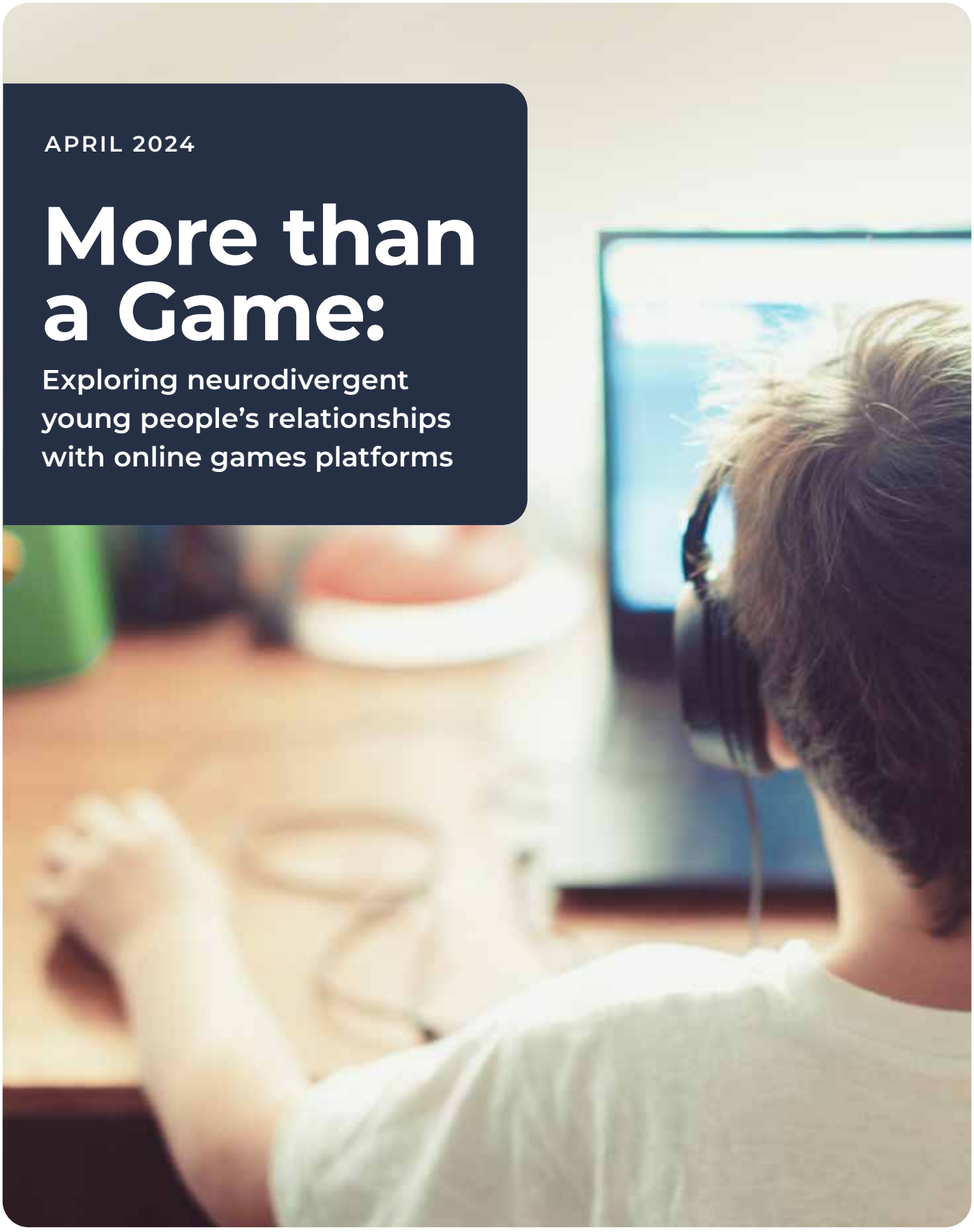
APRIL 2024

More than a Game:

Exploring neurodivergent young people's relationships with online games platforms



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Foreword

I couldn't be more proud to introduce the final report from this important research partnership with Roblox. Being the mother of an autistic teen myself, I am acutely aware of just how important online games are to so many neurodivergent teens, offering a sense of solace and respite from the stresses and strains of daily life.

One of the most interesting findings from this research – and one which resonates with my own family's experience - is just how many neurodivergent young people use online games as a way to engage with a wider community. Social communication can be tough for neurodivergent young people, but online games offer a way to connect with others through common interests, in a way that is perhaps less intimidating than in the 'offline world'. And yet, doing so can present risks. The parents and young people we spoke to were often aware of these challenges, but did not always know what to do in response.

I am therefore delighted that we have been able to use the insights from this research to create a bespoke set of resources, tailored to the needs of neurodivergent young people and their families, based on the information they shared with us. Too often, research is used to highlight problems without doing anything to respond to them – but not in this case.

We are immensely grateful to Roblox for supporting this important project. We hope it leads to better support for neurodivergent young people and their parents, whichever online games they enjoy playing.

Carolyn Bunting MBE
Co-CEO of Internet Matters

Roblox is home to many young people, who create, play, and socialize on our platform every day. We want to ensure that everyone feels safe, welcome and can fully enjoy their experience, but we know that sometimes users have different support needs. That's why we wanted to work with our partner Internet Matters to find out exactly what the challenges were, and how we could better support our community.

We know that the challenges extend beyond Roblox. We want people to thrive on any platform or digital space they use. By helping to build critical thinking and digital skills for everyone, it's a win for all and sets up a healthy, safe, and positive future. Understanding the particular challenges faced by different demographics is foundational to being able to develop impactful support, and research is the key to all of it.

It was important for us to work with the experts, the charity partners who support our neurodivergent friends, who have first hand knowledge of this community and could open the door to have very real conversations with teens and parents about their experiences. We will be forever grateful to these charities and families for taking the time to share and help us to learn.

We will continue to work with Internet Matters on this important topic and will use the information to evolve and innovate to support families of neurodivergent young people. Together we can make a real difference for neurodivergent families!

Tami Bhaumik,
Vice President of Civility & Partnerships, Roblox

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Acknowledgements

Internet Matters and Roblox would like to thank our charity partners in the UK and the US who supported this project and all of the young people and parents in the UK and US who gave up their time to take part in this important research.

Ambitious about Autism

Autism Society

autistica

Executive Summary

Aims and Objectives

Supported by Roblox, Internet Matters undertook research in the UK and US with neurodivergent young people (including autistic young people), aged 11-17, who were interested in video games and playing these games online, along with their parents. This research aimed to better understand the benefits and challenges presented by the online world to neurodivergent young people, with a particular focus on gaming environments.

The research was conducted in partnership with charities in the UK and the US including Autism Alliance (UK), Autistica (UK), Ambitious about Autism (UK) and Autism Society (US)

Terminology

The focus of this research is on neurodivergent young people (specifically autistic young people and those with ADHD) aged 11-17 and their parents. We recognise however that there may be other conditions that young people may have which may fall under the umbrella of neurodivergence, e.g. specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia. Although there may be some young people with these conditions included in the research, in order to have been involved in the research they will have also indicated that they are autistic and/or have ADHD.

Aside from the methodology section, this report uses the terms 'autistic young people' and 'autistic child', in line with a move towards identity-first language within the autistic community. The methodology section reflects the precise language used in the survey.

Methodology

The research employed a mixed methods approach involving an online survey and virtual focus groups with neurodivergent young people and their parents in the UK and US. The online survey took place in September and October 2023, with the focus groups taking place in October 2023.

An online survey of 12-17 year olds and their parents was promoted and distributed through UK and US charity partners and 480 surveys were completed; 77% (n=369) from the UK and 23% (n=111) from the US. Over half of parents who responded had one or more child/ren that had autism (56%, n=271), and half had one or more child/ren with ADHD (48%, n=231). Two-thirds of parents who had a child with autism (66%, n=317) said that their child had been given a formal diagnosis of autism, 13% (n=62) were in the process of getting a diagnosis and 13% (n=62) had a child with suspected autism but no formal diagnosis.

Nine virtual focus groups were set-up and facilitated by the Autism Society (in the US) and Ambitious about Autism (in the UK). In total, the focus groups involved 18 parents and 20 young people.

Neurodivergent young people's online behaviours and experience of video games

Playing video games was common amongst neurodivergent young people. Over 9 in 10 (92%, n=441) were playing video games by themselves offline; 91% (n=439) were playing with other people online and 82% (n=392) were making their own content online.

Neurodivergent young people were playing video games for a significant amount of time each week, with around 7 in 10 playing for up to three hours per day during the week and at weekends.

Communicating with others whilst playing online games was common amongst neurodivergent young people (only 2% of those surveyed were not communicating with others). Online friendships had often been formed through common interests, either because they played the same games (53%, n=240), shared content that they liked (51%, n=213), or liked the same things (46%, n=220).

Parents and young people's feelings and attitudes towards online games

Most parents recognised the importance of playing video games in their child's life; 63% (n=305) agreed that they understood how important video games were to their child. Slightly fewer young people felt that their family understood the importance of playing video games in their lives, although over half (56%, n=269) agreed their family understood that it was important to them.

Neurodivergent young people in our focus groups reported on the benefits of playing video games on their happiness, and their ability to stay entertained and relaxed.

Playing online games also helped neurodivergent young people to develop friendships (51% agreed) and feel part of a community (31% agreed). Qualitatively, the opportunity to make friends online was often easier than offline for some neurodivergent young people, who spoke positively about the opportunities playing online games presented to connect and build bonds with new people, whilst feeling accepted and part of a community. Many of the young people we spoke to in focus groups thrived in finding others online with similar interests, feeling comfortable and accepted for who they were.

Other benefits of playing video games reported by young people in focus groups included positive impacts on their communication skills (for example, being able to talk and interact with others online), their creativity, the opportunity to be adventurous and to use their imagination and tactical problem-solving skills.

Parents reported benefits on their child's ability to learn other skills they could use in everyday life including on confidence and problem solving (63%, n=298) and helping their child to communicate better (59%, n=285).

Challenges associated with playing online games

Time spent playing online games was a concern for parents and over half thought their child spent too much time gaming (52%, n=249). Parents were often balancing the importance of video games in their child's life with the need to respond to and manage the time their child spent playing video games, which some found challenging.

The impact of gaming on behaviour was also an issue for around half of parents (52%, n=249) who felt their child's behaviour worsened when they were gaming. Examples from the focus groups included young people becoming aggressive, short-tempered and irritable.

Many autistic people have a highly focused level of interest in particular hobbies or topics. For some, this can tip over into obsession – whatever those hobbies or topics are. Both parents and young people observed in focus groups that this could be directed towards their playing of online games. This included young people finding it difficult to remove themselves from a game when required (e.g. to do other activities) or becoming too invested in friendships they had made online.

Neurodivergent young people recognised, but to a lesser extent, that there were challenges associated with playing online games. They discussed feeling "addicted" if they played too long, which made it difficult to take breaks and could lead to feelings of frustration and anger on occasions if things were not going well (for example, leading to 'rage quitting' or aggressive behaviour).

Staying safe online

Most young people were confident they could keep themselves safe online (63% totally confident or very confident), and parents agreed (60%).

Parents were taking steps to keep their children safe when they were playing online games: around 3 in 5 parents talked to their child regularly about being safe when gaming online (64%, n=306), had rules

in place about gaming (62%, n=298) and checked their child's devices (59%, n=281). Parents in the focus groups discussed talking to their children about who they were communicating with online, setting rules around that (for example, not accepting friend requests from people they did not know, not meeting up with people), and not sharing personal details.

Although it is positive that many young people (and their parents) feel that they know what to do to stay safe online, it is important to reflect that this does not necessarily mean that they actually have that knowledge in reality, or that they act upon it – for example, for some neurodivergent young people, saying they know what to do may be a learned response.[1]

Some young people and parents highlighted where there were gaps in their knowledge or action taken. As with parents generally, use of online safety tools or controls amongst parents of neurodivergent young people was relatively limited: between 39%-48% of parents were not aware of or did not plan to use tools like screentime management apps, parental controls on video games or safety software. Less than half of young people were knowledgeable about using privacy settings (45%), reporting content or users who made upsetting comments (44%) and blocking accounts (42%).

This perhaps explains why it was fairly common for young people to have less positive experiences whilst playing video games. Over 2 in 5 young people (44%, n=210) reported often seeing or hearing bad things when gaming online and some recognised that their gaming habits and behaviours were not always positive. Qualitatively, there were mentions of hearing inappropriate language including rude and derogatory language. Young people acknowledged less positive experiences whilst playing video games, which could include playing the same games repeatedly (34%, n=163), spending too much time gaming (26%, n=125) and gaming preventing them playing outside and getting physical exercise (26%, n=125). Having bad gaming habits (31%, n=149) was also mentioned which may include, as previously mentioned, young people finding it difficult to stop gaming to do other tasks, or becoming frustrated by games they were playing. Around a fifth or less of young people had experience of issues whilst gaming such as bullying online, being contacted by strangers, and exposure to violence and hate speech.

