

Classification Office

TE MANA WHAKAATU

Content that Crosses the Line

Conversations with young people
about extremely harmful content online

Content that Crosses the Line:

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Content Warning:

This report includes discussion of harmful online content, including content that is illegal in New Zealand. This includes references to suicide, child sexual abuse material, violent extremist content, and graphic violence.

The report does not include detailed descriptions of this content, but the topics discussed are highly sensitive and may be distressing or upsetting for some readers.

If you or someone you know needs support, we have included a list of resources and services at the end of this report ([see page 38](#)). This also includes information about reporting harmful content and tools to help you and your whānau stay safe online.

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Most importantly, we would like to thank and acknowledge the rangatahi who shared their wisdom and experiences with us. We present this report, and the whakaaro they shared with us, as a tohu for communities to better understand young people's experiences online and how to best support them.

Consultation development, facilitation, analysis and reporting by Waitārehu Hoyle and the Classification Office.

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Introduction

The Classification Office is tasked with assessing and classifying content to prevent and reduce harm to our communities.

Some of this material is so harmful that it crosses the line of what is deemed by Parliament to be acceptable in New Zealand, and is illegal to view, share, or create. Classifying illegal material reduces its availability, supports the prosecution of offenders, and protects victims.

Harmful content was easier to contain when the Classification Office was established 30 years ago. When we restricted or banned content, it largely stayed out of public view. Today, content that once remained in the dark corners of the web is now surfacing in everyday online spaces – through messaging apps, social media algorithms, and even search engine results.

The growing accessibility of illegal content online – including violent extremism and child sexual abuse material – demands prompt, responsive, and consistent classification services and support for the justice system. This forensic classification work informs criminal investigations and requires in-depth analysis and expertise, and we continue to be actively involved in efforts to limit the availability of extremely harmful material, both in New Zealand and globally.

While classification of illegal content has always been a crucial part of our work, our approach has evolved alongside the rapidly changing digital landscape. We're one part of a global network of enforcement agencies and civil society organisations that work to prevent the spread of extremely harmful material.

In recent years, parents, teachers, youth workers – and young people themselves – have consistently raised concerns about the impact of harmful content. It affects safety and mental wellbeing, and contributes to real-world harm. Beyond emotional and psychological effects, this content can influence attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, with serious impacts on society as a whole. There are also legal risks for those who create, share, or even possess material that crosses legal boundaries.

The rise in harmful online content calls for a stronger focus on prevention and support. To respond to this challenge, we take a public health informed, multi-layered prevention approach. Our goal is to help New Zealanders better navigate these issues – understanding legal boundaries and recognising broader harms such as desensitisation, trauma, radicalisation, and the promotion of violence or harmful behaviours.

To guide our response, we need to hear directly from young people.

We recently consulted with 10 groups of young people from across Aotearoa, and their voices form the foundation of this report.

These conversations provided valuable insights into young people's experiences and highlighted both their resilience and the serious challenges they face online.

- Young people talked about personally seeing extremely harmful content, including content that has been classified as objectionable (illegal) in New Zealand. This includes examples of graphic real-world violence, including mass shootings, livestreamed suicide, and extreme violence towards animals.
- Exposure to harmful content is often unintentional, appearing in social media feeds, chat groups, or shared directly by others. Even if not actively searching for harmful content, curiosity – or a desire to test their boundaries – can lead young people to engage with it when it unexpectedly appears in their feeds. Participants expressed a lack of confidence in platforms' ability to moderate content effectively.

- Participants described a range of impacts young people may experience when exposed to extremely harmful content, or harmful content more broadly. This includes emotional and psychological effects, from short-term shock to long-term mental health issues. Young people also talked about harmful influences on attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, such as promoting extremism or radicalisation.
- Young people told us they often lack support when dealing with harmful content and want to receive help without fear of judgement or punishment. They prefer supportive, understanding responses and want to feel empowered to handle situations with adult support available if needed.

This report does not provide a complete picture or comprehensive evidence about the experience of young people more generally. Importantly, we have not gathered insights about the experience of those who regularly seek out illegal material.

However, these insights are consistent with our broader understanding of the issues, and reflect concerns frequently raised by the wider community. This report can't speak to how widespread this

exposure is or how frequently it occurs, but these insights add to growing evidence that encountering extremely harmful content is part of the online experience for some young people.

It is essential that we understand the challenges this type of content presents for young people in Aotearoa. This report is an important step in raising awareness and ensuring they receive the support and guidance they're calling for.



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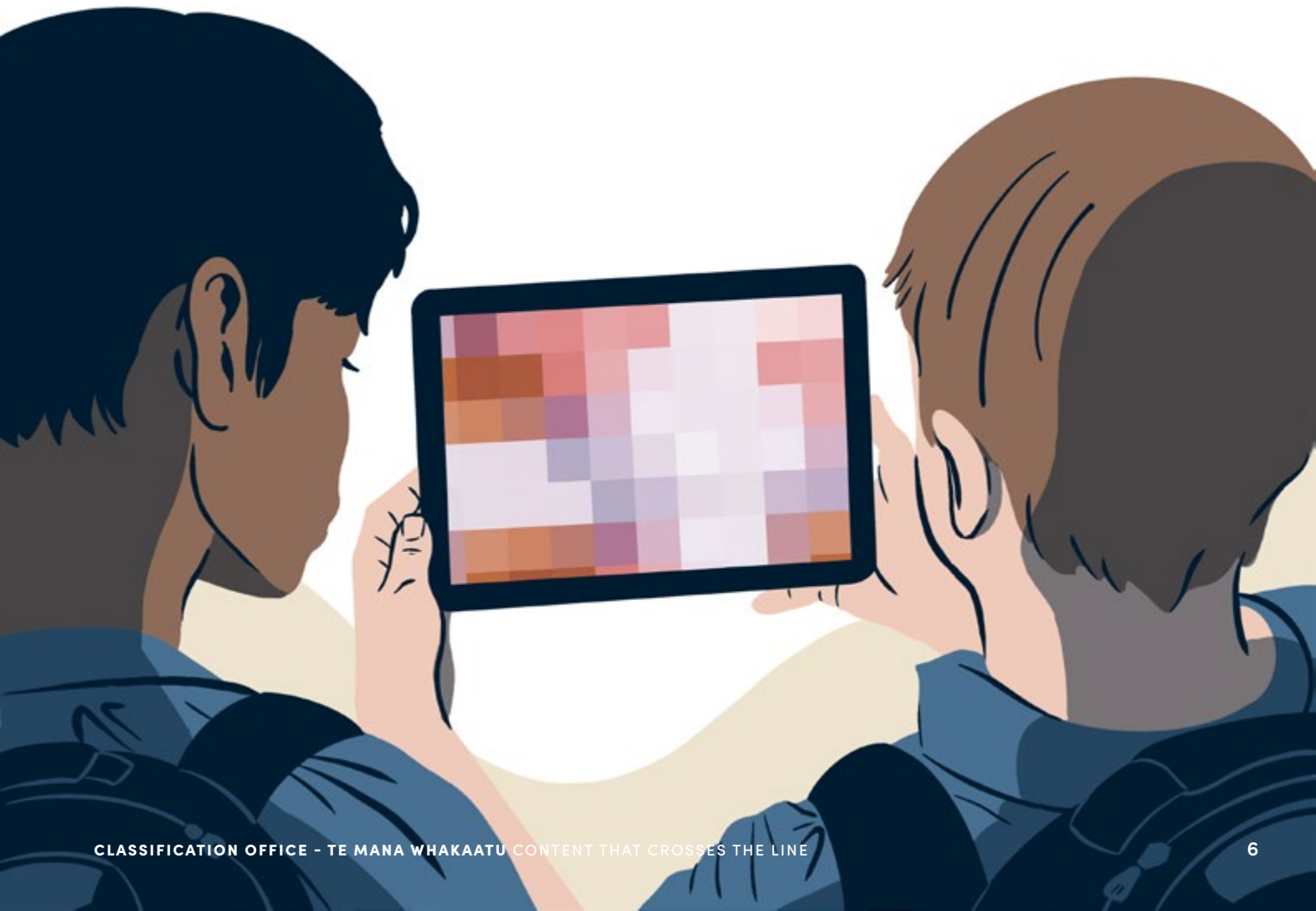
Caroline Flora
Chief Censor

What do we mean by ‘extremely harmful content’?

