

Social Media as a Catalyst and Trigger for Youth Violence

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Executive summary

Social media now plays a central role in the lives of young people in the UK, with the vast majority of teenagers using smartphones and tablets to access online platforms throughout their waking hours. The integration of social media into the daily lives of young people has left online–offline boundaries increasingly blurred. Whilst online activity offers huge potential to enhance the quantity and quality of communication between people across the world, it also raises some serious challenges.

This report focuses on one of these challenges, namely, the links between young people's use of social media and youth violence. Whilst social media platforms are being used to glamorise, display and incite serious acts of violence, this content currently drifts under the radar of responsible adults and organisations which have the potential to respond to and challenge this behaviour.

The report makes for uncomfortable reading, particularly for those who work with young people and recognise the daily challenges that many face. The attitudes and behaviour of the young people discussed in this report must be viewed within the wider social and economic context of their lives. Many will have grown up in areas of socioeconomic deprivation, may be struggling to cope with serious issues around trauma stemming

from early childhood experiences and are therefore exhibiting attitudes and behaviours that are tragically understandable when considered in this context. All of the findings presented in this report are intended to be read in light of the above.

By highlighting the ways in which social media is acting as a catalyst and trigger for serious incidents of violence between young people in real life, the report provides a springboard for action and collaborative exchanges between a full range of stakeholders as we move forward. It identifies a number of measures aimed at preventing young people harming, and being harmed by, other young people as a result of activity on social media. Its recommendations, however, should not be taken as a fixed blueprint, but as a means of kick-starting the development of appropriate and effective policy and practice in this area.

Key findings

- **No holds barred online:** Because social media is commonly perceived to be hidden from adults, a virtual free-for-all space has emerged in which a small minority of young people share various forms of material that both display and incite serious incidents of violence in real life.
- **Impact of the smartphone:** Whilst some of the online activities discussed in this report have been occurring for several years, they now pose far greater challenges because of the recent developments in smartphone technology, which have radically altered both the nature and prevalence of young people's use of social media.
- **Growing audience:** By collapsing time and space, social media platforms are providing young people with unprecedented opportunities to disrespect one another. Before the advent of these platforms, incidents of violence, disrespect and provocation were typically confined to relatively small audiences, as well as a single location and point in time. Now, however, visceral displays of violence and disrespect are being captured via photographs and videos, and may be replayed at any time as the content spreads virally over multiple platforms. In addition, the enhanced audience size facilitated by social media makes violent retaliation more likely because of the unprecedented potential for disrespectful online activity to undermine young people's perceived status and reputation.
- **Threats and provocation in music videos:** Young people and professionals reported concerns around what they referred to as drill music videos, which threaten and provoke individuals and groups from rival areas. A clear distinction must be made between the vast majority of music videos that simply provide a raw reflection of the realities of young people's lives (content that does not provoke real-life violence), and a much smaller number of videos that go well beyond this, through displays of young people brandishing weapons, incendiary remarks about recent incidents of young people being seriously injured and killed, and explicit threats to stab or shoot specific individuals and members of rival groups.

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- **Violent intent is the exception rather than the norm:** It is important to highlight that the vast majority of young people do not want to live the violent and risky lifestyles that are being glamorised in drill music videos. Many attempt to launch careers as music artists as a means of escaping life 'on road'. In addition, these videos should not be seen as a root cause of youth violence. According to young people and professionals, however, they are acting as a catalyst and trigger for serious incidents of face-to-face violence between young people.
 - **Daily exposure to online violence:** A small minority of young people are exposed daily to social media content that displays or incites serious violence in real life. This includes uploads of photos and videos of individuals and groups trespassing into areas associated with rival groups, and serious incidents of theft and violence perpetrated against young people. Some of the latter are being taken within prison settings and broadcast live over social media by prisoners with access to smartphones. Some social media accounts are dedicated entirely to archiving and sharing material that displays young people being seriously harmed, disrespected and humiliated.
 - **Social pressures:** When young people are disrespected by content uploaded to social media, this can generate significant social pressure to retaliate in real life to protect their perceived status and reputation. Moreover, when young people witness graphic displays of real-life violence involving their friends and family, this can leave them suffering from significant levels of anxiety and trauma. Those who initially upload the content disrespecting a particular individual or group become prone to retaliatory acts of serious violence and theft, which in turn are often recorded and broadcast over social media, creating a vicious cycle of retaliation.
 - **Vulnerability of young women:** Professionals and young people reported cases of girls being violently attacked and sexually assaulted by members of rival groups after appearing in content uploaded online. In addition, professionals described cases in which young women who commented on content uploaded to social media were subsequently groomed and pressured into risky activities such as holding and storing weapons or drugs.