Supporting neurodivergent young people to enjoy the benefits of playing video games safely

Neurodivergent young people can find some parts of playing video games difficult. Around 1 in 4 young people (27%, n=129) found the sensory aspect of gaming difficult and over 1 in 5 young people found the accessibility of games (23%, n=110) and communicating with others difficult (22%, n=106).

Most young people (67%, n=320) thought that their parents were best placed to talk to them about being safe online, but many also thought that video game platforms could help (47%, n=224). Two in five parents mentioned a role for other young people like them (41%, n=197), or people with their condition (39%, n=187) talking about online safety.

Young people would like help with knowing how to talk to their parents/carers about issues that occur when gaming (48%, n=229); how to interact with others online (44%, n=213) and how to play games in a safe manner (45%, n=217).

Qualitatively, parents were not always confident that video game platforms were currently doing enough to keep neurodivergent young people safe online, with some feeling that platforms should do more to prioritise safety, including through making safety features more intuitive and easier to use.

1. *The concepts of 'masking' and 'scripting' are emerging areas of research, but these ideas point to how autistic people sometimes feel they have to reply to questions in a certain way, which may not be indicative of what they genuinely think or feel. A Conceptual Analysis of Autistic Masking: Understanding the Narrative of Stigma and the Illusion of Choice - PubMed (nih.gov)*

Neurodivergent young people and Roblox

Over 9 in 10 (92%, n=441) young people who participated in the survey were currently playing Roblox and doing so frequently, with 2 in 5 young people (40%, n=193) playing at least once a day. Adopt Me! (61%), Tower of Hell (57%), Brookhaven (51%), Meepcity (14%) and Shindo Life (11%) were the most popular Roblox games amongst the young people surveyed.

Neurodivergent young people associated Roblox with being happy (48%, n=212), challenging (46%, n=205) and safe (44%, n=196) and those in the focus groups spoke positively about the variety of games, the ability to role play, and the opportunities it provided to allow them to connect and communicate with others whilst playing.

More than 4 in 10 young people (44%) associated Roblox with safety, and some perceived it to be safer than other video game platforms. However others were less positive, with research participants mentioning frustrations around toxic players, hacking and moderation.

Strengthening the moderation of games, clearer signposting to (or support to use) new safety features (e.g. introducing a report button for spamming), and prompter responses and resolutions to complaints/ issues were suggested by young people as ways in which they could be better supported by Roblox.

1. Introduction

1. Introduction

Previous research from Internet Matters has consistently highlighted that vulnerable children experience the digital world in different ways than their peers, with varying impacts on their wellbeing. For example, our Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World Index has found that children with special educational needs often experience more positive benefits from being online, whilst also having an increased risk of experiencing online harm.

Neurodivergent young people make up a significant proportion of the wider group of young people with special educational needs – especially autistic young people. In 2022-23, 'Autistic Spectrum Disorder' was the most common primary need among English school pupils receiving support through an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

Earlier research[2] has suggested that autistic young people engage in video games more frequently than their peers, but there is relatively little research exploring the reasons behind this, their experiences of playing video games and how they could be better supported. This research aims to help fill this gap, by enabling a better understanding of the benefits and challenges presented by the online world to neurodivergent young people, with a particular focus on gaming environments.

1.1. Terminology

The focus of this research is on neurodivergent young people and their parents aged 11-17, with a specific focus on autistic young people and those with ADHD. However, we recognise that young people may have other conditions including specific learning difficulties, which sometimes may be considered to be neurodivergent. It is important to note that although there may be some young people with these conditions included in the sample (see Table 1), they will have also had to have autism and/or ADHD to be included in the research.

1.2. Aims & Objectives

Supported by Roblox, Internet Matters undertook research in the UK and US with neurodivergent young people (including autistic young people), aged 11-17 year olds who were interested in video games and playing online.

The key objectives of the research were to:

- Identify the current challenges that neurodivergent young people aged 11-17 (in both the UK and US) face whilst online, and whilst in game environments.
- Identify the approaches that parents and neurodivergent young people take to keeping themselves safe online.
- Explore the perceived benefits and drawbacks of neurodivergent young people's playing online games
- Identify what support and resources would be helpful to young people and their parents in ensuring their safety whilst playing online games – along with what more platforms could do.

The research was conducted in partnership with charity partners in the UK and the US including Autism Alliance, Autistica, Autism Society (US) and Ambitious about Autism.

1.3. Methodology

A mixed methods approach was taken to the research involving an online survey and virtual focus groups with young people and their parents in the UK and US.

1.3.1. Online survey

An online survey for neurodivergent young people aged 12-17 years old and their parents was designed, with the first part of the survey being for parents and the second part of the survey being for completion by young people. The survey was sent to parents for completion, who were then asked for their consent to pass the survey over to their child for completion.

2. *Pavlopoulou,G; Usher, C and Pearson, A. 'I can actually do it without any help or someone watching over me all the time and giving me constant instruction': Autistic adolescent boys' perspectives on engagement in online video gaming. British Journal of Developmental Psychology (May 2022) 'I can actually do it without any help or someone watching over me all the time and giving me constant instruction': Autistic adolescent boys' perspectives on engagement in online video gaming (wiley.com)*

The survey was promoted and distributed through our UK and US charity partners, including distribution through existing networks, groups and social media. Internet Matters also promoted the survey on social media and a prize draw was offered to encourage responses. The survey was launched in the UK on the 7th September 2023 and in the US on the 15th September 2023 and closed on 15th October 2023.

Overall, 480 neurodivergent young people and their parents completed the survey; 77% (n=369) from the UK and 23% (n=111) from the US. 53% (n=254) of parents were male and 46% (n=221) were female. Most were aged 45-54 (50%, n=241). Full details on the parent survey sample profile can be found in Annex A.

As shown in Table 1, over half of parents had one child or more with autism (56%, n=271), and around half had one or more child with ADHD (48%, n=231).

Two-thirds of parents (66%, n=317) who had a child with autism had been given a formal diagnosis", 13% (n=62) were in the process of getting a diagnosis and 13% (n=62) had a child with suspected autism but no formal diagnosis.

A full sample profile for parents can be found in Table 2 of Annex A.

Two-thirds (67% , n=320) of the neurodivergent young people who completed the survey were male and 32% (n=153) were female. Nearly a fifth (18%, n=87) were aged 12-13; 61% (n=294) were aged 14-15 and 21% (n=99) were aged 16-17. A full sample profile for young people can be found in Table 3 of Annex A.

Table 1: Condition of young person – shaded rows indicate neurodivergence focus for the research

	Nos	%
Autism	271	56%
ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)	231	48%
Sensory impairment (e.g. hearing, speech or sight)	29	6%
Specific learning difficulties (such as dyslexia or dyscalculia)	42	9%
Physical disability	23	5%
Social, emotional, or mental health condition (such as moderate or severe anxiety or depression)	89	19%
Moderate or severe learning disability	16	3%
Something else	6	1%

1.3.2. Virtual focus groups

The online survey was used to recruit parents and young people for involvement in virtual focus groups. The virtual focus groups aimed to further explore young people's and parents' experiences, behaviours and attitudes towards playing online games.

Virtual focus groups lasting up to 90 minutes were conducted in the UK and the US in October 2023. All groups were set up and facilitated by the Autism Society (in the US) and Ambitious about Autism (in the UK).

Overall, nine online focus groups were undertaken involving 18 parents and 20 young people aged 11-17, this was split as follows:

- **UK:** 2 focus groups with 11 parents in total; 2 focus groups with young people (7 11-14 year olds and 5 15-17 year olds).
- **US:** 2 focus groups with 7 parents in total; 3 focus groups with young people (3 11-14 year olds and 5 15-17 year olds).

1.4. Structure of this report

Section 2 of this report outlines how neurodivergent young people are engaging with the digital world and video game environments, including how they are spending their time online, who with and how often.

Section 3 discusses the role of video games in neurodivergent young people's lives, including its perceived benefits, importance and challenges.

Section 4 explores neurodivergent young people's feelings of safety when they are playing online games and their experience of risk online.

Section 5 identifies the type of support and resources that young people and parents feel would be helpful in ensuring that neurodivergent young people can game safely online.

Section 6 summarised how neurodivergent young people are currently engaging with Roblox and their views on safety on the platform.

Section 7 summarises our conclusions and responses to the findings from the research.

2. Neurodivergent young people's online behaviours and experiences of playing online games

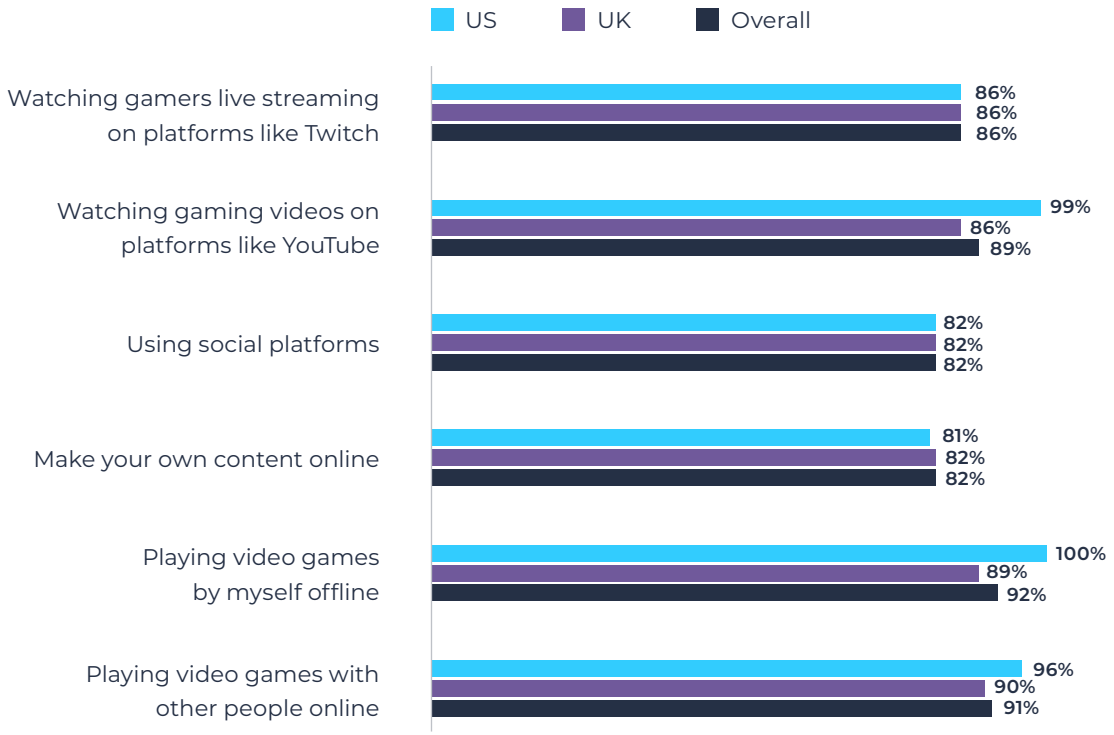
This report section provides an overview of how neurodivergent young people are engaging with the digital world, and with online games. This covers the amount of time young people spent online, how they are communicating, and with whom.

2.1. Neurodivergent young people's engagement with online games

Engagement with online games and other online activities was high amongst neurodivergent young people, as would be expected because of the focus on targeting neurodivergent young people with a specific interest in video games. As shown in Figure 1 around 9 in 10 young people were playing video games online with other people (96% US, 90% UK) or by themselves (100% US, 89% UK). Young people involved in the focus groups had initially become interested in playing online games from their family or friends talking about it, or from seeing it on YouTube.

