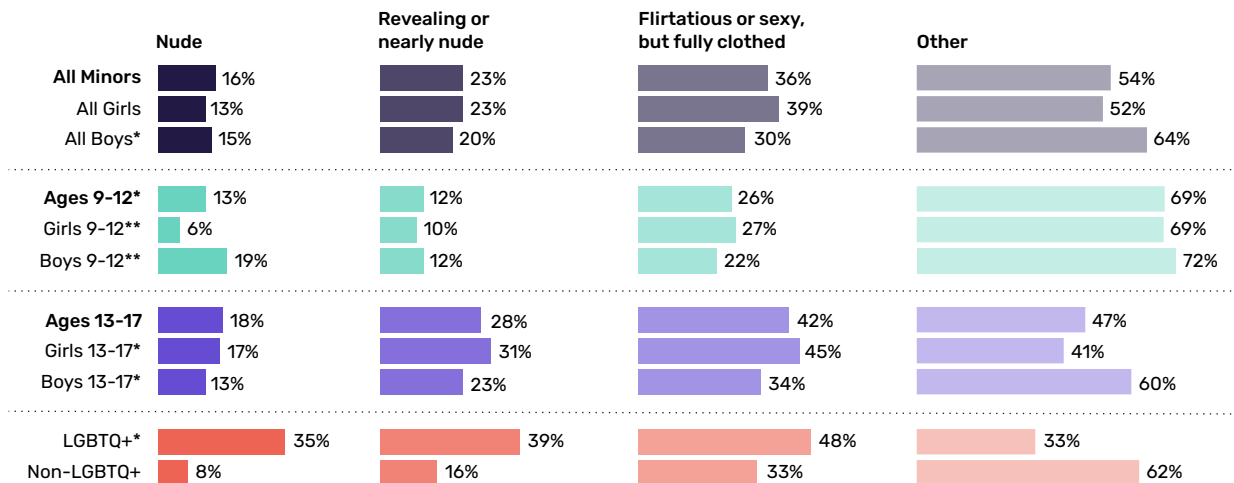


Note: Numbers shown as common reflect the net percentage of minors who selected "very common" or "somewhat common." Numbers shown as uncommon reflect the net percentage of minors who selected "not very common, but happens" or "never happens."

Fig 17 | Type of imagery minors have shared with online-only contacts

Among minors who shared photos or videos of themselves with someone they only knew online

Q52. Thinking about when you have shared photos or videos of yourself with someone you only know online, which of the following types of photos/videos have you ever shared? Please select all that apply.



Note: Columns will total more than 100 because question was multiple select. * Base sizes <100 ** Base sizes <50

Sharing Private or Explicit Imagery

Online relationships among minors and among adults often involve the sharing of images or videos. One in four (26%) minors reported they had shared photos or videos of themselves and/or had privately live-streamed or video chatted with an online-only contact (Fig 14).

While not all imagery shared is sexual in nature, minors who indicated they had shared an image or video with an online-only contact classified some of those images as: flirtatious but fully clothed (36%), revealing

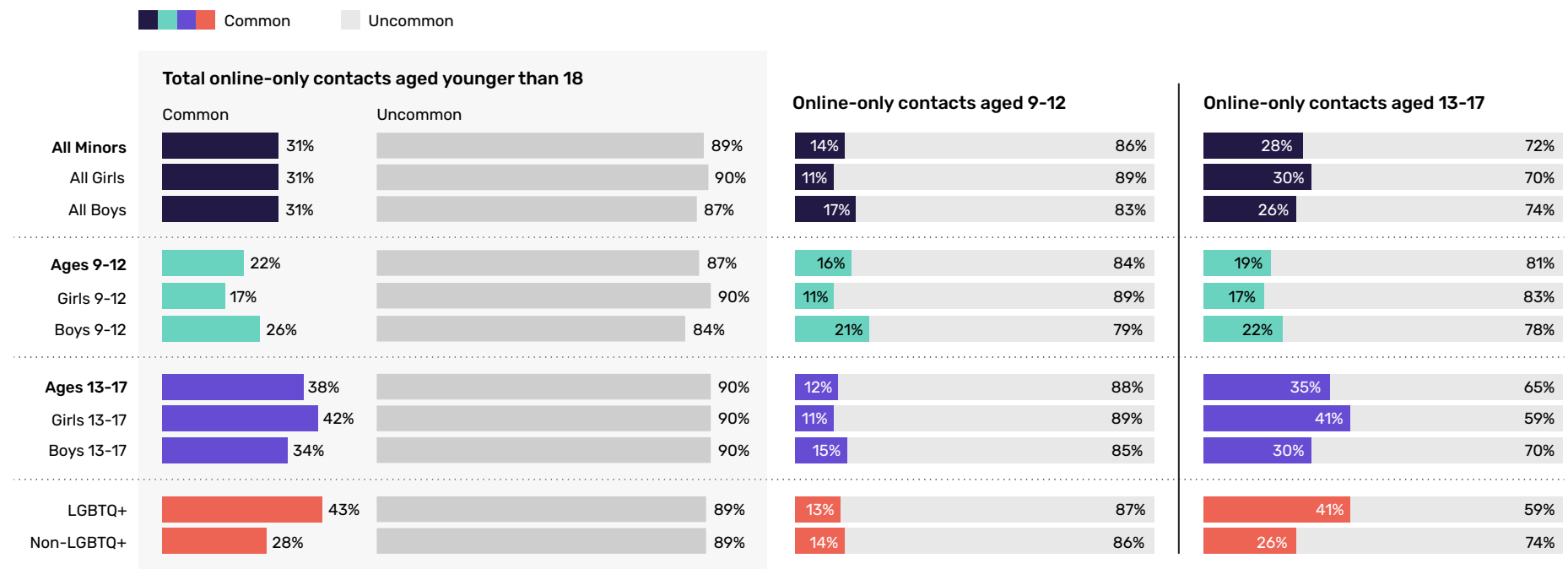
or near nude (23%), or nude (16%) (Fig 17). Teen girls were more likely than teen boys to share flirtatious or revealing images with online-only contacts. Likewise, teens were more likely than younger minors to share explicit content. That said, 1 in 8 (13%) 9-12-year-olds reported having shared nude images of themselves with an online-only contact.

LGBTQ+ youth were more likely than their non-LGBTQ+ counterparts to report having shared imagery with an online-only contact, with the

1 in 8
9-12-year-olds
have shared a
nude image with
an online-only
connection

Fig 18 | **Perceived normalcy of sharing nudes with other minors who are online-only contacts**

Q46. For people you know who are your same age and gender, how normal is it to share nude photos/videos/livestreams online with people they have not met in person?



Note: "Common" reflects the net percentage of minors who selected "very common" or "somewhat common." "Uncommon" numbers shown to reflect the net percentage of minors who selected "not very common, but happens" or "never happens." "Total younger than 18" data will total more than 100 because it combines multiple selections.

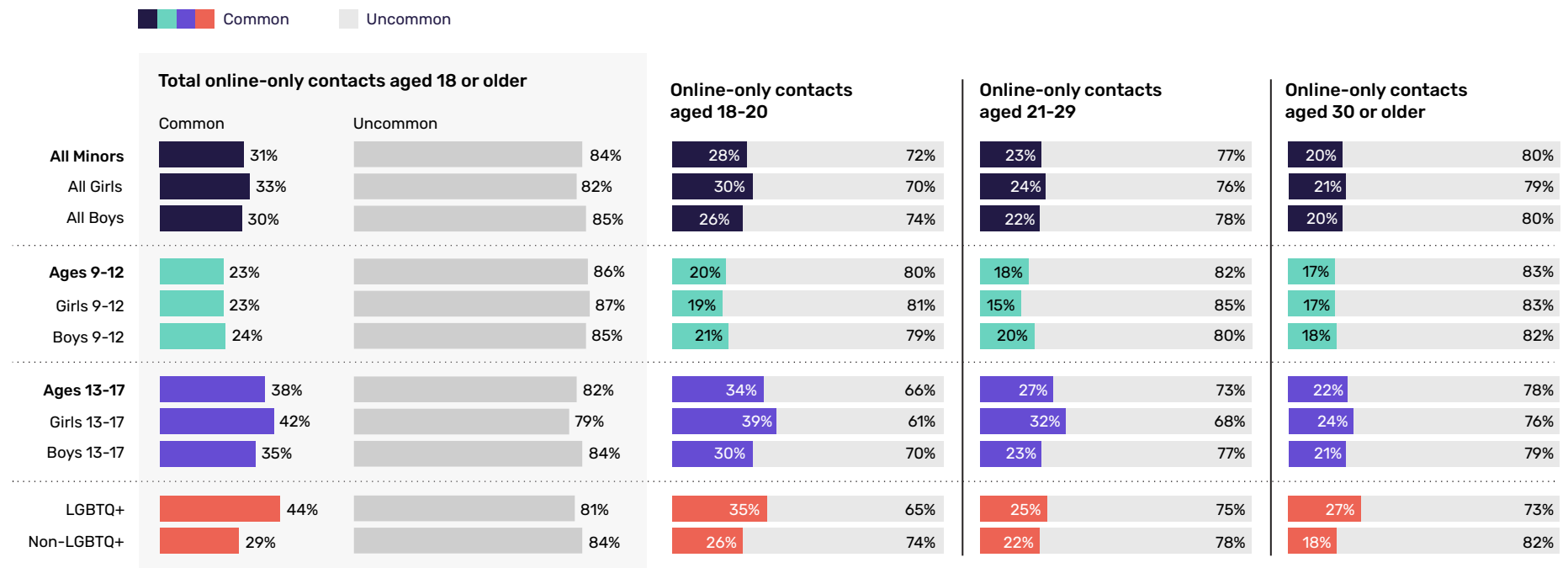
difference most identifiable in their higher likelihood to have shared nudes. Among those who have shared imagery, nearly one-half (48%) of LGBTQ+ minors reported sharing flirtatious content versus one-third (33%) of non-LGBTQ+ minors; 39% of LGBTQ+ minors reported sharing revealing but not fully nude content compared to 16% of non-LGBTQ+ participants; and 35% of LGBTQ+ minors reported sharing nudes with virtual connections compared to 8% of non-LGBTQ+ youth.

Close to one-third (35%) of teens reported it was common to share nudes with other teens they met online, with teen girls more likely than teen boys, and LGBTQ+ teens more likely than non-LGBTQ+ teens, to hold this position (Fig 18). Among younger minors (aged 9-12), nearly 1 in 5 (22%) reported the sharing of nudes with other minors they only know online as a common experience, including sharing them with older minors: 16% reported it's common to share nudes with other 9-12-year-olds

1 in 5
9-12-year-olds
believe it's
common to share
nudes with teens
they meet online

Fig 19 | **Perceived normalcy of sharing nudes with adults who are online-only contacts**

Q46. For people you know who are your same age and gender, how normal is it to share nude photos/videos/livestreams online with people they have not met in person?



Note: "Common" reflects the net percentage of minors who selected "very common" or "somewhat common." "Uncommon" numbers shown to reflect the net percentage of minors who selected "not very common, but happens" or "never happens." "Total younger than 18" data will total more than 100 because it combines multiple selections.

they meet online and 19% reported it's common to share nudes with teens (aged 13-17) they meet online.

Worryingly, minors perceive the sharing of nude images with online-only contacts who are adults (aged 18 or older) to be about as normal as sharing them with online-only contacts who are minors (aged 9-17). More than one-third (38%) of teens, one-quarter (23%) of 9-12-year-olds, and nearly half (44%) of LGBTQ+ minors reported it was common to share nude images with adults they meet online (Fig 19). Teen girls and LGBTQ+ youth were more likely to view sharing nude images with adults they meet online as common when they believed the recipient to be a younger adult; however, approximately one-quarter of teen girls (24%) and of LGBTQ+ youth (27%) also viewed sharing nudes with an adult they meet online aged 30 or older to be common. Among 9-12-year-olds, little difference was identified in the perception of normalcy, irrespective of whether they perceived the recipient to be a minor or adult.

Cold Solicitations

Importantly, there appear to be differences in how minors experience and view sharing nudes with an established online-only contact and requests for nudes they may receive in the form of a cold solicitation (i.e. from someone online with whom they've never had a previous interaction). Forty percent of all minors and more than 1 in 4 (29%) 9-12-year-olds have experienced a cold solicitation online for explicit imagery from an online-only contact (Fig 20). Among 9-12-year-olds, boys were more likely than girls to have received a cold solicitation while for teens, this gender difference was reversed. LGBTQ+ youth were the most likely to have experienced a cold solicitation and were nearly twice as likely as their non-LGBTQ+ peers to have had this experience.

While many minors have experienced a cold solicitation, it was not reported as a frequent experience for most; however, approximately 1 in 7 (15%) minors and 1 in 4 (26%) LGBTQ+ youth reported this as a weekly or daily experience (Fig 21).