In this report, the term ‘extremely harmful content’ is a working definition referring to video, images, text and other material that people see online that could potentially be classified as objectionable (meaning banned or illegal) in New Zealand under the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993. We’ve provided more information about legal classifications in the section below: *What is ‘objectionable’ content?*

While the report draws on this legal framing, the consultations centred around young people’s own experiences of what they consider to be extremely harmful, which may not always align with what is technically illegal. Each person perceives harm differently, depending on context, lived experience, and cultural background.

Some of the content discussed by young people clearly fits this report’s definition of extremely harmful content, including graphic depictions of real-world violence, such as executions, mass shootings, suicide, and extreme cruelty towards animals. These types of content are the primary focus of this report.



Key insights

These insights are based on what young people shared during consultations. While their experiences don't speak for all young people, they're consistent with what we've heard in our previous work and offer valuable insight into how young people experience harm online.

Young New Zealanders are seeing extremely harmful content online

These consultations highlight that some young people are seeing or engaging with extremely harmful, and in some cases illegal, content online.

A number of participants described their own experiences of seeing extremely harmful content, including content that has been classified as objectionable (illegal) in New Zealand. This is consistent with our previous engagements with young people, many of whom have reported seeing content that has been classified as objectionable.

While this report can't speak to how widespread this exposure is or how frequently it occurs, these insights show that encountering extremely harmful content is part of the online experience for some young people.

Extremely harmful content can be difficult to avoid for some

Seeing extremely harmful content was mostly – but not always – described as unintentional or unwanted.

For the most part, participants who encountered this content described this in similar ways to how they engage with other types of content – whether on social media feeds, messaging apps, or through direct sharing in person.

Participants tended to lack confidence and trust in social media platforms' ability to moderate content, take effective action, and ensure the safety of users. Some participants took active steps to report content, but this was often seen as only somewhat effective, if at all.

Participants talked about scrolling past content they would prefer not to see, or deciding to stop watching if content is making them uncomfortable. Some participants felt that it can be difficult to prevent exposure to extremely harmful content entirely, even if young people take active steps to avoid it.

Curiosity is a key driver for engaging with content

Even when young people weren't actively seeking this type of content, some described feeling curious or wanting to test their boundaries when it appeared, whether in social media feeds, group chats, or on niche sites known for graphic material. For some, this reflected a desire to explore limits or make sense of something disturbing or unfamiliar. While this kind of curiosity can be a normal part of development for some young people, it may also come with a sense of uncertainty or discomfort, especially when the content is graphic or emotionally confronting.

These insights may reflect the experiences of many young New Zealanders who come across such material, but they do not cover the full range of ways young people might see and engage with this content. Most notably, consultations did not address the experiences of young people who actively seek out harmful content in a highly problematic way.

Real-world graphic violence was the most common type of extremely harmful content mentioned by young people

Content depicting real-world graphic violence, injury, or death was mentioned in every group. The types of content included mass shootings, beheadings or executions, dead bodies, assaults, gang violence, graphic depictions of suicide, and extreme violence towards animals.

In general, much of this content could potentially be illegal. A number of participants described having personally seen this type of extremely harmful content, including specific examples that have been classified as objectionable in New Zealand. This includes the Christchurch mosque attack livestream, and a suicide livestream.

Other types of content mentioned include violent extremist material and violent sexual material – this was sometimes referred to as extreme pornography, violent porn or sexual violence.

While child sexual abuse material was not directly discussed in the consultations, participants did talk about young people sharing nudes – sexual images or videos of themselves or others. Some of this content – even if shared consensually – can be classified as objectionable under New Zealand law.

These were the most common types of content participants raised or felt comfortable discussing in consultation groups, and do not represent the full spectrum of material young people may see online.

Young people associate this content with a variety of harmful impacts

Participants described a range of impacts young people may experience when exposed to extremely harmful content, or harmful content more broadly.

This includes emotional or psychological impacts, ranging from short-term shock or disgust to a longer-term impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Participants also pointed out that these impacts can vary significantly depending on the individual, and that social, cultural, or personal factors can shape how content is experienced or understood as harmful. Some participants also reflected on how content might influence people's attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours – for example, raising concerns about the potential for certain content to promote extremism or normalise harmful views.

These consultations provide some important insights into how young people understand and experience harm, but they don't capture the full range of impacts, or the experiences of those who may be engaging with this content intentionally or in more highly problematic ways.

Young people want guidance and support

Insights from these consultations suggest that encountering extremely harmful content is part of the online experience for some young people, and they are often dealing with this challenge without adequate support or guidance.

Participants spoke about the need for supportive and understanding responses when seeking help with difficult content or online experiences. They emphasised that assumptions or strong emotional reactions from adults can make it harder to speak up and sometimes lead them to avoid reaching out altogether.

Participants stressed the importance of being able to talk without fear of criticism or punishment. They felt that judgement or punitive actions – such as taking away devices – were unhelpful, and more likely to push them away from seeking support. Young people want to feel confident managing these situations on their own terms, with the reassurance that trusted adult support is available if and when they need it.



Background and objectives

Who we are and what we do

The Classification Office – Te Mana Whakaatu (the Office) is an independent Crown entity responsible for classifying material which may need to be restricted or banned. This can include films, books, video games and online content. We conduct research and produce evidence-based resources to promote media literacy and to help New Zealanders to make informed choices about what they watch.

Our role includes classifying potentially objectionable (illegal) material submitted by enforcement agencies and the courts. The majority of this involves child sexual abuse material, followed by content promoting terrorism and violent extremism.

While we are not responsible for investigations or enforcement, the Office contributes to wider efforts to reduce the availability of objectionable content in Aotearoa and globally. We work closely with domestic agencies including the NZ Police, the Department of Internal Affairs, NZ Customs, and the courts. Internationally, our work contributes to networks such as Tech Against Terrorism, the Christchurch Call, and Project Arachnid, run by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection, which aims to detect and remove child sexual abuse material from the internet.

What is 'objectionable' content?

In New Zealand, certain types of content – whether found online or offline – can be classified as 'objectionable', meaning it is illegal to view, share, create, or possess. The types of content we can classify are referred to in legislation as 'publications', and this includes text, video, images, and audio.

The Office assesses and classifies publications using legal criteria in the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993.

Content can be classified as objectionable if it depicts or deals with things like sex, horror, crime, cruelty, or violence, in a way that would be harmful to the public.

Several factors determine a classification, including how something is presented, if it has artistic, social or cultural value, and the impact on its intended audience.

Some types of content are given special consideration when determining a classification, including:

- Torture
- Sexual violence
- Sexual activity involving children or young people
- Degrading or dehumanising conduct
- The promotion of crime or acts of terrorism.

Some types of content are always classified as objectionable, including anything that promotes or supports:

- The sexual exploitation of children or young people
- Sexual violence, torture, or extreme violence.

The classification system balances the need to protect New Zealanders from harm while upholding the right to freedom of expression. Under the Bill of Rights Act 1990, New Zealanders have the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and opinions of any kind in any form, subject to reasonable limits set out in law.

A full breakdown of the classification criteria is available on our website.¹

¹ www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/classification-info/the-classification-process/#The%20classification%20criteria

Types of objectionable content online

While child sexual abuse material and content promoting terrorism or violent extremism are the most common forms of objectionable content classified by the Office, a wide range of other material may also be classified as objectionable under the Classification Act. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Some types of pornographic or sexual content, – for example, content promoting sexual violence or bestiality
- Graphic depictions of real-world violence – such as executions, mass shootings, suicide, or extreme cruelty towards animals.

During consultations, young people mentioned specific examples of illegal content they had seen online. One widely known example is the livestream video recording of the Christchurch mosque attacks in 2019. This footage was classified as objectionable because it promotes and supports extreme violence and terrorism. The video was clearly created to glorify mass murder, and has since been linked to manifestos associated with other violent attacks. Several participants said they had seen this or knew of others who had.

Detailed information about the classification of the Christchurch mosque attack livestream is available on our website.²

Under New Zealand law, accessing, viewing, or sharing content classified as objectionable is a criminal offence. This applies regardless of whether the content was intentionally sought out or encountered unintentionally. Individuals can still face legal consequences even if they were unaware that the material was illegal.

