Sprite+ Security, Privacy, Identity, Trust, Engagement, NetworkPlus | SALIENT | NSEC Network for Security Excellence & Collaboration | UKRI Economic and Social Research Council

DIGITAL WORLDS AND ONLINE HARM

RISE POLICY BRIEF | OCTOBER 2026

Key takeaways

1. **Online misogyny travels through everyday language and peer cultures in chlildren and young people**
2. **Dark web environments incubate and disguise misogyny through coded language and emojis**
3. **Tackling online VAWG requires targeted action right across the digital ecosystem, on moderated and unmoderated platforms**

Recommendations to policymakers

Invest in youth-informed prevention education in schools and beyond

The Department for Education and Home Office should fund an evidence-informed, youth-informed programme addressing online VAWG that draws on young people's good practice in navigating digital misogyny.

Delivery should involve schools, colleges, universities, youth services, local safeguarding services and specialist VAWG organisations. The programme should equip educators to understand contemporary online misogyny and platform dynamics, while developing young people's critical digital literacy and capacity for allyship.

A national framework should connect prevention inside and outside education, support earlier identification and clearer referral pathways, and avoid placing disproportionate responsibility on girls and young women to manage harm.

Strengthen detection and coordinated responses to hidden online misogyny

The Home Office, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and Ofcom should embed indicators of hidden-online misogyny within VAWG, Online Safety Act and policing frameworks.

This should be supported by sustained investment in AI-enabled monitoring and practitioner training, while police and safeguarding services should adopt shared risk taxonomies and referral protocols.

Without stronger operational capability, data frameworks and cross-sector coordination, coded abuse may remain undetected and harmful behaviour may become normalised or escalate into offline harm.

Research findings

Online misogyny travels through everyday language and peer cultures

Dr. Nelli Stavropoulou, Prof. Rose Capdevila and Prof. Lisa Lazard, *BRAVO*

In a series of workshops with secondary school-aged boys in Milton Keynes, participants described interconnected digital spaces in which experiences could move between safe and unsafe. Some encountered doxxing and racist or abusive messages in comments, gaming chatrooms and real-time gaming interactions.

Blocking and informal support from parents were common responses, and although some knew how to report abuse, most expressed scepticism about whether reporting would have any helpful effect.

Language linked to the manosphere and incel culture was also travelling across platforms and between online and offline spaces. Terms including "mogging" and "looksmaxxing" had become part of everyday vocabulary through social media, gaming, memes and peer interactions. These terms could appear playful or harmless while still reinforcing ideas about masculinity, gender hierarchy and worth.

> **"If you're not looksmaxxing, you're not lifemaxxing."**
>
> – Secondary school participant, BRAVO Project

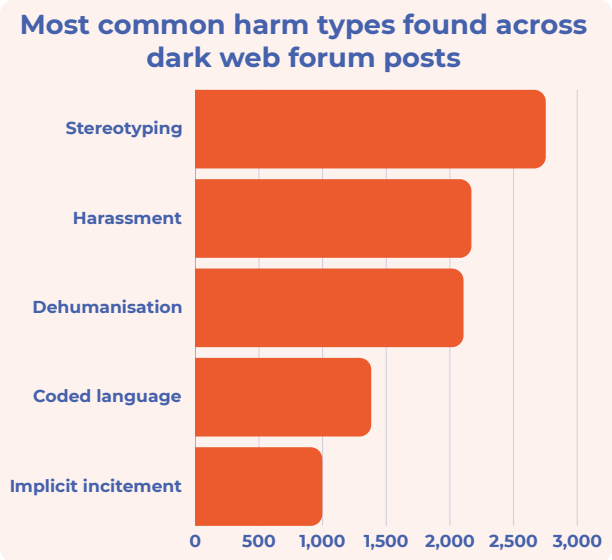
However, young men were not passive consumers. They actively interpreted online content, navigated peer pressure and, in some cases, challenged harmful narratives. This type of critical digital literacy, digital citizenship and youth-informed allyship is an alternative to approaches that criminalise or problematise boys and young men.

The project has produced the BRAVO Toolkit, a co-created a learning resource for young people, parents, carers and educators, aligned with VAWG prevention, the updated 2026 RSHE curriculum and online safety legislation.

Dark web environments incubate and disguise misogyny through coded language and emojis

Dr. Anitha Chinnaswamy, *HARMONY*

We know that misogyny is rife on moderated spaces like social media and gaming platforms. However, evidence suggests that this may be the latter-stage of these narratives, and they actually begin life on unmoderated 'dark web' environments.



Focusing narrowly on content removal or individual perpetrators can miss the interaction between technology, cultural norms, gender inequality and failures across platforms, safeguarding and enforcement.

Analysis of over 5,500 posts from high-risk anonymous forums identified misogynistic content, doxxing, harassment and gendered threats. Six forensic case studies evidenced non-consensual intimate-image trading, doxxing-for-hire, grooming, misogynistic radicalisation and abuse-as-a-service.

The most common finding was not open abuse, but coded language and emojis created specifically to avoid detection, and conventional keyword searches can miss these coded and evolving forms of VAWG.

The project's HARMONY Dashboard enables practitioners to systematically decode, monitor and evaluate dark web spaces based on risk level and types of harm.

References

RISE projects

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About RISE

The UK Government's Safer Streets Mission and Freedom from Violence and Abuse strategy aim to halve violence against women and girls (VAWG) within the next decade.

Funded by UKRI's R&D Missions Accelerator Programme, RISE is an interdisciplinary research and engagement programme led by SPRITE+, NSEC and SALIENT to help deliver this aim.

Recognising that no single intervention can tackle VAWG alone, RISE's 13 research projects take a whole-society approach and tackle critical issues including early prevention in adolescents, online misogyny, disability-inclusive approaches and women's safety in public spaces.

We want our work to reach the practitioners and policymakers working in this area, and most importantly, make a difference to those impacted by gender-based violence and abuse.

Find out more

Email: sprite@manchester.ac.uk
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