1 in 3

9-12-year-old boys have received a cold solicitation for explicit imagery

1 in 7

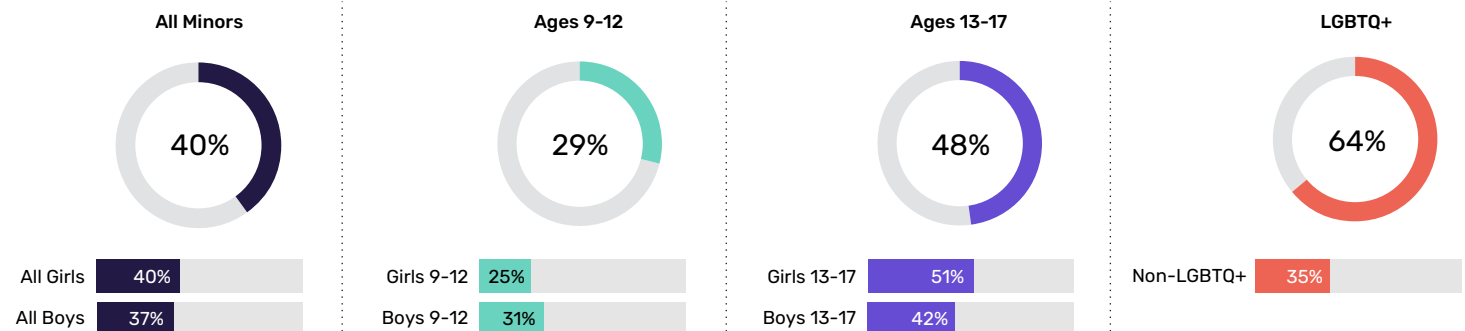
Minors are asked for nudes by a stranger online daily or weekly

1 in 4

LGBTQ+ minors are asked for nudes by a stranger online daily or weekly

Fig 20 | Percentage of minors who have received a cold solicitation online

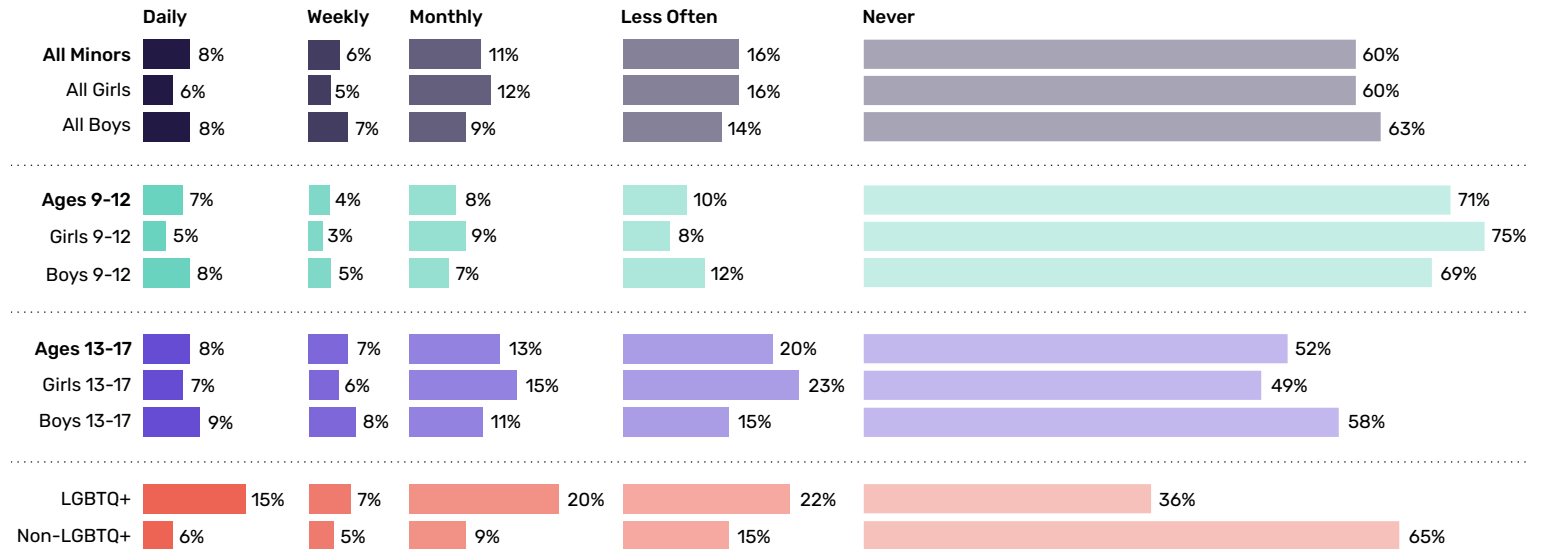
Q65. How often does someone you do not know and have never interacted with ask you for nude photos or videos on an online platform or app?



Note: See Research Methodology & Design section for survey typo related to this question. Numbers shown reflect the net percentage of minors who selected "multiple times a day," "about once a day," "once or a few times a week," "once or a few times a month," or "less often, but have used before."

Fig 21 | **Frequency with which minors receive cold solicitations online**

Q65. How often does someone you do not know and have never interacted with ask you for nude photos or videos on an online platform or app?



Note: See Research Methodology & Design section for survey type related to this question.

The Role of Platforms in Online Networks

Platform preferences among minors and the types of interactions they have on them are critical pieces of information in preventing and combating online sexual exploitation. As such, Thorn regularly includes a series of questions about platform usage in youth surveys. Given the ever-evolving landscape of platforms and young people's preferences towards them, the list of platforms included is reevaluated for each survey to include both widely known platforms along with those less commonly used. The findings, however, remain consistent: kids interact on — and are navigating risky encounters on — every platform.

85%

Of minors reported their friends pretend to be older online, typically to access services for which they are too young

Irrespective of written policies, kids are active across all platform types (Fig 22), including those designed for an adult-only audience, underscoring the need for all platforms to build with child safety in mind from the beginning. More than 4 in 5 (85%) minors indicated their friends pretend to be older online, where more than half (53%) reported it is at least somewhat common (Fig 23). The leading reason minors,

Fig 22 | **General platform use among minors**

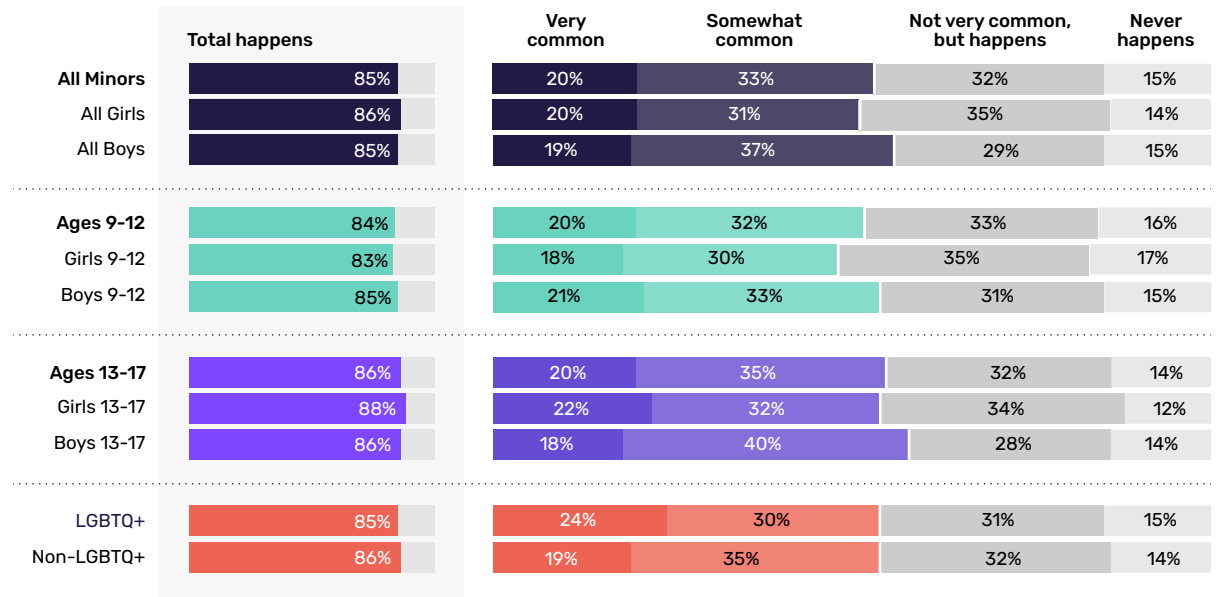
Q8. How often do you use/check/play each of the following?

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

	At least once a day			Ever used		
	All Minors	Ages 9-12	Ages 13-17	All Minors	Ages 9-12	Ages 13-17
Amino	4%	4%	4%	15%	15%	15%
Among Us	21%	29%	15%	54%	60%	50%
Bumble	4%	4%	4%	13%	13%	13%
Byte	5%	5%	4%	13%	13%	12%
Call of Duty	21%	17%	25%	54%	50%	58%
Discord	17%	15%	19%	36%	28%	41%
Facebook	32%	26%	36%	55%	46%	62%
Fortnite	28%	36%	22%	63%	69%	59%
Google Hangouts/Meet	21%	21%	20%	45%	42%	46%
Grand Theft Auto (GTA)	16%	14%	18%	48%	42%	52%
Grindr	4%	5%	2%	11%	12%	10%
Houseparty	6%	7%	5%	22%	21%	23%
Instagram	51%	34%	64%	68%	50%	82%
Kik	6%	7%	4%	20%	16%	23%
Marco Polo	5%	6%	4%	19%	20%	18%
Messenger (Facebook)	32%	29%	34%	57%	54%	59%
Minecraft	28%	34%	23%	77%	78%	75%
Monkey	4%	5%	3%	13%	13%	13%
Nintendo Switch	22%	27%	17%	55%	60%	50%
OnlyFans	3%	4%	3%	10%	12%	10%
Pinterest	15%	10%	19%	48%	39%	56%
Reddit	11%	9%	13%	38%	28%	45%
Roblox	25%	34%	19%	61%	68%	57%
Signal	4%	5%	4%	11%	13%	10%
Slack	4%	4%	4%	14%	14%	14%
Slither. io	5%	6%	5%	35%	32%	38%
Snapchat	45%	30%	56%	67%	52%	78%
Tagged	4%	6%	3%	12%	14%	12%
Telegram	7%	7%	7%	16%	17%	16%
TikTok	51%	45%	55%	71%	65%	76%
Tinder	4%	5%	4%	11%	10%	12%
Triller	5%	6%	4%	14%	14%	14%
Tumblr	8%	7%	8%	24%	19%	28%
Twitch	14%	13%	15%	40%	33%	46%
Twitter	20%	14%	24%	44%	30%	56%
VSCO	5%	5%	4%	17%	15%	19%
WhatsApp	16%	14%	17%	33%	31%	36%
Whisper	4%	6%	3%	13%	14%	12%
Wickr	3%	4%	3%	11%	12%	11%
Wink	3%	3%	3%	12%	13%	12%
Wishbone	3%	3%	3%	16%	15%	17%
YouNow	4%	4%	3%	13%	13%	13%
YouTube	77%	75%	78%	94%	92%	96%

Fig 23 | **Perceived normalcy of friends lying about their age online**

Q63. How common is it for your friends to pretend to be older than they actually are online?



Note: "Total happens" reflects the net percentage of minors who selected "very common," "somewhat common," or "not very common, but happens."

Fig 24 | **Reasons minors think their friends lie about their age online**

Among minors who say their friends pretend to be older than they actually are online

Q64. Which of the following describe why your friends pretend to be older than they actually are online?

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

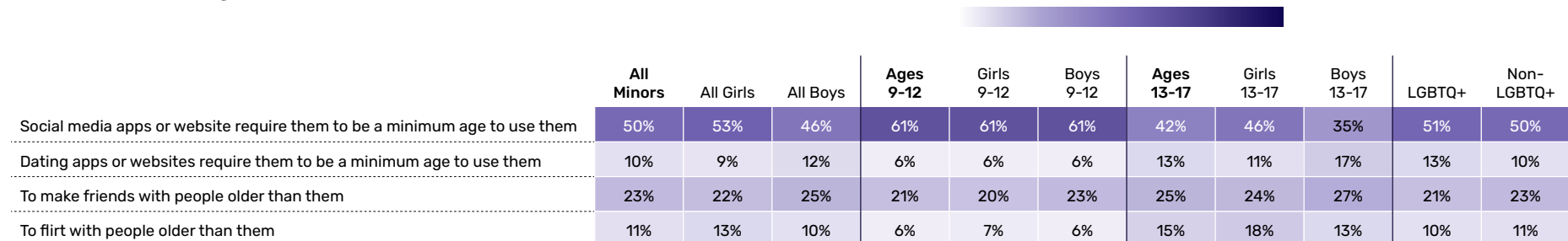


Fig 25 | Platform groupings

Social media

Amino	TikTok
Byte	Triller
Discord	Tumblr
Facebook	Twitch
Houseparty	Twitter
Instagram	VSCO
Monkey	Whisper
Pinterest	Wink
Reddit	Wishbone
Snapchat	YouNow
Tagged	YouTube

Gaming

Among Us
Call of Duty
Fortnite
Grand Theft Auto (GTA)
Minecraft
Nintendo Switch
Roblox
Slither.io

Private messaging

Google Hangouts/Meet
Kik
Marco Polo
Messenger (Facebook)
Signal
Slack
Telegram
WhatsApp
Wickr

Dating/adult

Bumble
Grindr
OnlyFans
Tinder

particularly 9–12-year-olds, pretend to be older online is to access social media platforms that have a minimum age requirement for access (Fig 24).

In addition to platform-specific trends, researchers applied broad labels to platform types to examine trends in user experiences (Fig 25). In other words, are there types of platforms on which certain experiences are more common for different user groups? Given the varied nature of interactions on these services, many could hold multiple labels. This approach of examining user trends and experiences by platform type or functionality will benefit from continued exploration and refinement. Labeling for this analysis was as follows:

- **Social media platforms:** Platforms that encourage broad user interaction across a number of areas of interest and include the ability to discover new connections.
- **Gaming platforms:** Platforms focused on a specific game or suite of games, generally with multi-player options. These did not include broader social platforms that commonly include discussions of gaming.
- **Private messaging platforms:** Platforms designed for closed messaging between existing connections and lacking the ability to discover new connections.
- **Dating/adult platforms:** Platforms designed around romantic and sexual interactions among adults.