Why we're doing this work

Supporting young people and raising awareness about harmful and illegal content

Some young people are exposed to extremely harmful content in online spaces, and many face this exposure without adequate support or guidance. It is the role of the Classification Office to raise awareness and help young people to navigate these situations safely.

The purpose of this work is to ensure young people, and the adults who support them, have the knowledge and skills to recognise and respond to extremely harmful online content. This involves:

- Prevention: we proactively engage with young people about the risks associated with harmful online content, including the dangers of radicalisation, criminalisation, and the creation or sharing of content.
- Education: we develop clear and accessible resources to help young people recognise, report, and manage exposure to extremely harmful content. This includes understanding legal boundaries and the broader harms it causes, such as desensitisation, trauma, and the promotion of harmful behaviours.
- Support: our approach involves equipping young people and the adults in their lives (educators and caregivers) with the information and resources they need to support young people who see or engage with extremely harmful content.

This report outlines the insights we gathered from recent consultations with young people. Their voices ensure that our work is not only informed by their experiences, but grounded in the perspectives of those most affected by extremely harmful content online.

² www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/news/news-items/christchurch-mosque-attack-livestream-classification-decision

These insights will guide the development of further training and educational materials for educators, and tailored resources for parents and caregivers. By designing our approach around the unique needs of each group, and centring the lived realities of young people, we aim to create resources that are not only accurate, but genuinely useful.

This work reflects the Office's wider role in regulating online content and safeguarding the public from harm. It also speaks to our responsibility to raise awareness of complex issues and promote the wellbeing of tamariki and rangatahi.

While we don't yet have comprehensive data on how common this is in New Zealand, there is growing concern among families, communities, and professionals that young people are being exposed to extremely harmful, and in some cases, illegal, content online. Our job is to respond not only to that exposure, but also to the uncertainty around it: many young people are navigating these experiences without clear guidance, support, or shared understanding.

What we know about young people's exposure to extremely harmful content

The way harmful content spreads online has changed significantly. In the past, access to illegal or disturbing material was more limited and less visible to the public. Today, it can appear almost anywhere, from social media feeds and messaging apps to search engines and gaming platforms. Content that was once hidden or hard to find is now just a few clicks away.

Much of this material is user-generated and designed to attract attention. Algorithms that prioritise user engagement can unintentionally promote this kind of content, making it easier for harmful material to circulate, even when users don't go looking for it. As a result, some young people are being exposed to extremely harmful, and sometimes illegal, content without warning or support.

This includes graphic depictions of violence and self-harm, and content that promotes hatred or discrimination. Our research and engagement with young people over the past few years suggest that while exposure levels vary, these experiences may not be uncommon, and many rangatahi are unsure how to respond, or where to go for help.

Our 2022 research, *What We're Watching*³, revealed that many young people (aged 16 to 17) have encountered content promoting harmful behaviours, including:

- Violence targeting specific groups (31%)
- Violent extremism or terrorism (20%)
- Self-harm (15%)
- Suicide (16%)
- Eating disorders (15%).

While this gives us a useful snapshot of what some older rangatahi are seeing online, it doesn't capture the full picture, particularly for younger age groups or those experiencing more persistent or hidden forms of harm.

We don't have system-wide data on young people's exposure to extremely harmful and illegal content. We don't know how widespread the issue is, or how common it is for young people to actively seek out and engage with this material.

³ www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/resources/research/what-were-watching

Concerns raised by young people and communities

Across our engagement, including conversations with our Youth Advisory Panel,⁴ young people consistently raised concerns about encountering harmful or illegal content online. These concerns reflect not just personal discomfort, but broader uncertainty about what's safe, what's legal, and how to respond.

In our 2022 research, *What We're Watching*, 73% of 16 to 17-year-olds expressed concern about children and young people encountering harmful content online. Additionally, 48% of this age group found it difficult to avoid harmful content, and 40% felt that social media platforms provide sufficient tools for staying safe. Only 31% trusted these platforms to remove harmful material.

Many parents and educators feel unequipped to guide young people through the rapidly evolving online landscape, especially when exposure is accidental and it's unclear how to respond safely or legally.

Why we conducted consultations with young people

We know that young people face challenges around this content. However, we wanted to understand how young people experience this in their everyday lives: what they're seeing, how it affects them, and what support they feel is (or isn't) available.

These consultations were designed to give us deeper insight into those experiences and ensure that young people's voices shape not just the resources we create, but the broader approaches we take in responding to these challenges.

Additionally, this report will be shared with organisations, educators and other stakeholders with an interest in online safety and young people's wellbeing.



⁴ www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/about/youth-advisory-panel

The consultation process

Consultation participants

Consultations involved ten groups of young people. While these groups are not representative of young New Zealanders generally, they included a diverse range of participants from communities across New Zealand. The age of participants ranged from 12 to their early 20s, and included young people who identified with a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. We included participants from various urban and rural locations, socioeconomic backgrounds, and educational environments.

How we conducted consultations

Consultations included facilitated group discussions and guided questionnaires. Sessions ranged from one to two hours, facilitated by interviewers familiar with the unique contexts of each group. The approach prioritised open, youth-led discussion rather than structured or adult-imposed definitions.

The consultations focused on young people's personal experiences and perceptions of what they consider to be extremely harmful content. This meant discussions often included a broad range of content and behaviours, not limited to what is legally defined as objectionable. Some of this content comes under our definition of extremely harmful content, which is the focus of this report.

Views about harmful behaviour are also discussed in this report, with a focus on how this relates to extremely harmful content, including the way in which it is being shared, commented on and promoted.

Ethics and safety

Consultation adhered to clear ethical guidelines, ensuring participant wellbeing and data integrity. This included:

- **Informed consent:** All participants or their guardians, where applicable, were informed of the purpose and scope of the consultation. Consent forms explained data use, confidentiality measures, and participants' withdrawal rights.
- **Confidentiality and anonymity:** All documentation protected participants' identities. Specific identifying details were either omitted or generalised to maintain confidentiality.
- **Wellbeing support:** Given the sensitive nature of discussions, wellbeing support was available during and after each session, ensuring participants could access help if needed.

Data analysis

The consultation process was jointly led by an external facilitator and a team from the Classification Office. Following the sessions, the facilitator produced a detailed summary of key themes. The Classification Office research team then undertook a second stage of analysis, coding the full transcripts and refining the material into this report. The final draft was peer-reviewed internally to ensure accuracy and consistency.

Limitations

The qualitative nature and group-based structure of consultations limit the generalisability of insights to the broader New Zealand youth population.

The topics explored reflect what participants felt comfortable sharing in a group setting, which may not capture the full range of views, experiences, or levels of exposure. Group dynamics, topic sensitivity, and cultural context all shaped how the conversations unfolded.



Consultation insights

How and why young people see or engage with extremely harmful content

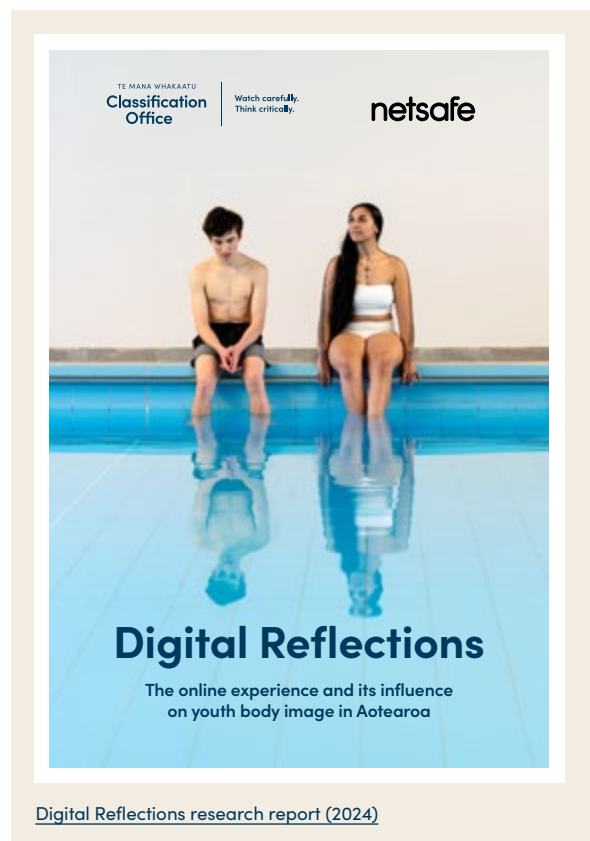
A number of participants described their own experiences of seeing extremely harmful content, including content that has been classified as objectionable (illegal) in New Zealand. While participants generally described encountering extremely harmful content as accidental or unwanted, their reflections also revealed how curiosity, peer influence, and platform design can shape these experiences.

