

JUNE 2023 | EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LGBTQ+ Youth Perspectives: How LGBTQ+ Youth are Navigating Exploration and Risks of Sexual Exploitation Online

Findings from 2022 quantitative research among
13-20-year-olds

Research conducted by Thorn in partnership with Benenson Strategy Group

THORN 

 Benenson
Strategy
Group

Methodology & Research Design

This research focused on teens (aged 13-17) and young adults (aged 18-20), and consisted of two phases: qualitative online diaries and a quantitative online survey. Collectively this research sought to examine the following core guiding questions:

- How do online experiences, online habits, and preferences compare for LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ youth?
- What are LGBTQ+ youths' primary motivations for connecting with others online, and how do they seek to do that?
- How do LGBTQ+ view risk and danger online?
- Among LGBTQ+ youth, are there differences in the risks/experiences across identities?

PHASE 1 - QUALITATIVE ONLINE DIARIES

Using an online ethnographic journal methodology, we engaged with 24 LGBTQ+ 13-17-year-olds on three occasions over the course of a week. In each interaction, online diarists were prompted with a series of broad, sweeping questions designed to help them share and shed light on their unique online experiences and communities. Hundreds of pages of transcripts were produced and analyzed to help form hypotheses to test in the subsequent quantitative phase.

PHASE 2 - QUANTITATIVE ONLINE SURVEYS

In 2022, 1,662 young people from across the United States participated in an 18-minute online survey. Phase 2 was intended to quantify the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of teens and young adults, with a particular lens on how the online experiences of LGBTQ+ youth differs from non-LGBTQ+ youth. To ensure a representative sample nationwide, data was weighted to age, gender, race, and geography, based on U.S. Census data.

A Note on Terms

Within our respondent sample, the implications (and even legality) of surveyed experiences differ. In an effort to maintain clarity throughout the report, we will refer to respondents aged 13-17 as "teens" and aged 18-20 as "young adults". When discussing data and trends across all age groups (13-20), the terms "all participants" and "young people" will be used interchangeably. For added clarity, all tables specify the age ranges corresponding to the presented data.

In other reports, we often refer to sexually explicit content involving a minor as "Child Sexual Abuse Material" (CSAM) and more narrowly, sexually explicit material of a minor with no apparent adult offender present as "Self-Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material" (SG-CSAM). For the purposes of this report, due to the inclusion of both adults and minors in the sample, the more general terminology of "nudes" or "nude imagery" is used throughout.

A Note on Privacy and Safety

Ensuring the privacy and safety of those who chose to participate in this research was paramount. All participant responses were anonymized. Minor participants were recruited via existing youth panels or directly through caregivers at the time of this survey. Caregiver consent was required for teens' participation in youth panels, as well as for those teens recruited directly for the survey. In addition, help resources were provided to participants in the event they wanted to learn more about the topics discussed or desired to speak with a trained counselor about these issues.

Overview

Over the last several years, Thorn has fielded a series of research initiatives aimed at understanding how youth in particular view and respond to online experiences, from consensual exploration to navigating risky and dangerous encounters. This previous research^{1,2} has underscored that LGBTQ+ youth may face heightened risk for harmful online experiences and distinct considerations in how they react to these events.

Previous surveys often have not, however, provided enough detail to more deeply understand the scale of these experiences and the unique perspectives LGBTQ+ youth may hold, presenting challenges to delivering relevant and accessible interventions and safeguarding programming.

Thorn's latest work sought to build off the existing body of research to ensure strategies to combat online child sexual exploitation are inclusive and relevant to the needs of LGBTQ+ youth. In a survey of nearly 1,700 young people aged 13-20 we explored their perspectives regarding online communities, sexual exploration in a digital age, and how they navigate feeling unsafe online.