Most minors using social media, gaming, private messaging, and dating/adult apps reported having

interacted with someone they don't know offline while on these types of platforms: 86% of minor users on gaming platforms, 85% of minor users on social media platforms, 76% of minor users on private messaging platforms, and 75% of minor users of adult/dating platforms reported this type of interaction (Fig 26). Interactions with online-only contacts were most likely to occur for teen users on social media (93%), while for 9–12-year-old users' online-only interactions were most likely to be experienced on gaming platforms (91%). Daily interactions with online-only contacts was also reported as common for minors across all platform types, including for 59% of minor users on social media, 45% on gaming platforms, 43% on private messaging platforms, and 41% on dating/adult platforms.

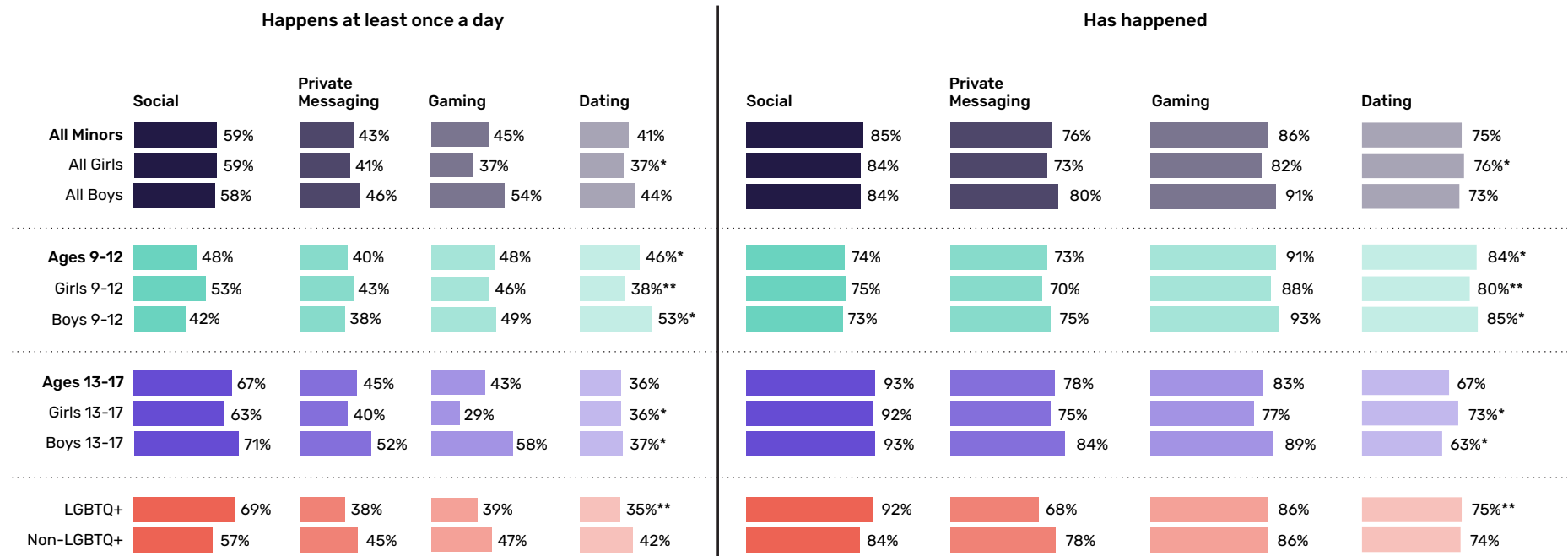
In several areas, boys reported higher connection rates with online-only contacts than girls: they were more likely to report daily interactions with an online-only connection on gaming platforms and on dating sites.

Not all virtual interactions involve more active engagement through messaging; however, nearly 1 in 3 minors reported messaging daily with online-only connections including users on social media (42%), gaming (36%), private messaging (32%), and adult/dating (30%) platforms (Fig 27). Boys on these platforms were approximately 10–15 points more likely than girls to have reported daily messaging with an online-only contact across social, gaming, and private messaging platforms, and were 22 points more likely than girls to have reported daily messaging with such contacts on adult/dating sites.

Fig 26 | **Frequency of minors' online-only interactions by platform type**

Among users of each platform type

Q14. Through each of the following platforms/apps, how often does someone you only know online interact with you in any way — for example, by adding you, sending/receiving messages, liking photos or videos, re-sharing content, etc.?

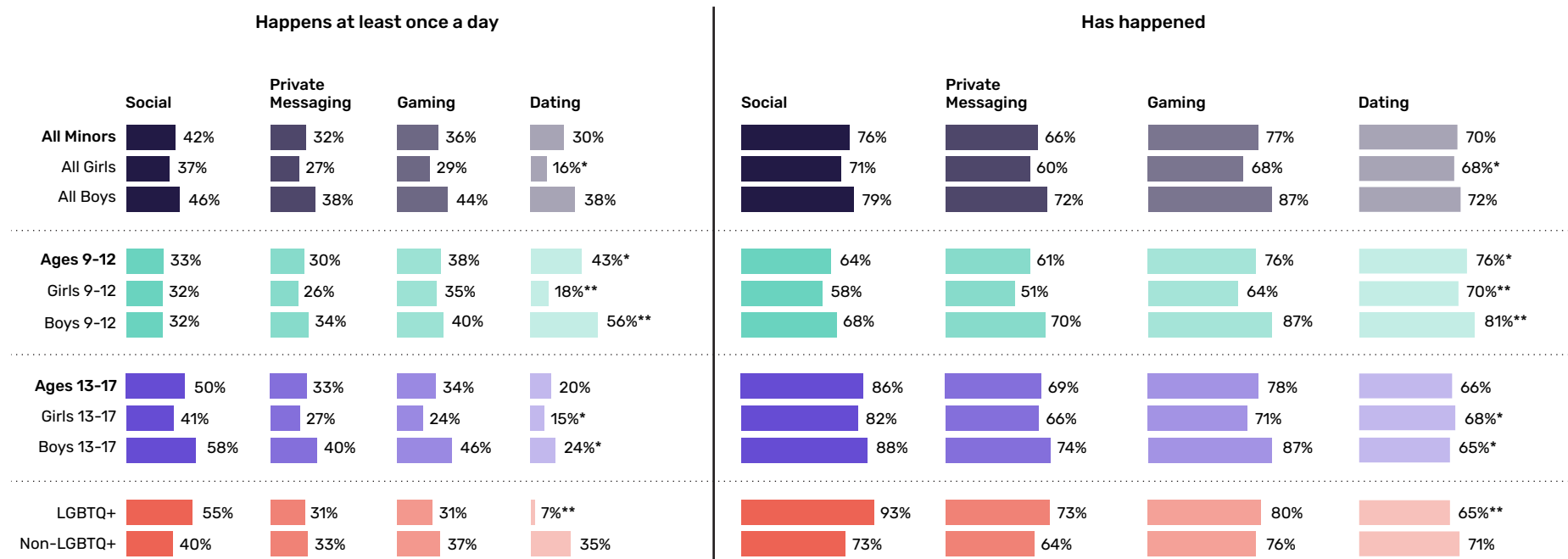


Note: See Research Methodology & Design section for survey typo related to this question. "Happens at least once a day" reflects the net percentage of minors who selected "multiple times a day" or "about once a day." "Has happened" reflects the net percentage of minors who selected "multiple times a day," "about once a day," "once or a few times a week," "once or a few times a month," or "less often, but have used before."

* Base sizes <100 ** Base sizes <50

Fig 27 | **Frequency of minors' messaging with online-only contact by platform type, among users of each platform**

Q18. Through each of the following platforms/apps, how often do you exchange messages from people/individuals you have never met in person?

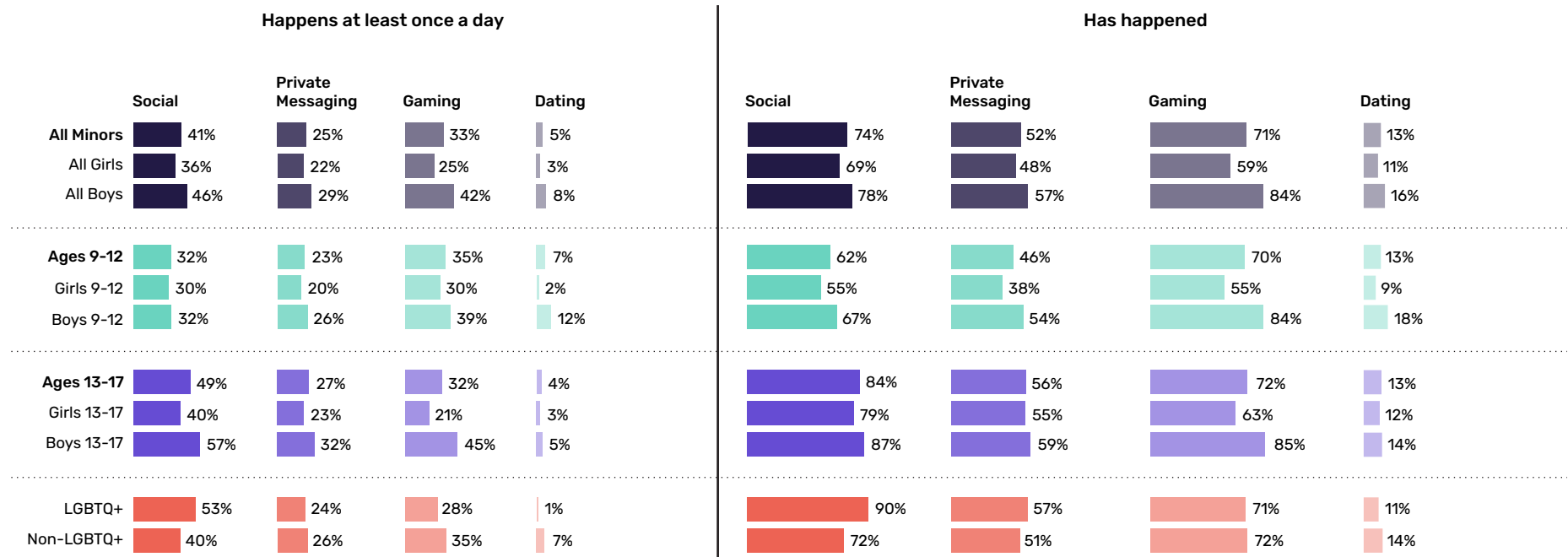


Note: See Research Methodology & Design section for survey typo related to this question. "Happens at least once a day" reflects the net percentage of minors who selected "multiple times a day" or "about once a day." "Has happened" reflects the net percentage of minors who selected "multiple times a day," "about once a day," "once or a few times a week," "once or a few times a month," or "less often, but have used before."

* Base sizes <100 ** Base sizes <50

Fig 28 | **Frequency of minors' messaging with online-only contact by platform type, among all minors**

Q18. Through each of the following platforms/apps, how often do you exchange messages from people/individuals you have never met in person?



Note: See Research Methodology & Design section for survey typo related to this question. "Happens at least once a day" reflects the net percentage of minors who selected "multiple times a day" or "about once a day." "Has happened" reflects the net percentage of minors who selected "multiple times a day," "about once a day," "once or a few times a week," "once or a few times a month," or "less often, but have used before."

Private messaging apps warrant unique consideration for the role they play in meeting people online and how these relationships deepen for minors. Unlike social, gaming, and dating apps, private messaging platforms are intentionally not designed for meeting new contacts. However, nearly 2 in 3 (65%) minors reported they have experienced an online-only contact inviting them "to move from a public chat into a private conversation on a different platform." Half of all minors (52%) reported having used a private messaging app to interact with an online-only connection, including 46% of 9-12-year-olds; one-quarter of minors, including 23% of 9-12-year-olds, have had daily interactions with an online-only contact using

2 in 3

Minors have been asked to move from a public chat into a private conversation on a different platform

1 in 5

9-12-year-olds have messaged daily with an online-only contact on a private messaging app

a private messaging platform (Fig 28). While private messaging platforms are not the point of origin for most minors' initial interactions with online-only contacts, minors revealed they are popular platforms for continued and ongoing interactions with them.

Unsurprisingly, some of the most widely popular platforms based on general usage (Fig 22) were also among those where the most minors have ever messaged, or messaged daily, with online-only connections (Fig 29). Minors reported the most daily messaging with online-only contacts on Instagram (19%), Snapchat (19%), and Messenger (17%). Among 9-12-year-olds, daily messaging with virtual contacts was reported the most on Roblox (18%), Messenger (17%), and TikTok (17%).

However, popularity alone does not account for some platforms that show the highest rates of users messaging with online-only contacts. Tinder (81%), Tagged (79%), Telegram (78%), and OnlyFans (78%) showed the highest rates of minors ever exchanging messages with online-only contacts while YouNow (33%), Signal (33%), Tagged (32%), and OnlyFans (32%) captured the highest rates of daily messaging by users (Fig 30).

Fig 29 | Frequency of minors' messaging with online-only contacts by platform

Q18. Through each of the following platforms/apps, how often do you exchange messages from people/individuals you have never met in person?

Note: See Research Methodology & Design section for survey typo related to this question. "Happens at least once a day" reflects the net percentage of minors who selected "multiple times a day" or "about once a day." "Has happened" reflects the net percentage of minors who selected "multiple times a day," "about once a day," "once or a few times a week," "once or a few times a month," or "less often, but have used before."