The place of extremely harmful content in participants' online experiences

Young people engage with social media and other online content for the same reasons as adults: to make and maintain social connections, access entertainment, stay informed, explore their interests, and express themselves.

Most young people grow up with consistent access to online content, and the use of social media is generally seen as a normal part of life. While most social media platforms set minimum age requirements, access to these platforms among children appears to be widespread. This was highlighted in a recent eSafety report from Australia⁵ and is consistent with what young people told us in our 2024 research, *Digital Reflections*.⁶

For the most part, participants who encountered this content described this in similar ways to how they engage with other types of content – whether on social media feeds, messaging apps, or through sharing in person. This content could appear unexpectedly, and in some cases leave a lasting impression. Outside of more mainstream platforms, some mentioned more niche platforms or websites known to feature graphic material.



⁵ <https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-02/Behind-the-screen-transparency-report-Feb2025.pdf?v=1740006414535>

⁶ www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/resources/research/digital-reflections-the-online-experience-and-its-influence-on-youth-body-image-in-aotearoa/

Content being shown or shared by others

Participants described being exposed to harmful or unwanted content shared by others through social media messaging apps and group chat services like WhatsApp, Snapchat, Discord, and others.

This sometimes happened in shared online spaces like game servers or fan communities, where strangers could post or forward disturbing material without warning.

A lot of people send stuff around like that on Discord.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

You can just be in like a server that's for a game you like, or a YouTuber or something, and someone can just send something that's crazy.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

... on Snapchat and stuff, if you like, have someone that adds to your group chat that you don't really know.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Some young people described being sent extremely graphic or distressing content, including depictions of real-world violence or suicide.

Yeah, I got sent something of people shooting themselves.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Additionally, harmful content wasn't always shared online; some young people were exposed to it in person when others showed disturbing content on their phones – for example, in a group setting on a bus or at school.

Seeing content on social media feeds

Social media algorithms significantly influence the content young people see in their newsfeeds. Some participants talked about how harmful or disturbing content can appear unexpectedly while scrolling through social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram or Snapchat, even when they hadn't searched for it.

Yeah, you can just be scrolling and you don't have any control over what pops up.

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Some noted that algorithms are designed to keep people engaged by recommending content that aligns with their interests. This can sometimes lead to exposure to extreme or shocking material, even if they weren't actively seeking it out.

For some, this exposure left a lasting impression.

Maybe it's even something you weren't meant to see. I'm just thinking, if you're on social media or something, and you're just scrolling and then it comes up, and you weren't even searching for it, and then you just come across it, and it's really bad, and then that stays with you ... like all those ... when the Christchurch ... that was all live streamed. Lots of people weren't even trying to find it.

MALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

Others explained how simply spending more time on certain posts, even if they disagreed with them, could result in similar content appearing again.

Just the longer you interact with something, the longer it thinks you want it, even if you don't. Even if it's something you disagree with and you're also liking someone's comment that also disagrees, it doesn't know that.

FEMALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

Some reflected on how algorithmic exposure works differently depending on the platform. One participant noted that extreme or harmful content has to be deliberately sought out on some platforms.

I would argue that most extremist content you actually have to go out of your way to physically find, and it's often on unregulated websites such as Reddit and things like that, which aren't as mainstream. I'm not sure about TikTok 'cause I haven't had too much exposure, but you can't ... well maybe up until last year ... but before then, you couldn't really find any extremist content on platforms like Instagram unless you were looking, and the algorithm wouldn't actually recommend extremist content. So I think it's more the opposite side of the argument, that you actually have to look for it in most cases.

MALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

These insights reflect the sense that content visibility can be unpredictable. One participant noted how quickly algorithms can shift:

I see stuff like that on TikTok; bad stuff sometimes pops up. If you like one thing, like a horror movie, suddenly it's all you see.

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP

While young people acknowledged how content feeds are shaped by their activity, they also highlighted how little control they often feel they have over what they're shown.

How and why young people share this content

Some participants talked about why people share disturbing, and in some cases extremely harmful content on social media. This includes the desire to shock or elicit a response, for humour, or desire to communicate or process issues. In some cases, content was shared to raise awareness or as a form of advocacy around world events.

There was a meme once ... where someone's head was getting cut off, but they added something like "Good morning" with a funny caption. I didn't laugh at that because I think the image itself wasn't funny.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

At our school, if two people are in a relationship and one sends something explicit, sometimes the other person shares it with their friends ... Some friends probably think it's a joke, but it's not. It just gets passed on to random people, and soon everyone knows about it.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Some participants described sharing as a way to process disturbing content or make sense of it socially:

I think sometimes your friends can come across it ... I'm not sure how they do ... and ... well, no one really gets shocked. You tell your friend what happened. They might say, "Holy heck, look at this" but they don't mean it in a negative way. They just like to have someone to communicate with them about it.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP



Some participants talked about graphic or distressing (while not necessarily illegal or extremely harmful) material being shared in relation to real-world events like the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

At one point, my stories were just all this kind of stuff related to it, but it was very much just trying to raise awareness, I would say. At least on my feed, it wasn't extreme content, but it was still, I guess, bringing up the issues, so everyone was definitely going to be aware of it.

MALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

I guess the reason why people use extreme content for their causes is because that's the easiest way to make something stick. It's an easy way to do it. I think there should be regulation in how it's done, because just because it's easy doesn't mean it should be done. There are other ways to get your message across.

FEMALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

It seems like a really difficult situation because, on the one hand, you've got activists and stuff ... Because that's their motivation... It ends up the outcome being really harmful content that gets put out there.

MALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

Some talked about a sense of pressure to share this content to raise awareness and show solidarity, even if content might be distressing or potentially harmful.

I was just thinking about the peer pressure aspect. I definitely don't think it's such blatant peer pressure ... but it's definitely an unspoken peer pressure. There was, I think like April, where everyone was just posting about it.

FEMALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

One group discussed whether knowing that content was illegal would affect someone's decision to post or share it.

As in, like, the person who was posting that content would probably not care if it's legal or illegal because they want to share that content anyway. Because it's already kind of upsetting to just watch. They want to get their message across, whatever that message is, being either you see what's happened or just the sake of letting people know what's happened.

FEMALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

... just because of how unregulated this is... in most cases, I just think it goes under the radar, so if there's no consequence, obviously, no one thinks twice about doing it, seeing as they can get away with it.

MALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

How and why young people seek this content

While most exposure to extremely harmful content described in these consultations was unintentional, some participants reflected on the reasons why young people might seek out extremely harmful content. Curiosity was the most common driver they mentioned, whether to see graphic or extreme content or test personal boundaries, even if they knew it might be harmful or distressing.

I've seen gore ... Just out of curiosity, me and my friend ... well, someone actually posted it on their WhatsApp status. We asked the guy, "Where did you get this video from?" He said it was from a website, so we went there ... but there was some bad stuff. So ... we decided not to watch it again.

MALE – COMMUNITY GROUP

Yeah, I think it varies from person to person. Some might see something and decide they never want to do it again, while others might think, "It's not that bad, I might do it again".

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Some also described how social media algorithms and shared content can contribute to seeking harmful material. Social media is designed to keep users engaged with attention-grabbing material, and shocking content can keep showing up in their feed.

Basically, it's trying to get you to be on the app as long as possible, and I don't know how they actually all work, but it kind of makes sense that it's like, there's stuff that's really like wow, and it gets your attention, then almost that could... I don't know... as well as being engaging it also could be really just shocking, and then that could kind of spiral into maybe harmful or extreme even.

MALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

Others noted the ease with which content can be accessed (e.g., through shared posts or a simple click), and that curiosity can make it harder to resist viewing it, even when a warning appears.

Well, you could be scrolling through Instagram reels or something, and certain files just pop up. Sometimes there's a warning, but it's not hard to get past it, especially when curiosity kicks in. I think that's been pretty common for a while now.

MALE – COMMUNITY GROUP

Some reflections linked this to morbid curiosity or fascination with things that feel taboo or culturally sensitive, such as death or extremism.

