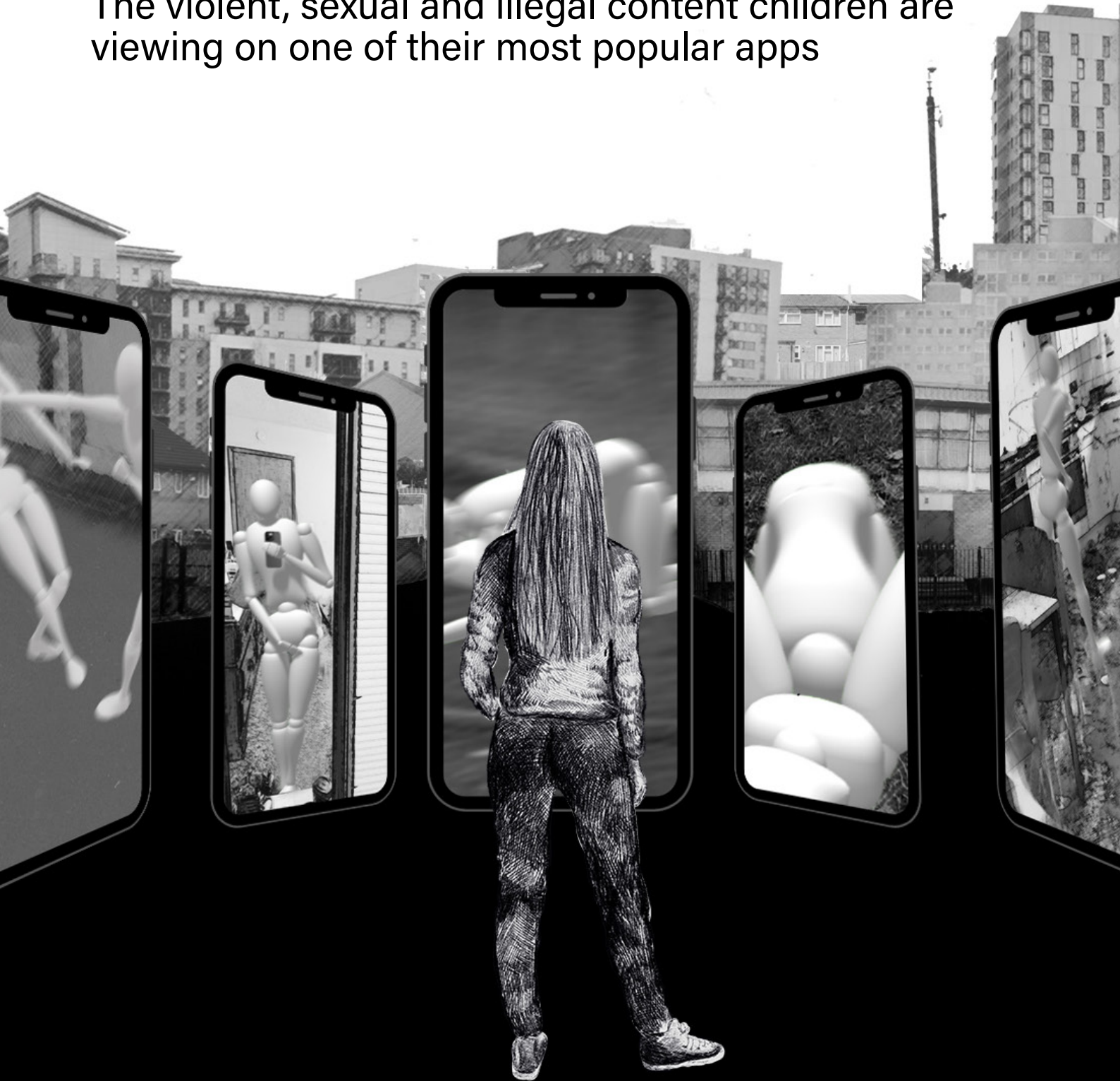# Anti-social Media

The violent, sexual and illegal content children are viewing on one of their most popular apps

June 2023

Contents

About this research

This research set out to explore in detail the specific experiences and behaviour in deprived or vulnerable children that we had observed during other projects. In the course of this other work, it became evident that some children were seeing disturbing, graphic and illegal content on Snapchat as a matter of course.

Revealing Reality researchers wanted to understand whether other children in similar circumstances had similar experiences, and, if so, what effect they were having. We also wanted to explore how and why Snapchat's features and functionality might be enabling – or even driving – such behaviour.

This report presents the evidence and our analysis of the research findings.

The children who participated in this research do not represent all children. But their experience sheds light on how far removed much of the content they see on Snapchat is from what may be imagined in the mainstream, how quickly and widely this content can spread, how unsuitable – as well as often illegal – it is for children, and how badly it serves them.

We found similar experiences among children throughout Great Britain. The 13 children who participated in this research lived in some of the most deprived areas of Birmingham, Glasgow, London and Manchester. One was in foster care, one had attended a pupil referral unit, several had had interactions with the police and their families had experience of the criminal justice system. Most of them were supported by youth services and centres. All of them were seeing graphic, violent, sexual and often illegal content on Snapchat.

The interviews with the children lasted at least one hour, sometimes several hours. Some were conducted online, others we visited in person.

We also interviewed and consulted a range of professionals and practitioners, including youth workers, police officers, liaison officers and school teachers, whose experiences and observations have also informed this research.

All participants in the research – children, practitioners and professionals – have been given a pseudonym and any details that might identify them are not included in this report, including precise geographic information.

About Revealing Reality

Revealing Reality is a multi-award-winning insight and innovation agency. We enjoy working on challenging projects with social purpose to inform policy, design and behaviour change. These include researching how digital services and platforms are shaping people's behaviour across relationships, media literacy, health, financial products and more.

Over the last few years, Revealing Reality has conducted several projects specifically exploring digital design and online harm for a range of clients including 5Rights Foundation, the DCMS, Ofcom, the Children's Commissioner and Internet Matters.

Anti-social Media is a piece of research we have undertaken independently and funded ourselves to explore what we considered to be an important but overlooked area of research into children's experiences online.

To find out more about Revealing Reality or if you have any questions our research, please get in touch via www.revealingreality.co.uk

Introduction

"I feel like it's changed how I see everyone because I used to think, like, no one would hurt each other... I would be like, oh, you're too young. Now I've seen all of this, no one really cares about how young you are. Like, if you do something to get on the nerves of someone else, you could possibly die from stuff like that. So I keep my mouth shut."

Ayeesha, 14, London

"They were kicking him, punching him, hitting him. And then he was trying to cover his face and they ended up pinning his arms back and kicking him in the face over and over. There was a lot of blood. It was really graphic. This made its way all around Snapchat, everyone that knew him had seen it. It was really violent."

Youth worker, Manchester, describing a revenge attack on a boy of 16

"They just lay it down on a bed or something. A lot of knives or knuckledusters, with the money sign and the amount it is. And then it just says, 'Text me if you wanna buy it'. They ask you to text them on Snapchat."

Aman, 17, London

Anti-social networks

This research reveals the stories and experiences of vulnerable children from across Britain, routinely viewing videos of illegal activity – fights, beatings, stabbings, sexual assaults, "raids"; illegal content including sex acts involving children; and the sale of weapons and drugs online. Some children report seeing this type of content several times a day, every day.

They're not viewing this content on the dark web, finding it buried on hard-to-reach websites or through clandestine underground networks. They see it on mainstream social media and messaging platforms, primarily on Snapchat.

When people think of Snapchat, they might think of silly photo filters and temporary images – kids sending each other selfies overlaid with cute cartoon dog faces, which disappear from their chat 24 hours later. But the content the children in this research are seeing doesn't always disappear – it's often screenshotted or filmed on a separate device and reposted again and again, sometimes visible to tens of thousands of people at a time.

The general public might be aware that "these days" some teenagers send each other nude images on Snapchat, but they probably don't realise that this can include videos of graphic

sexual content and even assault. That the sharing of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) is common. That Snapchat is being used as a digital marketplace by criminals selling knives and drugs. And that shocking and humiliating physical assaults are shared daily, normalising violence and reinforcing messages about what happens to people who don't follow the local 'rules' of behaviour.

Local, social, and illicit by design

Snapchat is optimised for building networks. Most children use it less for following celebrities, and more for plugging in to their social and local networks. Its features and functionalities enable the distribution of material across these networks while it stays out of sight for the majority.

As a place to share illicit content, it makes sense that Snapchat is the platform of choice. By default, Stories disappear after 24-hours and Snaps disappear after they've been viewed. Snapchat says it doesn't allow unmoderated content to reach a large audience. But it doesn't define "large".

And the number of 'friends' a Snapchat user can have is far more than the number of people they are likely to have in-person relationships with offline.

Snapchat's Quick Add function offers a seemingly endless list of recommended 'friends' based on mutual connections and a range of other factors that aren't disclosed. You can add up to 6,000 people as 'friends', although there's no limit to how many people can add you. Some accounts operate more like broadcasters –distributing local 'gossip' to large numbers of followers – videos of fights, threats, leaked nudes.

Reinforcing boundaries

As the evidence in this report reveals, Snapchat is being used by some people to arrange and amplify fights, build and destroy reputations, reinforce geographical rivalries. For certain demographics – young, urban, disadvantaged – it serves as the local news. And the larger this local violence, criminality and jostling for status looms in their lives – filmed, shared and reshared – the less the world beyond their neighbourhoods

feels relevant to them. They live in a hyper-local bubble, which shapes their experiences, attitudes and expectations.

To people outside of these bubbles, this activity and its consequences are largely invisible. These children say they wouldn't consider reporting unsuitable content – they've seen what happens to a 'grass'.

Many of these disadvantaged young people talk of some of the filmed fights and humiliation as performative, the fact they can be filmed and shared makes this activity more likely. This research suggests Snapchat's design features not only enable the sharing of unpleasant and illegal material, but in some cases shape the behaviour that leads to its creation.

For the children we've interviewed for this research, living in some of the most deprived areas of the country, Snapchat is a way of keeping close to the local drama, seeing conflict play out, watching who comes out on top. Crime is not far away – on their phones as well as in their streets. Building and defending a reputation is important. The social map is defined by who has clout, who is allied with whom, who to fear, who carries a knife, and who is prepared to use it publicly.

What these children see on their phones on Snapchat matters to them. Often it also frightens and disturbs them. It's real and it's local. They struggle to imagine life any other way. The Snapchat filters these children experience are not colour effects and bitmoji overlaid on photos, Snapchat is a filter through which they see the world, assess the options available to them, and envisage their future.

The world through a Snapchat filter

Experiences of children across Britain

We interviewed 13 children during this research between October 2022 and April 2023. For the most part, they lived in some of the most deprived parts of London, Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow. These are not children who would conventionally take part in research projects and recruiting them required sensitivity and flexibility.

We recruited the children through our own networks and used a variety of methods to do so. These included:

- Reaching out to youth centres and youth workers

- Reaching out to organisations who support young people – particularly disadvantaged young people

- Posting on social media

- Talking to professionals or parents/guardians we've spoken to before and them passing us on to other relevant people (with their consent)

What did these children have in common?

Many of these children had very challenging lives. They all had distinct and varied experiences, however all of them had seen many examples of worrying content on Snapchat. This included violent content such as fights and stabbings, sexual content including nude images or videos of children, and the sale of weapons and drugs.

Although the children were recruited using different channels, all of them lived in urban environments during the time when they saw this type of content on Snapchat. Compared with national data, they all lived in neighbourhoods that over-index on measures of deprivation, crime and socio-economic disadvantage.

All 13 children lived in pockets of Great Britain that are in the top 20 per cent on the English[1] and Scottish[2] indices of deprivation on the dimension of crime. Eight out of 13 lived in areas that are in the top 10 per cent. It should be noted that they were not recruited with these demographics in mind, rather this trend emerged retrospectively when their data was analysed by the research team.
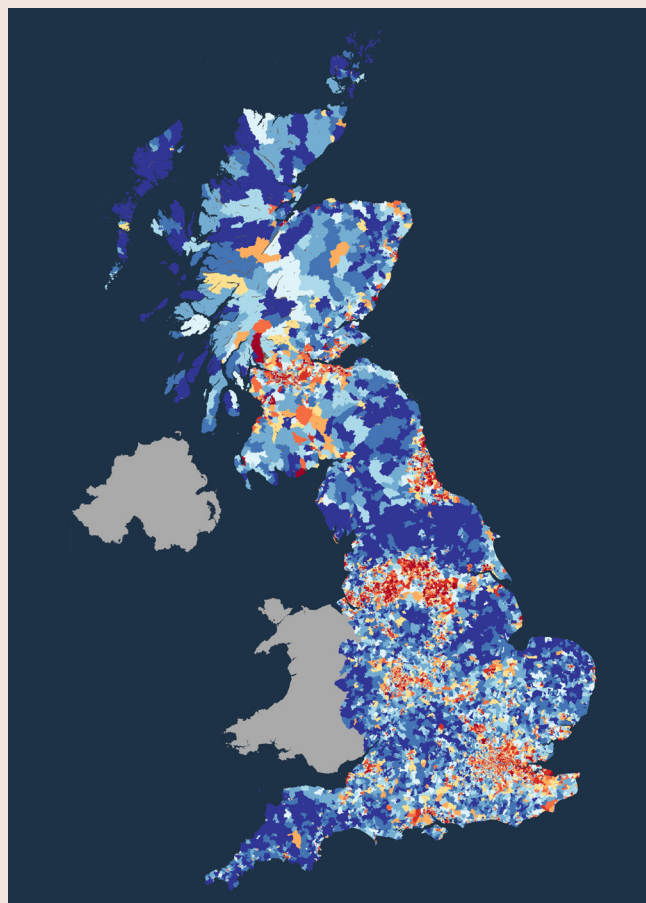
Approximately 750,000 children aged 13 to 17 live in these 20 per cent of deprived neighbourhoods across England and Scotland. Not all of these children will experience similar exposure to violent and harmful content on Snapchat; some will be better protected, choose to disengage from social media, or move in different social circles than the children we have

interviewed. But It's possible they will live only one or two degrees of separation from these online networks.