Four key findings emerged:

- 1 LGBTQ+ teens reported a greater reliance on online communities and spaces.**
- 2 LGBTQ+ teens reported higher rates of experiences involving nudes and online sexual interactions.**
- 3 Cisgender non-hetero male teens reported higher rates of risky encounters and of attempting to handle unsafe situations alone compared to other teens.**
- 4 Offline relationships—such as with caregivers and friends—are the preferred people to turn to when young people feel unsafe. However, 1 in 3 LGBTQ+ teens would still rather handle a dangerous situation alone than turn either to their online or offline communities.**

1 Thorn. (2023). Responding to Online Threats: Minors' Perspectives on Disclosing, Reporting, and Blocking in 2021. https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/Thorn_ROT_Monitoring_2021.pdf

2 Thorn. (2022). Self-Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material: Youth Attitudes and Experiences in 2021. https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/Thorn_SG-CSAM_Monitoring_2021.pdf

Key Findings

Importance of Online Communities and Spaces

While the internet – as both a place for exploration and a tool with which to engage and develop relationships – is ingrained in day-to-day life for many young people, this is especially true for LGBTQ+ youth.

3 in 4

LGBTQ+ participants agree that online communities are essential for LGBTQ+ youth.

Among LGBTQ+ participants, nearly three-quarters agree that “online communities are essential for LGBTQ+ youth.” For many young LGBTQ+ people, the internet feels like a safer, more representative, and in some cases preferred alternative to their offline communities, presenting unique opportunities to explore and connect more openly than they may be able to offline. Many LGBTQ+ participants reported

digital forums as places where they can be their true and authentic selves.

As an extension of this search for spaces to explore and connect openly, some respondents reported maintaining secondary accounts (sometimes referred to as finstas), or multiple accounts on single platforms, in order to share content more privately or outside of the view of others in their social circles. Among teens, the rate of reporting secondary accounts was higher for LGBTQ+ respondents than non-LGBTQ+ respondents, with LGBTQ+ teens twice as likely to have a secondary account (36% vs. 18%). Among teen respondents with a secondary account, 1 in 3 reported creating it before the age of 13.

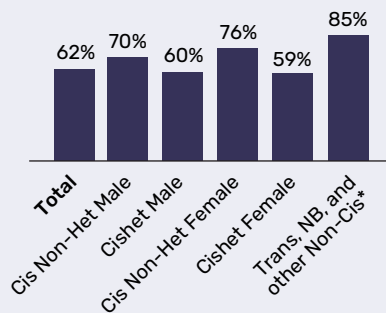
1 in 3

Teens with a secondary account report creating it before they turned 13.

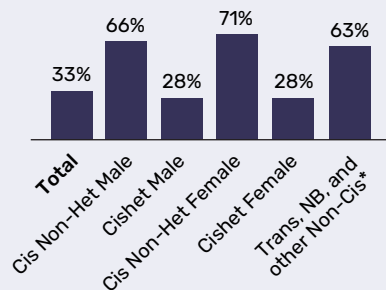
Foundational Attitudes – Importance of online community and exploration

Ages 13-17

My online community is essential to me

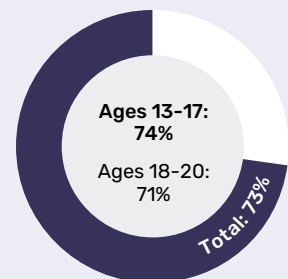


It's important for me to be able to explore my sexual orientation and/or gender identity online