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- **Negative implications for education and employment:** The social media accounts of some people who self-identify as being part of a street gang are being followed by tens of thousands of young people. This continuous lens into a seemingly seductive and lucrative lifestyle that glamorises violence and the pursuit of money through illegal activities such as drug distribution further undermines the commitment of some young people to education and legitimate forms of employment.
 - **Lack of legal and organisational guidance:** Whilst professionals such as police officers and youth outreach workers in some countries actively use social media to pick up on signs of increased tensions to pre-empt violence, in our focus groups and interviews UK professionals reported being more cautious around engaging with social media content. A key reason for this is a general lack of guidance on how frontline professionals can and should be using social media from both an organisational and legal perspective.

Current responses

- **Limited response to online reports:** Social media platforms typically advise young people to report content that displays or incites serious incidents of violence directly to the platform provider or advise young people to contact the police directly. A range of professionals, however, questioned the extent to which social media platforms are acting on young people's reports, suggesting that material that supposedly violates a platform's community guidelines often remains online.
- **Inadequate training:** Many professionals describe current e-safety training as either non-existent or narrowly focused on online chat rooms and internet forums. Such material is now outdated in an era of smartphone technology and social media applications.
- **Limited supervision:** Professionals and young people report that parents and carers typically provide very little oversight of, or engagement with, their children's use of social media.

Recommendations

Whilst young people now have access to unprecedented tools of communication, a range of professionals, as well as parents and carers, currently lack the knowledge and skills to address the risks and challenges that are accompanying these advancements in technology. Frank and honest conversations, as well as prolonged and collaborative efforts, will be required from a range of stakeholders to effectively tackle this issue.

A range of groups and organisations have roles to play in tackling the links between young people's use of social media and serious youth violence. To this end, it is useful to distinguish between three distinct albeit complementary strategies: prevention, intervention and suppression.

Prevention

- All professionals working with young people, for example teachers, social workers, foster carers, youth workers and the police, should be provided with sufficient, up-to-date training on social media; this should be mandatory for those working with children and young people who are most at risk. Training should cover all of the main issues raised in this report, including specific content that focuses on the exploitation (sexual and otherwise) of young women.
- Further research should be commissioned on the links between activity on social media and the exploitation of young women. This research should generate concrete recommendations for policy and practice, and inform the future training of professionals working with children and young people.
- Online resources explaining the basics of the main social media platforms, as well as the importance of parents and carers providing oversight of their children's activity on social media, should be developed by the Home Office, widely shared and updated on a regular basis to keep pace with the evolving social media landscape..

Intervention

- Where appropriate, professionals working with young people should actively use social media (particularly online content that is fully public) to better inform and support their frontline practice.
- In light of the rapid evolution of social media platforms and smartphone technology in recent years, existing legislative guidance regulating the powers of public bodies to monitor online content should be revisited, with careful consideration given to the appropriate balance between respecting people's rights to privacy and the imperative of safeguarding vulnerable children and young people.
- The Home Office should provide comprehensive guidance on what constitutes appropriate and acceptable use of social media to a full range of stakeholders, which includes the police, teachers and social workers.
- Voluntary, charitable and social enterprise organisations should provide similar guidance to their frontline practitioners.

Suppression

- All social media providers should provide a clear and simple process for users to report online content that violates the platform's own guidelines directly to the platform provider, highlighting that this process will be fully anonymous.
- Platform providers should ensure that they have efficient procedures in place to remove content that is deemed inappropriate in accordance with their own guidelines. When content is removed, a specific rationale should be provided to the relevant user or displayed on the webpage concerned.

About the research

This report is based on research comprising three main components. First, a six-month period of analysis of the following social media platforms: Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram and Periscope. Second, discussions with key stakeholders, including young people's advocates, gangs and serious youth violence workers, young people themselves, the police and managers of local authority gangs teams. And third, an international review of relevant literature.

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