This report includes detailed case studies of four of the children who participated in the research who most clearly exemplify the research findings. Below is a brief summary of all 13 children and the seven professionals we interviewed for this research, which, taken together, have provided the evidence for those findings.

Ethical considerations and safeguarding

The interviews covered very sensitive subject matter and some of the children were vulnerable, which meant researchers had to take a flexible, child-centred approach to the interviews, making sure the children were safe and felt comfortable to contribute. Researchers gained fully informed consent both from the children, and from their parent or responsible adult by way of a form which explained in clear terms how the information they provided would be used.

The researchers made sure the children felt comfortable during the interviews, so some took place in their homes, others in neutral locations of their choice such as youth centres. They were encouraged to take breaks if and when they felt they needed to.

The children were not obliged to answer any questions they didn't feel comfortable answering. This was explained before the interview and reiterated throughout. They were given the opportunity to end the interview at any point, and to withdraw from the research at any point, even after the consent form was signed.

The children's parents or responsible adults were informed of the topics to be covered in the interviews beforehand so they could judge the suitability of the research for the child, and so they could be prepared to talk to the children should they need to.

Protecting the anonymity of those who took part in the research

All children who took part were anonymised, so their responses could not be linked back to them. We have used pseudonyms to refer to those who took part and obscured or generalised demographic or other potentially identifying detail to protect their anonymity. Respondents and their parent or responsible adult gave informed consent for their information to be used in this way.

Safeguarding

Researchers followed safeguarding procedures which put the wellbeing and safety of those who take part above anything else.

The following measures were taken to safeguard children taking part:

- Gaining parental or responsible adult's consent for all children participating aged under 16;

- Taking all reasonable steps to ensure that those taking part understood the nature and implications of their participation;

- Ensuring respondents were aware they did not have to answer any questions or talk about any topics that they do not want to;

- Giving all respondents the option to ask any questions before, during and after the interview;

- All researchers carrying out interviews have enhanced DBS checks and have previous experience conducting research with young people on sensitive topics.

Across all our work including this project, if a researcher ever believes a participant to be suffering from, or at risk of, significant harm, then they must report this to the relevant agencies, notwithstanding confidentiality. This condition is made clear to all participants and their parents or responsible adults before informed consent is obtained.

Introducing the children

Ali, 14, Glasgow, White British

Ali lives with his mum and two brothers in Glasgow. He's been in fights in school, videos of some of which have been circulated on Snapchat, and has also been involved with the police. He's now being supported at a local youth centre. Ali uses Snapchat every day, where he sees fights from his local area and across the city. He often sees weapons being wielded or used on videos shared on Snapchat Stories.

Aman, 17, London, British Asian

Aman lives with his parents and siblings in London. He describes his area as "quite dangerous" with some gang activity. He's studying at college and spends his spare time with his friends and at a local youth centre. Aman uses Snapchat less than he used to, but when he used it frequently he often saw content advertising weapons and drugs for sale.

Ayeesha, 14, London, Black British

Ayeesha lives under the care of her foster mum along with some of her siblings. Ayeesha is in a mainstream school this year, having previously attended a pupil referral unit. She describes herself as having a reputation across local schools and is particularly well known for her involvement in fights. Ayeesha sees violent or sexual content on Snapchat every day, sometimes several times.

Chloe, 14, Manchester, White British

Chloe lives with her parents in an estate in Manchester. She comes from a family that is "known" in the area and is conscious of maintaining her reputation. She spends most of her spare time with her friend, Kennedy, and uses Snapchat for several hours a day. Chloe has two Snapchat accounts with over 5,000 contacts, which she uses to keep up to date with local drama. She sees violent or sexual content at least once a day.

Dylan, 17, Glasgow, White Scottish

Dylan is an only child who lives with his parents in Glasgow. He mostly keeps to himself and his close group of friends. In his spare time after school, he typically spends time at a local youth centre. He uses Snapchat occasionally and encounters content ranging from school fights to leaked nude images.

Jaamil, 17, Birmingham, British Pakistani

Jaamil lives with his parents, and siblings in Birmingham. He is in college and hoping to go to university next year. He sees local fights and violence on Snapchat frequently. He tries to stay away from violence, but has occasionally felt he had to fight to defend his reputation.

Jamie, 14, London, White European

Jamie, who uses the pronoun 'they', lives in London with their mum. While they grew up in a Catholic household, Jamie now practises Hellenism and identifies as a witch. They are supported after school at two youth centres and spend a lot of time with local friends. Jamie has recently reduced their use of Snapchat to avoid seeing violent fights.

Jo, 15, Glasgow, White British

Jo, who uses the pronoun 'they', lives with their dad and siblings in a high-rise flat. Jo is supported at a local youth centre where they have made some good friends. They spend a lot of time gaming, where they often meet new people and then take the conversation to Snapchat. Jo sees a lot of fights on Snapchat, some of them involving serious violence and use of weapons.

Kennedy, 15, Manchester, White British

Kennedy lives with her mum and sibling in an estate in Manchester. Her family has lived in the area for generations and is "known". She enjoys having a reputation, though there is some pressure to keep up appearances. Kennedy uses Snapchat many hours a day. She enjoys keeping up to date with what is happening in the local area. This typically includes seeing violent fights and nude images.

Maka, 14, London, Black British

Maka lives with his mum and two siblings in south London. His older siblings are living elsewhere. Maka's is a religious family, and he regularly attends church and meets people this way. Snapchat is the primary platform he and his friends use to communicate. He often sees fights and violence that happen in his local area popping up on his Snapchat Stories as well as the spreading of nude images.

Suf, 17, London/Nottingham, Black British

Suf is currently living with a relative in Nottingham. Previously he lived with other relatives in London. Suf had a turbulent upbringing, spending time in foster care and in and out of temporary accommodation throughout his childhood. When he lived in London, Suf would frequently see violent and extreme content on Snapchat, usually of events in his local area.

Taylor, 17, Glasgow, White British

Taylor, who uses the pronoun 'they', lives in Glasgow with their parents and spends their free time after school at the local youth club. While they do not use Snapchat as often as they used to, they still see violent content. This typically ranges from fights in school to more violent fights using weapons.

Udai, 15, Birmingham, British Asian

Udai lives with his parents and two of his siblings in Birmingham. After feeling he was at risk of getting into trouble like some of his peers, he started spending a lot of his time at the local youth centre. Here, he plays basketball and has met some good friends. Udai has been exposed to local gang activities via Snapchat, including seeing fights, violence, and weapons being posted on people's Stories.

Introducing the professionals

Helen, safer schools police liaison officer, London

Helen is a police officer working with several schools across the city on issues involving criminality and threats of violence. Helen talked about how often Snapchat is mentioned in situations where she has to get involved, especially in how often it is used to make threats of violence, for example by sharing images of weapons. She said it is also used in the distribution of CSAM in schools.

Marie, youth worker, Leeds

Marie is a detached youth worker based in a relatively deprived area of Leeds. She is based partly in the youth centre but spends a lot of her time in the local area doing outreach work with young people who are unlikely to seek support from a youth centre. Marie talked about how sexual and violent content on Snapchat is easily spread and shapes how the children see themselves and their peers. The children Marie support have either previously been perpetuators of this content or victims of the recorded violence. The children trust Marie and often show her snippets of some of the content they encounter, though Marie suspects that what she sees is the only tip of the iceberg.

Cath, youth worker, Glasgow

Cath is a youth worker in a relatively deprived area of Glasgow. She is based partly in the youth centre and partly in the community and supports a number of local children. Cath said the children she supports see much of the violence and fighting that goes on in the local area on Snapchat. One of the children she supports was recently assaulted and it was filmed and circulated on Snapchat.

Serena and Michael, youth workers, London

Serena and Michael are youth workers at the same youth centre in London. A lot of their focus when supporting children is on mitigating postcode conflicts, often gang-related. Michael spoke about the tendency for people to film everything that goes on in the local area. If there's a fight, or a stabbing, people's first instinct is to get their phone out and film it. This then gets shared around on Snapchat.

Steve, headteacher at a pupil referral unit, Leeds

As the head of a school providing alternative provision, Steve works with children who have been excluded from mainstream school, who often have complex behavioural challenges, and many of whom have special educational needs. Steve talked about the role the use of Snapchat often played in fights and conflict among students, crime and theft, and grooming of other young people into criminal activity.

Malik, youth worker in an integrated gangs team, London

Malik is a youth worker in London, currently a deputy team manager in an integrated gangs team. He is supporting a small caseload of young people. The main part of his job is to spot themes, trends and patterns and try to reduce youth violence across the borough through training and various interventions. Malik attested to the sale of weapons, drugs and other illicit items that young people reported seeing on Snapchat.

"Snapchat made me act the way I act now"

Case study
Ayeesha, 14

"Everyone knows my name," Ayeesha says. The teachers know her "because my name is always on their radios" and the other kids know her for "scrapping". Her reputation preceded her – many of her classmates had seen a video on Snapchat of her fighting another girl before she'd even started at the school.

This is the second mainstream secondary school Ayeesha's been to in the last 12 months, with time at a pupil referral unit (PRU) and a stint home-schooling in between. The Monday after our interview she's got a meeting at the school to find out if she'll be allowed to stay after her latest fight.

Feeling trapped: negative influences and low expectations

Ayeesha says her behaviour has got worse since her time at the pupil referral unit. "If a kid's made a mistake, you putting them in a school with just kids that made the same mistake, you're going to see patterns. And they're going to start copying it, which causes their behaviour to change. That's what happened to me. I feel like I went in way better than when I came out." She's now got a wider network of friends and people she 'knows' as a result too.

"If a kid's made a mistake, you putting them in a school with just kids that made the same mistake, you're going to see patterns"

Ayeesha says she wants to "do something" with her life. "Because I feel like most people have the perception like foster kids aren't going to go far. I've had a lot of people tell me that. My social worker even said to

me, like, 'We're expecting you to have a baby soon.' I want to change people's perception of kids in care aren't all the same."

She says she wants to be a forensic scientist. But Ayeesha, now 14 and in year nine, says she only goes to school about half the week. If she has lessons or teachers she doesn't like, she doesn't attend. She "rates" science, so she'll often go in for that, but she says her teacher is a "joke" and everyone messes around. Ayeesha sits at the back. Sometimes she and her friends smoke vapes hidden in the sleeves of their school shirts.

Whether she goes in for lessons or not, after school every day she meets up with her group of friends. They take it in turns to buy something from McDonald's and then they'll head to an abandoned block of flats nearby, where they'll play hide and seek, vape and smoke weed, avoiding the "nitties" – the term they use for drug addicts – and any homeless people who are there.

Ayeesha has been in care since she was four, and she's lived in this area of London all her life. Poring over a map of the area, she points out where the abandoned flats are, other places she and her friends go to smoke, and where her various schools have been.

Local lives: protecting postcodes and reputations

Geography is important. Where they live defines the young people Ayeesha knows, even if they're not actually in gangs. "That's your postcode, you're supposed to support them, innit," she says.

Ayeesha is careful that no one other than her closest friends knows where she lives. She doesn't want anyone to be able to come after her. "You think I'm getting my door bust down?" she asks.

It's the same on Snapchat. Ayeesha uses Snapmaps to see where her friends are sometimes when she's out and they're trying to find each other. But she doesn't reveal her own location. "I always put myself on Ghost Mode, I'm not getting run up on!"

Just as local geography is writ large, there are unspoken but uncontested markers of status among the young people Ayeesha knows and sees in her area. People are "rated" for "scrapping", smoking, and general "badness". Knowing and being seen to know rated older kids – "olders" – confers status too. "If they know your brothers or your sisters, they're your olders automatically."

Often geography and status intersect. "If they think you're on badness in their area and they don't recognise you, they're going to be like, 'Oi, what are you doing?'"

But when she's on her own, Ayeesha isn't so confident. She gets scared if she's walking alone in the dark. She says she's even scared at home. "Even in my own room, I'm scared of the dark."