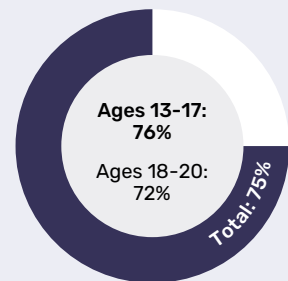


LGBTQ+

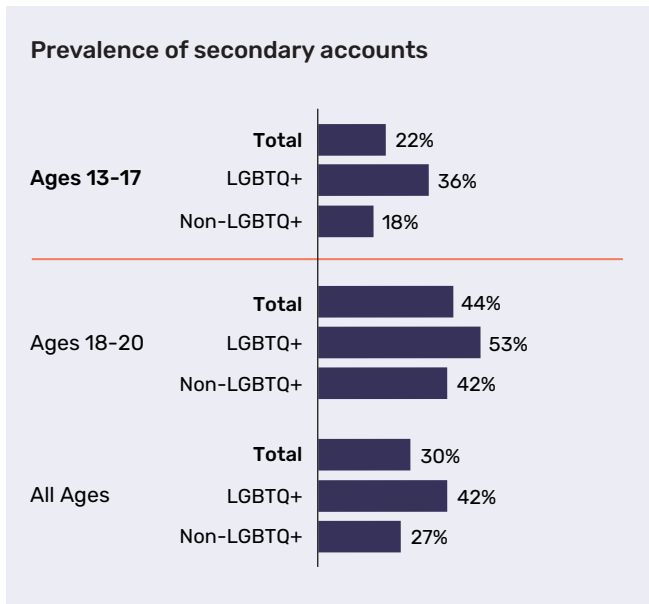
Online communities are essential for LGBTQ+ youth



For LGBTQ+ youth, it's important to be able to explore sexual orientation and/or gender identity online



Note: Percentages reflect participants who selected the response option "Agree". *Base size <100



Across teens, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation, the primary reason reported for maintaining a secondary account was to keep activity private from parents. Uniquely for LGBTQ+ teens, the second most common reason was because “I can be my authentic or real self.” Compared to LGBTQ+ peers, non-LGBTQ+ teens were nearly 20 points less likely to name this as a reason – 50% compared to 31%. Transgender, non-binary, or other non-cisgender teens were the most likely among all groups to cite this reason for creating a secondary account.

LGBTQ+ teens with secondary accounts were nearly half as likely to interact with kids from school on their secondary accounts and almost 1.5 times as likely to interact with people they only know online. In addition, this group was much more likely to report interacting with other LGBTQ+ minors their age on secondary accounts compared to primary accounts (65% compared to 44%) and to interact with LGBTQ+ adults on secondary profiles in the same way (43% compared to 23%).

Youth are using digital spaces not only as a tool to interact with their existing offline community, but also as a means of building online-only relationships. Online-only relationships were more prevalent among LGBTQ+ participants, with 40% of LGBTQ+ participants reporting they have never met the

majority of the people they interact with online compared to 25% of non-LGBTQ+ participants. This gap was consistent among participants aged 13-17, where a majority of online interactions with people they only know online was more common among LGBTQ+ teens (42%) compared to non-LGBTQ+ (25%) teens.

42%

LGBTQ+ teens report the majority of people they interact with online they only know online, compared to 25% of non-LGBTQ+ teens.

Who young people are interacting with by account type

Among participants ages 13-17 with a secondary account

On a primary account	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
	Family members	78%
Kids at my school	76%	69%
People who share my interests	65%	55%
People I know online only	45%	57%
Other LGBTQ+ people	51%	-

On a secondary account	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+
	Family members	18%
Kids at my school	38%	52%
People who share my interests	64%	50%
People I know online only	63%	51%
Other LGBTQ+ people	71%	-

Note: The response option “Other LGBTQ+ people” was only presented for LGBTQ+ participants. Columns will not total to 100 because question was multiple select.

Percentage of online interactions happening with strangers, ages 13-17

	NONE	NET <50%	NET 50%+
Total	12%	71%	29%
Cis Non-Het Male	5%	45%	55%
Cishet Male	9%	70%	30%
Cis Non-Het Female	10%	67%	33%
Cishet Female	17%	80%	20%
Trans, NB, and other Non-Cis*	10%	61%	39%

Note: Some columns may not total 100 due to rounding. *Base size <100

Notably, these high rates of online-only relationships did not remain consistent across all demographic groups. Cisgender male non-hetero teens reported

notably higher rates, with more than half (55%) saying the majority of people they interact with online are online-only relationships. Trans/non-binary/non-cisgender participants showed the next highest amount (39%), followed by cisgender non-hetero female (33%), and cisgender hetero male (30%) participants. Cisgender female hetero teens were the least likely group to report a majority of their online contacts were with people they only knew online (20%).