> *"Well, I watched quite a lot of YouTube, but also I think it came to a point where I didn't really get a gaming console until I was about 10. But from that point on, I was just kind of learning how to get through the gameplay mechanics at my own pace, and that resulted in both YouTube videos and just working out through viewing the game description and talking with my friends about it"*
> **(UK young person, 11-14 years old)**

Figure 1: Young people's engagement with gaming and other online activity – young people survey



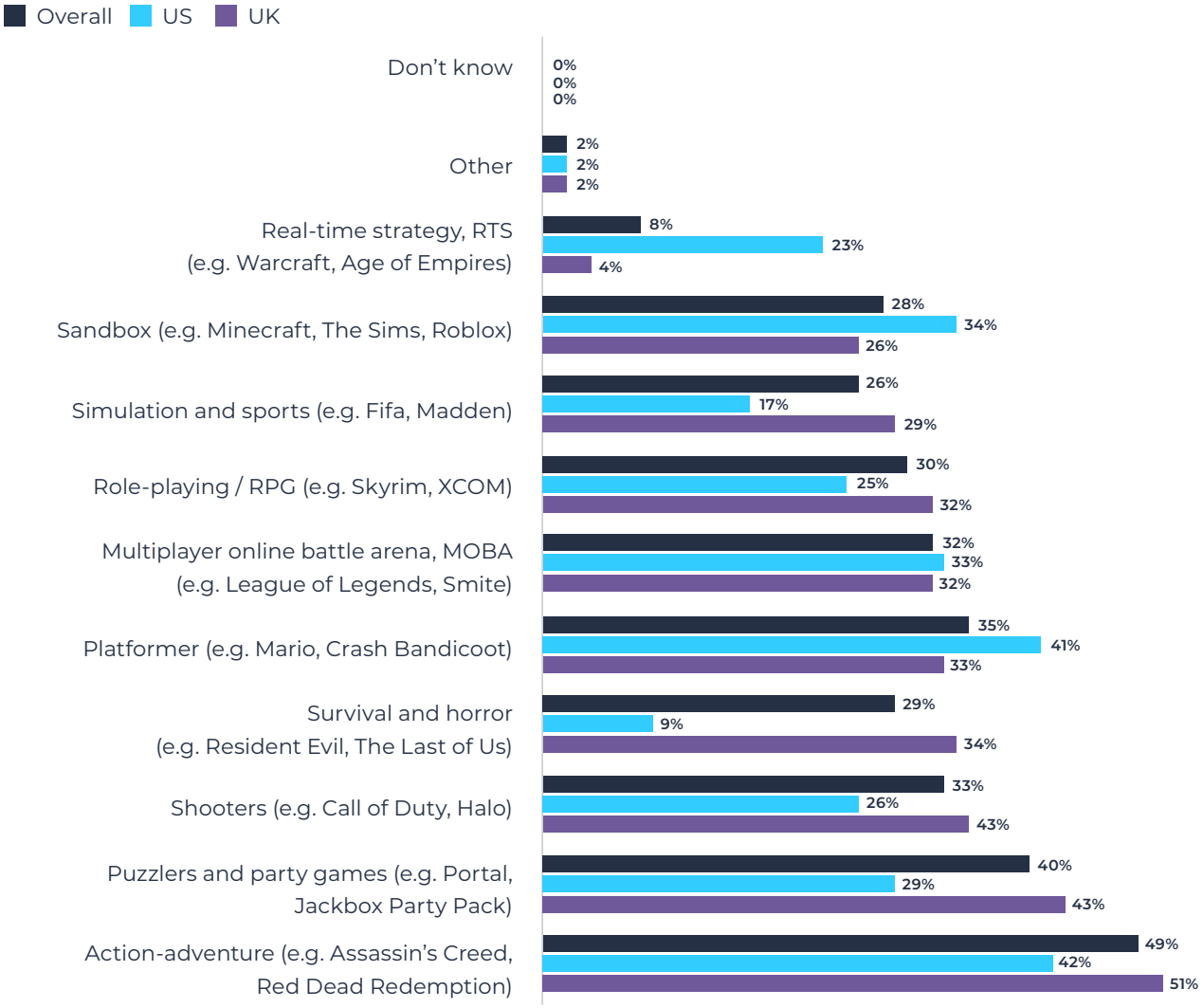
Source: Young People survey. Base: all respondents n=480, UK 369, US 111.

Online content creation was also a common activity amongst neurodivergent young people (82% reported doing this), and it was older young people who were most likely to be doing this (89% 16-17 year olds 78% 12-13 year olds, 80% 14-15 year olds). We asked young people creating content to describe which platforms they used to do this. Whilst most did not answer, the most frequently given responses were YouTube (n=16), TikTok (n=14), Roblox (n=7) and Instagram (n=4).

2.1.1. Type of games played

Action-adventure and puzzler and party games were the most popular types of games (Figure 2) amongst the young people surveyed (51% and 43% respectively of young people play these). Qualitatively, young people cited many different games they were playing including (in no particular order) Call of Duty, Roblox, Minecraft, Warrior Cat, Adopt Me!, Dragon Adventures, Cold War, Kaiju Universe and Wizard 101. Some participants mentioned specific games within Roblox while others simply referred to 'Roblox'.

Figure 2: Types of video games played



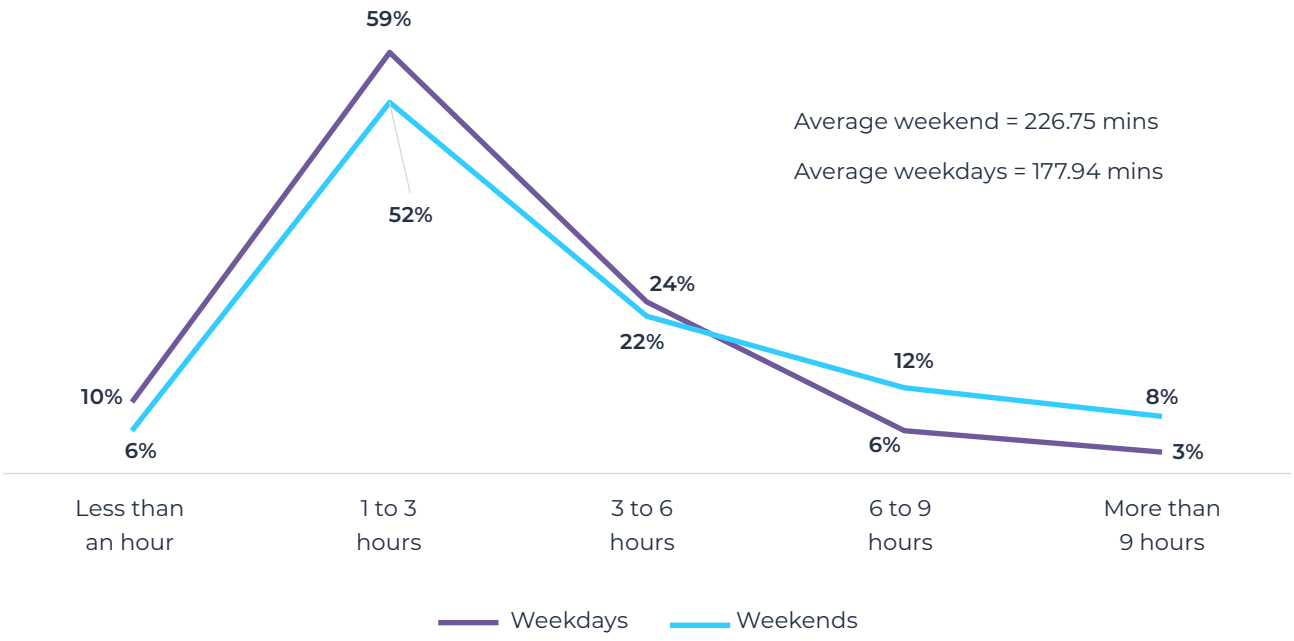
Source: Young People survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

2.1.2. Frequency of game play

Neurodivergent young people were playing video games for a significant amount of time during the week and at weekends, highlighting the prominent role that video games played in their lives. Around 7 in 10 young people were playing for up to three hours a day during the week and at weekends, with this only increasing slightly at weekends compared to during the week (Figure 3).

During the week 12-13 year olds were spending the most time playing video games (245 minutes on average) compared to 14-17 year olds (151 minutes on average for 14-15 year olds and 198 minutes on average for 16-17 year olds).

Figure 3: Amount of time spent playing video games on weekdays and weekends



Source: Young People survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

Neurodivergent young people from the US were spending the most time playing video games, spending an average of 202 minutes during the week (compared to 171 minutes amongst UK young people), rising to 326 minutes at the weekend (compared to 197 minutes amongst UK young people).

2.2. Playing video games and communicating with others online

Communicating with others whilst playing video games was common amongst neurodivergent young people and only 2% (n=10) of those surveyed did not communicate with other people when they were playing online games.

We asked young people who they played video games with, allowing them to tick multiple options. Around 9 in 10 young people said they played video games by themselves (88%, n=423), and over three-quarters (78%, n=374) said they played with their parents/guardians. This chimes with the parent survey, in which nearly 4 in 5 (79%, n=383) parents said that they watched their child play online games with others at least sometimes, and a similar proportion (81%, n=389) said they played video games with their child at least sometimes. Much smaller proportions said they did these activities infrequently or never.[3]

> *"I think, like I said before, I quite like meeting people who have similar interests to me. Because I mean people at school aren't really into the same sort of video games, anime and things like that, so it's quite nice to meet people who are".*
> **(UK young person, 15-17 years old)**

According to the survey, young people were less likely to say that they played online games with friends, where this refers to friends they met online as well as offline friends (27%, n=128). This may be partly explained by the wording of the survey, with young people perhaps feeling reluctant to use the word 'friendship' to describe certain relationships with peers who they play online games with. Qualitatively, the significance of friends in young people's gaming lives came out more strongly. The importance of playing online games in helping young people to develop friendships (or connections with peers) and the benefits of this will be discussed in more detail in Section 3.2.

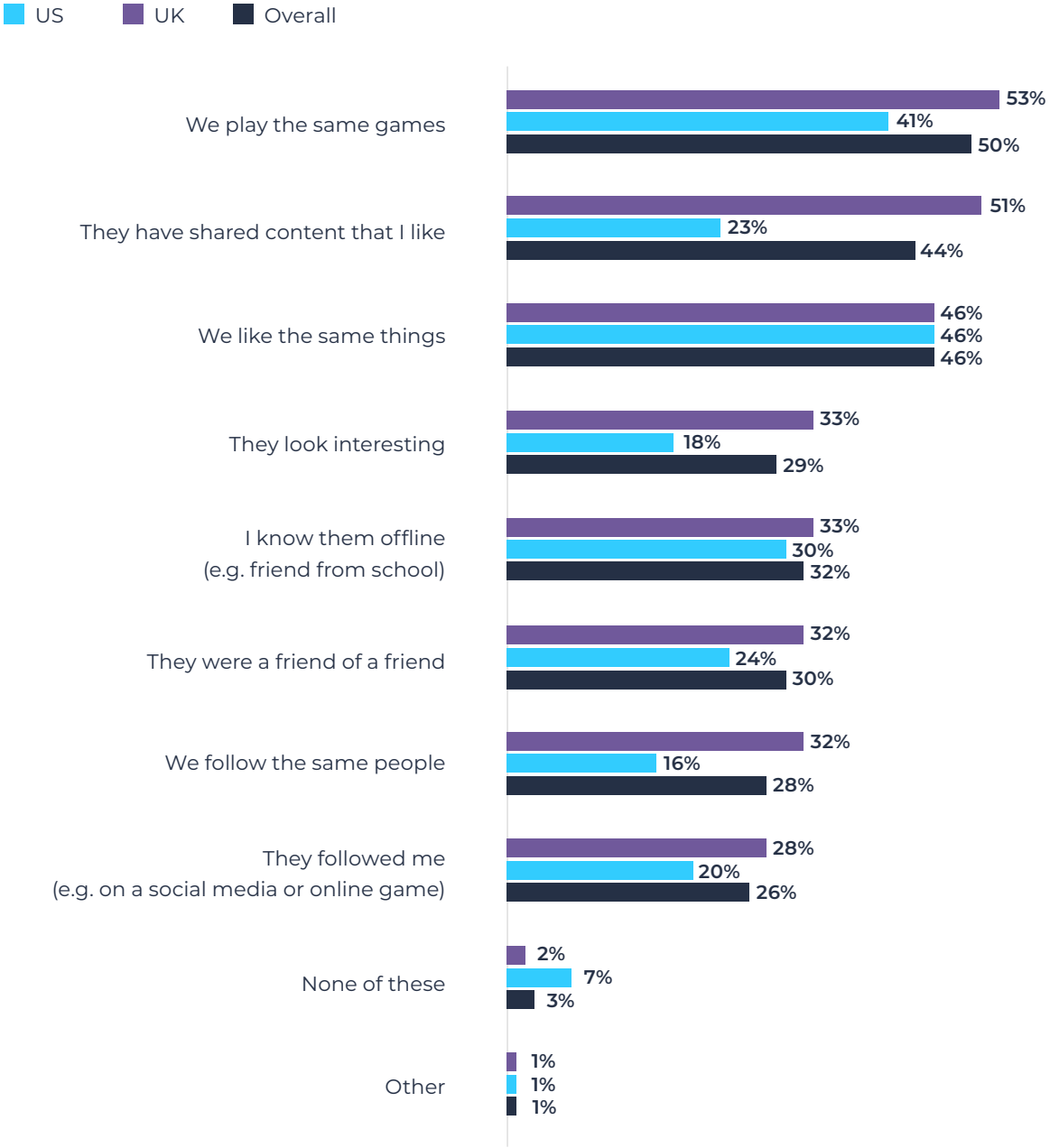
> *"I usually sometimes play with my friends at school and usually by myself. I've made friends in a lot of games and I sort of found friends who played the same games with me and we quest each other for those questing games"*
> **(US young person, 15-17 years old)**

We also asked young people about online friendships more generally – not just in the context of playing online games. Most neurodivergent young people reported that only a minority of their friends were online friends who they had never met in-person: nearly 6 in 10 (58%) said that about a quarter or less of their friends were online-only friends. However, a significant minority (27%) said that about half or more of their friends were online-only friends, and only 4% said that they had no online-only friends. US young people reported a higher proportion of online-only friendships compared to UK young people.[4]

> *"I quite like things like {online game} then it means you can meet people with similar interests and so on, which I quite like, sort of like a community of people who all like the same game generally speaking".*
> **(UK young person, 15-17 years old)**