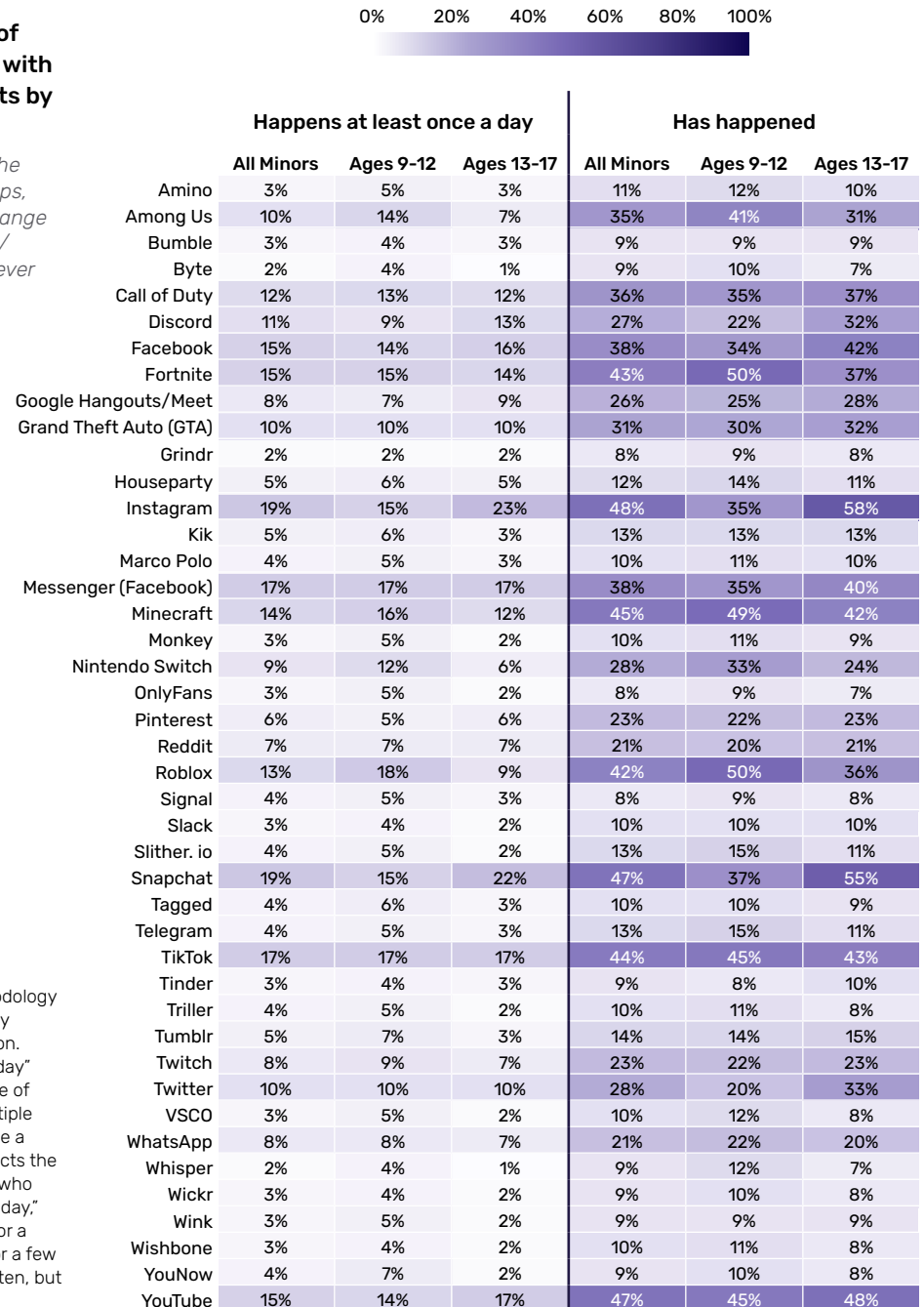


Fig 30 | Rates of messaging with online-only contacts by platform, among platform users and all minors

Q18. Through each of the following platforms/apps, how often do you exchange messages from people/individuals you have never met in person?

Key: **Above average %**

	Among users of each platform		Among all minors	
	Daily	Ever	Daily	Ever
Average	23%	66%	7%	21%
Amino	23%	72%	3%	11%
Among Us	19%	65%	10%	35%
Bumble	26%	67%	3%	9%
Byte	19%	68%	2%	9%
Call of Duty	23%	67%	12%	36%
Discord	31%	76%	11%	27%
Facebook	27%	70%	15%	38%
Fortnite	23%	68%	15%	43%
Google Hangouts/Meet	18%	59%	8%	26%
Grand Theft Auto (GTA)	22%	66%	10%	31%
Grindr	21%	78%	2%	8%
Houseparty	25%	55%	5%	12%
Instagram	28%	70%	19%	48%
Kik	22%	66%	5%	13%
Marco Polo	20%	54%	4%	10%
Messenger (Facebook)	29%	66%	17%	38%
Minecraft	18%	59%	14%	45%
Monkey	25%	75%	3%	10%
Nintendo Switch	16%	51%	9%	28%
OnlyFans	32%	76%	3%	8%
Pinterest	12%	47%	6%	23%
Reddit	18%	55%	7%	21%

	Among users of each platform		Among all minors	
	Daily	Ever	Daily	Ever
Average	23%	66%	7%	21%
Roblox	21%	68%	13%	42%
Signal	33%	73%	4%	8%
Slack	23%	75%	3%	10%
Slither.io	10%	37%	4%	13%
Snapchat	29%	71%	19%	47%
Tagged	32%	79%	4%	10%
Telegram	25%	78%	4%	13%
TikTok	24%	61%	17%	44%
Tinder	31%	81%	3%	9%
Triller	25%	69%	4%	10%
Tumblr	20%	59%	5%	14%
Twitch	19%	56%	8%	23%
Twitter	23%	62%	10%	28%
VSCO	20%	57%	3%	10%
WhatsApp	23%	62%	8%	21%
Whisper	19%	71%	2%	9%
Wickr	24%	76%	3%	9%
Wink	26%	74%	3%	9%
Wishbone	19%	60%	3%	10%
YouNow	33%	67%	4%	9%
YouTube	16%	50%	15%	47%

Managing & Responding to Risky Encounters

“If something goes wrong you never have to see this person again and if they start being mean or bullying you there are really simple solutions to that. [I]n real life it may not be that easy to get rid of someone who is [preying] on your downfall and constantly being very rude and disrespectful to you.”

CIS FEMALE, 14, AFRICAN AMERICAN/BLACK/CARIBBEAN AMERICAN, SOUTH

Minors are aware that risks exist online, including with online-only contacts. However, minors also perceive more flexibility in them; when an online relationship becomes uncomfortable or unwanted, they believe it's easier to ignore the person or otherwise cut off contact.

Overall, the top reason minors reported they became uncomfortable in exchanges with their online-only contact occurred when they suspected the person they were interacting with was lying to them. This was especially true among boys, 46% of whom reported they have experienced this (Fig 32). Nearly 9 in 10 minors (86%) reported it was common for people to lie about who they are online, indicating that the vast majority of minors enter online relationships attuned to this risk (Fig 31).

Even though many minors seek out online relationships for the ability to open up about personal experiences, many have become uncomfortable

with online-only contacts (Fig 32). Overall, 40% of minors reported they have felt uncomfortable online because they were asked for personal information and approximately one-third of all minors have become uncomfortable after experiencing someone online trying to become close with them too quickly (31%) or contacting them too often (35%). Girls and LGBTQ+ minors appear to be especially at risk for this type of experience with online-only contacts: approximately 40% of teen girls and nearly half of LGBTQ+ minors reported experiencing one of these uncomfortable interactions.

One-quarter (26%) of minors reported a conversation with an online-only contact turning sexual and led them to feel uncomfortable, with girls and LGBTQ+ youth significantly more likely to have reported this experience. One in three (34%) girls reported this experience, including 42% of teen girls and 24% of girls aged 9-12. More than half (54%) of LGBTQ+ minors reported a similar experience, compared to 20% of non-LGBTQ+ youth.

Fig 31 | Percentage of minors who think it's common for people to lie about their identity online

Q62. How common do you think it is for people online to lie about who they are?

Note: Numbers shown reflect the net percentage of minors who selected "very common" or "somewhat common."

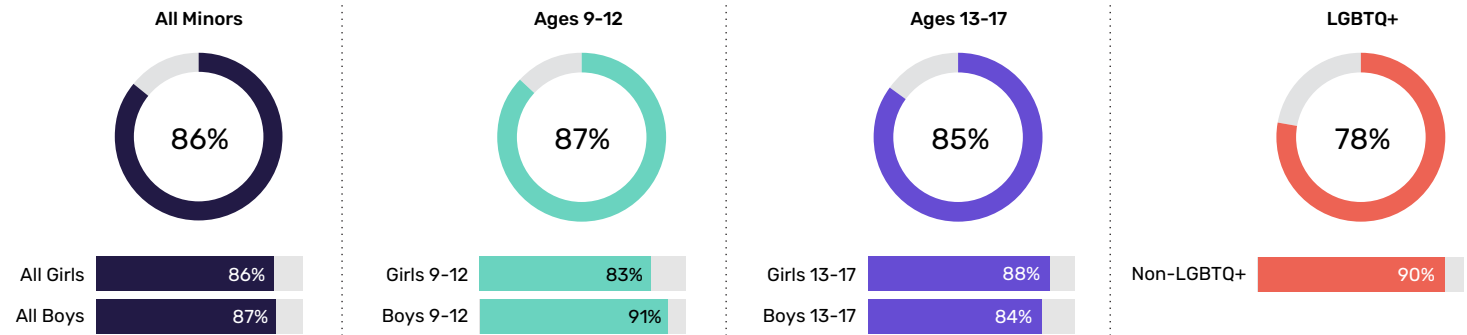


Fig 32 | Types of online exchanges that made minors uncomfortable

Q29. What types of exchanges have made you feel uncomfortable online (select all that apply)?

Note: Rows will total more than 100 because question was multiple select. Numbers represented by "conversation became sexual" include respondents who selected "the conversation turned sexual in nature" and/or "I was being asked for nudes."

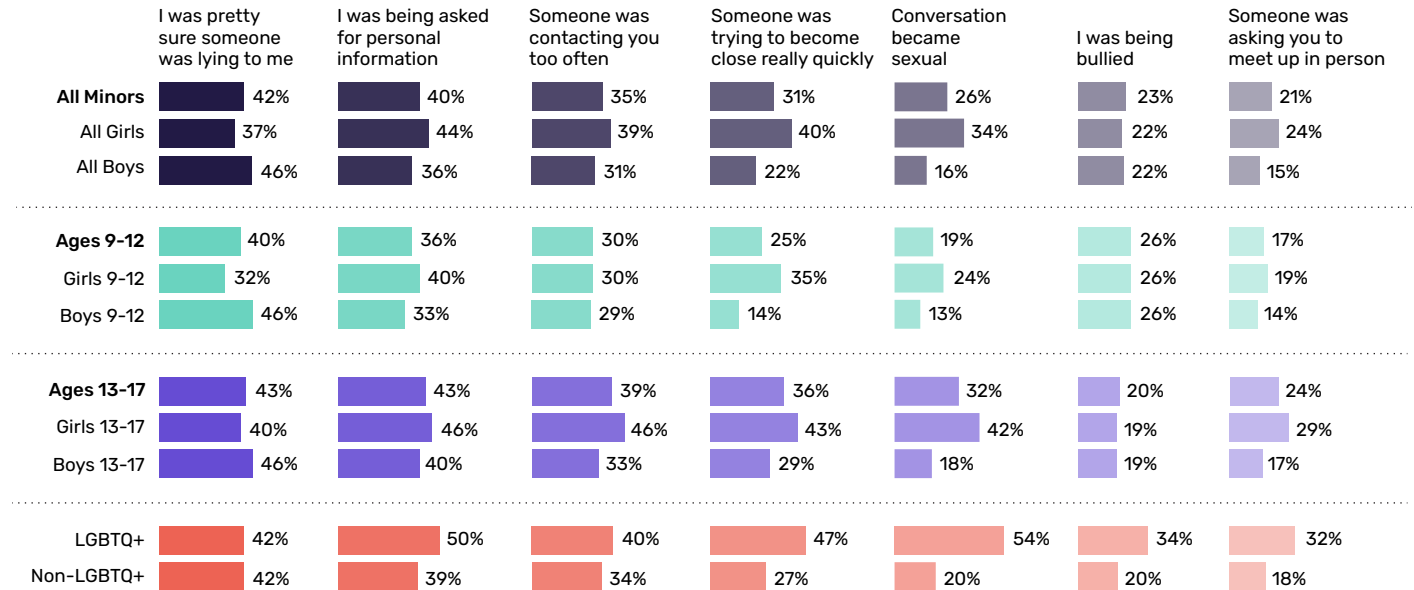
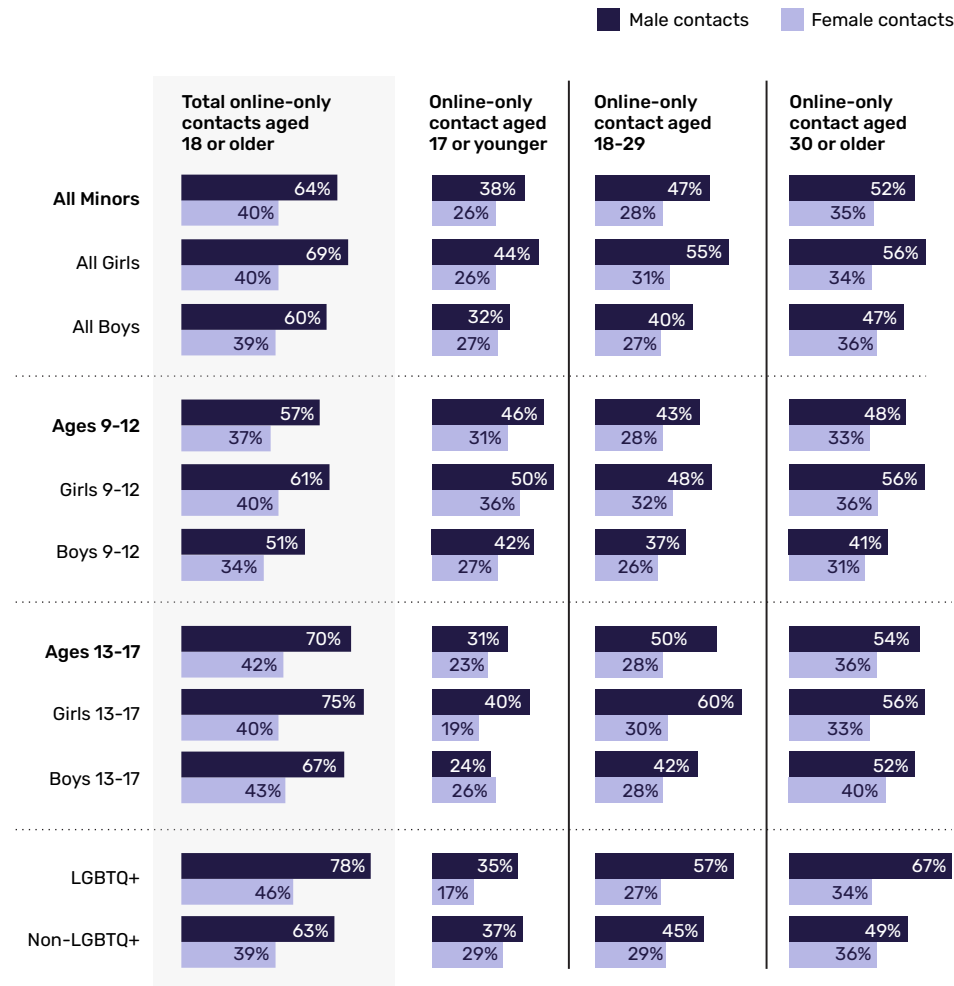


Fig 33 | **Types of online-only contacts minors have felt uncomfortable messaging with online**

Q28. Have you ever felt uncomfortable while sending messages with any of the following types of people?