Sex, drugs and fighting: Ayeesha's day-to-day experience of content on Snapchat

Reputation is at the centre of much of Ayeesha's experience of Snapchat too. She and her friends, and the wider network of people she knows, post and share content that depicts their day-to-day experiences and, ultimately, often appears to shape them. Videos of people she recognises from school or her local area performing sex acts, fighting, taking part in humiliating 'raids' or posing with weapons are commonplace.

She feels sorry for the girls she sees in videos having sex, even though she insists she would never be "dumb" enough to find herself in that situation. "If it's serious, then you're known for that for life. Like I know a girl, she's 16, 17. She gave slops to [performed oral sex on] some guy when she was in year seven and that's what she's known for in the area now."

"Stuff gets sent around so quick, it's like you can't go anywhere without anyone knowing, 'Oh, that's that girl who this happened to, that's that guy that this happened to.'"

Ayeesha herself came across a video on Snapchat of her older sister "doing stuff" with a boy. "I was scrolling, and I was like, 'That looks like someone...' I was sitting there staring at my phone for three, four, five minutes. I was like 'That's my sister!' And then in the next five, 10 minutes after it got posted, I had like 20 different people telling me, 'Eh, that's your sister, innit?' and I was like, 'Yeah.' Everyone knew it was her. I had people telling me, 'Your sister's a slag.' ... I got into a few fights about it."

Videos of Ayeesha fighting have been shared on Snapchat too. Sometimes she's won the fight and the reaction online is praise; other times she's been "banged" and the video is acutely embarrassing. "There's always a video that catches you."

She says she's been seeing videos of sexual, violent or humiliating activity, and people "flexing" – showing off weed, money or shoes, for example – since she was in year eight.

"When things get shared it's most common that they get shared on [Snapchat] Stories. But it's also through messages as well, so you can post it on your Story. And then another person can post on their Story. Or you can just screen-record their Story and then post on yours and that's how it gets around."

"you can send it everywhere as well. So you can post it on your Story. And then another person can post on their Story. Or you can just screen-record their Story and then post on yours and that's how it gets around"

New 'friends': Ayeesha's experience of Quick Add on Snapchat

Ayeesha says she's been getting sent dick pics from strangers since the day she got Snapchat. Now 14, she said she was usually sent around three or four every day. "At first I was like, 'Eurgh!' But now I'm so used to it it's like OK, and then... I block them. I feel like people my age, we've seen all of that stuff like it doesn't really faze you anymore."

A lot of these pictures are sent by people she doesn't know trying to add her as a 'friend' using Snapchat's Quick Add feature, and sending messages before their request has been accepted or rejected. She says she doesn't know how Snapchat selects who can send a request via QuickAdd, and she can't see any positives about the function. "Whoever made that, I don't know what you thought you were doing."

Status symbols: Ayeesha is in a Snapchat group of around 60 'known' kids at her school

Ayeesha was added to a Snapchat group of about 60 young people from different years at her school. What unites them is their reputation – they are "known". Two of her siblings are in the group too. "I'm in it, but I don't talk," she says. "As soon as you talk, someone will get onto you for some damn reason." She gets so many notifications from this group, "my phone is always pinging," that she's tempted to leave. But she says she never would, because it's "live". "You get told everything before everyone else. Like if there's going to be a scrap, they'll post it on there."

Group members will post pictures of other people doing "wet" [sexual] stuff, people having fights, and "other things that are supposed to be kept secret", such as "who will sell weed in school hours".

The group also includes pictures of members or people they know holding weapons – "Rambo knives, a gun one time," although Ayeesha thinks some of these are taken in other countries.

She also sees graphic violent content shared in these groups. Sometimes she'll recognise the people involved, or at least the location, like the video she saw of a rape taking place in what she recognised as a local park.

"A boy raped a girl and videoed it and sent it around Snapchat and everywhere. And then I realised it was near the basketball courts because literally there is only one type of bush in this area. It got sent around everywhere.

"And then people started blaming the girl, saying it was the girl's fault, but it wasn't really. I think it was on the news as well. She was, like, 13, and he was older."

Other times she doesn't know the people, but she concludes they've been filmed locally because of the accents. Recently someone shared a video of a guy wearing a "ballie" [balaclava] with his legs and arms tied together whose neck was slit with a zombie knife by another man. In the clip, the perpetrator said, "This is what happens to all the people that give chat," and Ayeesha said she could tell from the accent that he was local. She thought it was probably connected to the fights she's seen outside school between local Albanians and Romanians.

Speaking out: being seen as a "snake" can have dangerous repercussions

She would never report any of these videos, she says. On Snapchat, as in life, being thought of as a "snake" is the cause of much of the "drama" between young people. Reputationally, Ayeesha believes it's potentially impossible to recover from. It can also put you directly at risk of humiliation or harm, as can falling foul of any of the unwritten codes of behaviour among the people Ayeesha knows.

"People posting videos of people raiding people's houses, that's a big thing now. There was one where, like, a group of young boys, they were, like, around my age, and some guy forgot to pay the boys back so they broke into his house and made his mum twerk and said 'If you don't twerk, we're going to hurt your son.' And she had to twerk.

"A video I watched the other day was a girl and her house got raided by a few other girls. It wasn't even a few, it was a huge group of girls. The girl was in the toilet and they grabbed the girl by the hair and stuffed her face in her shit and videoed it and it got sent everywhere. Even my friend in [another borough] had it."

How does seeing this material make her feel? "I just know, like, to watch my mouth and to look behind my back if I have problems. I feel it's informative in a way, to tell you to, like, chill." She avoids areas or routes where she's seen footage of attacks taking place.

> "I just know, like, to watch my mouth and to look behind my back if I have problems. I feel it's informative in a way"

Locked in: what she's seen has shaped Ayeesha's behaviour

She says the material she has seen on Snapchat has shaped her worldview. "I feel like it's changed how I see everyone because I used to think, like, no one would hurt each other... I would be like, oh, you're too young. Now I've seen all of this, no one really cares about how young you are. Like, if you do something to get on the nerves of someone else, you could possibly die from stuff like that. So I keep my mouth shut."

"I feel like Snapchat made me act the way I act now. I'm very wary."

She also sees brutal content that she thinks has been filmed abroad. A video was shared in her school Snapchat group recently of a man, she thinks Russian, getting his ears cut off and then his fingers, one by one.

"I feel ill for a second. But then I think, 'Oh, well, it's not me, is it?' So why should I care?" But she says she finds herself thinking about videos like this at night before she goes to sleep.

She won't stop looking at Snapchat, though. As someone who is "known" herself, she feels she needs to know what other people are doing – her way of working out "who is good and bad".

Ayeesha lives in a London borough with her foster mum and siblings. Like many parts of London, the neighbourhood where she lives is relatively deprived, but sits cheek by jowl with considerably more affluent areas. The population is ethnically diverse, with the majority of residents identifying as Asian, Black, Mixed race or other. According to the 2021 England and Wales Census, Ayeesha's neighbourhood[3]– has the following characteristics:

70% of households have at least one indicator of deprivation (compared with 52% on average for England and Wales)

5% Only 5% of adults work in a higher managerial, administrative or professional occupation (compared with 11% on average nationally)

25% of people over 16 have no qualifications (compared with 15% on average for England and Wales)

20% of adults are long-term unemployed or have never worked (compared with 11% on average for England and Wales)

The local area[4] is in the top 20% most deprived areas on the dimension of crime according to the English indices of deprivation 2019.

Note: These numbers have been rounded to the nearest 5% to maintain anonymity

[3] Output Areas (OAs) in the England and Wales 2021 Census are the lowest level of geographical area for census statistics and are usually made up of between 40 and 250 households.
[4] Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in the England and Wales 2021 Census are made up of groups of OAs, usually four or five. They comprise between 400 and 1,200 households.

"My phone is always pinging"

Locally filmed videos Ayeesha has seen on Snapchat

- Ayeesha beating up another girl. She said the other girl had to go to hospital after she broke her arm and fractured her ankle. In the video, others can be seen filming the fight as well. The video was widely shared among local young people and Ayeesha was 'praised' for her performance in the fight.

- Someone getting stabbed outside her school.

- Boys she knows or recognises getting "slops" (oral sex) and "giving back shots to girls" (anal sex or sex from behind) in the park. Often they are underage. One video involved her sister.

- Two people having sex in the school field – likely underage.

- A rape in a local park of a girl Ayeesha thought was 13.

- Her brother beating up a guy who was being rude about another brother in a local shop.

- Numerous videos of humiliating local raids. In one, a girl was filmed while her head was pushed into her own toilet. In another, a local boy's mother was forced to twerk while being filmed.

- A guy wearing a "ballie" [balaclava] with his legs and arms tied together whose neck was slit with a 'zombie knife' by another man. The perpetrator said: 'This is what happens to all the people that give chat,' and Ayeesha said she could tell from the accent that he was local. She thought it was probably connected to the fights she's seen outside school between local Albanians and Romanians.

"Every fight video is videoed on Snapchat"

Ali, 14, says he likes the area in Glasgow where he lives with his mum and two younger brothers.

"I wouldn't want to move anywhere else, because I know my area off by heart and I know everybody there so it's a lot to give up."

But he admits there are not many things to do locally. A couple of parks "that you can sit in for, like, an hour".

"That's how other people get into drinking and drugs and all that," he says.

Fighting chance: conflict is ingrained in Ali's school life

He thinks what would make the area better is a local high school, because there would be less inter-area rivalry and violence. "That's a dream come true, if that happened," he says. "It'd be better if we only had one gang instead of three or four, because there's always going to be a fight."

In school, there's a fight every day, he says. "I'm not really involved much, but sometimes my friends are and then when I'm with my friends, I'd end up getting involved in it."

The fights in schools don't involve weapons, but sometimes children do get badly hurt, he says, because "there's always somebody that's outnumbered".

Four years ago Ali got "jumped" and then "decked" by three older boys who'd previously hit his younger brother and thrown a stone at his mum while trying to steal their football. After that, Ali's mum signed him up for boxing, which he now describes as his main hobby. These days, he says, he knows how to defend himself.

"I don't go looking for fights, but if a fight comes to me, I'm not going to go down without a fight."

Uneven ground: a video of Ali being 'jumped' by 10 boys circulated round his school

That didn't prevent him getting hurt recently, though, when 10 boys "jumped" him in a park near school during the lunch break. One hit him in the back of the head, then the others joined in till he was on the ground, where they kicked him. "One of the boys, two-foot, jumped onto my head."

Part-way through this story, Ali switches from telling it as he experienced it, to describing what can be seen in the video of the fight.

"They said, 'Are you sorry?' And I was like, no, I'm not sorry. You can see me going in the video, going, 'No.'"

> "They said, 'Are you sorry?' And I was like, no, I'm not sorry. You can see me going in the video, going, 'No.'"

He imitates himself wagging his finger. He came away with a black eye and a bust lip.

The video was "all over the school", he says. "Snapchat, airdrop, that's what people do, aye." Reputationally, he came off better. "They boys were the ones that got slagged in school. It takes 10 boys to leave one black eye, you know what I mean?"

The school police officer saw it too, and subsequently one of the boys was expelled. He says some of the other boys who jumped him are scared of him now, but he wouldn't do anything to them because he'd have older kids and even adults coming after him.

"The problem with [this area] is everyone's related so you can't just fight with one of them. Sixteen- to 20-year-olds would come after me if I was to fight one of those boys because it's their youngers. I would have their dads coming after me. If I was to do to one of them what they'd done to me, I would have god knows how many people coming through my door. That's how crazy these things get these days."

On the map: Ali sees fight videos from across Glasgow

Ali says he sees fight videos on Snapchat every day. Most of them are fist fights that have taken place in or near school. But he also sees videos of fights from across Glasgow, some in the area he lives, some in other places he recognises. "Half the time it's people that I've seen before, I've met before, I've said hello to before. I've said hello to before. I've seen people fighting that have jumped me, I've seen people trying to back me up fighting."

These fights range in scale and severity. Some of them Ali considers to be "fair" fights between evenly matched people or groups, others he describes more like ambushes.

"Some of them will be having a one-on-one and it's a fair fight and somebody loses and then they walk away, shake hands or something. Some of it is a four-on-four or a six-on-four or a ten-on-five or a five-on-seven or whatever. Some of them are gang fights. Some of them are one-on-one with blades, some of them are gang fights with blades, or not even blades, just weapons, in general."