3. *See figure 29 in Annex B for a full breakdown.*
4. *Around half of US young people (49%, n=54) reported that half or more of their friends were online friends who they hadn't met in person (compared to 21%, n=77 of UK young people).*

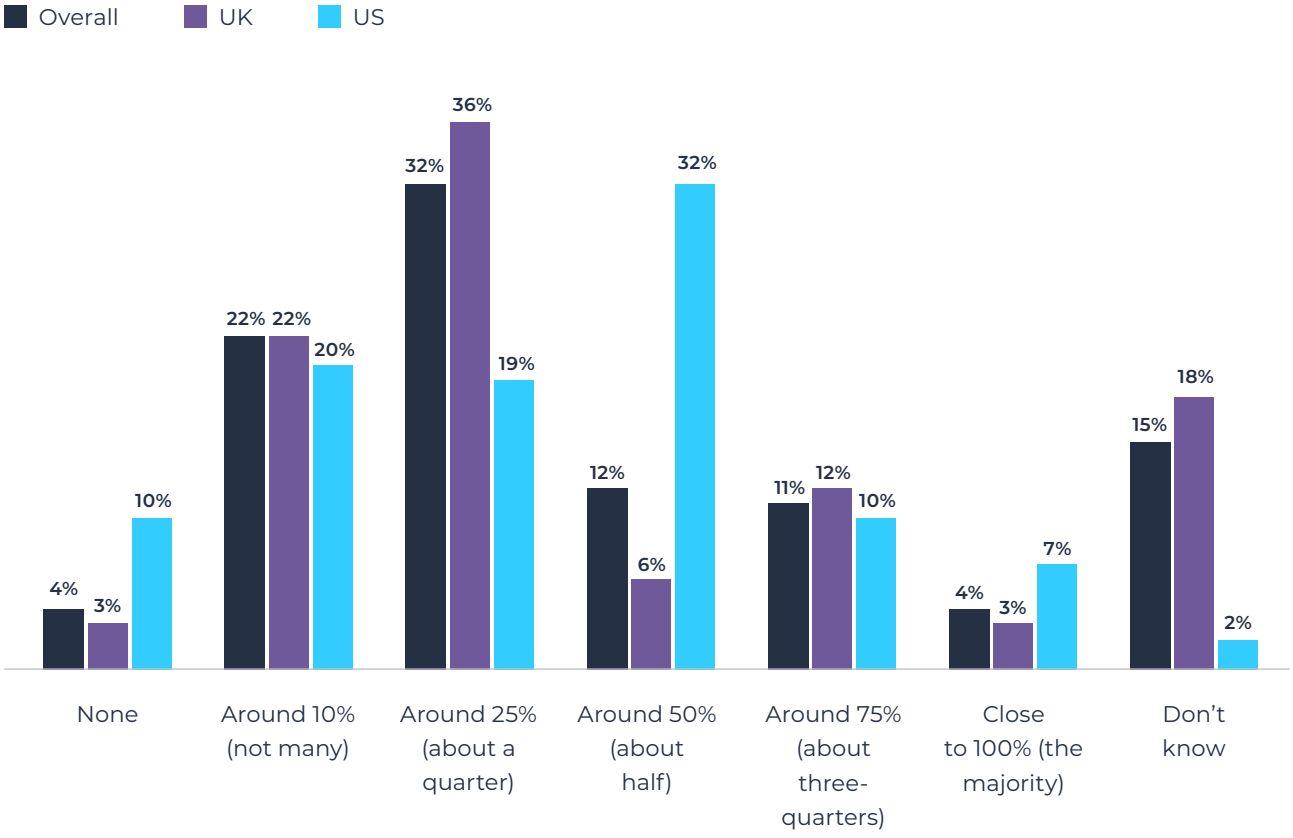
Figure 4: Reasons for forming online friendships – young people survey



Source: Young People survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

Neurodivergent young people who had developed friendships online had done so through a commonality of interest (see Figure 4), either through liking the same games (53%, n=240), sharing content that they liked (51%, n=213), or liking the same things (46%, n=220).

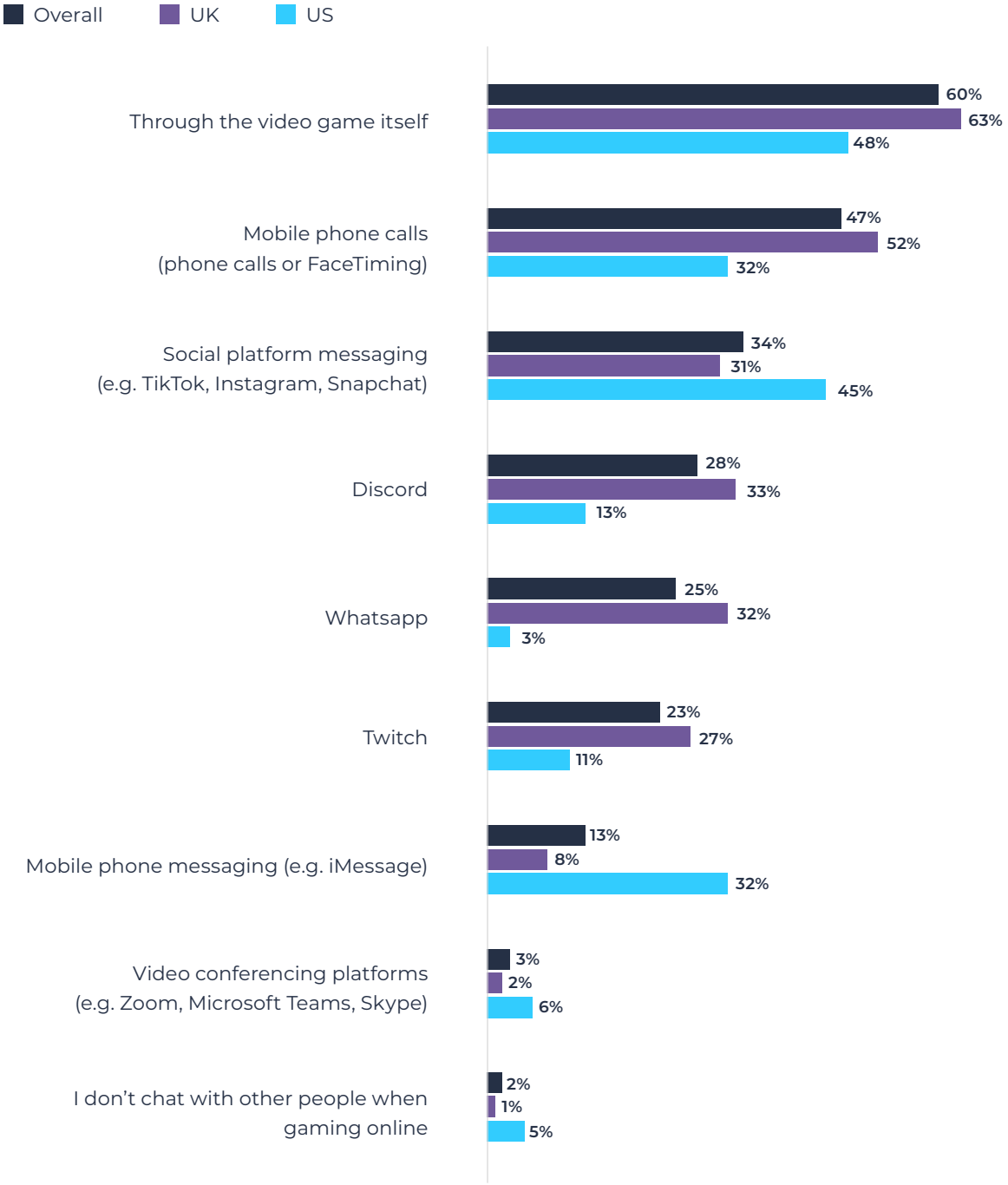
Figure 5: Thinking about all of your friends (offline or online), roughly what percentage of these are online friends that you haven't met in-person?



Source: Young People survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

As shown in Figure 6, when young people were playing online games they were mainly communicating through the game (60%, n=288) or mobile phone calls (47%, n=226). The use of other social media platforms to communicate was much less common; 34% (n=163) were using messaging on social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram and 28% (n=134) were using Discord.

Figure 6: Mechanisms that young people were using to chat when online gaming



Source: Young People survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

3. Parents' and young people's attitudes towards online games

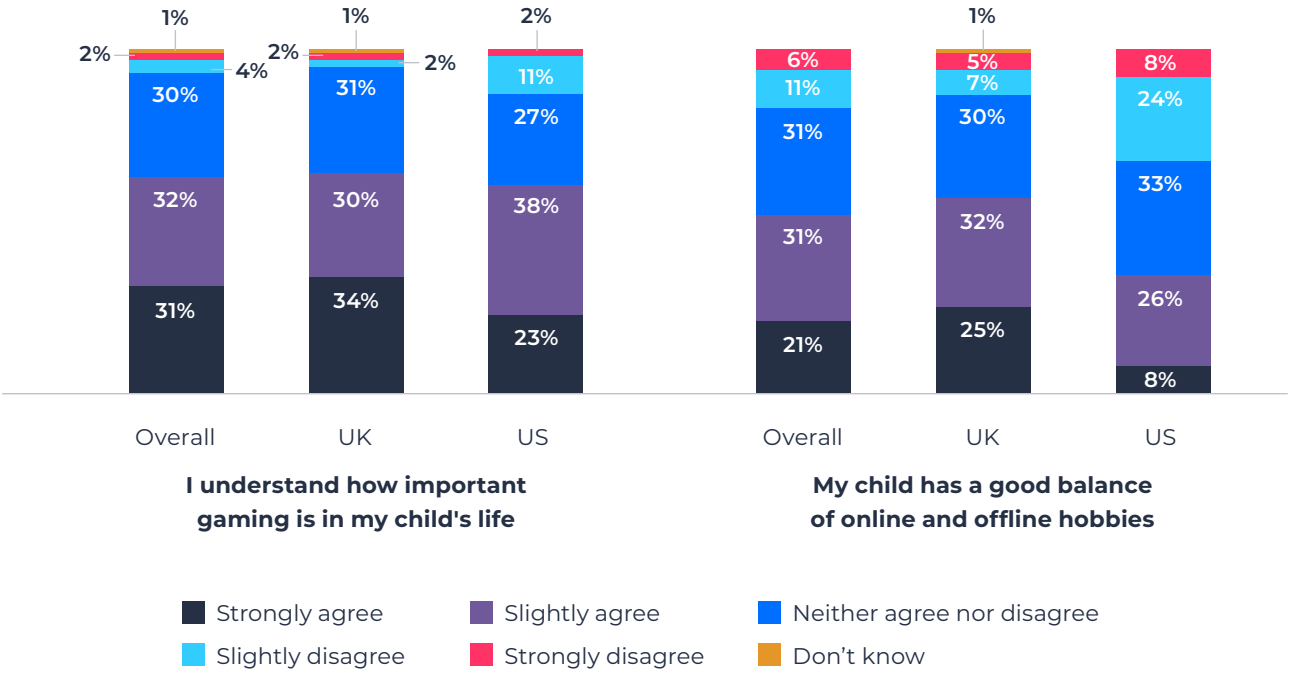
This section discusses the role of video games in young people's lives, including their perceived importance and the role that parents play in their child's gaming lives. The benefits and challenges associated with online games, as reported by young people and parents, are also discussed.

3.1. The role of video games in young people's lives

Parents recognised the importance of video games in their child's life (Figure 7), with nearly two-thirds (63%, n=305) agreeing they understood how important gaming was to their child. Young people gave a more mixed view, whilst over half (56%, n=269) agreed their family understood that gaming was important, a fifth (20%, n=98) disagreed (with this being higher amongst young people in the UK). This gap might suggest that some parents do not show their children that they understand that gaming is important to them.

Parents were conflicted as to whether their children had a good balance of online and offline hobbies. Over half (52%, n=248) of parents agreed; however 3 in 10 (31%, n=149) were unsure and 18% (n=86) disagreed. US parents highlighted this as more of a challenge (Figure 7) with 3 in 10 (32%, n=36) reporting that their child did not have a good balance of online and offline hobbies. Qualitatively, UK and US parents highlighted concerns about the amount of time their child was spending online: it was widely felt that playing video games could sometimes dominate their child's time and reduce their interest in taking part in other activities (see Section 3.3).