Note: Rows will total more than 100 because question was multiple select.

Uncomfortable Interactions with Adults

Minors are encountering these uncomfortable experiences not only with peers, but adults as well – especially adult men (Fig 33). Overall, 47% of minors reported they have had an uncomfortable experience messaging with an adult male aged 18-29 and a majority (52%) have had this experience with an adult male they believed to be aged 30 or older. Comparatively, 38% indicated they have felt uncomfortable messaging with a male aged 17 or younger.

LGBTQ+ minors were especially likely to have had an uncomfortable experience with an adult male: 67% reported they have felt uncomfortable while messaging with a male aged 30 or older and 57% have felt the same way about a male aged 18-29. Girls also reported having uncomfortable experiences with men aged 30 or older at high rates: 56% of both 9-12-year-old girls and of teen girls have had this happen.

Although less common, uncomfortable interactions with females online are not rare. Approximately one-quarter (28%) of minors reported having an uncomfortable experience while messaging with a female aged 18-29 and more than one-third (35%) reported the same with a female aged 30 or older. Teen boys were the likeliest to have reported feeling uncomfortable while messaging with a woman aged 30 or older.

1 in 2

Minors have had an uncomfortable experience messaging with a male aged 30 or older

2 in 3

LGBTQ+ youth have had an uncomfortable experience messaging with an adult aged 30 or older

Fig 34 | **Percentage of minors who have cut off contact with an online-only contact**

Q31. Have you ever cut off contact with someone you only knew online?



Responding to Uncomfortable Encounters

In moments of discomfort, many young people take steps to terminate contact with the other person: more than three-quarters (77%) of minors reported they have cut off contact with an online-only contact (Fig 34).

Blocking or choosing to ignore the other user were minors' preferred methods for breaking off contact: minors were more than three times as likely to block someone (69%) or ignore them (66%) than they were to report them (20%) to a platform when trying to cut off contact (Fig 35).

But discomfort does not always lead to ending contact, and in some instances online-only contacts may circumvent blocks or convince a minor to unblock them. Nearly a quarter of minors (23%) reported they have remained in contact with someone they only know online even after they made them feel uncomfortable — and LGBTQ+ minors were nearly twice as likely as their

3x

Minors were more than 3x as likely to block or ignore an online-only contact than they were to report the user

non-LGBTQ+ peers to have kept in contact with an online-only connection who made them feel uncomfortable (Fig 36).

The most common reason minors gave for maintaining contact with an online-only connection who made them feel uncomfortable was that a foundational friendship had already been established.

"I felt as if I was overreacting and should give him a second chance."

CIS FEMALE, 16, WHITE, SOUTH

"[T]hey kept messaging me so it was easier to just keep it cordial rather than just blocking them on all sites."

CIS FEMALE, 13, WHITE, SOUTH

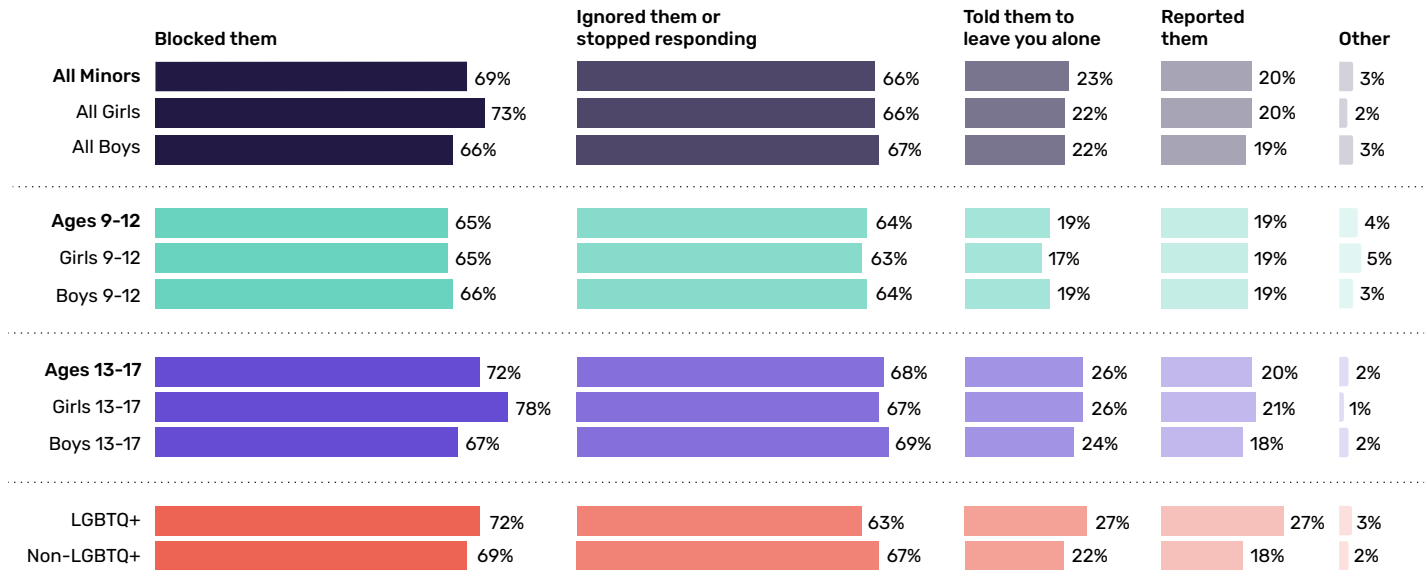
"...[I] had to block him because he was too clingy and would be constantly off and on with me: he created another account soon and I had to block that account...."

CIS FEMALE, 16, ASIAN, NORTHEAST

Fig 35 | **Minors' methods for cutting off contact with online-only contacts**

Among minors who cut off contact with online-only contacts

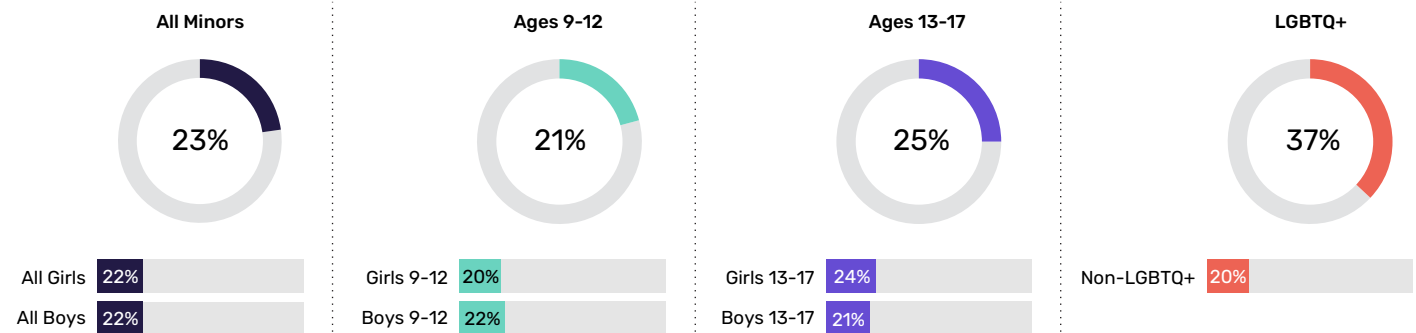
Q32. How did you cut off contact?
(select all that apply)



Note: Rows will total more than 100 because question was multiple select.

Fig 36 | **Percentage of minors who maintained contact with an online-only contact even after they were made to feel uncomfortable**

Q33. Has someone you only knew online made you feel uncomfortable, but you remained in contact with them?



Note: Numbers shown reflect percentage of minors who selected "yes."

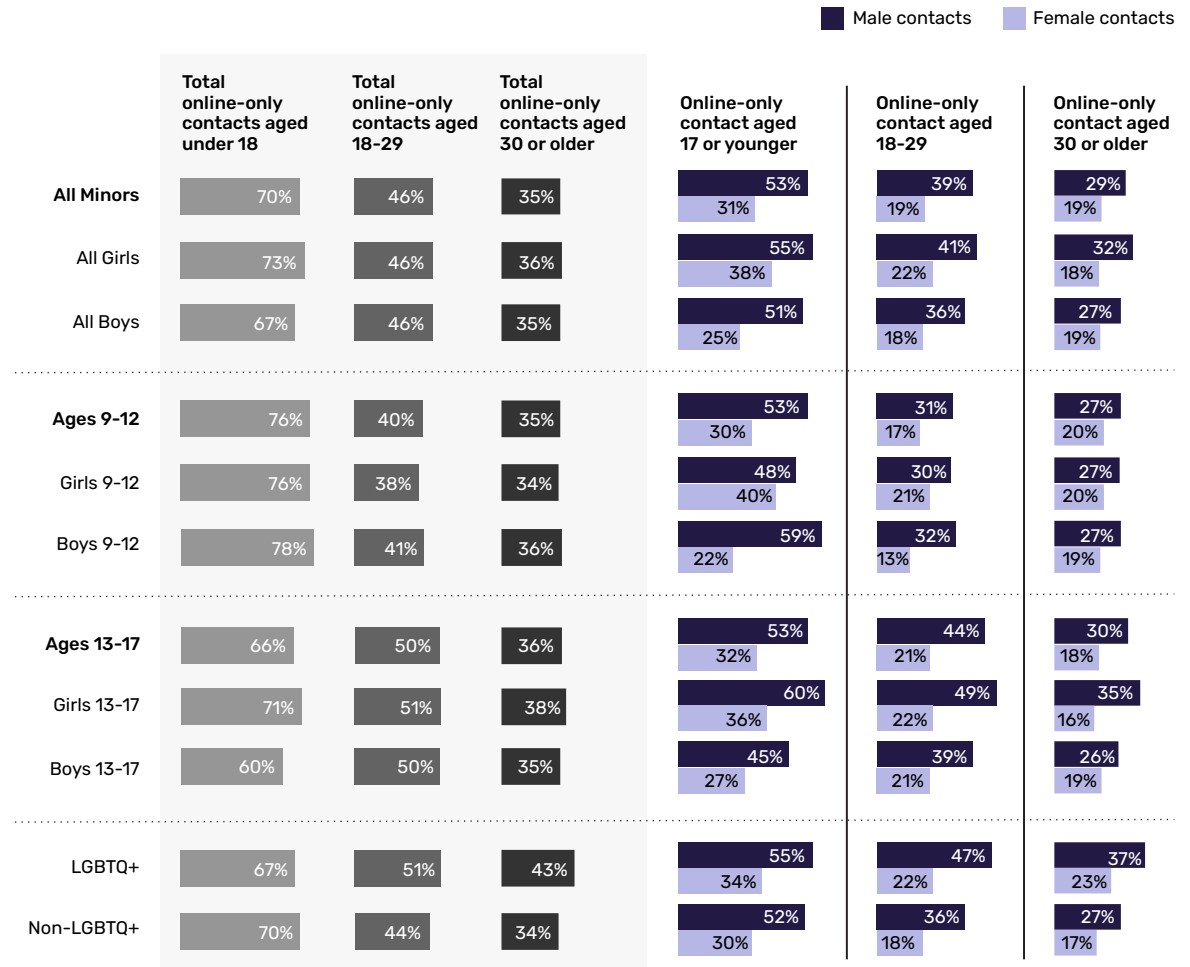
Most (70%) minors reported they have cut off contact with another minor where, for those who had, it was more common for them to cut off contact with a male than female connection. Yet, a sizeable share of minors reported they have also cut off contact with adults they only know online, with girls and LGBTQ+ minors the likeliest to have done so (Fig 37). Half (49%) of teen girls and half (47%) of LGBTQ+ minors reported they have cut off contact with an adult male aged 18-29 and more than one-third of both groups have cut off contact with a man they believed to be aged 30 or older. There were fewer differences among demographics in the rates of cutting off contact with adult women.

Minors decide to end relationships with online-only contacts for a wide variety of reasons, many of which may have nothing to do with manipulation or sexual risk, including becoming bored or having a disagreement. That said, many minors, in particular teen girls and those minors identifying as LGBTQ+, reported they had terminated a relationship with an online-only contact after they felt lied to, the conversation became sexual, and/or they were asked to share sexually explicit images or videos of themselves (Fig 38).