I personally think that perhaps when something sticks with me, it's more of that morbid element to it. I'm not sure. I just think that comes from kind of a basis, like human nature. You're being drawn towards things that you don't normally see or things that are quite serious, and you're quite curious. It's probably why it's sex with most people and why people go looking for extremist content in the first place.

MALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

With this idea of extremist content, and it's quite taboo, and I feel like it's something that isn't talked about. In some cultures, death is something you don't talk about even though there's the curiosity of kids if they are given online space.

MALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

One group talked about legally banned content, and how this could influence young people's behaviour.

... you might get curious depending on the situation or context. For example, you might see a video on TikTok of someone getting killed, and although that content is banned, there's probably footage of it somewhere else on the internet. So, you get curious, especially when you see people in the comments saying, "Oh my god, that's crazy." You might go and search it up even though you know it's banned. It's that curiosity.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

I think that's why I looked up the Christchurch video – because it was banned, and I hadn't seen it. I was just curious.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Yeah, I had a similar experience with a banned movie. You wonder what's going on with it.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Managing unwanted content

As discussed above, coming across extremely harmful content or simply unwanted content was usually described by participants as something they'd prefer not to see. But avoiding it isn't always easy. How often (if at all) young people encounter this content, how they feel about it, and how they manage or respond to it varies from person to person.

Participants talked about some different ways they might manage or respond to unwanted content. The most straightforward response to unwanted content is to decide not to engage with it, for example by scrolling past it or stopping a video once it became uncomfortable.

Some participants said they report harmful or unwanted content when it appears on social media. Others said they use features like 'not interested' or flag content during live video previews. Participants' views about this are discussed in more detail under *Social media, content moderation and reporting* (see page 34).

Yeah, I report every time.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Yes, and I use the 'not interested' option. Or, if it's a live video ... there are a bunch of live videos when we're using TikTok, so I just report them during the preview.

MALE – COMMUNITY GROUP



Participants expressed different views about whether they would talk to someone about content they've seen, and who they would talk to. Some participants said they would talk to someone, like a parent, friend, teacher, or sibling, if they felt upset by something they saw. Participants' views about this are discussed in more detail under *Seeking support from friends and whānau* (see page 30).

M: If it's a direct threat or people getting hurt, I would tell someone.

F: Yeah.

M: Oh yeah.

SCHOOL GROUP PARTICIPANTS

My mum and dad.

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Usually, I just wouldn't tell anyone, but if it really hurt me, I'd probably tell my mum or my sister.

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Probably my parents.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

F: My sister. My friends ... I would get advice from them.

F: I mean, I kind of have different friends, and I talk to them about different things. I have my best friend I talked to her about everything. But if she's not around, I have like this person who I talk to about funny stuff, and then I have this person who I tell all my weird things to ... and she's kind of like a therapist in a way.

SCHOOL GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Insights summary – How and why young people see or engage with extremely harmful content

A number of participants described their own experiences of seeing extremely harmful content, including content that has been classified as objectionable (illegal) in New Zealand. This is consistent with our previous engagements with young people, many of whom have reported seeing content that has been classified as objectionable.

While participants generally described encountering extremely harmful content as accidental or unwanted, their reflections also revealed how curiosity, peer influence, and platform design can shape these experiences. These insights highlight a spectrum of responses – ranging from avoidance and discomfort to curiosity, humour, and discussing content with friends.

These consultations did not explore the full range of ways young people might encounter or engage with harmful content. Notably, they did not explore the experiences of those who deliberately or repeatedly seek out illegal or extremely harmful material.

While this report can't speak to how widespread this exposure is or how frequently it occurs, these insights reflect a variety of experiences from young people who occasionally or unintentionally come across such content during everyday use of online platforms.

What types of content did young people talk about?

As mentioned at the start of the report, the consultations focused on young people's views and experiences regarding what they personally consider to be extremely harmful, rather than content that is illegal as such. Participants discussed a broad range of content and online behaviours.

This section focuses on content that we've defined as 'extremely harmful' (i.e., potentially illegal), such as graphic depictions of real-world violence, including executions, mass shootings, suicide, and extreme cruelty towards animals.

The content discussed here does not represent the full spectrum of material young people may see online. Instead, it highlights the types of content that participants in these groups brought up or felt comfortable discussing.

In general, the content covered in this section could potentially be illegal. A number of participants described having personally seen extremely harmful content, including specific examples that have been classified as objectionable in New Zealand. This includes the Christchurch mosque attack livestream, and a suicide livestream.

Types of extremely harmful content

REAL-WORLD GRAPHIC VIOLENCE

Content depicting real-world graphic violence, injury, or death was mentioned in every group. The types of content included mass shootings, beheadings or executions, dead bodies, assaults, gang violence, graphic depictions of suicide, and extreme violence towards animals.

Like decapitated heads, like executions ...

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

I think one type of extreme content would be if you see a video of someone dying ... either if they're being murdered or if it's just a livestream of someone just flatlining, I feel like just that shouldn't be counted as normal content.

FEMALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

A number of participants mentioned the livestream footage of the March 15 Christchurch mosque attacks, which some had personally seen online.

Yeah, my friend got sent it ...

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Yeah, it was like, "Click on this video", and it was like a guy who was filming it on his body cam, and like, he went and started to shoot everyone ... and then I stopped watching that shit.

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Several participants mentioned suicide footage being shared or appearing on social media:

F: Yeah, and there was also a livestream on TikTok of a guy shooting himself as well.

F: Yeah, and he just sat there and blew his head off, and his dog came in.

F: Me and my cousin were watching, and we just looked at each other like ... 'What the fa ...'

SCHOOL GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Yeah, that came up when we were in Year Nine. Like, it was live on his computer, and he just went and hung himself ...

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP

M: There was one on Facebook ... of a suicide ... of a guy with a shotgun.

M: And like, self-harm. I remember there was a big thing at school where parents and people at school heard there was a video going around and worried that people would commit suicide.

SCHOOL GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Some young people mentioned graphic cruelty and violence towards animals.

Maybe, like, it was like a year ago when this video came out of a cat being killed in a blender.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Once I saw someone put a kitten in a blender.

SCHOOL GROUP – WRITTEN RESPONSE

EXTREMISM AND ADVOCATING VIOLENCE

Some participants mentioned violent extremist material, and, more broadly, content promoting violence and hatred towards others. In some cases, young people distinguished between seeing violent content and content that actively encourages or justifies it.

I guess the fact that violence and gore and stuff is not really bad on its own, it's mostly just when it's advocated, when it's said that it's okay to do that kind of stuff ... If you're showing that it is morally wrong that's another thing.

MALE – COMMUNITY GROUP

Others described how extremist views can spread easily online, especially when they provoke strong reactions or engagement.

... it's the ones which get the biggest traction because they get the biggest interaction, which is often things coming from the extreme. So some of the very hardline types – and I mean certain groups are very good at their online media – you'll come across a lot of content. For example ... Al Qaeda stuff – that's very widespread on Instagram and all that.

MALE – COMMUNITY GROUP



SEXUAL CONTENT INVOLVING CHILDREN OR YOUNG PEOPLE

Content that promotes the sexual exploitation of children or young people is illegal under New Zealand law. Any sexual content involving children or young teenagers is likely to be considered illegal.

While child sexual abuse material was not directly discussed in the consultations, participants did talk about young people sharing nudes – sexual images or videos of themselves or others. Some of this content may fall under the definition of extremely harmful content, as even material depicting consensual sexual activity involving young people can be classified as illegal under New Zealand law.

When discussing nudes, the harms participants focused on were not necessarily the content itself, but rather the harmful behaviours associated with it, such as harassment, bullying, and the non-consensual sharing of images.

I'm on Snap, and I get sent nudes. Like, I'm not asking for them.

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Yeah, I've had a couple of experiences where in one group chat, probably around 10 people, there was an incident where two people in the chat, who were somewhat connected but in different places, both sent nudes. Both of their photos got leaked, so the whole group ended up with both. More recently, though not to me but to some of my friends, they've been sent explicit content from random people, like classmates and such.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

PORNOGRAPHY AND VIOLENT SEXUAL CONTENT

Although this was not a focus of the consultations, sexual or pornographic content (other than nudes) was mentioned by some participants. This was sometimes referred to as extreme pornography, sexual violence/rape, violent porn or 'snuff films'.