Frequency of Unwanted or Risky Online Interactions

The internet can offer more inclusive and private places for exploration and connection as compared to some offline communities; however, there’s widespread acknowledgement across all groups – regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity – that young LGBTQ+ people face unique challenges when it comes to online safety in general (79%). Bullying, harassment, and trolling are among the top challenges identified by participants as uniquely or disproportionately impacting LGBTQ+ young people online.

LGBTQ+ participants were between 1.5 to 2 times more likely to indicate prior experience of unwanted or potentially risky interactions online.

These gaps were also seen among teens, and in some cases were larger for teens compared to young adults. For example, LGBTQ+ teens were more than twice as likely as non-LGBTQ+ teens to have reported receiving a request for nudes from someone they don’t know online (19% vs 8%); twice as likely to have reported getting blackmailed or receiving threats (10% v. 5%); 3 times more likely to have had an adult attempt to befriend and manipulate them online

1.5 - 2x

LGBTQ+ participants were 1.5 to 2 times more likely to experience risky encounters online

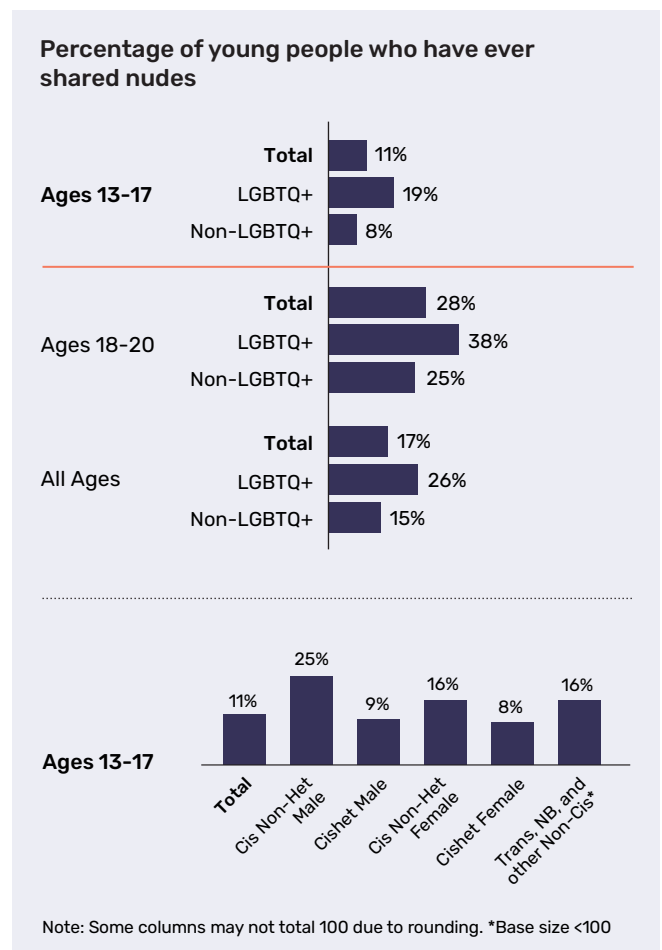
1 in 5

LGBTQ+ teens have received a request for nudes from someone they don’t know online.

(19% vs 6%); and nearly 3 times as likely to have reported being bullied (33% v. 12%).

Experiences Sharing Nudes

Overall, approximately 1 in 6 (17%) participants reported having personally shared their own nude photos or videos. And while the likelihood to report having shared nude content increased with age – young adult participants were roughly 3 times more likely to report having shared nudes than teens – still 1 in 10 (11%) teenage participants reported they had shared their own nude imagery. For the majority of teens (86%) who had ever shared their own nudes, this happened within the year prior to completing the survey.