Figure 7: Thinking about your child's behaviours around gaming online, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



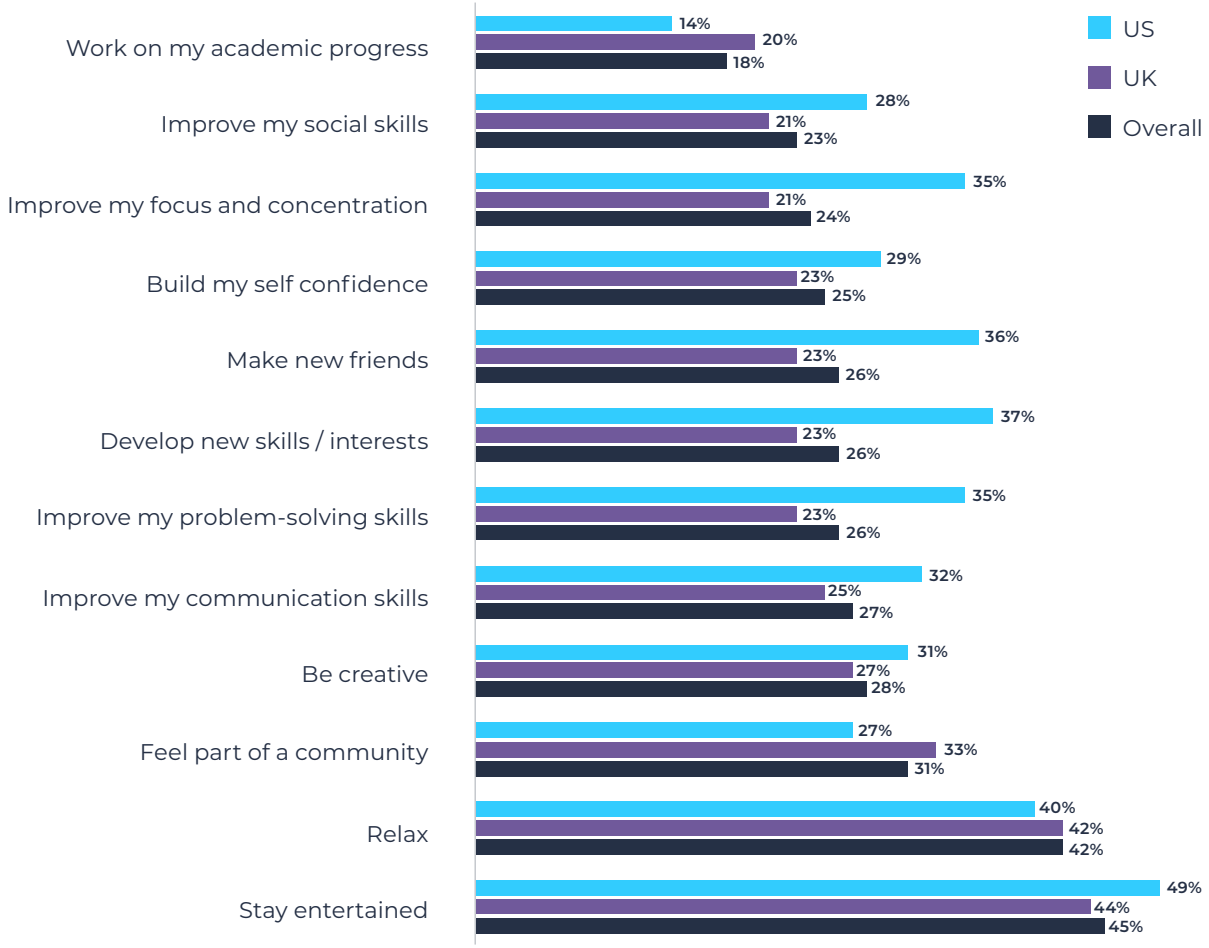
Source: Parent survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

3.2. Benefits associated with playing online games

Over half (58%, n=279) of young people felt that gaming made them feel happy, with reported happiness highest amongst the 12-13 age group (77% vs 50% 14-15 year olds and 67% 16-17 year olds). By contrast, there were some young people that were more likely to disagree that gaming made them feel happy, most noticeably UK young people (21% disagreed vs 7% US young people) and 14-15 year olds in both countries (24% disagreed) indicating that young people's experiences whilst gaming were not always positive.

> *"Escapism. I actually met one of my closest friends on {online game} called {name of friend]. My characters are like a coping strategy. If I'm stressed it's like they're with me, next to me"*
> **(UK young person, 11-14 years old)**

Figure 8: Here are some benefits playing games on game consoles and mobile devices can have on people. Thinking about your own experience, which, if any, of these do you agree with?



Source: Young people survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

Playing online games also helped young people to stay entertained and relaxed (over 2 in 5 young people from the UK and US reported these benefits). Young people and parents in the focus groups talked about their gaming as escapism and downtime, that may help provide a mechanism for neurodivergent young people to cope with the world around them.

Young people identified the development of friendships and feeling part of a community as key benefits of gaming. Half (51%, n=254) of young people agreed that gaming helped them to make new friends online and those in the focus groups highlighted the benefits of playing online games in making friends with similar interests in a way that was easier at times than in real life, helping them to connect and build bonds with new people. Online interactions reduced the need for face-to-face interactions which some neurodivergent young people found difficult or more challenging.

"I quite like meeting people who have similar interests to me. Because I mean people at school aren't really into the same sort of video games, anime and things like that, so it's quite nice to meet people who are".
(UK young person, aged 15-17)

"I got into it because of YouTubers and it has improved my social skills a lot. I'm much more talkative with people now, a lot more than I used to be".
(US Young person, aged 15-17)

Feeling accepted and part of a community was another commonly reported benefit of playing games online, with 31% (n=149) of young people surveyed agreeing that gaming helped them feel part of a community (Figure 8). Young people in the focus groups discussed feeling more accepted for who they are within the friendships they had made online. The anonymity of the online gaming world, and the opportunity to connect with people with similar interests, led to them feeling more comfortable and not "labelled" as being different.

"I feel accepted. I feel very comfortable talking to people online. I have zero issues with some people, but overall, I honestly just feel very comfortable. I can be myself and there's no one who could really tell you what to do on playing games".
(US Young person, aged 15-17)

"I feel completely accepted online. The anonymity of online games, I guess it removes any sort of branding if you really want to stretch it, but overall, it's just that interactions are shorter with people, and if you do get to know them, they're good enough people that they won't care, even if they do find that you're autistic or whatever, odd, information they're wishing for in this survey. But yes, I feel completely accepted and I don't feel like they're even as much weight to autism and online gaming".
(US Young person, aged 15-17)

Playing video games also supported the development of young people's communication skills, and their ability to talk and interact with others online, including developing skills in co-operation. Neurodivergent young people discussed how gaming allowed them to interact with others in a more comfortable space, with less reliance on face-to-face contact, which many found challenging because of their condition.

> *"But online gaming is definitely, for at least myself, in some ways quite nice, because in a way, having to deal with someone actually being there can be a lot more socially draining than just playing online for a bit"*
> **(UK young person, 11-14 years old)**

> *"And I've learned more social skills, communication skills than anything else has taught me via online gaming. I've learned a lot of just like how to work a computer and I've learned about different groups of people. I've learned a lot of like thinking processes and strategies since I play a lot of games that use thinking and logic".*
> **(US Young person, aged 15-17)**

Further skills or knowledge which young people developed through playing video gamed included their creativity, sense of adventure, imagination and tactical problem-solving skills.

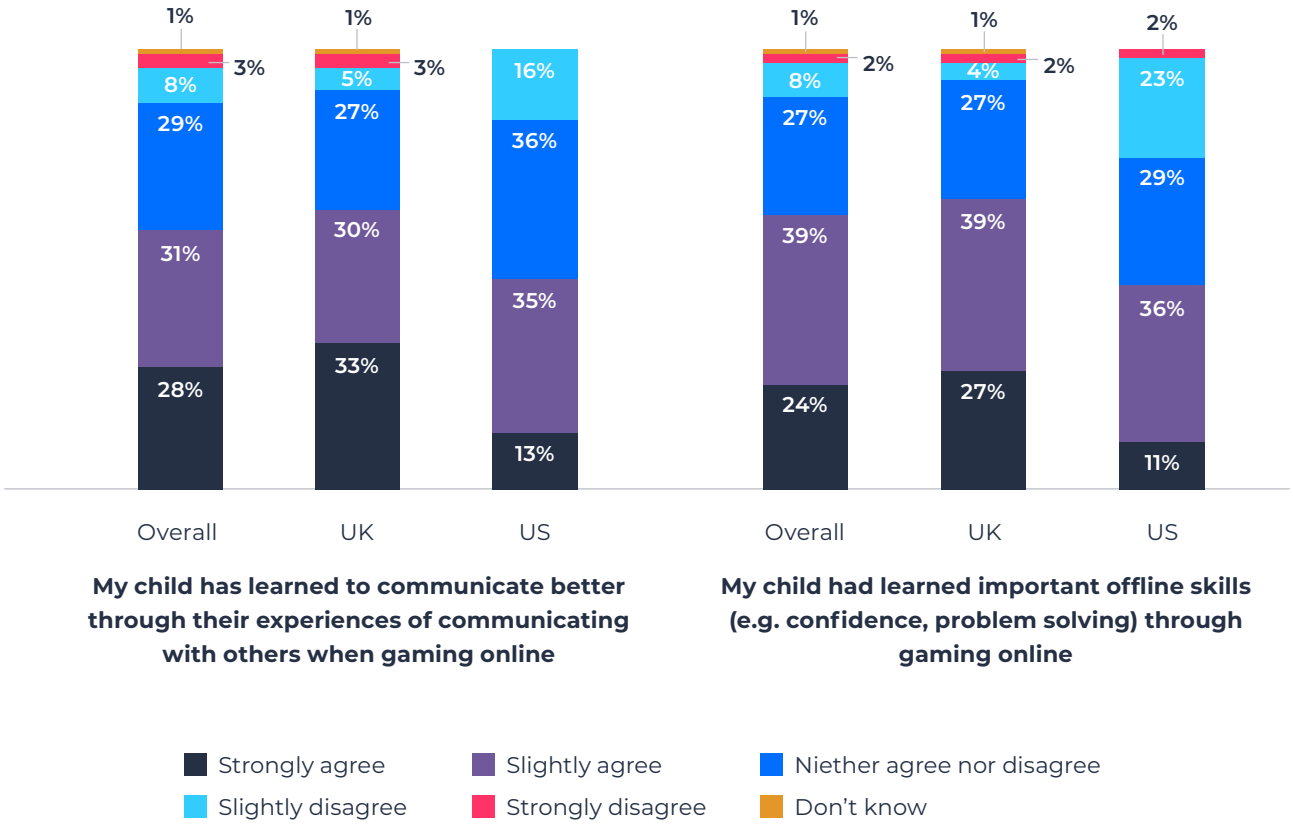
> *"I like that there's so much to explore. There's no limits. Sometimes even when you play by yourself, it's still really fun to do. Some games have no rules, some have a lot, but either way they will just inspire your imagination, help you to learn, some of them. There's no limits".*
> **(UK Young person, aged 11-14)**

Nearly two in three parents (63%, n=302) agreed their child had learnt important offline skills from gaming online and around three in five (59%, n=283) agreed their child had learned to communicate better through their experiences of communicating with others when gaming online (Figure 9).

Qualitatively, parents cited the benefits of online games on:

- Their child's ability to maintain friendships, which can be more difficult to achieve in real life
- Offering downtime and a relaxing, enjoyable experience
- Skills in problem solving, perseverance
- Team-work, negotiation and co-operation
- The opportunity to be creative and use their imagination.

Figure 9: Thinking about your child's behaviours around gaming online, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Source: Parent survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

"And also, how to take turns for instance, or to think about other people and consequences of your actions somebody said earlier on, if you blow up somebody else's base or something, then there's actually going to be a person at the end of it feeling quite upset. So, life skills too".
(UK parent)

"He's very determined if he can't do something when he's gaming or certainly when he was playing {online game} and everyone kept calling him a newbie, he just wanted to keep practising to get better so he didn't look rubbish or whatever he put it. And I think that's quite a good life lesson actually, that if you keep at something then you'll just improve".
(UK parent)

3.3. Challenges associated with playing online games

A key aspect of this research was to explore possible concerns and challenges associated with neurodivergent young people playing games, in order to understand how this community could be better supported.

Parents had some concerns about their children's gaming. Over half felt their child spent too much time gaming (52%, n=249); with this being highest amongst parents in the UK (57% UK vs. 37% US). Qualitatively, many parents had conflicting feelings about the amount of time their child spent online and were at times balancing an acknowledgement of the importance of video games in their child's lives, with the need to respond and manage the time their child spent playing. Parents with older children (aged 14+) could find it more difficult to restrict time online, as they did not feel it was appropriate to place as many restrictions on them because of their age. Others judged what limits or rules were required depending on how their child was interacting with them (e.g. levels of behaviour, attention) or whether they were still completing other tasks (e.g. chores or schoolwork).

> *"For me, I just kind of play on how he's interacting with us. If he's more agitated where he's getting triggered more easily than I know I need to back off on the game time...so I'll have him shut his computer off or sometimes I even have to take it from him if I see his attitude changes. But as long as he's getting along with the siblings, he's getting along with us, then I don't restrict it too much.."*
> **(UK parent)**

> *"He could be on it from the moment he wakes up to the moment he's gone to bed. I struggle with trying to limit the amount of time that he has and it does get to be quite a battle sometimes I do have restrictions in place such as the Google Parent app thing. So, the phone will automatically shut off at set time, but then he's constantly still asking me, oh can you just extend it a little bit longer, please mom and I have to really put my foot down and say no. But yeah, I think if things weren't like that weren't created, it would be a lot harder for parents sometimes I feel"*
> **(US parent)**

Around half of parents (52%, n=249) thought their child's behaviour worsened when they were online gaming (Figure 10), with this being higher amongst UK parents (59% UK vs. 31% US). Parents discussed their child becoming aggressive, short-tempered and irritable, particularly when they spent a lot of time playing games online, which had potential impacts on their ability to communicate effectively.