"Half the time it's people that I've seen before, I've met before, I've said hello to before"
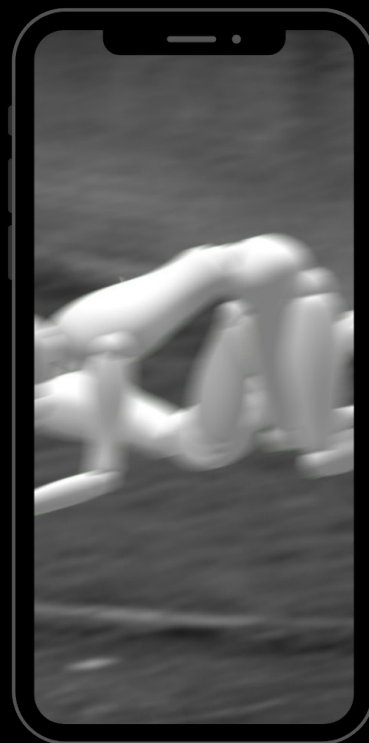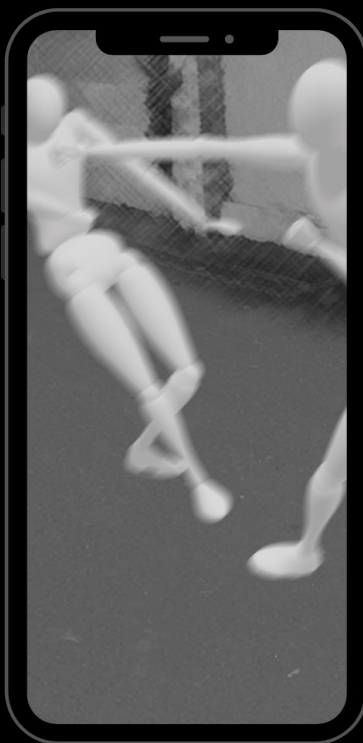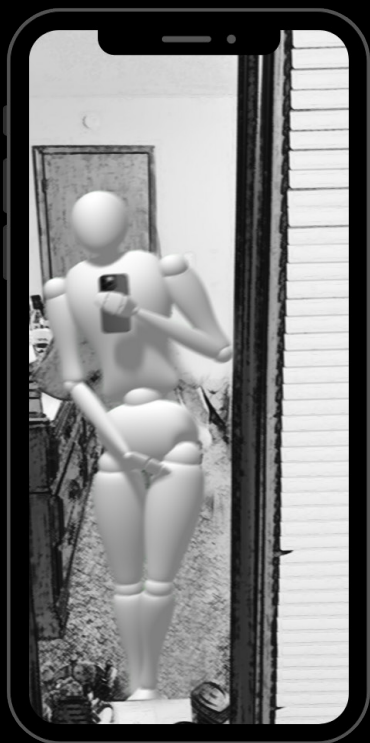
Videos of fights with weapons are common

These weapons include lock-backs [flick blades], machetes, "Rambo" knives, baseball bats, coshes, axes, hammers, glass bottles, Ali says. Sometimes stones, bricks and sticks. "Whatever somebody can pick up. Knuckledusters as well."

"Sometimes some people will get slashed. Sometimes some people will get hit in the head with a hammer, a brick, a baseball bat, a cosh… Sometimes they've got big ninja swords, taller than me – and I'm six foot."

"Those people that have got [videos of] violence, people that have just videoed it and they send it about to their friends. 'Oh, look what happened at lunchtime, look what happened at the weekend, look at this, look at that.'"

"There was a video going about today in school about two boys having a fight with coshes and baseball bats yesterday."

Videos are shared by accounts dedicated to sharing footage of fights.

Other videos are posted by accounts called things like "Glasgow scraps" or "Scottish scraps". These accounts are set up as if they were an individual person, the way Ali and all his friends have a personal profile. But they don't operate like

individuals; rather they collate and share content on a theme, in this case, fights, posting them to their Stories, which can be seen by anyone who's added them as a friend. "A couple of them added me, and I would just add them back," Ali says.

"They go about asking everybody on their Snapchat, 'Have you got any fight videos?' 'Aye, I do.' 'Can you send me them please?' 'Aye'. And then they get them all they post it on a private Story. And then it just gets people's attention and stuff."

> "They go about asking everybody on their Snapchat, 'Have you got any fight videos?' 'Aye, I do.' 'Can you send me them please?' 'Aye'. And then they get them all they post it on a private Story"

"Every fight video is videoed on Snapchat… For me, the way I find out about a fight is someone's Story. But the way I would get the fight would be someone sending it to me on a Group Chat, or personally, on Snapchat. Or Instagram.

"The fight gets posted on somebody's Story, that person screen records it and then they post it on

their Story, and then somebody screen records it, screen record, post, screen record, post, screen record, post."

Hard to leave: Snapchat is at the centre of Ali's social life

"Everyone's on it [Snapchat]. I use it every day. At least once an hour. In school at my age you're always texting somebody, like, 'Where are you?' You're just talking about stuff. And then at weekends you're always on it because you're asking who's where.

"And then there's a big thing where you Snap girls, you send Snaps and all that and you get streaks and stuff. You talk to girls and girls talk to boys and that's what it's mainly used for, for me."

He's become warier about who he adds as a friend on Snapchat. "I only add people that I know or that

I've met. I don't go about adding randoms." Ali says he now only has a few hundred friends on Snapchat, when previously it was many more.

Part of the reason for this, he says, is that when he'd accepted 'friend' requests via Snapchat's Quick Add function from people he didn't know in the past, they'd then send him short porn videos with invitations to click through for more.

"They send photos, the under areas and upper areas and some of them send a male and a female having intercourse. And inappropriate things like 'Come and meet me,' or something. When I get it I just block them straight away."

When he's older, Ali says he wants to be a youth worker, to use his own experience to help children, give them opportunities and advice. "I mean, I've been through a lot of stuff with the police as well for being in the wrong place at the wrong time and peer pressure and stuff."

Ali lives in a suburb of Glasgow with his mum and two brothers. The area is a historically poor neighbourhood, with the majority of the population identifying as White Scottish. According to the 2011 Scotland Census, Ali's neighbourhood[4] has the following characteristics:

90% of households have at least one indicator of deprivation (compared with 60% on average for Scotland)

5% Only 5% of adults work in a higher managerial, administrative or professional occupation (compared with 9% on average nationally)

50% of people over 16 have no qualifications (compared with 27% on average for England and Scotland)

10% of adults are long-term unemployed or have never worked (compared with a 5% national average)

The local area[5] is in the top 10% most deprived areas on the dimension of crime according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2016.

Note: These numbers have been rounded to the nearest 5% to maintain anonymity

4 Output areas in the Scottish 2011 Census contain at least 50 people and 20 households.

5 Data zones in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation contain roughly standard populations of 500-1000 residents.

Vicious circles

How Snapchat is used in violence and crime

The detailed case studies in this report are intended to give a sense of what life is like for the children we interviewed, the types of content they see on Snapchat, how they are using the app, and how they feel about their experiences.

While the case studies illustrate the children's individual personal experiences, across the research it's possible to see common themes emerging. We explore these themes in this chapter, looking at what takes place on Snapchat for these children, what motivates such behaviour, and how these experiences affect young people's lives.

What takes place on Snapchat? Sharing, connecting, buying, selling

Mass distribution: the sharing and resharing of harmful content

The children reported seeing content shared using Snapchat that included:

- Fights between individuals and groups, with and without weapons
- Gang threats and violence
- Fatal injuries and stabbings
- Humiliation videos and "raids" involving break-ins to people's homes
- Weapons advertised for sale
- Drugs advertised for sale
- 'Leaked' videos of sexual activity, of adults and of children (CSAM)
- Videos of sexual assaults
- Fatal injuries and stabbings
- Mutilation, torture and murder, often, but not always, presumed to have taken place abroad

This content was shared by users posting it to their Stories and within Group Chats (see User interface). Sometimes it was shared by accounts dedicated to distributing this sort of content. While each individual Story is viewable for only 24 hours by friends or followers of the account, children report that Stories are often screen-recorded and shared more widely – effectively going viral. Several said videos of fights between people they know at school, for example, re-emerge years after they were first shared and recirculate.

Although users are notified if another user screenshots their Story, this may not act as a deterrent to either party if there is a shared aim for, or ambivalence over, the content being shared more widely.

Sharing nudes: the normalisation of CSAM

Most of the children we interviewed said they'd seen sexual or nude images and videos shared on Snapchat, often of other children.

Many of these were nudes that the children said had been "baited out", frequently via so-called "bait-out pages" – accounts set up to share embarrassing, humiliating, sexual or violent content to all their followers. Nude images or videos, usually initially shared with someone else in confidence but then forwarded on, appear on the Stories of these accounts, which distribute them to a much larger network of people who are following the account for that purpose.

Maka, who is 14 and lives in south London, the youngest in a single-parent family of four, gave an example of nude images of a girl he recognised being shared on Snapchat. "Nudes get sent on people's Stories. In [one of] the Stories, there were captions and people were calling her a slut and stuff. And the person that posted it made a caption saying, like, 'People be careful of her,' kind of thing."

Maka explained that these images are often screenshotted and reshared again and again, superimposed with new captions. In this case, the captions were intended to embarrass and humiliate the girl who sent the original photo.

The children in the images he's describing are around the same age as him. And he says these kinds of images and this behaviour is relatively commonplace.

Suf, 17, had an unstable childhood. He spent his first 16 years growing up in London moving between houses and family members, including stays in temporary accommodation, after he was removed from the care of his mother.

After getting into some trouble in and out of school, Suf moved from London to live with another relative in Nottingham. He recalled how common it was when he was a couple of years younger for people to set up anonymous 'bait-out' pages on Snapchat.

"With these bait-out pages ... people thought they were the boss and got all these laughs and that... I wasn't, but people paid attention and were bothered about it ... sharing pictures and stuff."

Aman, 17, lives in north London in an area he described as dangerous. Growing up, he knew about illegal activity in his area, but was reluctant to tell the police for fear of the consequences.

"The stuff I've seen around where I lived, I didn't want to tell a police officer. Because obviously, like, where I live is quite dangerous. And obviously...well, teenagers nowadays they get threatened by gang members. And if you tell on anyone, the consequences are going to be brutal. Like physical."

Aman said he saw similar material on Snapchat.

"I see, like, younger girls, and girls around my age, like, having sex and it's just posted on Stories. Or males having sex...but in a way it's blocked by like a picture or a little label...like a badge of their username or profile pic. But in the background you can tell they're actually having sexual intercourse."

Ayeesha, 14, described tens of stories of sexual content that she'd seen shared on Snapchat. Some of it she thought had been filmed consensually in the first place, some of it not. Most of it was of people she recognised from her school or local area. One video was of a sex act involving her sister.

She had also seen videos of non-consensual sex acts, including a film of a rape filmed by the perpetrator, which she realised took place in a park near her house.

"There was something that happened in this park just here behind. A boy raped a girl and videoed it and sent it around Snapchat and everywhere. And then I realised it was near the basketball courts because literally there is only one type of bush in this area. It got sent around everywhere.

"And then people started blaming the girl, saying it was the girl's fault, but it wasn't really. I think it was on the news as well. She was, like, 13, and he was older."

The professionals interviewed for this research said they were aware nude images were shared frequently among young people. And what might have been initially shared consensually can later get distributed more widely on Snapchat as a form of revenge for a perceived wrong.

"People would use Snapchat to get back at each other. Like, if you've gone out with my boyfriend or someone I'm with ... they'll use Snapchat to kind of degrade you, taunt you." – Serena, youth worker

Helen, a police liaison officer based in a school, said she got a call about nude images of a girl being shared "at least once a week", usually without their consent.

Young people's behaviour on Snapchat – whether it's sharing violent content or being the one to film it – is often driven by a desire for status or "clout", according to Michael, another social worker we interviewed.

Buying and selling: the Snapchat marketplace

"They add it on their story and they say, 'Who wants this for this much amount of money?' They'll sell edibles, weed, balloons. Weapons as well. Rambos, samurai swords, knuckle-dusters, all sorts of things." – Aman, 17

Just as adults use Facebook Marketplace or Gumtree to buy and sell furniture or second-hand clothes locally, young people are seeing weapons and drugs advertised on Snapchat.

Aman, a 17-year-old living in north London, said he used Snapchat most days. And posts advertising weapons or drugs are nothing out of the ordinary to him.

"Whenever I go on Snapchat, I will see it. I'll probably see three to six posts about it per week."

Aman described seeing a range of things for sale, most commonly weapons or drugs, posted by other Snapchat users to their Stories. He said he sees the items with price tags attached to them, often laid out in someone's house.

"They just lay it down on a bed or something. A lot of knives or knuckledusters, with the money sign and the amount it is. And then just says, 'Text me if you wanna buy it.' They ask you to text them on Snapchat. After that, they'd get in contact in real life and sell to each other."

Aman is not the only one to see this kind of content. Another young person told researchers he'd "often seen people spread around drug prices" on Snapchat Stories too.

Malik, a youth worker who is part of a team trying to reduce youth violence, described what he had seen and heard from the young people he worked with – those in gangs, or at risk of becoming involved with them.

"The hunting-style knife is the weapon of choice at the present time," he said. He'd also seen other weapons such as samurai swords being sold on Snapchat.

"With one young person, I asked: 'Why did you get arrested?' He said: 'It was a knife.' I asked, 'Where did you get it from?' He said, 'I just saw it on Snapchat. I said I wanted that one, I met the person and got it.'"

It's not just weapons, it's "drugs, stolen items, phones" as well. "The amount of times I'll see a young person with a new phone, or Canada Goose Trapstar jacket, and they'll say they got it on Snapchat. Even a watch that's been stolen in a robbery, it's been stripped from someone – it will be put on Snapchat and it will be moved [sold] instantly."

Snapchat is being used as a marketplace. A quick and easy platform to buy and sell illicit items including weapons, drugs and stolen goods. Children like Aman are seeing this content and able to buy it as easily as they'd buy a piece of clothing.

