

## **spunout: Body shaming, bullying and racism most common harms witnessed by young people online** **(<https://www.activelink.ie/node/111589>)**

### **Digital learning programme to build empathy skills launches to prevent harm and promote bystander intervention online**

Body shaming, bullying and racism are the most common forms of harm witnessed online according to a new survey of 1,355 young people in Ireland.

The survey was conducted by youth organisation [spunout \(https://spunout.ie/\)](https://spunout.ie/) to inform the development of 'Empathy Online (<https://spunout.ie/academy/>)' a new, free, self-directed digital learning programme designed to help young people combat harm in online spaces by building a toolkit of empathy-based skills and to promote bystander intervention.

'Empathy Online' was developed by spunout with funding from [Google.org \(http://google.org\)](http://google.org) and aims to equip young people with the self-esteem to avoid contributing to online harm and the skills needed to feel more confident in safely and proactively responding to harms they witness in digital spaces.

#### **Harms witnessed online by young people (1,355) according to the survey:**

- Body Shaming (63%)
- Bullying (58%)
- Racism (57%)
- Misogyny or Sexism (51%)
- Homophobia (46%)
- Transphobia (45%)
- Fatphobia (45%)
- Witnessing upsetting content (44%)
- Xenophobia (33%)
- Ableism (32%)
- Discrimination based on religious beliefs (28%)
- Classism (24%)

Over 4 in 10 respondents (42%) in the survey said they wouldn't intervene when witnessing harmful behaviour online because they don't know how to respond, while a further 42% said they worried they might become a target as a result of standing up to perpetrators of harm online. The 'Empathy Online' programme has been designed to support and promote intervention from bystanders where they witness harm online by equipping learners with the safe and appropriate ways to respond.

When asked to describe the biggest challenges young people face online, exclusion from groups/group chats was top (48%), with mean or harassing public posts (23%) and mean or harassing DMs (18%) comprising the top three. Young people also reported constant negative news, comparing self to others, misinformation and being addicted to being online and doomscrolling as common challenges they faced in their time spent online.

#### **When asked what was most difficult about receiving hate online, young people said:**

- Feeling anxious or depressed (65%)
- Not knowing how to respond (45%)
- Feeling embarrassed (42%)
- Feeling unsafe (40%)
- People in my life not understanding or taking it seriously (31%)
- Negative reactions from other people online (22%)
- Lack of reaction from other people online (21%)

Young people felt people's own insecurities, lack of consequences afforded by anonymity, jealousy and boredom were the reasons those who perpetrate harm online do so. 'Empathy Online' has been designed to build self-esteem and empathy in participants to take a 'root cause' approach to reducing the prevalence of harm in digital spaces.

The data from the 'experiences of online harm' survey has informed the development of the new programme building on spunout's existing work in digital citizenship and mental health to improve the digital lives of young people in Ireland.

## **'Empathy Online' tackles key issues that young people face online, including:**

- Cyberbullying and harassment
- Discrimination and hate-speech
- Barriers to engaging our empathy in online spaces
- How clickbait can feed our thinking biases
- Harmful online communities
- How to respond to online harm
- How to support others in online spaces
- Young people's support options for experiencing online harm

This work was completed with the help of a grant from Google.org, the philanthropic arm of Google. With this grant, spunout has built an expert and peer-led resource designed to increase emotional skills and resiliency in an online world. The programme is designed to support young people at risk of experiencing, witnessing, or perpetrating online harm. It also provides young people with the tools to understand how algorithms and clickbait can attempt to alter our behaviour, and why.

'Empathy Online' equips young people with the practical tools to get the most out of their time online through expert-validated information, interactive learning activities, interviews with cyberpsychologist, Dr. Nicola Fox Hamilton and peer-to-peer learning through videos of young people sharing their lived experience. The course aims to empower young people to create a safe and enjoyable online experience for themselves and others.

In addition to expert-led insights, 'Empathy Online' places significant emphasis on the lived experiences of young people, highlighting their journeys of navigating the digital world. First-hand accounts from spunout's contributors play a crucial role in connecting the programme's teachings with real-life scenarios, allowing participants to see how empathy can create safer, more positive online spaces.

Among those who contributed is Craig, an 18-year-old college student from Kildare, who shared his personal experience:

"Taking part in 'Empathy Online' gave me the opportunity to properly evaluate my relationship with social media and gain a greater understanding of how I spend my time online. It helped me realise the steps I subconsciously took to create a happier space online for myself. Empathy Online is incredibly important, and I hope people understand the power they have to create an environment online which can be positive and beneficial for all, instead of falling into the trap of hate and anger which social media sets far too easily."

Craig's story, alongside many others, underscores the impact that practical, empathy-driven tools can have in reshaping how young people approach online harm. By amplifying these voices, 'Empathy Online' remains grounded in the real-world experiences of its users.

## **Ian Power, CEO of spunout, commented:**

"We believe young people have the solutions to the problems they face and in developing 'Empathy Online' we wanted to hear their experiences of online harm and what young people believed we should do to tackle it. We heard young people struggled with how best to intervene where harm is witnessed online, and crucially heard from those who had perpetrated harm online previously that they felt it came from a lack of self-esteem and empathy. This programme aims to equip young people with both self-esteem and empathy in order to prevent harm from being generated by future generations, and empower young people with the bystander intervention skills to combat harms where they witness it."

## **Rachael Bleakley, Google.org Regional Manager for Europe, Middle East and Africa commented:**

"At Google, we believe in the power of technology, but we also recognize the challenges young people face online. That's why we're proud to support organizations like SpunOut, who are working tirelessly to create a kinder, more empathetic online community. By equipping young people with the tools and skills they need to navigate the digital world safely and responsibly, we can build a better future for everyone."

'Empathy Online' launches today (October 17th) at The Foundry in Google's European HQ. The event will delve into the forms of online harm, Empathy Online's programme content, presenting spunout's research-driven and evidence-based methodology in developing the programme.

Additionally, the event will feature discussions on the course content and its potential impact, with insights from lecturer in

applied psychology and cyberpsychology in the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dr. Nicola Fox Hamilton, and a panel of young people who have either participated in the course during its pilot phase or are featured within the programme itself.

**Region**

Nationwide

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