LGBTQ+ minors in particular were more likely than other minors to have cut someone off for sexual reasons: 48% of LGBTQ+ minors who have cut off contact reported they have done so

Fig 37 | **Perceived ages of online-only contacts minors cut off contact with**
Among minors who cut off online contact

Q42. Have you ever cut off contact with any of the following types of people you have messaged with but have never met?
Please select all that apply.



Note: Rows will total more than 100 because question was multiple select.

because the conversation became sexual compared to 25% of their non-LGBTQ+ peers.

Experiences leading minors to cut off contact with adults were more likely to be for sexual reasons than those leading them to cut off contact with other minors (Fig 39). Notably, a majority (51%) of LGBTQ+ minors

and nearly half (44%) of teen girls who have cut off contact with an adult reported they did so after it became sexual. Minors were also more likely to have cut off contact with an adult after coming to believe the adult was lying to them about their identity: this was the leading reason 9-12-year-olds reported they cut off contact with someone aged 18 or older.

Fig 38 | **Reasons why minors cut off contact with online-only contacts**

Among minors who cut off online contact

Q43. For which of the following reasons have you ended contact with someone you messaged with online, but never met because... Please select all that apply.



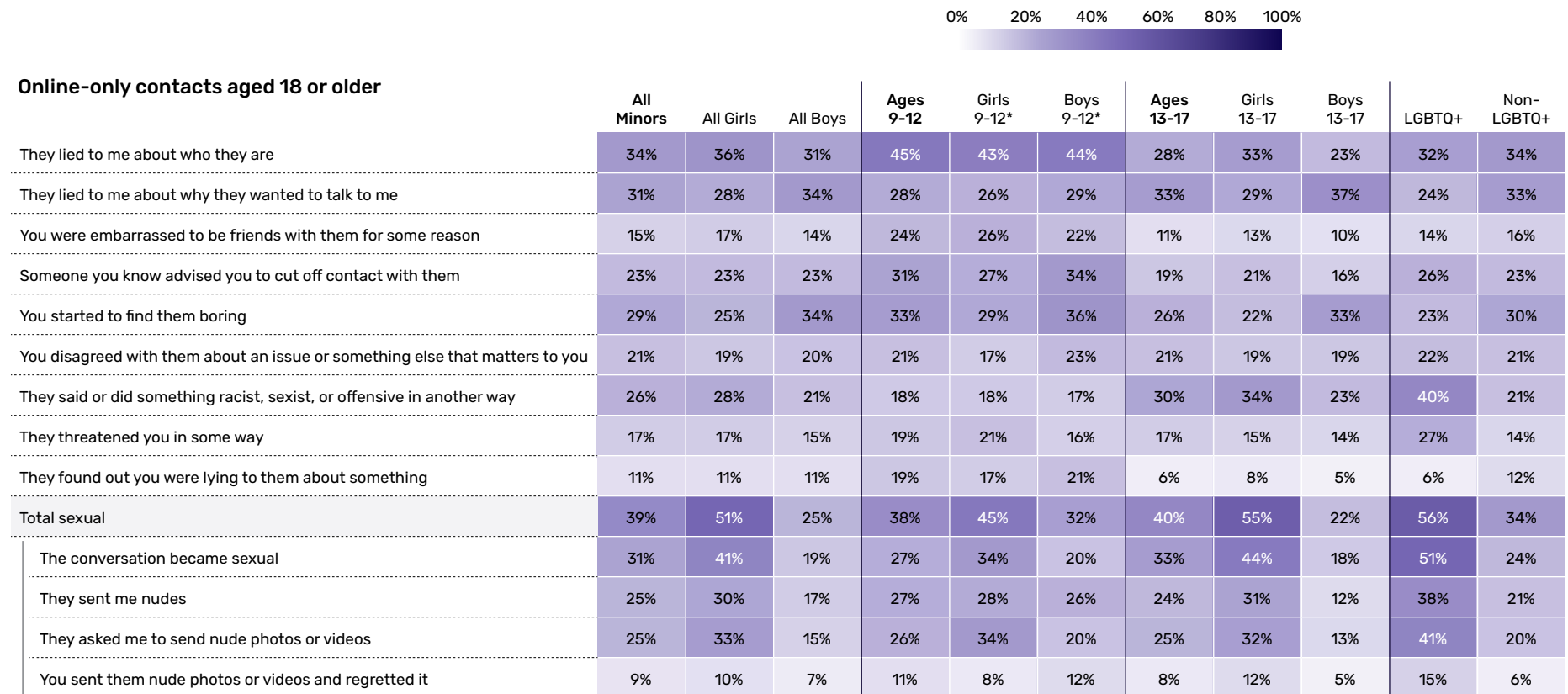
	All Minors	All Girls	All Boys	Ages 9-12	Girls 9-12	Boys 9-12	Ages 13-17	Girls 13-17	Boys 13-17	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
They lied to me about who they are	31%	33%	30%	35%	34%	35%	29%	33%	26%	30%	32%
They lied to me about why they wanted to talk to me	25%	24%	26%	19%	16%	22%	28%	29%	29%	23%	25%
You were embarrassed to be friends with them for some reason	13%	15%	10%	15%	16%	14%	11%	14%	7%	20%	11%
Someone you know advised you to cut off contact with them	22%	22%	23%	25%	20%	29%	21%	24%	18%	25%	22%
You started to find them boring	32%	29%	37%	32%	29%	34%	32%	28%	39%	28%	33%
You disagreed with them about an issue or something else that matters to you	26%	23%	27%	23%	18%	27%	29%	26%	27%	31%	25%
They said or did something racist, sexist, or offensive in another way	24%	25%	20%	15%	12%	17%	30%	34%	23%	38%	20%
They threatened you in some way	13%	12%	12%	12%	10%	13%	14%	13%	12%	23%	10%
They found out you were lying to them about something	10%	11%	10%	13%	12%	14%	8%	10%	7%	12%	10%
Total sexual	30%	37%	20%	24%	27%	20%	34%	45%	20%	48%	25%
The conversation became sexual	22%	29%	13%	17%	22%	11%	26%	34%	14%	41%	17%
They sent me nudes	17%	19%	13%	14%	13%	15%	19%	24%	11%	31%	13%
They asked me to send nude photos or videos	18%	23%	11%	15%	17%	12%	20%	27%	10%	34%	13%
You sent them nude photos or videos and regretted it	7%	8%	6%	7%	5%	9%	7%	11%	4%	13%	5%

Note: Columns will total more than 100 because question was multiple select. Numbers represented by "total sexual" include respondents who selected "the conversation became sexual," "they sent me nudes," "they asked me to send nude photos or videos," and/or "you sent them nude photos or videos and regretted it."

Fig 39a | **Reasons why minors cut off contact with online-only contacts who are adults**

Among minors who cut off online contact

Q43. For which of the following reasons have you ended contact with someone you messaged with online, but never met because...Please select all that apply.



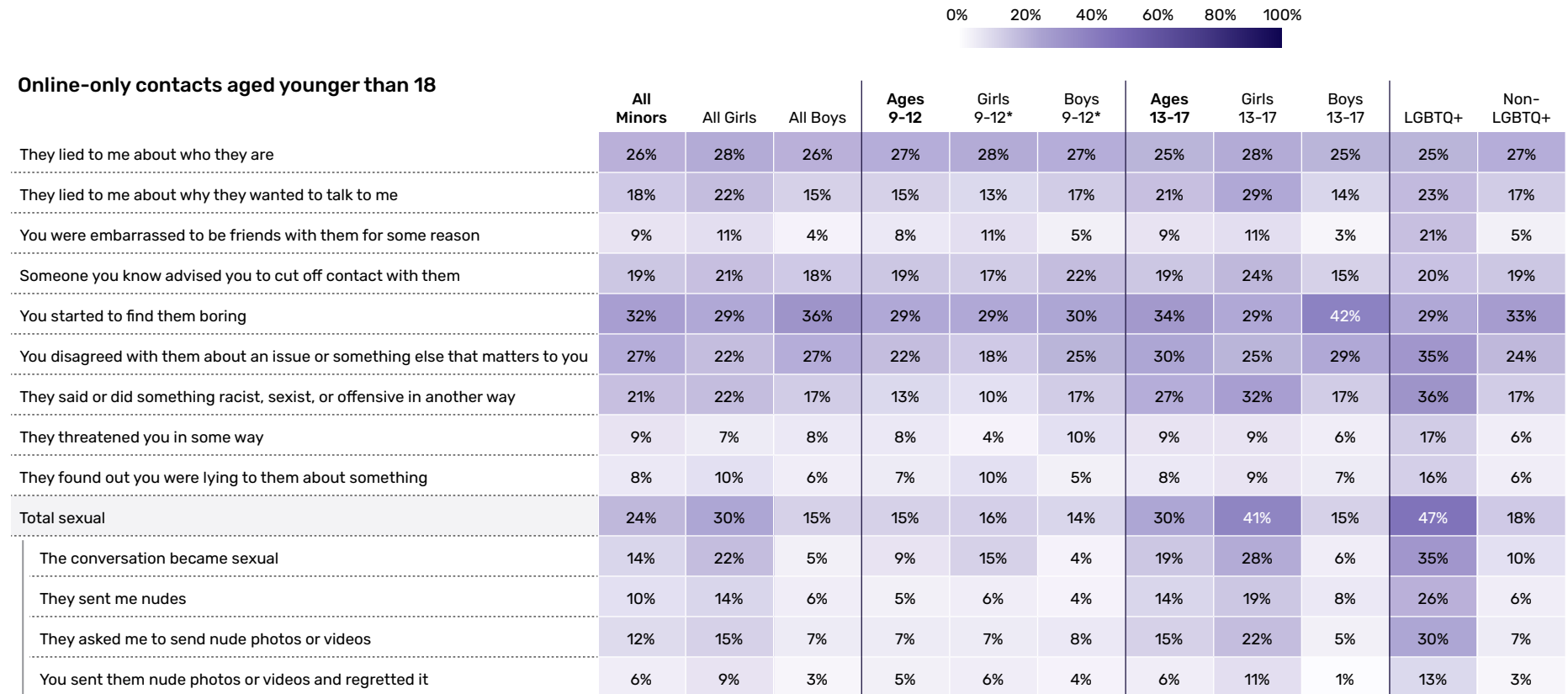
Note: Columns will total more than 100 because question was multiple select. Numbers represented by "total sexual" include respondents who selected "the conversation became sexual," "they sent me nudes," "they asked me to send nude photos or videos," and/or "you sent them nude photos or videos and regretted it."

* Base sizes <100

Fig 39b | **Reasons why minors cut off contact with online-only contacts who are other minors**

Among minors who cut off online contact

Q43. For which of the following reasons have you ended contact with someone you messaged with online, but never met because...Please select all that apply.



Note: Columns will total more than 100 because question was multiple select. Numbers represented by "total sexual" include respondents who selected "the conversation became sexual," "they sent me nudes," "they asked me to send nude photos or videos," and/or "you sent them nude photos or videos and regretted it."

* Base sizes <100

Case Study: Heightened Risk Based on Online Sharing Behaviors

While not all online relationships are malicious in nature, understanding if some minors are at a heightened risk for online exploitation based on a unique combination of their attitudes and online experiences is of critical importance. To evaluate this, a sub-sample of minors⁴ who reported experiences across three dimensions of sharing behaviors with online-only contacts were clustered together for analysis. This sub-sample of minors consisted of those who reported they had shared all the following types of information with online-only contacts⁵ (though not necessarily the same contact):

- **Identifying information:** email or screen names, phone number, or where they live or attend school;
- **Sensitive or emotional information:** something they are stressed or concerned about, happy or excited about, have never told anyone else before, or would not discuss offline; and
- **Sexual or flirtatious exchanges:** flirted, talked about dating, or talked about sex.

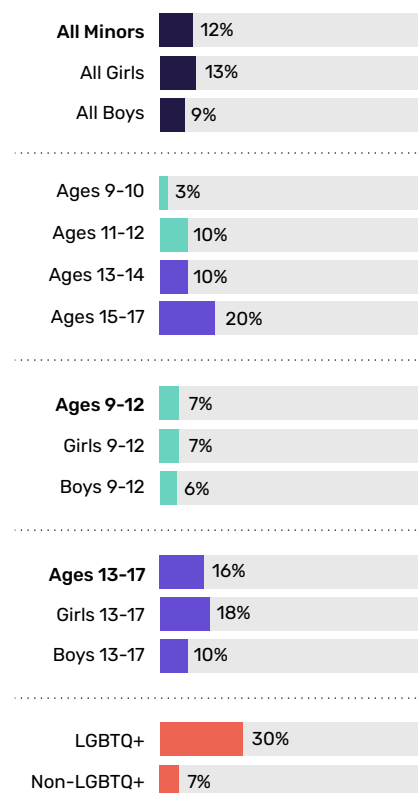
Nearly 1 in 8 (12%) minors surveyed qualified as part of this sub-sample. Compared to the full sample, minors in this sub-sample were disproportionately LGBTQ+ youth, teen girls, and older teens: 30% of all LGBTQ+ minors, 18% of all teen girls, and 20% of all 15-17-year-olds surveyed qualified as part of this higher risk sub-sample (Fig 40).

1 in 8
Minors reported online behaviors that place them at heightened risk for online grooming

Fig 40 | **Percentage of minors who exhibit heightened risk online sharing behaviors**

Among minors who cut off online contact

Q50. Have you ever experienced/done any of the following with someone you only know online? Please select all that apply.