LGBTQ+ teens were almost twice as likely to have reported sharing their own nude photos or videos, with nearly 1 in 5 (19%) LGBTQ+ teens who said they

had done so, compared to slightly under 1 in 10 (8%) non-LGBTQ+ teens who said the same.

1 in 5

LGBTQ+ teens have shared their own nudes.

Rates of experiences with nudes differed across segments of LGBTQ+ teens depending on gender identity or sexual orientation. However, cisgender non-hetero male teens reported the highest rates of experiences across multiple types of encounters.

Cisgender non-hetero male teens were the most likely to have shared their own nudes, with 1 in 4 (25%) having reported this experience, compared to 1 in 6 (16%) cisgender non-hetero females or transgender, non-binary, or other non-cisgender respondents in the same age group. Cisgender non-hetero male teens were also two or more times as likely as other minors to have reported asking someone else to send them nudes, and two or more times as likely to have reported they had re-shared nude photos or videos of someone else.

Preferred Support Systems for Youth

Young people are responding to unwanted and/or potentially risky online experiences with a mixture of online and offline resources and relationships; their decisions of where to turn are often informed by the quality and accessibility of those resources, the anticipated outcomes of using them, and the perceived risk of the moment.

Prior research³ has shown that online tools act as the first line of defense – and in some cases the only means of responding – for many young people when they encounter a risky situation online. A strong majority of participants in the current survey, ranging from 64% to 84% depending on the scenario, reported using either blocking or reporting tools in response to potentially unwanted or risky online experiences, a rate at times more than twice that of confiding in a caregiver, trusted adult, or friend.

Neither platform reporting tools, nor online-only friends, take the place of offline support systems for young people. When asked, “when you feel unsafe online, who are you more likely to turn to?” more than half (54%) of participants, including nearly two-thirds (63%) of teens, reported they’d be more likely to turn to people they know in person than someone they only know online.

Unfortunately, many teens do not want to, or do not feel comfortable, turning to either their existing online or offline communities when in danger. For nearly one-quarter of teens, they said they were more likely to try and handle a situation by themselves than turn to someone they know on or offline. For LGBTQ+ teens, this is even more pronounced: 1 in 3 (32%) LGBTQ+ teens report if they felt unsafe online, they’d try to handle it themselves, including nearly half (45%) of cisgender non-hetero males.

While both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ teens showed similar rates of looking to parents/caregivers when

Frequency of nude sharing behaviors by young people, ages 13-17

	Total	Cis Non-Het Male	Cishet Male	Cis Non-Het Female	Cishet Female	Trans, NB, and other Non-Cis*
Send or share photos or videos of someone who is nude to others	12%	27%	15%	13%	7%	12%
Receive or get sent photos or videos that are nude that you did not ask to receive	29%	54%	26%	36%	24%	40%
Ask someone to send you photos or videos that are nude	14%	32%	16%	17%	8%	12%
Have nude photos or videos of yourself shared or leaked without your permission	10%	21%	11%	8%	6%	14%

3 Thorn. (2023). Responding to Online Threats: Minors’ Perspectives on Disclosing, Reporting, and Blocking in 2021. https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/Thorn_SG-CSAM_Monitoring_2021.pdf

Understanding who teens turn to if exposed to unsafe online experiences or behaviors, ages 13-17

	Total	LGBTQ+	Non-LGBTQ+	Cis Non-Het Male	Cishet Male	Cis Non-Het Female	Cishet Female	Trans, NB, and other Non-Cis*
I'm more likely to turn to people I only know online	9%	9%	9%	9%	9%	10%	9%	7%
I'm more likely to turn to people I know in person	63%	56%	65%	44%	60%	63%	71%	58%
I'm more likely to try and handle it on my own	24%	32%	22%	45%	27%	22%	16%	33%
Other	4%	3%	4%	2%	4%	5%	4%	2%

facing an online risk, LGBTQ+ teens were much more likely to look to their friends for support as compared to non-LGBTQ+ teens.