According to my mate – who was not my mate for very long, I'll make that very clear – who was trying to impress people at a sleepover ... it's where you've got someone who essentially gets kidnapped, sexually assaulted and then killed. There's a reason he's no longer our friend – very much links to him trying to think that was a brag.

MALE – COMMUNITY GROUP

Insights summary – What types of content did young people talk about?

Young people mentioned a variety of content, the most common examples involved depictions of real-world graphic violence, injury, or death. Much of this content could potentially be illegal, and a number of participants reported seeing specific examples of content that have been classified as objectionable in New Zealand.

These were the most common types of content participants raised or felt comfortable discussing in consultation groups, and do not represent the full spectrum of material young people may see online.

For example, potentially illegal sexual or pornographic content was not a focus of discussions and was seldom raised by participants. Even if participants had come across such content, participants may not have wanted to discuss this in detail during consultations due to its sensitive nature.

As mentioned earlier, these consultations do not provide insights about the experience of young people who may actively seek out illegal material and do so regularly, or the types of content they may be engaging with.

The impact of harmful content

Participants described a range of impacts young people may experience when exposed to extremely harmful content, or harmful content more broadly. This includes emotional or psychological impacts, and the potential to influence people's attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours.

Emotional impact and mental health

Participants described a range of emotional and psychological impacts young people may experience when exposed to harmful content. This includes emotional or psychological impacts, ranging from short-term shock or disgust to a longer-term impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

Participants also talked about this from personal experience. Some described feelings of fear, disgust, or anxiety, and how distressing content can 'stay with them' long after they encountered it.

You know how sometimes you'll be like, "That video I watched, and I never forgot it," type thing. You know what I mean? So say it was like a beheading. I'm sure if someone's watching that it's not something that they're just gonna be able to forget, it's gonna stick with them.

MALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

I think it's because it's video from a person's perspective usually. When you watch all these videos like beheadings and stuff like that, when someone's filming it, it's very from their point of view, so you kind of feel like you're in that position as well, and that's why I feel like it sticks with you. Because you're kind of being put in that situation through a screen.

FEMALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

When you see something like that ... you think about it at first and feel weird when you see it. Then later, you might not think about it as much, but when you go back to it, those feelings come up again.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Well, it's not good, but you don't want to tell anyone ... because it's, like, embarrassing to admit you've seen that stuff.

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP

I think it's a problem, especially for kids. Younger kids learn fast because ... when they see something illegal out of curiosity, they'll try to do it, try to experience it. Also, harmful content like that gore video I saw a few years ago ... it stayed in my mind for ... weeks, maybe days. You don't forget ... those kinds of things.

MALE – COMMUNITY GROUP

Just like when I first saw something, I kind of felt like a bit anxious about it, because I guess I was thinking about the worst possible outcomes.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

It can affect your focus too, like instead of being able to concentrate on something, you're thinking about that content.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP



Some participants reflected on how repeated exposure may have an increasing impact over time.

I want to give an example of how I feel it affected one of my peers and their relationships. I know someone who was exposed to harmful content, and it really impacted their once-pure mindset. Unfortunately, they fell into that trap. It's surprising to me how algorithms can change someone's mindset and their entire life, leaving them in a situation they can't recover from. When we talk about extremely harmful online content, I feel like it connects to what I'm talking about. I've seen firsthand how much my friend has been affected by it.

FEMALE – COMMUNITY GROUP

Well, you could see something online that triggers a response, like a trauma response. Maybe something happened to you, like an accident or something, and then you see something similar and it brings back those painful memories. Stuff you thought you'd overcome.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

It's a process – one thing leads to another, and you find yourself going deeper and deeper, which can lead to things like depression.

FEMALE – COMMUNITY GROUP

The thing is, young people don't realise the effect it has on them either. No one really does unless someone brings it up to you. Like if you're not aware of the situation, you're just going to be looking and watching these videos either way. I feel like young people also need to understand the content that they're watching is actually something that's subconsciously sticking to their heads as well.

FEMALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

It may bring back memories about a family member who has gone through suicide or self-harm, making them feel hurt or shocked.

FEMALE, SCHOOL GROUP – WRITTEN RESPONSE

In some groups, written exercises captured how harmful content made them feel personally, or the impact on young people more generally.

I don't know how to forget.

Guilty, even though it wasn't my fault.

Scared and it turns into a common thought.

Violated, like something has been taken.

Harm can be something that gets on your mind and doesn't leave it and keeps coming back again and again at times that you don't want that thought to come into your head.

Pretty disgusted that somebody would do a thing like that and then somebody would share it to me for no reason.

SCHOOL GROUP – WRITTEN RESPONSES

feeling scared
uneasy **grossed out** ruined **horrified**
shocked annoyed uncomfortable
distressed angry **confused**
mortified petrified **nauseous** embarrassed
feeling sick ashamed weirded out **disgusted**
irritated upset feeling unsafe **scared** overthinking
losing sleep **disturbed** not knowing what to do
stressed out **traumatised**
not sure if they should tell anyone

SCHOOL GROUP
WRITTEN RESPONSES

Impact on attitudes, beliefs or behaviour

Some participants reflected on how content might influence people's attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours. In some cases, this was described in broad terms. In other instances, the effects were described more specifically, such as leading to self-harm or illegal behaviour.

Think that they need to harm themselves after seeing this content.

It could be a topic someone has dealt with before, resurfacing old feelings or normalising harmful behaviour.

Anxious, they might feel anxious or even traumatised, bringing back past trauma. It could motivate some people to do illegal things.

FEMALE, SCHOOL GROUP – WRITTEN RESPONSES

Some participants discussed the ways harmful content can contribute to discrimination, extremism or radicalisation.

Like, a very extreme example of harmful online content, especially for Muslims, is like, March 15. That was because this person had these racist, prejudiced ideas of Muslims and they came from a place of ... whatever.

FEMALE – COMMUNITY GROUP

Inciting hate, violence and discrimination against groups of people.

Learning dangerous ideologies.

Negatively influential material that can incite hate against people or discrimination against a group of people.

COMMUNITY GROUP – WRITTEN RESPONSES

These comments reflect the broader concern that some online content doesn't just provoke short-term emotional responses. It can also shape how people see others, especially when harmful views are repeated, normalised, or framed as justified.

The impact is different for everyone

Some participants talked about how these impacts can vary significantly depending on the individual, and social, cultural, or personal factors can shape how content is experienced or understood as harmful.

F: I think it depends. I think each person is obviously different and feels differently based on what they see. But I think after a while, you almost become... like it doesn't seem like a big deal. The spectrum kind of changes and it kind of increases ... you're more tolerant.

M: I would like to say about violence and gore, people take it differently. Some people just watch it and forget about it; some people enjoy watching it, and some people enjoy watching it and want to do it, which is kind of not the right thing to do.

COMMUNITY GROUP PARTICIPANTS

M: ... different people will find different things extreme. It's kind of crazy how everyone's getting their own algorithm because it's almost like then it can adapt it and send out stuff to that person, which might be really shocking just to them.