> *"I know for us, if he spends too much time online, he just gets more short tempered, gets more frustrated with his siblings, easier and quicker. And so one of the first things we do is when he starts getting real irritable is to decrease the gaming or the online activity. Give me your phone, give me your laptop. We need to take a break".*
> **(US parent)**

"I've got to be honest. He used to get absolutely hyper when he was playing it and aggressive when he had to come off it, he would sit and watch the clock, he couldn't focus on anything else. He was totally obsessed when it came to {gaming platform} so we had to ban it for a while because it just took over our lives basically. And then he couldn't handle people killing him, he would have meltdowns and they did on purpose, they trapped me, they tricked me....And it's almost jeopardised friendships and things like that because he takes it very personally and doesn't know how to detach."
(US parent)

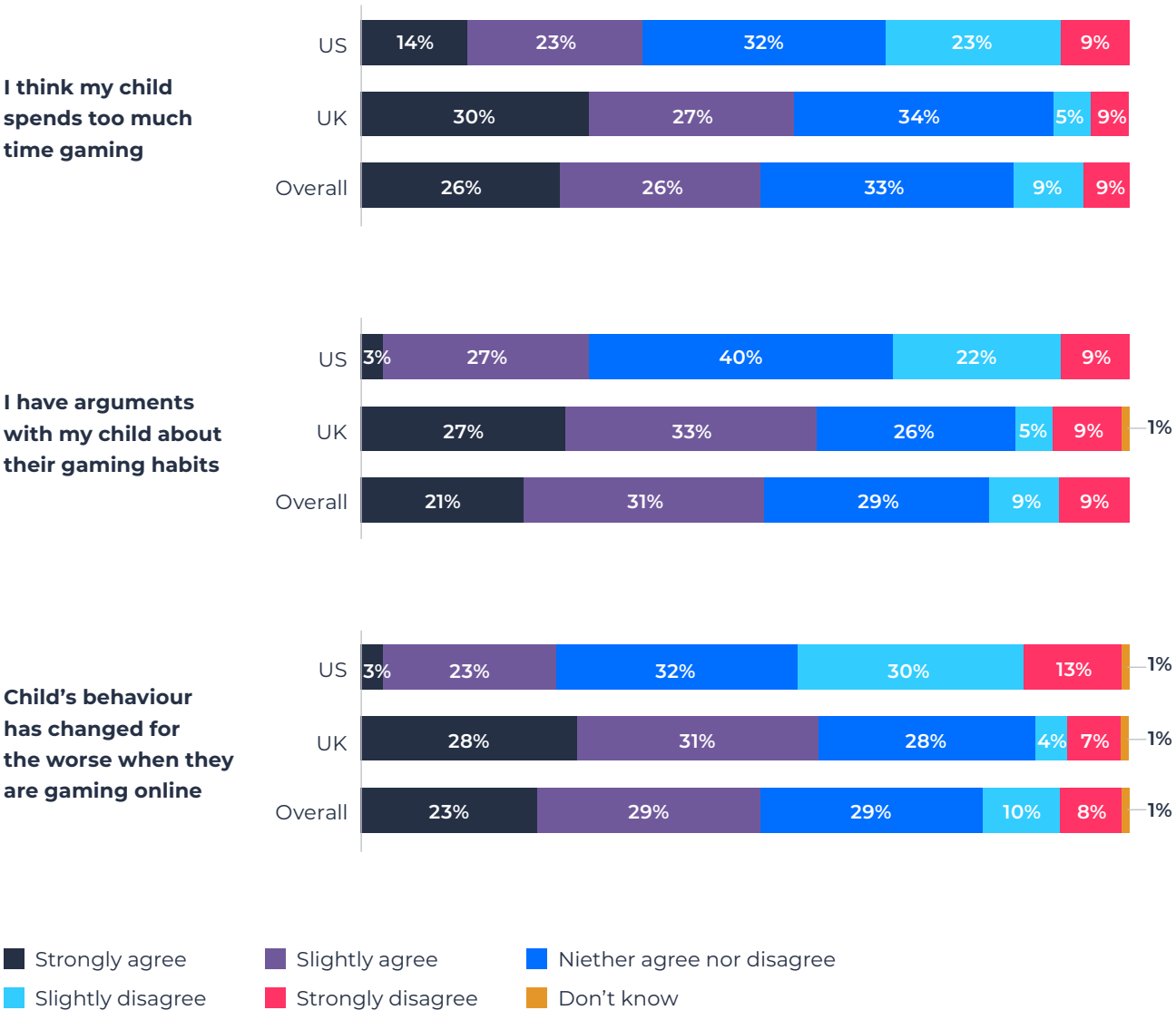
Parents highlighted concerns about their child becoming "obsessive" about games they were playing and the friendships they had made online. Intense interests and repetitive behaviour are common aspects of autism, so it is unsurprising that for some autistic young people this behaviour is directed towards the online games they play. Parents felt their children could find it difficult to see past a game, or to stop gaming when needed (e.g. to do other activities or tasks) with the next stage of this work focusing on providing advice and guidance to parents and young people around these issues. As their children could sometimes have difficulties with real life friendships, the priority they placed on online friendships was significant, which could result in a child becoming too invested in the friendships they had made online or finding it difficult to prioritise other things.

"There was the obsession where it literally was all he could think about, all he could focus on at one point to the point where almost that he just couldn't think about leaving the house because he had to wait for his gaming time. It did become silly with {an online game}, a huge addiction and the competitive side of things".
(US parent)

"It's the urgency if she gets a ping or a message or a notification that comes up. Which of course we can adjust... but if she gets one of those, the urgency and obsessiveness of having to respond to that rather than being present with someone like me who is face-to-face in her room with her... she is much more likely to be involved with the online stuff rather than the actual humans. And I think that's the balance from a parent's perspective that I find... trying to find that balance that... we are having a conversation, this is more important than your game... no it isn't, of course it isn't"
(UK parent)

Arguments between young people and their parents about gaming was relatively common: 52% (n=250) of parents reported arguing with their child, although fewer young people reported arguing with their parents (39% agreed, n=187; 32% disagreed, n=96). Parents involved in the focus groups also mentioned concerns about in-game spending and the risk of their child being scammed.

Figure 10: Challenges associated with online games – Parent perceptions



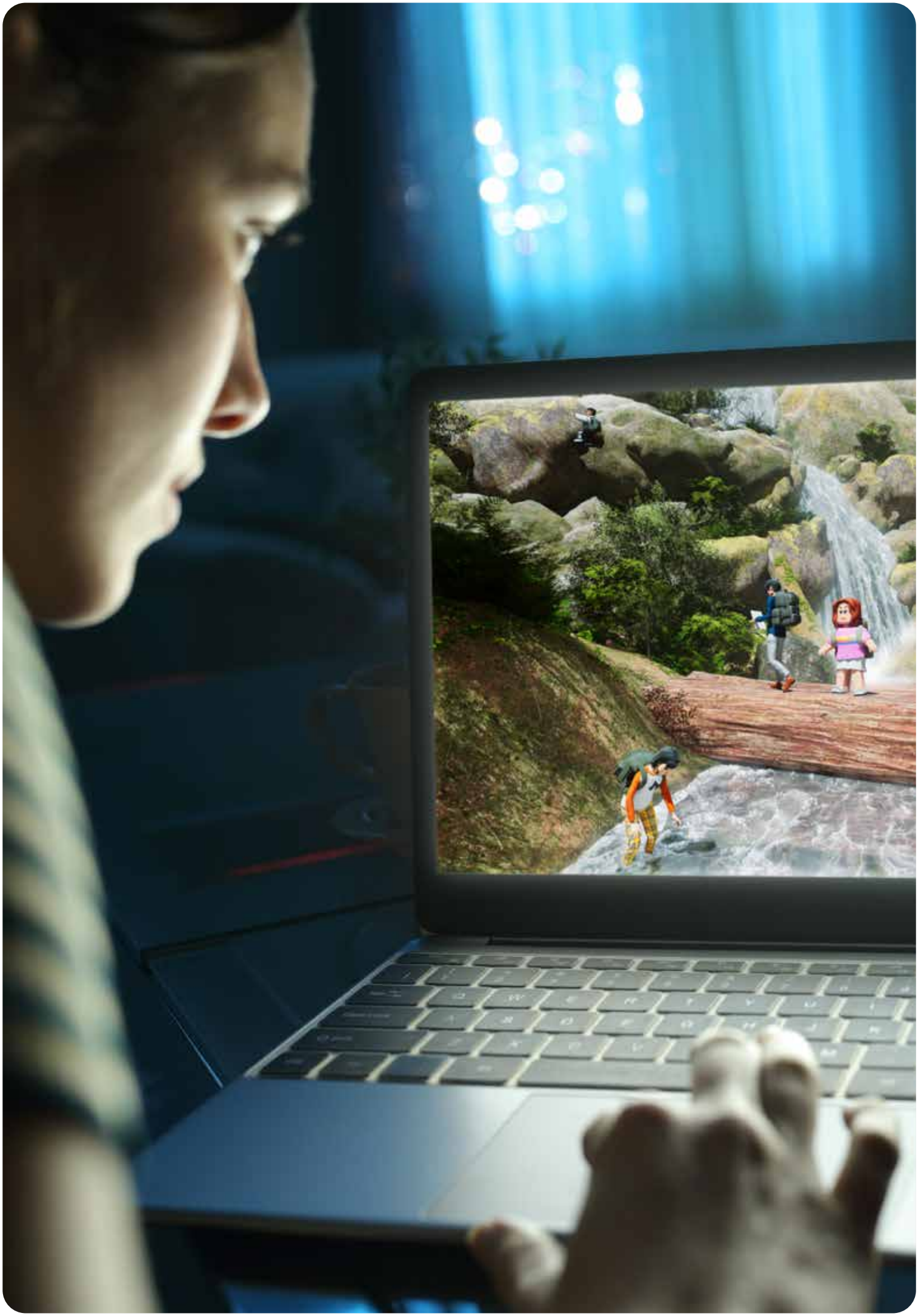
Source: Parent survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

Neurodivergent young people thought there were challenges associated with playing games online. They discussed feeling "addicted" if they played too long, which made it difficult to take breaks and could lead to feelings of frustration and anger on occasions if things were not going well (for example, leading to 'rage quitting' or aggressive behaviour). One young person mentioned feeling that too much online gaming could have an impact on friendships in real life and lead to isolation.

> *"Like summer this year I basically isolated myself because I was too addicted to my phone and Xbox and whatnot, and wasn't too great. But I am now getting better with sessions with others and I've got a nice little friend group I'm in".*
> **(UK young person 15-17)**

Some of the parents we spoke to also used the language of "addiction" to describe the challenges faced by neurodivergent young people in controlling the amount of time they spent playing games. It is certainly possible for young people to spend so much time online that it is considered a disorder or condition – for example, some use the term Problematic Interactive Media Use (PIMU) to describe this.[5] However, for this label to be applied, the behaviour pattern must be severe enough that it results in significant negative consequences for a young person's social and mental wellbeing, functioning at school and in wider life. Many young people find it challenging to regulate the time they spend playing games without meeting this threshold.

5. *Boston Children's Digital Wellness Lab. Family Guide to Problematic Interactive Media Use (PIMU)* https://digitalwellnesslab.org/family-guides/family-guide-to-problematic-interactive-media-use-pimu/



4. Staying safe online

This section of the report focused on parents' and young people's feelings of safety when they are gaming online, their experience of harm online and the actions they are taking to mitigate exposure to risk.

4.1. Parents' views on children's safety online

Where parents felt their child was more vulnerable online because they were neurodivergent, the reasons for this mainly reflected the challenges associated with online games highlighted previously (see Section 3.3). This included becoming obsessive with friends they had made online which can lead to defiance against parents; having a differing understanding of friendship because of their condition and finding it challenging to understand and navigate the boundaries of friendship.