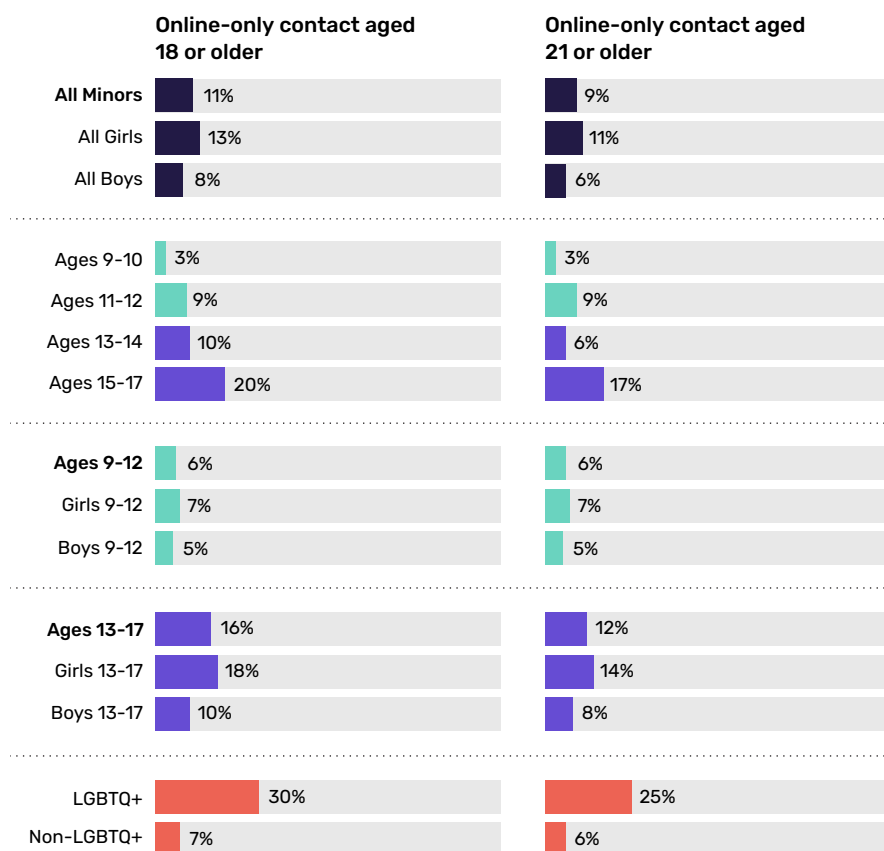
Note: Numbers reflect the net percentage of minors who responded they shared: identifying information; sensitive or emotional information; and sexual or flirtatious exchanges.

⁴ In corresponding figures, minors within the sub-sample are referred to as "sharing risk minors" while those not qualifying as part of the sub-sample are referred to as "all other minors."

⁵ Given that online offenders can — and do — pose as children online, we consider all minors who are engaging in these behaviors to be at a heightened risk of online grooming regardless of the ages they perceive their online-only contacts to be. As such, experiences with online-only contacts of any age were included in this analysis.

Fig 41 | **Percentage of minors who exhibit heightened risk online sharing behaviors and reported having online-only adult contacts**

Q50. Have you ever experienced/done any of the following with someone you only know online? Please select all that apply. Q13. Which of the following age ranges describe any of the types of people you only know online? Please select all that apply and if you aren't sure about the age range just give your best guess.



Note: Numbers shown as 18 or older reflect the percentage of minors who selected online-only contacts aged 18-20, 21-29, and 30 or older. Numbers shown as 21 or older reflect the percentage of minors who selected online-only contacts aged 21-29 and 30 or older.

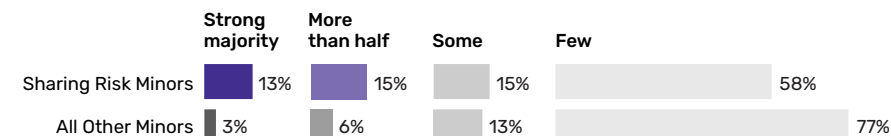
Online-only adult contacts

Concerningly, the vast majority of the sub-sample also reported being in contact online with adults they have never met, which compounds the risk of this group: 97% reported having an online-only contact aged 18 or older and 78% reported having one aged 21 or older. This means that among all minors, 9% have had experiences that qualify them as at-risk based on their online sharing behaviors and they reported interacting with adults aged 21 or older online who they have never met in-person. While the portion of the sub-sample with contacts aged 21 or older skew older themselves (aged 15-17), 6% of all minors aged 9-14 also reported the qualifying sharing behaviors and reported online-only contacts aged 21 or older (Fig 41).

One potential dynamic at play here appears to be minors' degrees of openness to connecting with online-only contacts more generally, including those they perceive to be adults: minors in the sub-sample were 3 times more likely (28%) than those who were not (9%) to indicate they respond to the majority of messages they receive from online-only contacts and they were twice as likely (30%) to report that they feel comfortable connecting with someone online aged 21 or older when compared to minors who did not qualify as part of the sub-sample (16%) (Fig 42).

Fig 42 | **Percentage of online-only contacts minors respond to by risk classification**

Q16. Overall, if you had to say, roughly what % of the people who message you that you do not know offline, do you respond to? Don't worry about calculating it exactly, just give your best guess.

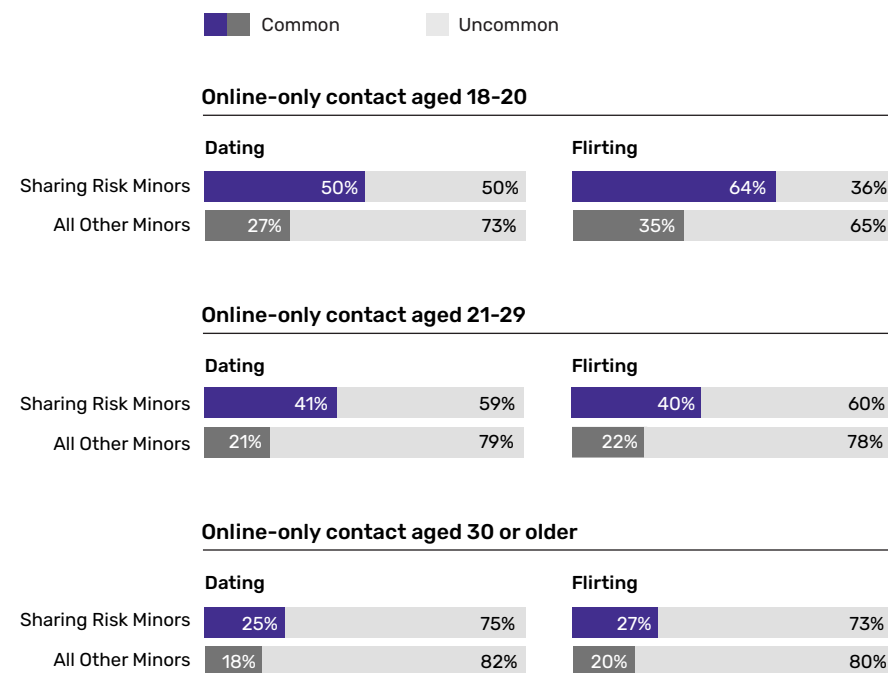


Note: Strong majority (76% or more), More than half (51-75%), Some (26-50%), Few (0-25%)

Fig 43 | **Perceived normalcy of romantic relationships with adult online-only contacts by risk classification**

Q44. For people you know who are your same age and gender, how normal is it to flirt with people they only know online in each of the following age ranges?

Q45. For people you know who are your same age and gender, how normal is it to date, or have romantic relationships online with people they have not met in person in each of the following age ranges?



Note: Numbers shown as common reflect the net percentage of minors who selected "very common" or "somewhat common." Numbers shown as uncommon reflect the net percentage of minors who selected "not very common, but happens" or "never happens."

Minors within the sub-sample were also more likely to believe online romantic relationships with adults are normal compared to minors not in the sub-sample: 59% reported it's common for their peers to date adults aged 18 or older online, 41% reported it's common to date adults aged 21-29 online, and 25% reported it's common to date adults aged 30 or older online. The respective numbers for minors not in the sub-sample were noticeably less: 32% (aged 18 or older), 21% (aged 21-29), and 18% (aged 30 or older) (Fig 43).

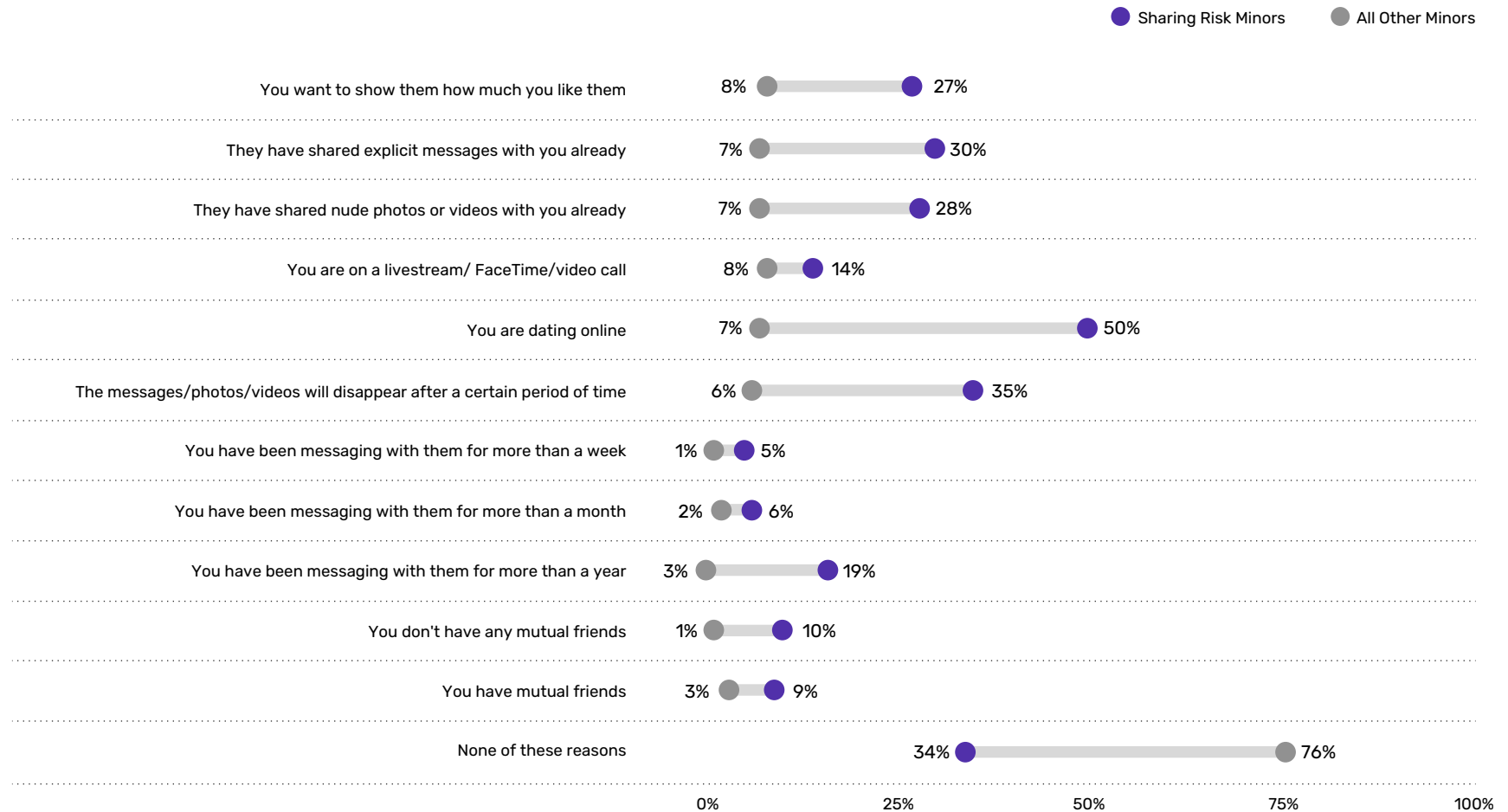
Perceptions of normalcy among minors in the sub-sample in dating adults they only know online is especially concerning as they reported that online dating was a key factor underlying their comfort with sharing explicit images or videos with that contact. Half (50%) indicated that being in an online romantic relationship would make them feel comfortable sharing this content (Fig 44). Minors in the sub-sample were also more than 3 times as likely to report they would feel comfortable sharing explicit images or videos of themselves with an online-only contact "to show how much they like them." Both of these data points raise alarms about how vulnerable these minors may be to the dangers of being groomed and exploited online.

Risk Awareness

While the majority of all minors reported awareness of the possibility of someone trying to manipulate them online, minors in the sub-sample were substantially more likely to believe someone has tried to befriend and manipulate them online: 3 in 4 (73%) indicated they believe this has happened to them already compared to 1 in 3 (35%) minors who did not qualify as part of the sub-sample. Additionally, minors in the sub-sample were more likely to believe this experience was common among their peers: 4 in 5 (79%) reported it is common for someone to befriend and manipulate kids of their age and gender compared to 59% of minors not in the sub-sample.

Fig 44 | Reasons minors may feel comfortable sharing sexual content with online-only contacts by risk classification

Q59. If you were messaging or having a conversation with someone you had never met in person, would any of the following make you feel comfortable sending sexually explicit messages and/or nude photos or videos?



Note: Columns will total more than 100 because question was multiple select.

While the sample size for comparison is small, minors within the sub-sample also reported being more familiar with the actual term “online grooming” compared to their counterparts: 62% of sub-sample minors reported they are very or somewhat familiar with the term, while 43% of minors not in the sub-sample reported the same. Among all minors who were familiar with the term, where they learned about it is informative. Minors in the sub-sample were less likely than their counterparts to have learned about it from caregivers while they were twice as likely (47%) compared to minors not in the sub-sample (23%) to have learned about it from an online community (Fig 45).