"I don't think Snapchat is realising that it's not safe. Like, in my opinion, if Snapchat ever saw something like this, they should remove those type of Stories, but I don't think they've ever done that before." – Aman, 17

As Malik says, although the police may know about some of this, it's difficult to know what they can do about it. "Snapchat is so private, it's hard to look at in that aspect."

Making contact: grooming and recruitment

It's easy to connect with other Snapchat users. Young people were using the Quick Add function to add friends and accept invitations from other people, often people in their local area.

Some, like Jo, 15, from Glasgow, did this frequently as a way to meet new friends. Jo spends a lot of time online and enjoys connecting

with people who may have similar interests in things like gaming. However, Jo was wary about meeting these people in person too soon.

"I know her general area but we don't get too specific. We want to know more about each other before knowing exact locations."

But some were less careful. In some cases Snapchat was being used to make contact with and potentially groom young people to become involved in criminal activity.

"We've got a group right now who have set themselves up as like a little gang. And they exclusively use Snapchat." – Steve, PRU headteacher

Often, professionals told us, what seems to facilitate this recruitment into illegal or gang-like activities is people with status portraying a kind of "glamourous lifestyle". One said there was a boy they were concerned about encouraging others to engage in crime. "The other kids gravitate towards him. He's hard, clever, handsome. He gives them a picture of the lifestyle and bling bling and money on Snapchat, and he's encouraging others to come with him."

Seeing a lot of this kind of content can affect young people's perceptions or assessments. One young person was asked by a police liaison officer, "Out of 100 kids, how many on average do you think carry a knife?" The young person responded, "100 out of 100". In reality, the police liaison officer told us, "It's one out of 100. It has become the norm for him, I think he's got the idea from social media".

Several professionals suggested this perception of how prolific weapons and violence are may make young people more vulnerable or susceptible to certain kinds of criminality, such as recruitment into gangs.

Another story involved vulnerable young people with learning disabilities being befriended over Snapchat by local gangs and slowly persuaded to support and engage in criminal activity.

"The boy being groomed was virtually illiterate... His mum got his phone and showed us some of the chat, the organising."

This young person, according to Steve, the headteacher of a PRU, had been identified as vulnerable and someone who could be manipulated into criminal activity.

"They've got him out spotting kids with expensive phones and leading them round the corner to be mugged. All organised on Snapchat."

Professionals acknowledged that this kind of thing is often difficult to pick up. Parents are often reluctant to monitor or read through children's Chats, which they consider to be private.

What motivates this behaviour?

Popularity is power

The children and professionals in this research told us that follows, shares and views get you 'clout' on Snapchat, so there's an incentive to share whatever gets attention. And often this is violent or sexual content, sometimes of illegal activity.

"It's very much a hype thing. It's views, hype and attention...people share [content] to get attention, to get followers and it's like people are doing it to get clout for themselves." – Michael, youth worker

Jamie, a young person living in London, echoed this. "Some people do it [share] because they want other people's validation. Like they've reposted it and, wow, they've got the original video."

Aman was trying to distance himself from the kinds of people that got status in this way, because he thought it was irresponsible. Nonetheless, he acknowledged that people around him were enticed by building a reputation for sharing violent, sexual or illegal content. "People [would film these things] because they think it's funny, but also they'd want to get attention, like obviously to get their account known or popular."

Asked why they would get more popular, he said: "Let's say they post something that gets everyone's attention, it would literally blow up and make the account more famous."

Ayeesha, who is 14 and lives in London, spoke about a boy she knows who has an account that is infamous in her area for posting lots of videos. He "knows everyone" and has videos of lots of local people. From fights, to exposed nudes, Ayeesha said everyone knows his account has all this content and he has status locally as a result.

'Pic or it didn't happen'

If drama is what gets attention online, there's an incentive to get your camera out at the first sign of trouble.

Time and time again, these young people described how every fight or face-off was filmed and seen by most of the people they knew in the local area. With everything being filmed, the stakes were even higher to be seen to come out on top. One way of doing this is to make it as obvious as possible that your opponent did not.

As Jaamil said: "Everyone is filming. Maybe not everyone, but there will always be a few people at the front who are filming. Even when [the person in shot] is knocked out or crying or whatever, people will be recording. And then that will get reposted everywhere as well, screen-recorded."

Often the default behaviour for people when they see a fight or a stabbing is to get out their cameras and capture it. "[If someone was hurt] even when you have a chance to save someone, people's first thought is to record it on their phones," Michael, a youth worker said.

Serena, a youth worker based in the south of England, said that often young people will record something, "then they'll promote it" to prove they were at the scene – another marker of status.

Michael said he estimated 99 per cent of incidents of people getting rushed, jumped or stabbed were filmed. "It's the first thing that happens. Instantly. I wouldn't say it's a badge of honour, but I would say it's quite important to the young person to get it on camera and share it. It shows, like, this did happen."

Recording their everyday lives is normal for young people, he added, so recording something more extreme, such as a fight, isn't out of the ordinary. They are also seeing this content on Snapchat posted by others, which normalises it further.

The fact that everything is filmed and shared across these networks shapes what people are doing. The fear, humiliation or status attached to activity is changed by the fact that everyone will see it, and it will stick around.

Jaamil, 17, who lives in Birmingham, saw a lot of clips on Snapchat of people getting 'rushed' (one person being outnumbered and attacked by several people).

"A lot of people record the rushing more. If there are, like, five guys rushing one guy, one or two of them will be recording it. It's as if they're doing everyone a favour. Or, like, to show that they're hard and stuff."

Making people say sorry

No matter where they lived or how they were, almost all the young people reported seeing a particular kind of video on Snapchat that entailed people being humiliated. Often this came in the form of the victim being forced to beg, apologise or do something humiliating on camera.

Jaamil described one of these videos. "They rushed a guy and made him say sorry. They first like grabbed him and stuff, gave him a few slaps and made him say sorry on his knees. They recorded him saying sorry on his knees. That's the way people do if they're going to rush someone."

Maka, 14, in London, said the camera and filming aspect was key. "I think sometimes what people do, they like to humiliate them by recording it. So you're getting beaten up, and the person...is just recording it and laughing."

When something is filmed and shared on Snapchat, hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people might see it. "Snapchat is a very good place if you want to spread something. If it interests someone, it will spread...such as nudity, sexual activity, drug activity, knife crime," said Jamie, 14, from London.

Udai, 15, from Birmingham, said people were making these videos to cause embarrassment. "I saw a one-on-one [fight] where it was one-on-one

but he made the guy takes his clothes off and threatened him and recorded him...They stripped the guy naked and they threatened him, tried to hurt him and everything. They recorded and posted it... I saw it on a Story... I just remember the guy begging and saying sorry and everything... My friend re-posted it...Most of these videos get re-posted a lot."

Ayeesha, 14, also saw videos of humiliating raids on Snapchat, in which victims were filmed whilst being made to do horrible and humiliating things on camera, such as the boy whose mum was made to twerk, or the girl whose face was pushed down her own toilet (see Ayeesha's case study).

Social workers also described people using Snapchat to capture and spread footage to prove something to those watching.

Performing for the camera

If you're in a video that is going to 'blow up', there's an incentive to look impressive. One thing that was consistent across most of the content young people and professionals described was that it often involved quite theatrical, dramatic displays of violence. Violence that seemed it might be optimised for how it looks on camera.

Similarly, professionals spoke about social media, including Snapchat, being used as a platform for displays of status and strength, and for threatening and intimidating others.

"A lot of young people are saying they're bombarded with stuff. And sometimes it's being used as bullying tactics. So if there's been issues within the area, and someone has put it up on a Snapchat broadcast and said 'If we find anyone in so-and-so they're gonna die tonight,' someone may then have sent it out again, or it gets dropped in a massive group." – Malik, integrated gangs team

Often, this kind content would involve wielding weapons. "When kids get into arguments now, the first thing that comes out are pictures of knives, machetes, guns. Where it might once have just been insults, now it very quickly turns into threats that involve weapons," said Steve, a PRU headteacher.

Fuelling fights

As described in Ayeesha's case study, when it comes to violence, young people know it is being filmed and act accordingly. "Stuff gets sent around so quick, it's like you can't go anywhere without anyone knowing." Ayeesha is acutely aware that if she gets into a fight, it'll likely be filmed and shared. This can influence what young people choose to do and how they do it.

Jaamil felt there would be less violence if it wasn't so easy to film and share it. "If people didn't have any phones there would be less fights actually because no one would be able to show everyone that they've beaten this guy up. They're not proving to anyone that they've beaten this guy up. You can't prove it. If a guy is apologising or something, you can't prove it if it's not being filmed."

How do these experiences shape children's lives? A filter on the world

The children in this research were often spending very little time, if any, outside their local area – for most of them, this was all they knew. At the same time, a lot of the content they saw on Snapchat – people being rushed, beaten up, stabbed, sexually assaulted – was also happening in their area, in places they recognised and spent time. This shaped the way they saw their area, and where they felt safe.

Maka, 14, had seen videos of people being rushed near his school that made him wary

walking around. "You have to be cautious of where you walk. You have to be alert. You have to be street-smart."

"There was this [Snapchat] Story I saw and there was this one guy and he got jumped in an area I recognised [near his school]...one of the guys kicked his leg and he dropped, and all of the other guys followed after and started beating him up. They had like planks and bats and stuff like that."

Suf reflected on where he grew up in London in a similar vein. He followed and saw some Snapchat pages dedicated to sharing information about the crime happening in a specific area.

"They keep you updated about what's going on in your area which is useful because it gives you information about how to move [carry yourself]. I feel like it's important in certain areas so you can move the correct way without causing any trouble."

Suf and his friends described these pages as a version of the news, providing information that was pertinent to their safety in their local area.

"If you see your area as always getting up to stuff, then you're obviously going to feel like you're not safe because it's not a good area."

While he saw this as useful in some ways, it also shaped a negative perception of his local area. And, speaking to some professionals, these perceptions were sometimes based on unreliable evidence. Malik, a youth worker working with children in or at risk of being in gangs, reported hearing children he works with claiming they'd seen a large number of stabbings in their area on Snapchat Stories. After investigating, he discovered that much of this was either not in the area or was from several years before. "You could be seeing stabbings that happened months ago," and some of what he saw "was three years old".

Ali, who is 14 and lives in Glasgow, saw fight videos on Snapchat every day. Most of them were in areas he recognised and spent time, and they often involved people he recognised too. The same is true of Ayeesha, who recognised the location of a lot of the footage she saw on Snapchat. She had built up a kind of mental map of her area, of where things are happening and where to be wary.

"Someone wants to show off that someone's getting battered. People buzz off it"

Case study
Kennedy, 15

Kennedy's neighbourhood in Manchester has one of the highest crime rates in the country. "I'd say come here if you like music all night long, speeding cars, kids fighting, police sirens," she jokes.

Historically densely populated, pockets of the area have undergone extensive regeneration. Kennedy is not positive about the newer developments, describing their residents as "snobs" who look down on the rest of the estate.

'Known' means safe: a reputation gives protection but must be maintained

She's lived in this area all her life, her mum has been here 20-odd years and her dad has "always been around here," she says, with several generations of his family living locally before him. "I feel safe, because we're 'known' here," she adds.

Reputation is everything. And while Kennedy feels confident no one will give her trouble because of who she is and the family she's from, she says she doesn't trust anyone. Initially, this includes the researcher from Revealing Reality.

Kennedy is careful what she says during her first interview. It takes place over Zoom, Kennedy in a youth worker's office at a local community centre. She doesn't want to show her face on camera or be interviewed on her own, so her friend Chloe (14) says she'll do the interview with her. Some days later, Kennedy and Chloe agree to meet our researcher in a community centre and show her around the area, opening up more about their experiences.

Kennedy trusts Chloe, but she describes the other girls at their school as "bitches" and says apart from Chloe, she mainly chats to boys.

Appearances are important to both girls. Kennedy is wearing £650 trainers and a £300 bag. Asked if she ever worries about wearing such expensive things Kennedy and Chloe give each other a look and laugh. "No one's going to rob us. They just won't. If they did we'd get it back straight away."

Strength in numbers: Kennedy will 'batter' anyone who insults her or her family

The girls talk about the back-up they get from their "olders". Local arguments and fights are common and often involve a wider network of family and acquaintances.

"Our family and stuff. It'll start with, like, my cousins, and then their friends and people, and it all becomes a big group. And then if something happens with people older than you, you just tell them and their full group will just go after them.

"When some girl jumped me, she got me from behind. So we all went round to the house – my mum, my auntie, my older cousins. They wouldn't come out, they got the police out on us."

Kennedy admits sometimes she's the one who starts the fights she gets into. She's been temporarily excluded from school after fighting several times, nearly always when somebody has insulted her or her family.

"If someone annoys me and it gets too far, I just fight them. Batter them. Some girl called my mum a smack head so I went over and battered her. I seen her, out with her mum, and I battered her. I knocked her mum's glasses off her face. They got the police involved, and she got me done for bullying at school."