> *"And therefore, when they start saying things that go against what your parents say... there can be some real anger back at you because you have gone against that person. And in that respect, I think they can become a lot more vulnerable"* **(UK parent)**

> *"I think the length of time and the obsession with getting to the next level and that kind of thing. I know all kids have that to a certain extent, but I think that autistic and neurodivergent kids in general probably take that to a slightly different level, so from that perspective I think that's not ideal and it would be great to have more support on that making them take a break"* **(UK parent)**

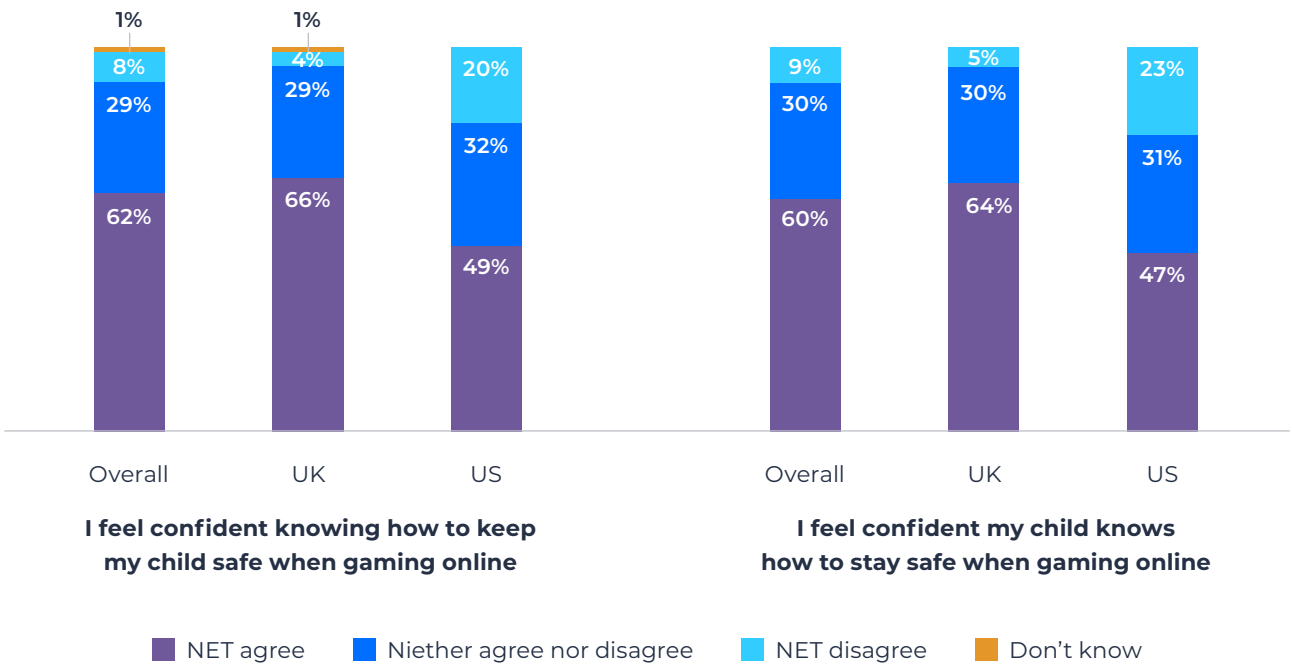
Parents were broadly confident they knew how to keep their child safe when they were playing online games (62% agreed, n=299), with confidence levels being higher amongst UK parents (66% of UK parents felt confidence compared to 49% of US parents). A fifth (20%, n=22) of US parents did not know how to keep their child safe when gaming online.

Qualitatively, although some parents felt confident keeping their child safe online, others lacked confidence due to not having done enough research about potential actions (for example, in relation to what safety tools could be used) or feeling that they lacked up-to-date knowledge about technology or gaming, particularly as gaming platforms, apps and devices were constantly evolving.

> *"I guess I've never been that confident either. I'm probably massively behind the times when it comes to tech, if I'm honest. My son's better at knowing all the different settings and controls than I am"* **(UK parent)**

Three in five parents (60%, n=289) were confident their child knew how to stay safe when they were playing games. However, around a quarter (23%, n=25) of US parents did not feel that their child knew how to stay safe when gaming online, compared to just 5% (n=20) of UK parents.

Figure 11: Thinking about your child's safety when gaming online, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Source: Parent survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

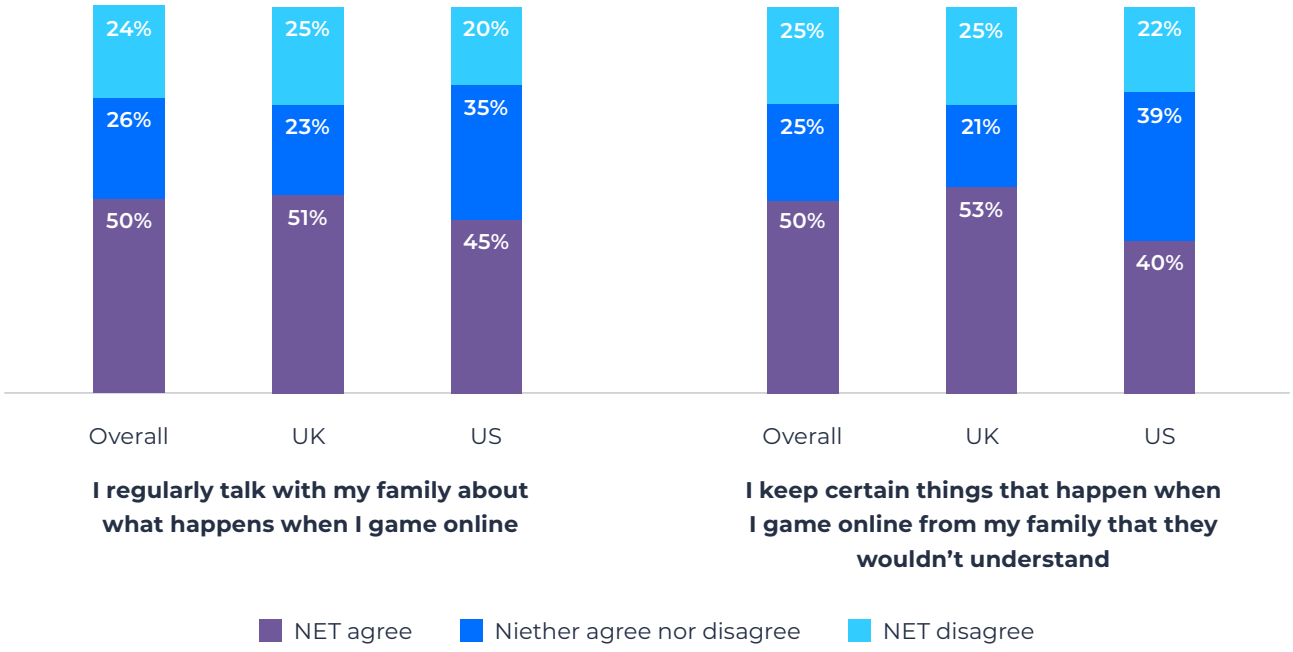
4.2. Young people's views on their safety online

Young people were more confident than their parents in their ability to keep themselves safe online: nearly two-thirds (64%, n=304) reported being totally confident or very confident (only 1% were not confident). Although those aged 12-13 were less sure than older children (18% reported being unsure).

Whilst it is positive that many young people (and their parents) feel that they know what to do to stay safe online, it is important to reflect that this does not necessarily mean that they actually have that knowledge in reality, or that they act upon it.

Young people had mixed views on how much they would talk to their family about what happens when they game online (Figure 12). Whilst half of young people (50%, n=240) regularly talked with their family about what happens , half of young people also kept back certain things about their gaming from their family (50%, n=240). This may be due to young people not always feeling that they wanted to share some aspects of their experiences playing games with their parents, for example because they felt that they could handle challenging experiences themselves.

Figure 12: Thinking about when you game at home, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

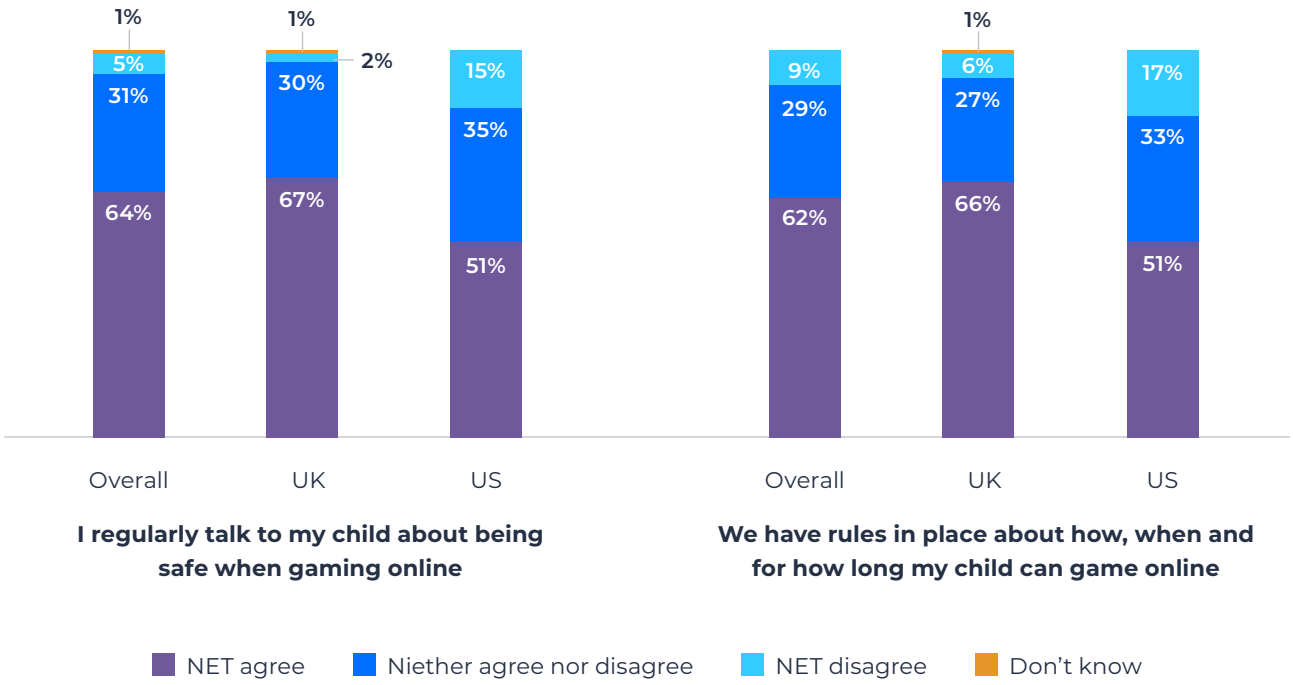


Source: Young people survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

4.3. Actions taken by parents and young people to stay safe online

Around 3 in 5 (64%, n=307) parents were talking to their child about being safe when playing online games and UK parents were more likely to do this (67% UK vs 51% US parents). Establishing rules for playing video games was also common (62%, n=298), particularly amongst UK parents (66% vs 51% of US parents) as was checking devices (59%, n=283).

Figure 13: Thinking about your child's safety when gaming online, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Source: Parent survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

Parents in the focus groups gave examples of the discussions they were having with their child about being safe online, including who they were communicating with and putting rules in place for communication (for example, not accepting friend requests from people they did not know, not meeting up with people). Several parents had spoken to their child about not sharing personal details, and the potential consequences of doing so. Parents felt that neurodivergent young people could sometimes be more susceptible to sharing information without understanding the possible implications.

"So, I think having those regular conversations and giving examples because I think some of the time kids just think it's parents just nagging and being protective. So actually, showing him examples of things that have happened in the media or documentaries where children have been interviewed and said, oh yeah, I was targeted by somebody on whatever game and whatnot. It makes it more real and easier for him to understand I think because he's at the age where he thinks he knows everything and it's fine".
(Parent)

"Basically, we go through all the scenarios. If anybody's asked you to do something, if anybody asked you to give him your information, because he has his own little debit card and so don't give your information, share your card number and all that kind of stuff. So we go through financial issues, we go through sexualized, make sure nothing's sexualized, and then just bullying. We go over that. No bullying with friends and no texting because he has a phone too, so none of that kind of stuff. So I know that's not the gaming world, but it all blends together".
(Parent)

There were discussions about parents using YouTube videos, documentaries or online courses to help educate themselves about online safety and what they should be talking to their child about.[6]