Cutting off contact

Minors in the sub-sample were more likely to have cut off contact with someone they met online: nearly all (94%) had prior experience cutting off an online-only contact compared to 75% of minors not included in the sub-sample. Notable for this research are the primary reasons they reported a higher likelihood for doing so: minors in the sub-sample were more likely to cut off contact if they thought they were being lied to about the other person’s identity or they felt uncomfortable about sexual interactions. In fact, a majority (53%) of all sub-sample minors reported they have cut off an online-only contact because their online interaction became sexual (Fig 46).

While minors in the sub-sample reported more experiences cutting off online-only contacts, they were also nearly two times more likely to have remained in contact with an online-only connection who had made them feel uncomfortable: 39% of minors in the sub-sample reported this experience compared to 21% of those not in the sub-sample. This underscores the powerful role of perceived friendships when minors are confronted with an uncomfortable situation online — and the vulnerability this may create for online groomers to exploit.

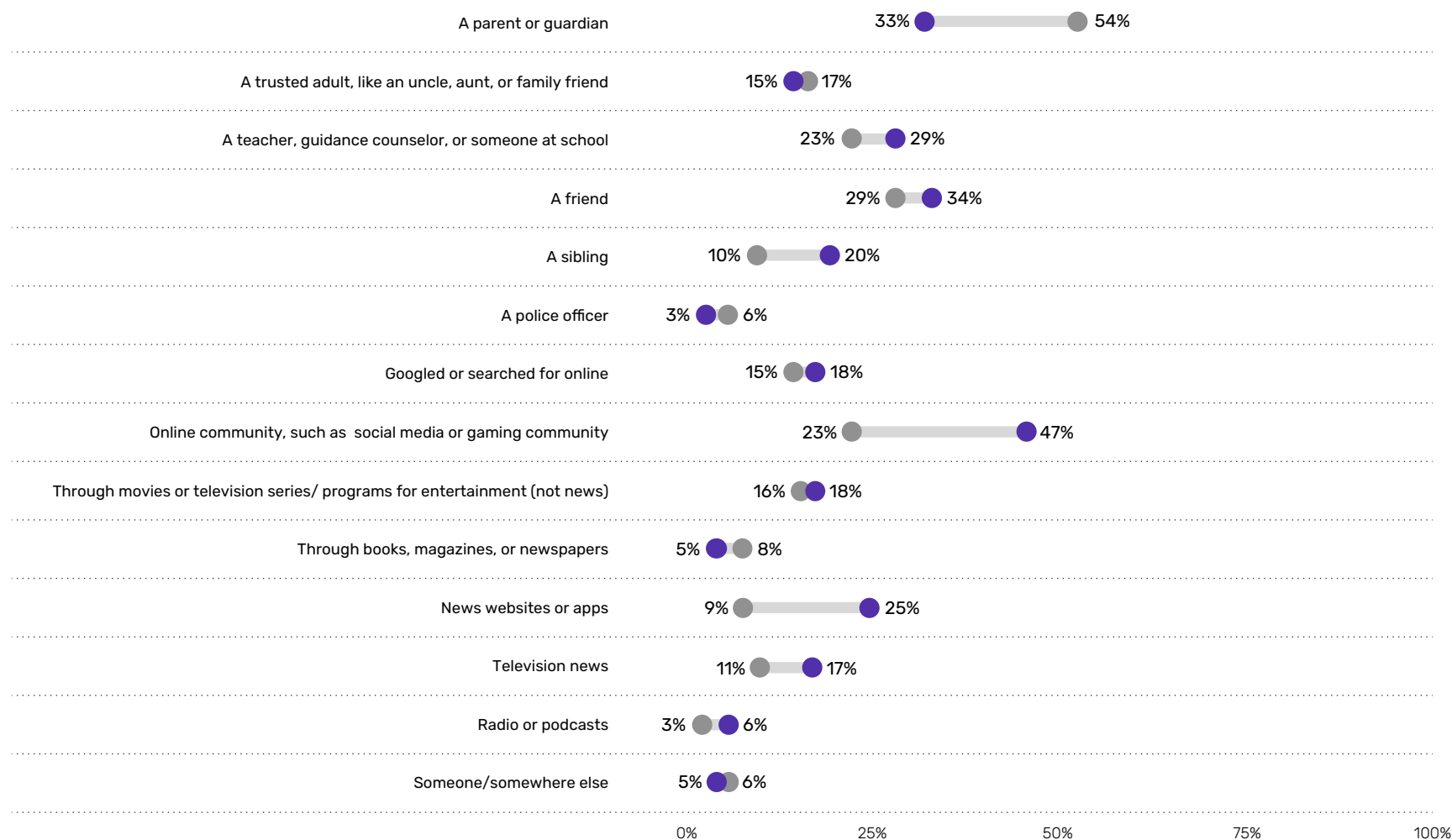
2x

Sharing risk minors were 2x more likely to have stayed in contact with someone who made them feel uncomfortable online

Fig 45 | **Where minors received information about online grooming by risk classification**
Among minors familiar with the term "online grooming"

Q72. And where have you come across or who have you talked to about online grooming or online groomers?

● Sharing Risk Minors* ● All Other Minors

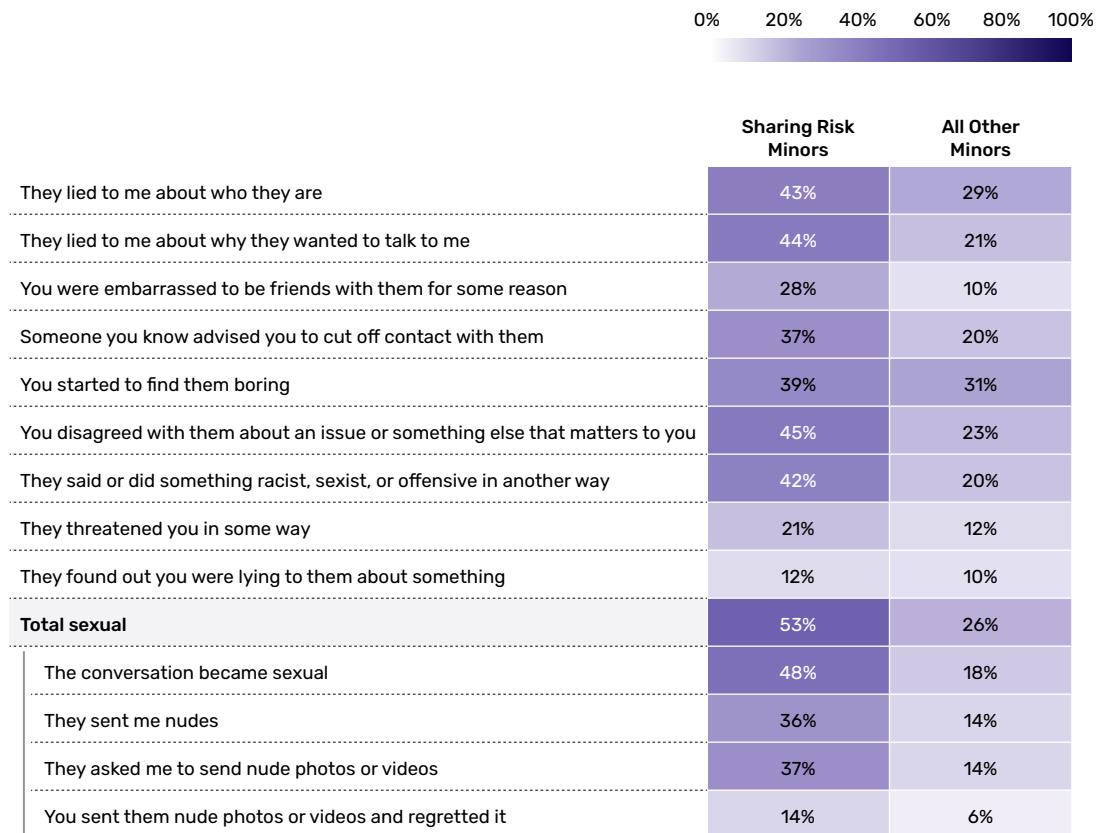


Note: Columns will total more than 100 because question was multiple select. * Base sizes <100

Fig 46 | Reasons why minors cut off contact with online-only contacts by risk classification
Among minors who cut off online contact

Q43. For which of the following reasons have you ended contact with someone you messaged with online, but never met because...Please select all that apply.

Note: Columns will total more than 100 because question was multiple select. Numbers represented by "total sexual" include respondents who selected "the conversation became sexual," "they sent me nudes," "they asked me to send nude photos or videos," and/or "you sent them nude photos or videos and regretted it."



Looking Ahead

This research explored young people's online social networks – who they are connecting with, why they connect, and how risks of online grooming may surface amid everyday interactions. In addition to highlighting areas for further exploration – such as the influence of gender, age, and sexual identity – the data underscores several key findings and corresponding opportunities for action.

1. Online relationships can be quite personal and meaningful – and for 1 in 3 young people, their closest friendships formed online.

From a youth-facing communications standpoint, the logic of “stranger danger” is often out of touch with the reality of how minors view their online only contacts. The perspective that *“everyone is a stranger at some point”* presents the concept of “strangers” as a starting place which all friendships go through, not a fundamental barrier to connection. Further, some minors, particularly LGBTQ+ youth, have a far greater reliance on online communities than others. Denying them the possibility for critical support and connection outright only serves to create greater isolation and vulnerability. Recognizing a stranger from a friend online should not be presented as a singular decision point, but can be part of a larger conversation around healthy online relationships and risk mitigation tactics.

2. Flirting and dating online are viewed as common, even when it involves an adult or someone much older. While it was more common among teens, still roughly 1 in 3 9-12-year-olds believed it was common to flirt with other minors online and 1 in 5 believed it was common to date a young adult online.

Minors report feeling fewer barriers online – either from personal inhibition or offline influences – including toward engaging in romantic or sexual exchanges with individuals much older than them. While the risk looks different for a 17-year-old flirting with a 19-year-old than for a 12-year-old with a 21-year-old, the fact remains that the internet creates more opportunities for adults, and even older teens, to manipulate young people into sexual exchanges. We must anticipate this and speak to it, including discussions of healthy boundaries and age appropriate relationships as we empower young people to navigate adolescence in a digital era.

3. Minors are regularly encouraged to leave open forums for 1-to-1 environments by online-only contacts. In fact, two-thirds of minors reported they have been asked by someone they met online to move from a public forum to a private conversation on a different platform.

In the same way that offline abusers intentionally build rapport then isolate their victims prior to hands-on abuse, so too do those looking to abuse kids online. After meeting minors in public forums, online offenders purposefully move victims across platforms to increase both their own security and a potential victim's isolation. Combatting this tactic requires active engagement and collaboration from all platforms, to ensure the environments they design have effective mechanisms to minimize risk for users. Platforms, including messaging services, must continue to improve and prioritize reporting functionality and their ability to respond quickly. Reliable reporting pipelines offer the most basic level of protection for users.

More, platforms must work alongside one another to innovate and deploy solutions that address the fundamentally cross-platform nature of online grooming. This type of shared commitment to addressing an online harm is not new; it has proven viable and effective in combatting the spread of child sexual abuse material, online extremism, and misinformation, to name a few. This same level of shared commitment is now needed to confront online grooming. Without it, offenders will continue to exploit the siloed nature of digital environments to their benefit in victimizing minors.

4. Being made to feel uncomfortable by an online connection does not guarantee a minor will be ready to cut off contact. Nearly one-quarter of kids stayed in contact with someone online who made them uncomfortable, with LGBTQ+ youth more than twice as likely to be in this position.

Recognizing risk, feeling equipped to respond to it, and finding effective tools to get help are different things. While young people are attuned to the risks of manipulation online, there is a high bar to cut-off contact, particularly when the minor believes they would be losing a relationship where they feel understood and accepted in a way they otherwise do not. Talking about healthy relationships and consent and developing exit strategies that resonate with minors are important parts of their online safety. In both our online and offline worlds, we must be elevating a diverse group of trusted resources to whom minors can turn, increasing the likelihood they feel there is help meant for them should the need arise.

Empowering young people with the awareness and confidence to report risky encounters they experience online is critical, but we have the ability to make it so fewer kids ever confront this danger in the first place. Platforms, in particular, are uniquely positioned to make this true. Rather than placing the burden so heavily on kids to see manipulation where they are looking for friendship, let us enlist the full potential of technology to explore, test, and deploy proactive solutions that recognize and combat grooming without waiting for a report from a child in danger.

Final Thoughts

Sweeping condemnation of online socialization fails to appreciate the value these relationships afford kids — it does not need to be an all-or-nothing approach. Rather, we can better understand which relationships pose the greatest risks, how they progress, and where these interactions are most often occurring. We can empower young people with awareness of healthy relationships, encourage confidence to break off contact or seek help if they are uncomfortable, and create accessible and non-judgemental support systems — both online and off — to turn toward when things go wrong.

And while equipping young people with the knowledge and skills to avoid or respond to online harms is critical, we are underutilizing the full power of technology to meaningfully reduce the risk of online grooming. There is an imbalance of responsibility, with the burden resting on the shoulders of kids to avoid or report people looking to abuse them.

On the internet, we've created a place where people explore freely — not only because of increased access but also because of the internet's promise of anonymity and privacy. This is a good thing. However, we cannot hide from the reality that there are those weaponizing this technology to harm kids. We can, and must, build fully aware of this reality — designing environments that proactively minimize risk, delivering relevant programs that empower young people to explore safely, and creating scalable response systems to protect kids when they need help.

Understanding the complex intersection of technology and child sexual abuse is critical for us to safeguard kids from the ever-evolving threats they face online. Without direct insights from kids who are encountering these issues every day, we risk falling behind in our commitment to their safety.

THANK YOU

We are grateful to the kids who took the time to participate in our survey. Without their gracious participation, we would not be able to share these valuable insights to build accessible and relevant interventions that keep their digital environments rich, open, and safe.

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