"If someone annoys me and it gets too far, I just fight them"

While Kennedy is adamant she only flares up when she's been insulted, Chloe rolls her eyes and both girls giggle. "It's always me that gets the blame!" Kennedy protests. "That's because you always start them," replies Chloe.

The youth worker, who we also interviewed, said maintaining their own and their families' reputations was expected of Kennedy and Chloe.

"They're both really nice girls, but it's part of their environment that they need to defend themselves. It's a dog-eat-dog world. If they don't defend themselves, they'll be looked at as weak. A lot of them, they have to defend their family name and try to keep up appearances".

Keeping up appearances and defending reputations can seem even more important if videos of fights are shared on Snapchat with hundreds or even thousands of other local people.

Snapchat: 'It's our evening news'

When Kennedy opens her phone and looks at Snapchat during the interview, the first video she sees, just posted on a friend's Story, is of a fight filmed outside a local building. Kennedy describes the video, which she assumes has been filmed by the friend that posted it. "A man pushed another man down on the floor, his hat come off, he punched him, pushed him back down, punched him again. Then the man stood up and ran away. They look like smack heads."

Kennedy says she spends about 10 hours a day on Snapchat at the weekend. She has Tiktok and Instagram accounts too, but uses Snapchat far more than either of these, or any other social media. She says she's got thousands of friends on Snapchat.

The fights Kennedy sees on Snapchat range from playground scraps through to serious, even fatal, assaults. And she sees them most days.

Kennedy: "I saw one person got stabbed. Someone was stabbing him and kicking him in the head."

Researcher: "Do you know who the people are?"

Kennedy: "No, they had ballies [balaclavas] on."

Researcher: "When did you see that video?"

Kennedy: "This morning."

Researcher: "Why do you think they get shared?"

Kennedy: "Someone wants to show off. Show off that someone's getting battered. That's what people are like. Someone's getting hurt. People buzz off it."

Researcher: "What account shared this?"

Kennedy: "Some account, it's called 'fights' or something."

Researcher: "How did that page get started?"

Kennedy: "They just make it, and they add people, and then they'll tell people to, like, share that page."

Researcher: "How did they come to add you?"

Kennedy: "They add everyone, off Quick Add."

Researcher: "How many adds do you get a week?"

Kennedy: "Maybe 30. Maybe more."

"They just make it, and they add people, and then they'll tell people to, like, share that page"

Taking sides: Snapchat videos are used to publicly shame and punish people

Kennedy says in a lot of the fight videos she sees, a group of boys is attacking one person. "There's always one side what's in a group." And there's always someone from the group filming it. Kennedy thinks they film it because it makes them look "big and hard". If nobody was filming, she says, she doesn't think the fight would get so big. "I don't think all the other boys would jump in, they do it because it shows they all back each other".

Videos of fights are deliberately deployed in local battles over reputation or revenge. The youth worker describes a video of a 16-year-old boy getting badly beaten up as a punishment for something he'd done to someone else, which was widely shared locally via Snapchat.

"He was stood outside a house. A few boys, I think about four or five, came and ended up beating him. They were kicking him, punching him, hitting him. And then he was trying to cover his face and they ended up pinning his arms back and kicking him in the face over and over.

"There was a lot of blood. It was really graphic. We saw him afterwards and he was battered and bruised.

"This made its way all around Snapchat – everyone that knew him had seen it. It was really violent. It was really embarrassing for him. A lot of his friends were laughing and some were a bit more sympathetic, because they know what these boys can be like. It stuck around for a long time".

Broadcast drama: Fight pages and bait pages

Kennedy and Chloe both follow a range of profiles on Snapchat that are known for collecting and sharing local gossip and drama. These tend to be focused either on fights and violence, or sexual content and nudes.

"Some of them are bait accounts that share nudes, all different accounts, there's loads." She says she sees nudes shared on Snapchat 'bait-out pages' six or seven times a week.

"Loads of people follow them. Hundreds, thousands of, I don't know, 12-17 year olds. The pages – they follow us, then we add them back. That's how they grow".

Asked why these accounts post nudes, Kennedy says: "Because it gets the views."

What do they share? "Willies," says Kennedy, giggling. "Sometimes they'll tag the people who it's of."

"You see, like, full-on shagging in videos [...] Think they [the boy] take a video and send it to people, and then they share it and post it, and then it just carries on from there. People screenshot and share it on."

The images and videos often involve children Kennedy knows from school or their local area, and when they're shared it can cause severe distress. One of these 'bait-out pages' shared an embarrassing photo of a boy, suspected to have been leaked by his ex-girlfriend. He was badly bullied and stayed away from school for three months. The same page shared a video of another boy Kennedy recognised masturbating.

While it's mostly 'dick pics', pictures and videos of girls get leaked too, and the reputational damage lasts longer, Kennedy says.

A photo a girl at her school had taken and shared with her boyfriend was leaked on Snapchat, she recalls. "Her ex put her [picture] on his Story. She started crying in front of everyone. It was her fault, she took the picture! People still take the piss out of her now".

Shock factor: Kennedy laughs off the graphic violence she sees

Kennedy and Chloe are both part of a Group Chat on Snapchat with a lot of boys, mostly from their school. They say it's mainly used to send videos, and the main objective seems to be to shock each other and provoke a reaction. The girls say they don't post videos to the group, but the boys do because they think it's really funny.

Sometimes these are sexual videos that Kennedy thinks might be leaked from bait pages. She describes one shared recently. "I saw someone fingering herself, in the bum hole. Don't know who it was or where it came from."

At other times they see graphic, violent videos that Kennedy thinks have been filmed in other countries.

"I saw someone getting shot in the head with a shot gun. So someone put a gun to their head and they was tied to a tree, and then they shot them and their head blew up. Because they was terrorists in Syria. And there was another one, someone getting his head chopped off [...] Then chopped his arms and legs off. So he was left with a belly."

The girls giggle while talking about these videos, full of bravado. But they say if they saw someone get hurt in real life, they'd find it horrifying. "Blood in person, it's, eurgh. But when you're not there, on Snap, it's not the same."

Without Snapchat, Kennedy reckons she'd be bored. She wouldn't know "what had happened" in her area or to the people she knows. "Snapchat's our evening news," Chloe says.

Kennedy lives in a suburb of Manchester with her parents and two siblings. The area where they live is a densely populated housing estate with majority White British populations, with regeneration projects underway nearby. According to the 2021 England and Wales Census, Kennedy's neighbourhood[6] has the following characteristics:

75% of households have at least one indicator of deprivation (compared with 52% on average for England and Wales)

5% Only 5% of adults work in a higher managerial, administrative or professional occupation (compared with 11% on average nationally)

35% of people over 16 have no qualifications (compared with 15% on average for England and Wales)

20% of adults are long-term unemployed or have never worked (compared with 11% on average for England and Wales)

The local area[7] is in the top 10% most deprived areas on the dimension of crime according to the English indices of deprivation 2019.

Note: These numbers have been rounded to the nearest 5% to maintain anonymity

[6] Output Areas (OAs) in the England and Wales 2021 Census are the lowest level of geographical area for census statistics and are usually made up of between 40 and 250 households.

[7] Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in the England and Wales 2021 Census are made up of groups of OAs, usually four or five. They comprise between 400 and 1,200 households.

User interface

How Snapchat works and how the children are using it

Snap Inc. describes itself as a technology company. The Snapchat website says Snapchat is: "A camera app made for real friends. It's a platform for expressing yourself through augmented reality, having fun with your friends and family and sharing your creativity with the world."[7]

While the name of the app emphasises the chat functionality, Snapchat also has features that enable content to be shared on among larger audiences, allowing content to spread quickly and easily, and continue circulating for months or even years after first being posted.

In this section of the report, we illustrate some of the features and functions of the app that the children interacted with that had a significant impact on their Snapchat experience. These are features that enable Snapchat to function much like many social media platforms, where users can build large networks of contacts, share content across those networks and opening up the propensity for popular "viral" content to spread and circulate even further. On Snapchat, these features are:

- **Quick Add:** A feature that encourages users to add new 'friends' from a continually refreshed list of recommendations, building large networks of people that children report they both do and don't know personally, up to a maximum of 6,000 users.

- **Stories**: A feature that enables the broadcasting of photos and videos to a user's entire 'friend' list (up to 6,000 users), by default. Each Story is viewable for up to 24-hours.

- **Group Chats**: A feature that enables users to set up groups of people who both are and are not existing 'friends' on Snapchat containing up to a maximum of 101 users.

- **Self-declaration of age on sign-up**: Age assurance is reliant on user self-declaration, and if accounts are registered as 18+, certain privacy features are set to 'off' by default.

This section of the report outlines how these features operate in more detail, and how they translated into the experiences of the children we met.

Registered age

Several Snapchat features operate differently depending on whether the user has registered on the app as under or over 18 years old. Some privacy features are switched 'on' by default for users registered as children. For example, users registered as under 18 can't be contacted by users who they have not added as 'friends'[8], while adult accounts can.

Users are asked to input a date of birth when they sign up to Snapchat, but if they provide an age placing them under the minimum age of 13, they are not prevented from trying again with an alternative date of birth.[9]

Snapchat says it "reaches" 90 per cent of the 13-24 year old population in 20+ countries, including the UK.[10] According to Ofcom's survey data[11], 28 per cent of children in the UK aged 8-11 (despite the minimum age limit being 13[12]) have a profile on Snapchat, rising to 64 per cent of 12-15-year-olds and 74 per cent of 16-17-year-olds.

[7] Snap Creators, Snapchat Basics
[8] Snapchat Support, Who can contact me on Snapchat?
[9] Snap Inc's response to HM Coroner Mr Andrew Walker's initial request for information, 7 December 2022
[10] Snap Creators, Snapchat Basics
[11] Ofcom, Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2023
[12] Snap Inc. Terms of Service, Effective: November 15, 2021

What we saw in the research:

Most of the children interviewed for this research had registered as over 18 on Snapchat, so their accounts did not have the default settings for children designed to increase privacy and protection.

Recent research by Ofcom[13] estimates that approximately four in 10 children aged 8-17 with profiles on Snapchat had signed up with an age older than their real age.

Quick Add and the nudge to build networks

Like many social media apps, there are features on Snapchat that make it very easy to build large networks of "friends". There are prompts to find or add 'friends' on several of the Snapchat pages. Since its launch in 2013, Snapchat has increased the maximum number of 'friends' a user can have. At the time of writing, this maximum was 6,000.

While the number of 'friends' you can add on Snapchat is capped at 6,000, there is no limit on the number of people that can 'add' you[14]. This seemingly means that some accounts could have far more than 6,000 followers.

As well as offering to sync the contacts in your phone with your Snapchat 'friends', and providing a 'Snapcode'[15] (similar to a QR code) that you can share with people you'd like to be Snapchat 'friends' with, Snapchat also has a **Quick Add** function[16] that suggests people you might want to be 'friends' with in the app.

Quick Add presents a list of recommended accounts to add as 'friends'. Snapchat says on its website: "Friend recommendations in Quick Add are based on who you're already friends with, who you subscribe to and other factors." These "other factors" are not in the public domain.
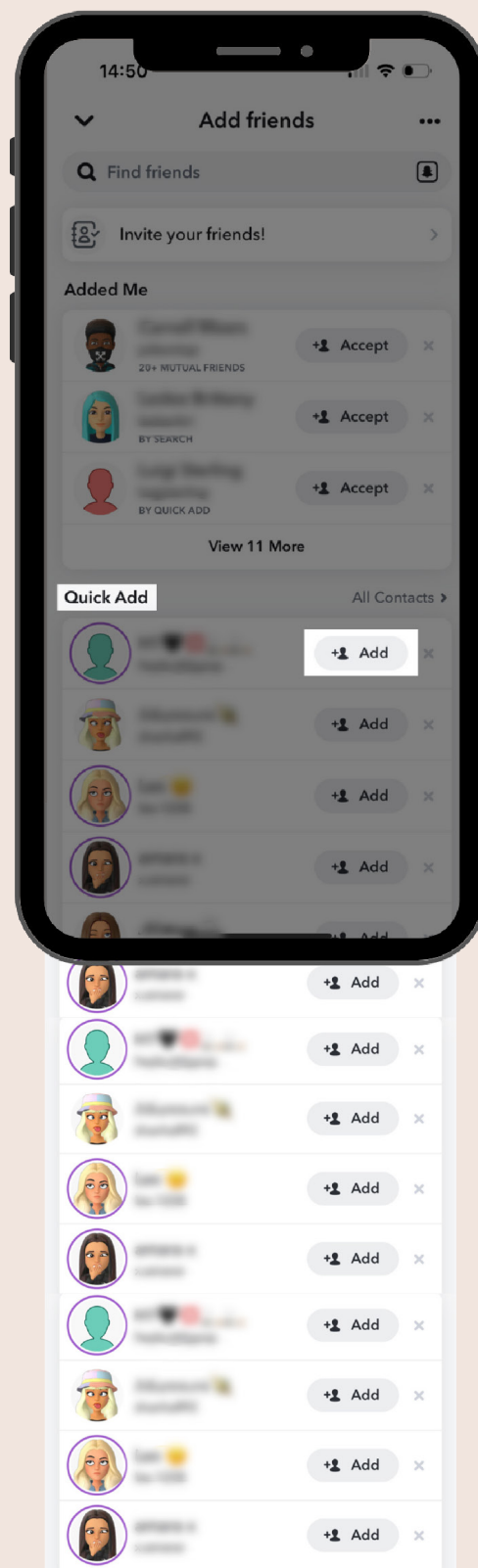
Quick Add suggests people the user might want to be 'friends' with

[13] Ofcom, Children's Online User Ages Quantitative Research Study, Yonder Consulting, July 2022
[14] Tweet from Snapchat Support, February 20, 2023
[15] Snapchat Support, How to scan a Snapcode
[16] Snapchat Support, How to add friends on Snapchat

What we saw in the research:

All the children who took part in this research had large networks of 'friends' on Snapchat, most of them in the thousands. One child had reached the maximum cap on the number of friends on her account.