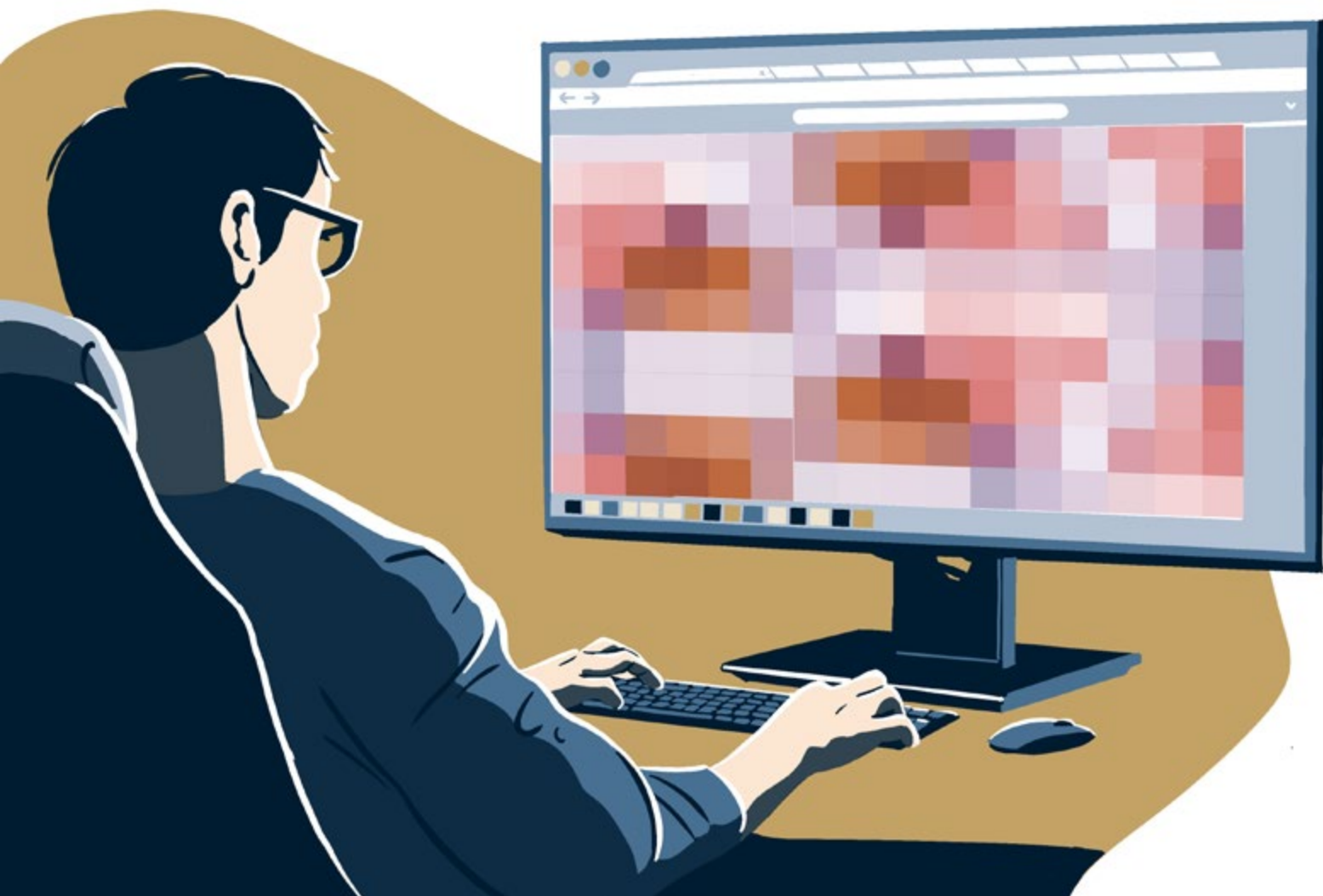
F: For me, I think why would that be online? You're showing someone leaving this earth. That's crazy. But someone would be fine with that content.

FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBERS

Some talked about how impacts can be compounded by the sensitive or taboo nature of harmful content, and how different cultural or societal norms can change this impact.

It definitely depends on the society that you're in. I feel like it'll stick to you more if the society that you're in deems it taboo to talk about. So if you're in a place where it's like, "We don't talk about those things," if you see that content in front of you it kind of sticks with you.

FEMALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER



Insights summary – The impact of harmful content

While these consultations do not provide a comprehensive picture of the potential harms young New Zealanders may face, they do provide important insights into how young people think about and experience the impacts of unwanted or unintentional exposure to harmful content.

The impacts of such content vary from person to person, but participants emphasised the emotional and psychological weight it can carry. This harm can be compounded by the ways they encounter disturbing content – including graphic depictions of violence and death – that can appear unexpectedly in their feeds or be shared online or in person. Several participants shared how such content can linger in their minds long after they've seen it.

Participants were less likely to speak in detail about the effects of more intentional or problematic engagement with extremely harmful content. However, some talked about the potential for serious behavioural or attitudinal impacts – including the influence of violent extremist material – and this is an important area for further research.

Guidance and support: what young people want

Insights from these consultations suggest that encountering extremely harmful content may not be uncommon for young people, and participants often talked about the challenges of dealing with negative online experiences without adequate support or guidance.

Seeking support from friends and whānau

While some participants indicated they would approach a parent for support, many expressed a preference for speaking with friends or siblings. Young people often described feeling more comfortable sharing their experiences with peers because they value the relatability and non-judgemental support they receive.

Sometimes you just feel rather uncomfortable talking to like a parent or an adult. I personally have really good friends. Like, if I had a problem with something, I know that I could go to them, and I could talk about it. That would help me.

SCHOOL GROUP PARTICIPANT

Some felt that it was easier talking with adults who have a less permanent presence in their everyday lives.

I think parents can be really hard people to talk to about hard and personal, uncomfortable stuff, because you see them so often, and it's going to remind you every time you see them. I think it might be easier to talk to someone a bit more disconnected, like a teacher or someone else. I mean ... not disconnected ... but you're not always surrounded by them.

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP

You know how you ... have your homework; you have your school world; you have your sports world? And it's like three different realms of people that all know a different version of you. I think in the home realm, it's really difficult to talk about hard stuff, because you're always there and your parents are always going to be there. You can never really shake parents. And sometimes it's better if they don't know about absolutely everything that happens, because ... they're literally always going to be there, and it's going to be something they'll always know about you, whereas, in a school or a sports realm, these people will disappear, and they'll eventually forget about this.

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP



BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

Participants highlighted a communication gap between parents and children when it comes to addressing online challenges, which can discourage young people from reaching out. Parents are sometimes perceived as lacking knowledge or understanding about online challenges, or overreacting when incidents occur.

It's my mum and dad too, but it can feel really hard sometimes, especially because my mum has a real lack of sensitivity about some of these things, and that can be hurtful. So it feels hard to go to her sometimes.

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Sometimes there's a miscommunication between "I'm in harm's way and need something done" and "I just want to talk to you without it affecting my entire life and social circle."

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP

F: It's different from when they went to high school or intermediate because now there's so much more going on.

F: Yeah, it's changed, and they always say, "Oh, we know how you feel. We were 14 once, we were 17 once." But our 17 is so different from their 17.

SCHOOL GROUP PARTICIPANTS

What you just said about getting off social media and stuff, maybe it's recognising how unhelpful it is 'cause it's just like, "Well, if you weren't on that damned phone, then you wouldn't have seen this stuff." So I imagine if someone was to find objectional content then they wouldn't feel like they could go to their parents, and then what do you do then? So I guess trying to build that understanding and bridge for communication.

FEMALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

If you tell your parents something, and they say, "Okay, I'm going to tell your teacher," and you're like, "No, I really don't want that." Sometimes telling a teacher or counsellor just makes things worse.

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Sometimes they [parents] take the wrong things too seriously and miss the things that actually matter.

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Young people often stressed the importance of being able to talk without fear of criticism or punishment. Participants often talked about how overly restrictive, judgemental or punitive actions – such as taking away devices – tend to hinder, rather than help.

Me and my mother especially ... we don't really see eye to eye with technology ... I probably wouldn't feel comfortable telling her, because she would just use it as an excuse to put more restrictions on.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Well, my parents said, "We're taking your phone away for a week." And I'm like, 'Why?' ... my phone is my social life when I'm not at school.

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP

And if that person is a parent, they'll be like, "Oh, maybe you should take a break from your phone if you're seeing content like that." That's not what I want. I just want to step away from it for a bit, think about it, and then come back.

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP

Young people want adults to remain calm and allow them to fully share their experiences before reacting. Strong emotional reactions or assumptions about their behaviour often complicate the situation and lead them to avoid reaching out altogether.

Sometimes, if you try to tell your parents something serious, like, they don't stay calm. You just want them to listen, but they get all worked up before you've even finished talking.

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP



WHAT GOOD SUPPORT LOOKS LIKE

Participants consistently emphasised the need for supportive and understanding responses when seeking help with difficult content or online experiences.



I need them to comfort me and tell me ways to fix it.

Just to listen.

Advice that could help your situation, but mainly you just want someone to talk to about the issue.

To be understanding and be there for me if I'm upset or hurt by it rather than getting mad.

Someone to talk to about it, someone who can listen and offer advice if asked.

... them to understand that I didn't try and find this content or problem.

I'd want their advice or help to solve the problem – not their criticism.

Help me instead of judging.

I want them to be helpful. I don't want them to get emotional.

SCHOOL GROUP – WRITTEN RESPONSES

Young people talked about seeking practical guidance that acknowledges their agency in managing challenging situations. They want to feel empowered to handle situations independently, knowing they have adult support available if necessary.