LGBTQ+ teens were 10 points more likely than non-LGBTQ+ peers to have reported they'd handle an unsafe online experience themselves.

As observed in many of the responses, cisgender non-hetero male teens are a notable exception. Nearly half of cisgender non-hetero male teens said they would try to handle a situation in which they feel unsafe online by themselves. This group reported they would handle unsafe online experiences themselves between 12 and 29 points more compared to other groups.



Many views related to disclosure barriers were shared by all participants, teens included. However, in addition to greater concern regarding consequences, LGBTQ+ participants (aged 13-20) reported greater concern than their non-LGBTQ+ peers for being cut off from their online communities. Transgender,

non-binary, or other non-cisgender participants held uniquely high concerns regarding loss of community. For 1 in 3 transgender, non-binary, or other non-cisgender participants with lived experiences, concern that reporting would lead to them being cut off from their online community prevented them from confiding in a caregiver or other trusted adult. While sample sizes are smaller, similar rates were apparent among teen respondents within this group more specifically. This concern rated approximately 2 to 3 times higher among this group than any other based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

In addition, for 1 in 4 (24%) LGBTQ+ participants who'd had a potentially harmful online experience that was not disclosed to an adult, concern over being outed was cited as a disclosure barrier. This concern ranked higher among young adults, for whom 1 in 3 reported it as a consideration in disclosure, with the greatest worry tied to being outed to parents/caregivers. While a more prominent factor for young adults, still 1 in 6 LGBTQ+ teens who'd had a potentially risky online interaction reported concern that sharing what they'd experienced with a parent/caregiver or other trusted adult would lead to them being outed, preventing them from disclosure.

1 in 3

Transgender, non-binary, or other non-cisgender participants reported concerns about being cut off from their online communities

1 in 6

LGBTQ+ teens reported concerns about being outed played a role in deciding not to tell a parent/caregiver about a potentially harmful online encounter.

Closing Remarks

As with all parts of our lives, technology now plays a role in romantic relationships and sexual exploration for many, including young people, and particularly for LGBTQ+ youth. Whereas in their offline communities they may fear judgment or physical harm, or simply may not see the non-hetero or non-cisgender people and relationships they are seeking, the internet opens new communities and experiences in a way that can feel more representative and inclusive than their offline worlds. As many young people told us in this research, the internet lets them be their true selves.

Given this, the need to develop platforms, tools, and programming that ensures online spaces are safe for all young people is vital. LGBTQ+ youth are using technology to explore their sexuality and connect with new people in a way that is not exclusive to them; however, it is happening for them at higher rates. Platform safety tools are a popular first line of defense in risky situations, but they are not a substitute for human support. Sadly, the availability and quality of human support is far from uniform, leaving too many isolated and trying to process harm alone. Diversifying the sources and types of support available may make an important dent in the number of young people who currently feel without a safe place to turn when navigating a risky online encounter.

The internet offers the ability to curate our experiences and communities - both to increase the good and decrease the bad - in a way we cannot as easily offline. This is uniquely relevant for LGBTQ+ youth. In the face of this, we must speak directly to the risks they are sure to be navigating and ensure they have access to open and non-judgmental spaces to turn for support.

Understanding the complex intersection of technology and child sexual abuse empowers us to safeguard kids from the ever-evolving threats they face online. Without direct insights from kids who are encountering these issues every day, we risk falling behind in developing valuable resources for them to navigate the digital age safely.

THANK YOU

We are grateful to the individuals who took the time to participate in this research. Without their gracious participation, we would not be able to share these key insights about the unique experiences and perspectives of LGBTQ+ youth. In addition to the research and design teams below, we are grateful for the guidance and input of Dr. Amy Green, Ph.D., and The Trevor Project as we navigated the initial design and goals of this research. We are also grateful for the support and contributions of Dr. Ellen Selkie, MD, MPH. Her expertise in this area was invaluable in delivering this report.

THORN 

thorn.org | info@thorn.org