The children reported frequently being added by people via Quick Add - both people they did know and those they didn't. Most of them had, at times, added many of these accounts in return, meaning the users of both accounts could see each other's Stories (see below).

Having a large number of Snapchat 'friends' is seen as a sign of status among young people, as evidenced both within this project and more widely[17.] Children reported that having a high number of Snapchat 'friends', a high 'Snapscore' (a score viewable on your Snapchat profile that broadly indicates how much you interact on Snapchat[18]) and knowing Stories have been viewed by large numbers of people[19] are all signs of popularity and "clout" on Snapchat.

By setting up a number of test accounts during this research, we observed that when we didn't allow sharing of phone contacts or location with Snapchat, and without adding or subscribing to any accounts at all, Snapchat still recommended accounts to be 'friends' with, even if you register the account as being under 18 years old. In this case, all these people were unknown to the 'user', as are the criteria for their recommendation.

Snap 'Chat' and Snap 'Stories'

For many children, the Chat function is a large part of how and why they use Snapchat[20]. This might be chatting with individual friends or in small groups, but it's not always personal or small-scale.

Group Chats can include up to 101 people[21]. The person who creates a group can only add people who are their 'friends' on Snapchat. However, not all members of a group need to be friends with each other to exchange messages and Snaps (pictures or videos) within the group[22]. By default, Snaps sent between 'friends' are deleted 24 hours after they are viewed. Users can also set Chats to delete straight after they've been viewed.
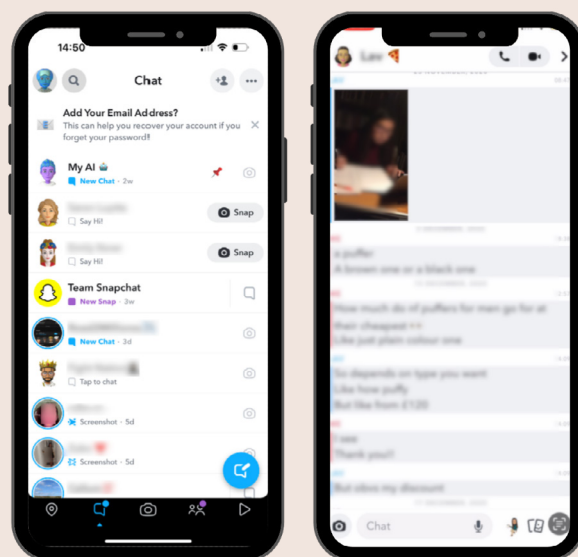
Users can be members of numerous group chats containing up to 100 other users, including people they may not know

[17] Children's Media Lives 2023: A report for Ofcom, Revealing Reality

[18] Snapchat Support, What is a Snapscore?

[19] Snapchat Support, How can I see who viewed My Story on Snapchat?

[20] Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes, Ofcom, published 29 March 2023

[21] On Snapchat, the words "Chat with up to 100 friends" appear when you tap to make a "New Group"

[22] Snap privacy and safety hub, Snapchat, Privacy & Safety: The Basics, April 21, 2021

But **Stories** are also a central feature of Snapchat for the young people in this research. Snapchat Stories function in a similar way to Stories on Instagram or Facebook. These are posts that can be pinned to a user's profile for 24 hours[23]. Users can watch and swipe through the Stories posted that day by people they are friends with. When someone posts a Story, the default is that it is viewable to everyone they are friends with, but this can be changed to be seen by "everyone" or a custom selection of users[24].

Each Story disappears after 24 hours by default, but a Story can be shared on into Chats, or screen-recorded and shared on at scale via other Stories.
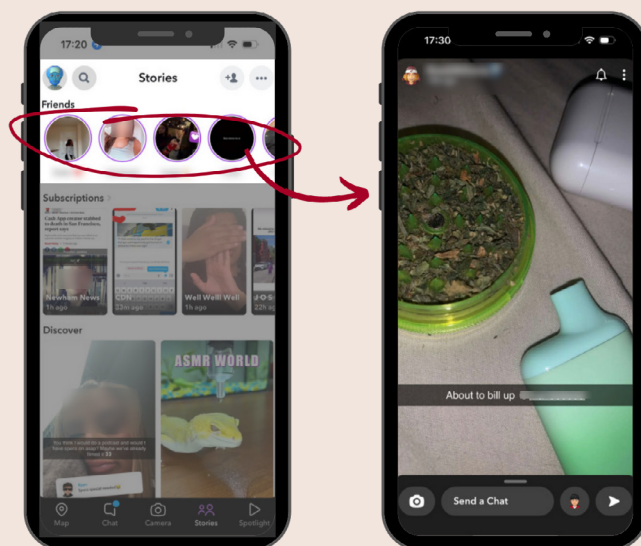
Users can scroll through their friends' Stories (left) and stories can be shared on to chats (right) or screen-recorded and shared on other stories

[23] Snapchat Support, How to add Snaps to My Story
[24] Snapchat Support, How can I change who can see My Story on Snapchat?

What we saw in the research:

Most children who took part in this research were in many large Group Chats – a whole school year, a youth club, people from the same area. Most of them were seeing violent and sexual content shared frequently in Group Chats.

All of the children in this research were also seeing violent and sexual content via Stories broadcast to much larger potential audiences – sometimes thousands of 'friends'.

Often the accounts the children were 'friends' with that shared this type of content were not operating as individual people posting in a personal capacity, but were labelled as and behaving more like broadcasters focused on a theme. For example, accounts with names like "[place name] fights" or "bait outs". These accounts proactively build their 'friend' base by adding hundreds of accounts, and then post content (e.g., videos of fights, or 'baited out' nudes) to be viewed by those networks.

Many of these videos and images appeared to spread on Snapchat as a result of being screen-recorded and reshared, and could still be in circulation months or even years after first being posted.

While these accounts can easily share content across networks of thousands of users, the content is not viewable unless they've been added as a 'friend' by the account in question. This makes it very difficult to know from the outside of these networks what content is being distributed. Our researchers spent time on Snapchat exploring these types of profiles that children had told us about, but were not able to view any of the content they shared. Some children reported that you won't get added or accepted by some of these accounts unless you are "known" locally by reputation. Accounts with a low Snapscore are reportedly also viewed with suspicion.

Moderation and reporting

Snapchat's community guidelines[25] expressly forbid much of the content described to us during this research. Images or videos depicting graphic violence, promoting or facilitating criminal activity, or depicting sexual activity involving a minor are all prohibited[26]. Snapchat says its 24-hour moderation team respond and remove any such content whenever it is identified[27].

However it is not stated by Snapchat whether content shared via Chat or broadcast via Stories is pro-actively moderated by Snapchat unless **reported by a user**, or detected as known Child Sexual Abuse Imagery (CSAM) by automated external databases (see below).

Snapchat says on its website: "Snaps and chats, including voice and video chats, between you and your friends are private – we don't scan their content to create profiles or show you advertisements. This means we typically don't know what you're saying or Snapping unless you ask us to"[28]. It's not made clear whether this is also true for Stories shared among 'friend' lists.

Snapchat says that any content that is automatically recommended to larger audiences (i.e., appearing to people who are not 'friends' with the user who's posted the content) using a recommender algorithm is proactively moderated to a higher standard than content shared between 'friends'[29]. However, given that many profiles are 'friends' with thousands of other accounts, content shared only between 'friends' can still circulate among large audiences, very quickly, without meeting this threshold.

Snapchat states that the platform uses PhotoDNA and Google's CSAI (child sexual abuse imagery) Match tools[30] to identify known illegal images and videos of child sexual abuse. These tools are able to automatically detect images or videos that have previously been identified on the internet as containing CSAM. If they subsequently appear on Snapchat they are then reported to law enforcement bodies. However, these tools cannot detect content containing CSAM that originates on Snapchat and is not reported by users or other forms of moderation.

Snapchat's latest transparency report[31] says it received 748,397 content and account reports in the United Kingdom in the six-month period from January 2022. It is not clear from publicly available information whether there is a mechanism for any content that is not reported by a user or identified by PhotoDNA or CSAI Match or any other moderation tools to be included in this figure.

What we saw in the research:

The children who took part in this research assumed that Snapchat was a less moderated space than other social media platforms, based on the fact that this is the platform where they see higher proportions of violent and sexual graphic content shared. Adults working with these children, for example youth workers interviewed for the project, had similar assumptions because they rarely, if ever, witnessed or heard about users being banned, or content being blocked or taken down.

Because most content disappears after being viewed, or after 24 hours, several children said they and their peers perceived Snapchat to be a "safer" place for people to share illicit or illegal content.

Some children were aware that it was possible that they or other users could report content to Snapchat, but none said they had ever done so. Some said that they would be very reluctant or even fearful of reporting content on Snapchat, because they could potentially face repercussions if other people in their local area found out they had been a "snake" or a grass.

[25] At the time of writing in May 2023

[26] Snap privacy and safety hub, Community Guidelines, Updated: 18 January 2022

[27] Snap Inc's response to HM Coroner Mr Andrew Walker's initial request for information, 7 December 2022

[28] Snap privacy and safety hub, Snaps & Chats

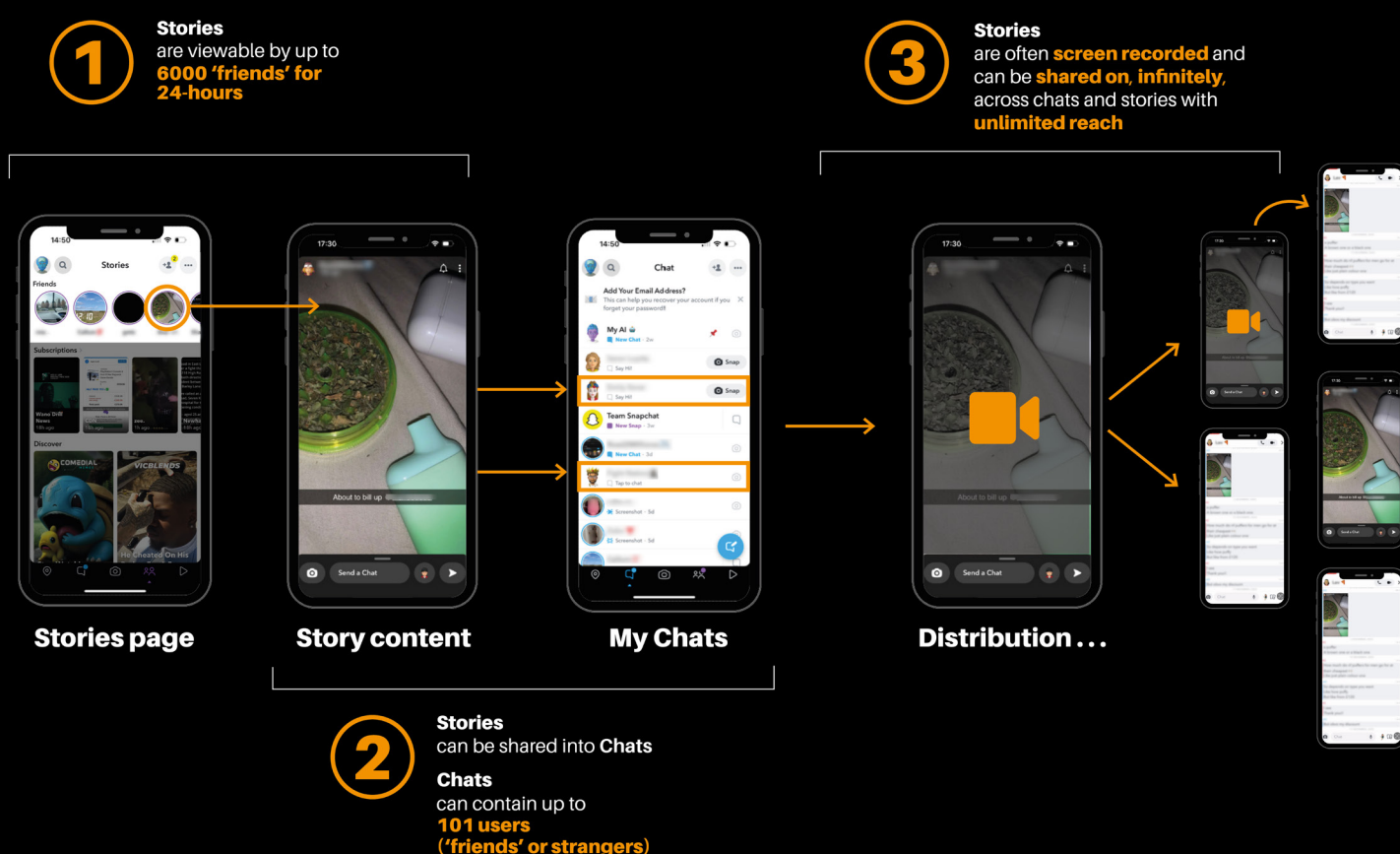[29] Snap Inc Content Guidelines for Recommendation Eligibility, Released: March 15, 2023

[30] Snap privacy and safety hub, Transparency Report, January 1 2022 – June 30 2022

[31] Snap privacy and safety hub, account / content violations, United Kingdom, January 1 2022 – June 30 2022

Implications

The children we interviewed described scrolling through Snapchat Stories from local 'friends' and accounts in the same way that other children might scroll through TikTok content produced by people all over the world. But on Snapchat this content isn't accessible to individuals who aren't connected as 'friends' or on Group Chats. Content can't be searched for as it can on TikTok or YouTube. As such, it's 'private' – albeit for perhaps a few thousand people at a time, and appears to be subject to a different type of moderation than content that is 'public'.