If [my parents are] worried about something that's happened, we'll sort it out first, and then we'll talk about their worries afterwards. And so like, if there's something gone wrong, I will talk to them first because I know that they'll have my back and they'll sort it out for me. And then, if there are some worries, we'll talk about it after things are sorted out.

FEMALE – SCHOOL GROUP

It's fine to talk to me like my age, not like a two or five-year-old that needs to be protected.

SCHOOL GROUP – WRITTEN RESPONSE

Social media, content moderation and reporting

When dealing with unwanted content, some young people simply scroll past it, while others choose to report it on social media platforms. However, participants tended to think these actions were only somewhat effective, if at all.

Some described reporting tools as complicated, multi-step processes that discouraged them from using them. Others had experienced repeated failures when attempting to remove harmful content, leading to doubts that future reports would result in meaningful action.

F: 'Cause I don't know how to.

M: Because nothing will get done about it.

COMMUNITY GROUP PARTICIPANTS

F: Well, on Tiktok, there's a report button, but you've got to do like, a really, really long thing. And then I got to the end one time, and it asked for ... it was ID or something ...

F: Yeah, like an email and phone number.

F: Yeah, it's like a super long like it should be, like, report, and then, yeah ...

SCHOOL GROUP PARTICIPANTS

I was gonna say, I feel like they almost gotta comfort you, and then they just discard it, because it's just like a "Thank you for submitting. We'll do what we can". It feels so untrustworthy. I don't know the ins and outs of how it's reviewed, but it feels like they're just trying to comfort you without much follow-through.

MALE – SCHOOL GROUP



This frustration reflected a lack of confidence in current content moderation systems. Some expressed a sense of resignation or despondency when talking about harmful content or how to address it.

It just feels like a bottomless well. Nothing is safe. Nobody cares. No boundaries.

FEMALE – COMMUNITY GROUP

There's no real way to stop it, except maybe, especially for rangatahi, by helping them set themselves up online and making them fully aware. Online, there's so much information constantly being spewed out. You can't really regulate it. So, perhaps it's about making them aware before the world does it to them.

MALE – COMMUNITY GROUP

I'm not sure. I mean, the internet's been around for a very long time, and the issue is nothing new, but I think it's more children having access to the online space and that being more of a common thing, that it's almost ... I'm not sure. I feel like the age at which children can access the internet is definitely decreasing and the exposure's coming more early on. I think it's the same rapidly evolving space as it always has been, but it's growing even faster now.

MALE – FORMER YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL MEMBER

Insights summary – Guidance and support: what young people want

Encountering harmful or unwanted content online is not an uncommon experience for young people. As these consultations show, some are also being exposed to extremely harmful, and in some cases illegal content online.

At the same time, many young people feel they're dealing with these challenges without the guidance and support they need. This was a strong theme emerging from consultations, and was consistent with our previous research with young people on topics such as pornography or body image content.

Participants talked about the importance of getting support when dealing with negative experiences online, but many felt reluctant to reach out to parents. They worried about parents overreacting or imposing restrictions, and emphasised the need for open conversations and non-judgemental support.

Young people also expressed frustration with social media platforms – from inadequate content moderation to reporting tools seen by some as overly complicated or largely ineffective.

These insights mostly reflect the type of guidance and support young people want in relation to unintentional or unwanted exposure to harmful content, and other more common negative online experiences. However, consultations did not address the needs or support requirements for young people who actively seek out this material, which may signal deeper mental health or behavioural concerns.

Next steps: supporting young people and communities

Our Office has a unique role in regulating illegal or extremely harmful content. Our responsibility is to help New Zealand communities manage these issues, understand legal boundaries, and recognise broader harms, such as desensitisation, trauma, radicalisation, and the promotion of harmful behaviours.

Using insights we've gained from young people, and the concerns raised by parents, educators, and those working with youth, we are building on our multi-layered prevention strategy.

Initial resources are available on our website, launched alongside this consultation report: www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/resources

We aim to:

- Reduce young people's exposure to illegal and extremely harmful online content
- Help prevent young people from being drawn into harmful online spaces or behaviours that could put them or others at risk
- Minimise the creation and sharing of harmful content by young people
- Equip young people with the skills to identify and manage harmful online content responsibly
- Provide education and support for young people, parents, caregivers, and educators
- Foster a safer online environment by empowering young people and their communities to recognise and respond to extremely harmful content.

OUR NEXT STEPS

Our approach includes creating practical resources for parents, caregivers, educators, youth workers, and communities to better understand and respond to extremely harmful or illegal online content.

We also run a social media approach targeting both young people and their parents, raising awareness about illegal material, its risks, and where to get help or report content.

To support those working directly with young people, we will offer 'train the trainer' sessions on how to discuss these issues and provide meaningful support.

Additionally, we will provide parents with practical tools and strategies for keeping their whānau safe in an increasingly complex online world.

Our wider work

The Office continues to be actively involved in efforts to limit the availability of extremely harmful material, both in New Zealand and globally. We regularly collaborate with domestic law enforcement agencies, including the NZ Police, Department of Internal Affairs, NZ Customs, and the judicial system, and are members of international networks such as Tech Against Terrorism, the Christchurch Call, and Canadian Center for Child Protection/Arachnid.

The growing accessibility of illegal content online (including violent extremism and child sexual abuse material) demands prompt, responsive, and consistent classification services and support from the justice system, including clarity on whether material has already been classified as objectionable.

Our approach to classification of content has evolved with this changing landscape. We are modernising how we assess harmful material and communicate about it with the public.

We are introducing capability to use hashing technology, an internationally recognised method for recording, searching for, and sharing information. This technology allows us to share information about material classified as objectionable without sharing the original content.

We aim to maximise the system-wide impact of our work. Classifying objectionable material reduces its availability, supports the prosecution of offenders, and protects victims. Our classification services provide greater efficiency, clarity, and consistency than if the legal status of publications had to be proven and determined in courts across the country.



Helplines and reporting guide

Not sure what to do when you or someone else comes across content that sticks with them? Reporting it and talking to someone you trust can help prevent it from resurfacing in your feed—or your mind—later on.

Save this page, share it with friends, pin it up in a shared space (bathrooms are great), or include it in a newsletter. You're not alone – help is just a call or message away.

Helplines

Need to talk but unsure where to start? These free, confidential helplines are here to support you:



Free call Youthline **0800 376 633** or **text 234** to talk with someone from a safe and youth-centred organisation.



Free call or **text 1737** any time for support from a trained counsellor.



Free call OutLine Aotearoa **0800 688 5463** from 6pm to 9pm any evening to talk to trained volunteers from Aotearoa's rainbow communities.



For eating disorders support, contact the Eating Disorders Association of New Zealand (EDANZ) helpline on **0800 2 EDANZ / 0800 2 33269** or at info@ed.org.nz



Free call Safe to Talk **0800044334**, **text 4334** or live chat to talk with someone about sexual harm.



Wellstop is an organisation that aims to eliminate harmful sexual behaviour in our communities. Call **04 566 4745** or contact online: www.wellstop.org.nz/enquiries-and-contact.html

Where to report content in New Zealand

If you come across material that you believe may be illegal or harmful, you can report it:



Child sexual abuse material or terrorist content
Report directly to the Department of Internal Affairs



Harmful online behaviour
If someone is harassing you online, sharing intimate images without consent, or engaging in harmful digital communication, you can report it to Netsafe

How to report to platforms

If you see something on a social media platform that isn't okay, you should report it to the platform in the first instance.

Go to our website to report:

Reporting is important but so is protecting your own space.

Blocking or unfollowing content or accounts can help keep your feed safer and put you back in control of what you see.



Questions about harmful content and the law

- Are you unsure if something you've seen crosses the legal line?
- Do you have questions about illegal or extremely harmful content?

You can contact a member of the Classification Office team here.

Email: info@classificationoffice.govt.nz
Phone: +64 4 471 6770
Freephone: 0508 236 767
www.classificationoffice.govt.nz

Whether you're looking out for yourself or someone else, reaching out can make all the difference. A conversation, a report, or a simple call for help can be the first step towards feeling safer online and in real life.

If you are in immediate danger or need urgent help, call 111 for the NZ Police.

Classification Office

TE MANA WHAKAATU

www.classificationoffice.govt.nz