But the features described above work together to create something that feels more like social media than chat. Content from people you don't know or follow can also easily find its way to you in Group Chats that you're both members of. And the Quick Add feature makes it easy to build large networks of these 'friends', all of whom, if they accept you, can share content with you. While Snapchat does not have a singular content 'feed' like that you might find on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram or TikTok, you can still scroll through reams of content posted by your 'friends' – potentially thousands of people – while still in a 'private' realm.

1 **Stories**
are viewable by up to
6000 'friends' for 24-hours

3 **Stories**
are often **screen recorded** and can be **shared on**, **infinitely**, across chats and stories with **unlimited reach**

Stories page

Story content

My Chats

Distribution . . .

2 **Stories**
can be shared into **Chats**

Chats
can contain up to
101 users ('friends' or strangers)

"You see gangs beating people up and a caption on saying who they are"

Case study
Jaamil, 17

Jaamil wants to be a lawyer. He likes the idea of being able to stand up and debate confidently in a courtroom, defend a client, win a case. He's studying for a BTEC in college and has applied for a law course at university.

Three evenings a week, Jaamil has a part-time job. This summer he's planning to set up a small business with his brother, doing odd jobs in his neighbourhood, so they can save up some money.

His family is full of business owners – his dad, uncles and grandfather own a string of properties in the area of Birmingham where they live, and in the UK city where Jaamil's grandfather lived when he first moved from Pakistan in the 1970s. Jaamil and his parents have always lived in the same part of Birmingham. The UK city his grandfather lived is the only other place he's ever been to.

"I like this area, I don't know where else I'd move. Unless I went to [the other UK city], but I only know people here and there, nowhere else."

Local life: Jaamil keeps his head down but his eyes open

Jaamil describes the area where he lives as "quite rough" but because he knows a lot of people, it feels familiar and pretty safe. His awareness of local crime and violence comes mainly from videos he sees online.

"I've seen a lot more in videos than in real life. I don't really go out at night, so I don't see it myself. But online I see people having arguments, people fighting, people getting robbed. Seen videos of when the riots were in Birmingham and people had guns and stuff. Mostly on Snapchat, but sometimes people post it on YouTube. Like, gangs will post on Snapchat about getting people from other areas. You'll see them beating people up and put a caption on saying who they are."

"I've seen a lot more in videos than in real life"

He describes a video he saw recently, filmed on a road near his college, of a fight between a gang and another group of local young people who had got into an argument on Snapchat Stories. There were about 15 people fighting, some with baseball bats and knives.

"It wasn't *bad* bad. No one got too injured, like not death or disabled, I don't think so. People got hit a bit. Afterwards we just saw the video online. You don't ever really know if the guy was dead or something after. People watching it, waiting for the bus and stuff, were filming it. It was on someone's [Snapchat] Story and then got screen-recorded, and then some of my friends were posting it to their Stories."

"It was on someone's [Snapchat] Story and then got screen-recorded, and then some of my friends were posting it to their Stories"

Jaamil describes the buzz at college after there's been a major fight locally, with all the kids talking about it and sharing the video the next morning. Just before the interview, there had been a fight outside the college gates and Jaamil is "still waiting" to see if there's a video of the fight. It feels important to keep up with the gossip and drama of it.

"I want to see what happened there. One of my friends just messaged me about it. But I don't know if there's a video or not already. After this I will probably message my mate and see if he has the video."

But Jaamil is determined to stay out of any gang-related activity himself, he doesn't want to jeopardise his hopes of getting a good job and having a family in the future.

"There's a lot of gang stuff, but me and my friends, we just put our heads down and walk on. I don't get myself involved in those sorts of situations".

Saving face: Jaamil says there is pressure to fight to defend your reputation

Nonetheless, he felt unable to avoid getting involved in a few scuffles and fights at school. "Normal fights" – those that don't involve weapons – took place at school at least once or twice a week, he says, sometimes every day.

"The worst that happened was someone using a metal water bottle or those things in maths, you know, a compass. Like when a fight happens, it's a bit like a knife, innit, but it's not a knife knife, it won't, like, injure the person proper badly or leave them in hospital."

These fights usually happened after an argument over a girl or when someone had been rude to someone else. The arguments tended to take place on Snapchat, so other pupils at school followed to see what was happening, which ramped up the pressure on those involved to defend themselves, Jaamil says.

"Sometimes, like, over a girl, or just, like, you know when people talk on Snapchat Group Chats, people just talk and swear at each other, or say, like, make a joke about someone and they get offended. Then

they'll want to fight."

"And because it's on the Group Chat and everyone's watching it, so if you say you don't want to fight, obviously people are going to screen-shot it and post it on their Stories and say, 'This guy's, like, a coward because he doesn't want to fight.' That's how most fights start."

"Because it's on the Group Chat and everyone's watching it, so if you say you don't want to fight, obviously people are going to screen-shot it and post it on their Stories"

Even Jaamil has felt he had to fight someone to defend his reputation. An argument on a Snapchat Group Chat had resulted in what Jaamil described as a misunderstanding – an older boy at school accused him of "violating him" [insulting him], which he denied. He felt immense pressure to respond to the accusation and set the record straight, but – aware how easily fights can escalate, and how dangerous they can be, especially if people use weapons – he desperately wanted to avoid being dragged out of his depth.

"So I'll try to be smart about it. I'll try to find them and fight them in school the next day. It's better to fight in school, there's cameras and not much weapons and less people will see than out of school."

> "It's better to fight in school, there's cameras and not much weapons and less people will see than out of school"

"Me and my friends we beat the guy up in school, so it's safer for all of us, so we won't have to do anything extra."

There are risks either way, Jaamil says. "If I ever got beaten up at school that's my whole reputation gone. People obviously record it, so the videos will stick around in the future."

Fight, film, share, repeat: Jaamil thinks the ability to film and share drives people to fight

The emphasis in a lot of the videos Jaamil sees is to demonstrate, on film, that the victim has been humiliated or made to apologise, as a way of proving that your side has come out "on top".

Sometimes people post videos of fights on their Snapchat Stories over which they have put captions explaining what the victim was being punished for, or what their justification for the attack was.

"If a guy's, like, a paedophile or something, they'll post in a caption what he did, they'll have a video of them pushing or hitting or attacking the guy, with a caption. I've seen that on Snapchat a few times."

"Or, like, they'll video a gang member saying sorry. In brackets it will say the gang name and say 'pressured'

[as a caption]. It means making him apologise for no reason, trying to... make him sad and sorry and apologise for being part of the gang or whatever."

Jaamil gives an example, a conflict that had arisen last year between two boys at college over an anonymous Snapchat account that had been sharing "mugs" – ugly photos – of people from the college.

"This one guy accused this other guy to some people, and he got annoyed because he got accused for no reason, so they were having an argument together. And then the guy that got accused called a few people in for a fight and they rushed the other guy. They made him say sorry. They grabbed him, gave him a few slaps at first. And make him say sorry on his knees. And then beat him up even more, and recorded him saying sorry on his knees, and then walked away."

Jaamil ponders what might be different if people didn't have phones and social media platforms.

"If people didn't have any phones, there'd be less people remembering the fights. So actually there'd be less fights. No one's going to be able to show everyone that they beat someone up. So they'll have less fights because they're not proving to anyone that they beat this guy up. You can't prove it to no one. If a guy was apologising or something you got nothing to record it with to prove it. You could be just saying anything to anyone."

> "If people didn't have any phones, there'd be less people remembering the fights. So actually there'd be less fights"

Scroll on: Violent videos are normalised, and viewers are desensitised

In Jaamil's social circle, everyone sees these videos. They are the currency of daily gossip, and being the one person who hasn't seen a fight video means you're out of the loop.

But Jaamil doesn't like watching violent, often cruel videos. And he gets annoyed with people filming a fight rather than stepping in to help, even when people are being stabbed, hit with baseball bats or kicked on the ground, crying, begging for the violence to stop.

One person alone can't change it, though, he says. It feels inescapable. "I feel remorse and feel sorry for the people, of course. But there's nothing I can do about it.

"So, you just move on, and watch the rest of your Stories."

Jaamil lives in an inner city area of Birmingham with his parents and three brothers. The area where they live is urban, densely populated and primarily South Asian and Muslim in population. According to the 2021 England and Wales Census, Jaamil's neighbourhood[32] has the following characteristics:

85% of households have at least one indicator of deprivation (compared with 52% on average for England and Wales)

5% Only 5% of adults work in a higher managerial, administrative or professional occupation (compared with 11% on average for England and Wales)

35% of people over 16 have no qualifications (compared with 15% on average for England and Wales)

20% of adults are long-term unemployed or have never worked (compared with a 7% on average for England and Wales)

The local area[33] is in the top 20% most deprived areas on the dimension of crime according to the English indices of deprivation 2019.

Note: These numbers have been rounded to the nearest 5% to maintain anonymity

[32] Output Areas (OAs) in the England and Wales 2021 Census are the lowest level of geographical area for census statistics and are usually made up of between 40 and 250 hou
[33] Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in the England and Wales 2021 Census are made up of groups of OAs, usually four or five. They comprise between 400 and 1,200 households.

Conclusion

Revealing Reality did this research to explore what some vulnerable children are seeing and doing on their phones, consider the consequences and implications, and share our findings.

What we found is that some disadvantaged children are seeing violence, sexual content and sometimes illegal material on Snapchat, often daily. And their experiences are a far cry from most people's perception of an app where kids send silly messages and pictures. Snapchat – the clue is in the name – is not widely thought of as social media at all. Indeed, many other children don't use it in that way.

Snapchat describes itself as a camera app, and says it's "made it a point to build things differently from the beginning, with a focus on helping Snapchatters communicate with their close friends in an environment that prioritises their safety, privacy and well-being".

On its website it adds: "That's why Snapchat opens directly to a camera, not a feed of endless content, and it is focused on connecting people who are already friends in real life. We have always wanted Snapchatters to be able to genuinely express themselves and have fun with their friends in the same way they would if they were hanging out in person – without the pressure to grow a following, gain views or earn likes."

But the children in this research are not just chatting, they are consuming content on Snapchat the way their peers do on TikTok, or as their grandparents might once have watched the evening news. And what they see is fights, stabbings, raids and CSAM.

For children who already have fewer opportunities in life, who have little or no exposure to life beyond the streets where they live and the schools where they 'scrap', seeing this content day in, day out has a big impact. Violence becomes normal, CSAM is routinely shared, reputations are made or destroyed, the local landscape is digitally overlaid with each child's mental map of where the biggest fights or the worst crimes have taken place. While other children use Snapchat's built-in filters

to add funny effects to their selfies, the filter these children experience is the normalisation of humiliation, aggression, violence and crime, the sense that this is what happens – and what matters most – in the areas where they are growing up.

Like all of us, these children are affected by the media they consume. And if that media consists of a daily round of graphic, scary and discomfiting videos that spread like a virus among their peers and neighbours, it can become harder for them to know about, imagine or aspire to experiences beyond those they see on their phones.

But the videos the children in this research see on Snapchat, and the ways they are enabled and sometimes motivated to behave – filming themselves literally fighting for status or forcing others to relinquish theirs, actively or passively ensuring content is spread far beyond their immediate friends – are not just shocking or sad. They are avoidable.

If society wants these children to grow up happy and healthy, to have norms and aspirations that will serve them well and give them the best possible chance of escaping cycles of disadvantage, it can consider how to make that happen.

No one claims Snapchat set out to facilitate criminality or harm, or deliberately designed its platform to encourage children to share CSAM or to film fights. But, as we've seen, Snapchat's features and functions make it possible. At the same time, as we've seen, putting the onus on these children to report unsuitable content is not realistic – they won't.

So what is the answer?

Just like any product, features and functions can be changed. Moderation can be increased. Vulnerable children's experiences don't have to be this way. Design choices are just that – choices.