4.3.1. Parents' use of online safety tools

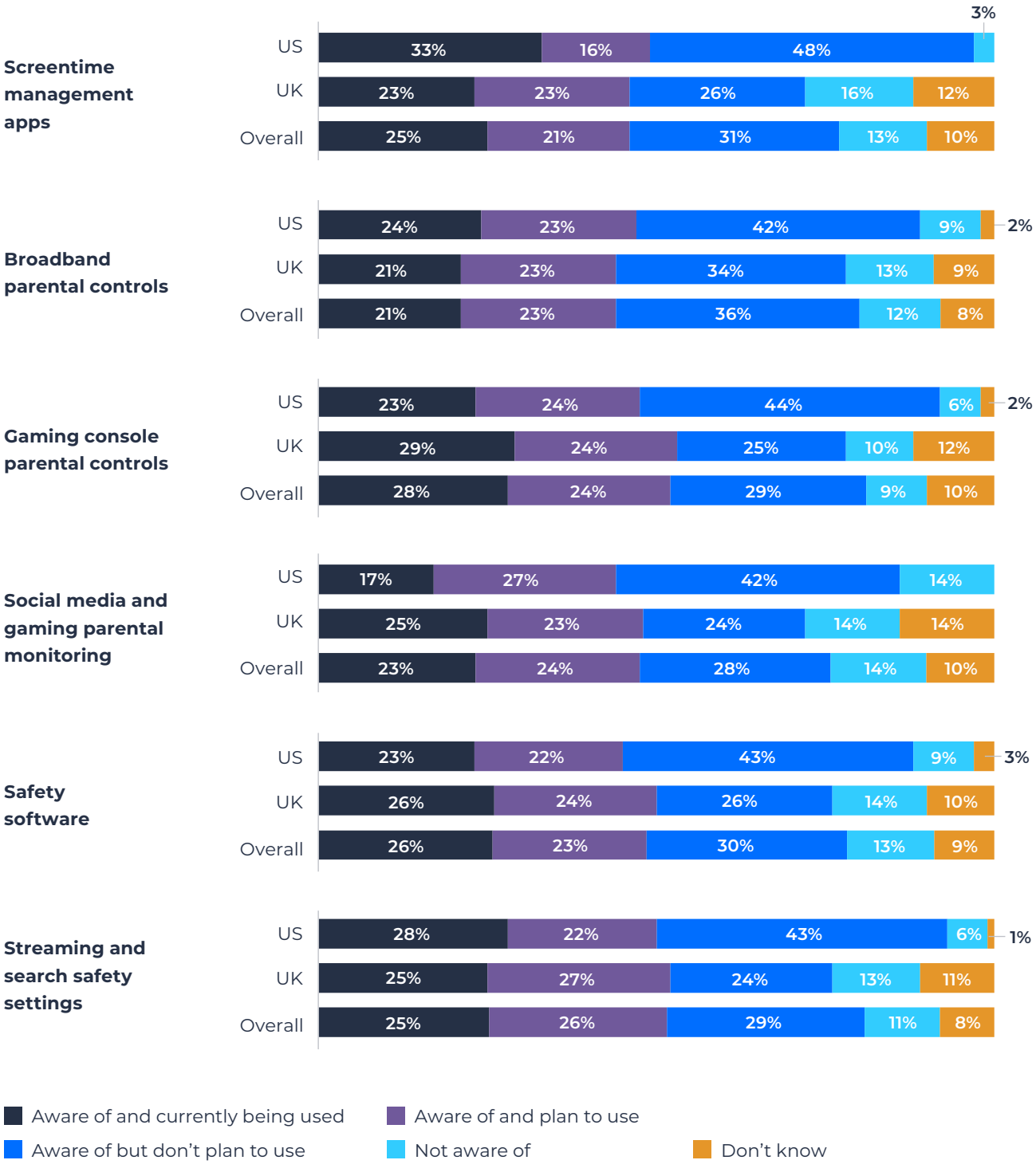
Whilst parents were discussing online safety with their child and putting rules in place for gaming, the use of technical online safety tools or controls was minimal (see Figure 14).

Parents were most likely to be using gaming console parental controls (28%, n=134) and safety software (26%, n=125). In the UK, gaming console parental controls (29%, n=107), safety software (26%, n=97) and social media and gaming parental monitoring (25%, n=93) were the measures most commonly used. In the US, screentime management apps (33%, n=37) and streaming and search safety settings (28%, n=31) were most common. Between 16% and 27% of parents across both countries expressed an intention to start to use one or more safety tool/control in the future.

However, as is the case with parents generally, there were many parents of neurodivergent young people who were unaware of technical safety tools or controls available, or were aware of them but not intending to use them. 48% of parents (n=230) said they were unaware of, or didn't intend to use, broadband parental controls, and 44% (n=211) said they were unaware of, or didn't intend to use, screentime management apps. As discussed earlier, qualitatively it appears that lack of knowledge or research were the main reasons for these tools/controls not being used by parents and that many parents were approaching online safety with their child from a dialogue/discussion perspective rather than being reliant on sanctions or controls.

6. *Research participants did not highlight specific sources of support. However common sources include Google's Be Internet Awesome, Common Sense Media and FOSI in the US, alongside Internet Matters and Ask About Games in the UK.*

Figure 14: Which, if any, of the following types of technical safety tools or controls were you aware of and have used within the digital devices in your home?



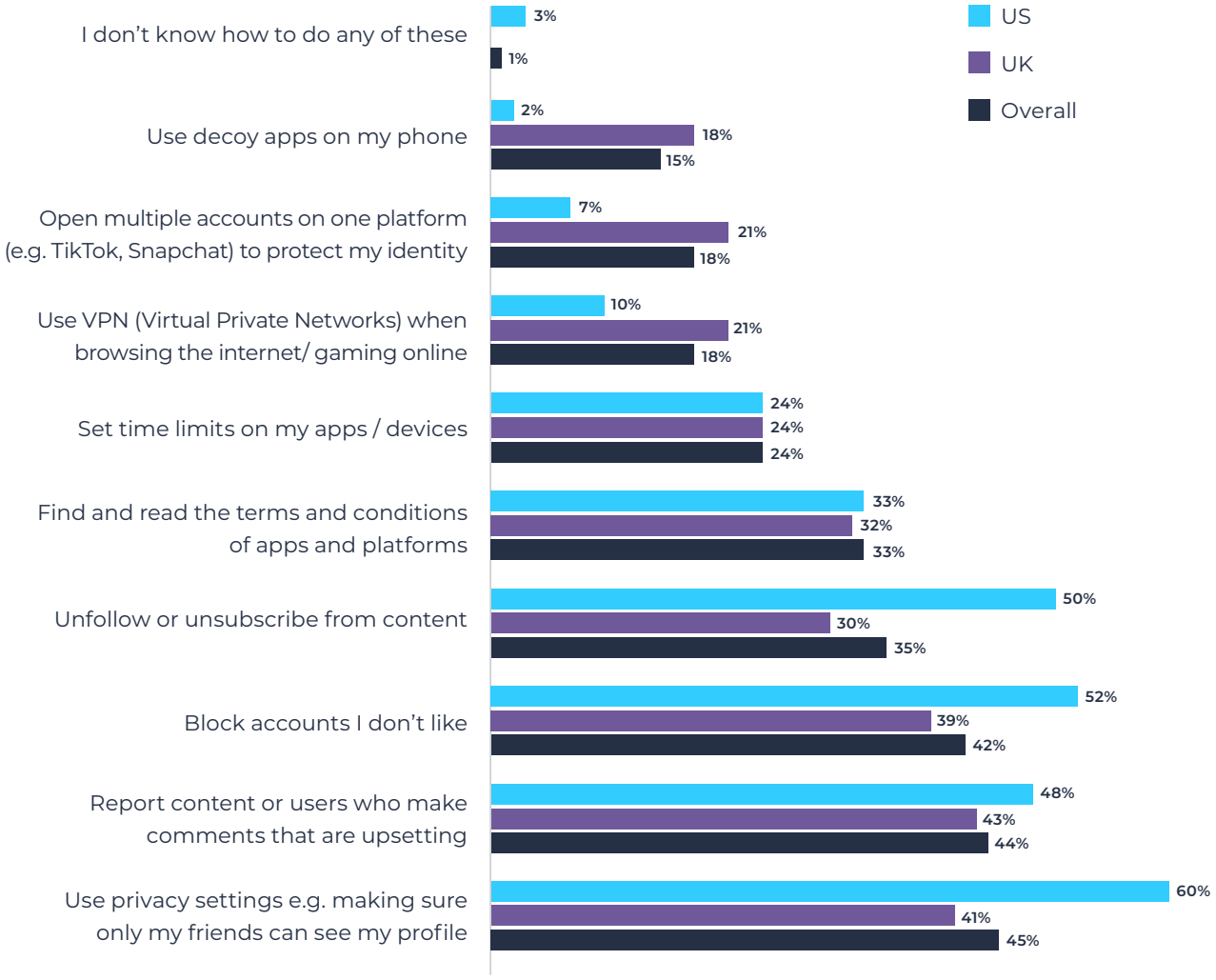
Source: Parent survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

4.3.2. Young people's use of online safety tools

Many of the neurodivergent young people surveyed were knowledgeable about at least some methods of protecting themselves online. Over half (54%, n=258) knew where to get help if they came across a problem online, although a fifth (21%, n=101) did not know where to go for help.

Less than half of neurodivergent young people were aware of certain actions that they could take to keep themselves safe online, suggesting that more could be done to educate young people. As shown in Figure 15, over 2 in 5 young people knew how to report content or users who made upsetting comments (UK 43%, US 48%). Knowledge of how to use privacy settings and block accounts and how to unfollow or unsubscribe from content was higher amongst young people from the US. Knowledge of how to use decoy apps, open multiple accounts on one platform and using VPNs was higher amongst UK young people.

Figure 15: Which, if any, of the following do you know how to do?



Source: Young People survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

Qualitatively, young people mentioned using online safety tools including VPNs, antivirus software, ad blockers and tracker blockers, alongside taking actions such as reporting issues to moderators, blocking other players and telling their parents about issues.

> *"But I do have a VPN just in case something bad goes wrong. So I always use VPN just in case like, just IP address grabbers or something. Got to be very careful around here".*
> **(US Young Person, 11-14 years old)**

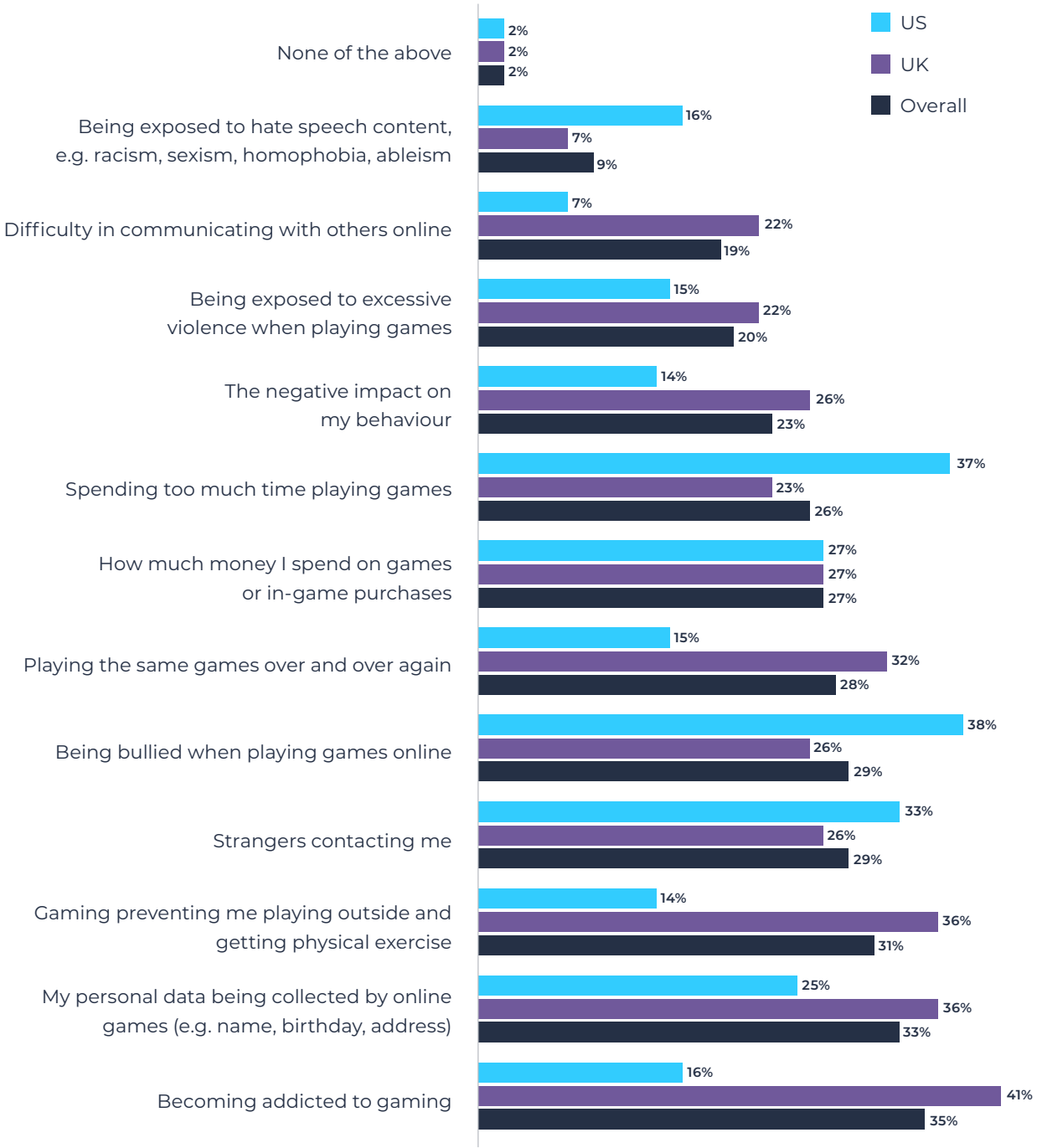
> *"I left the server, reported the player and blocked the player just in case they were to add my account or anything".*
> **(US Young Person, 11-14 years old)**

4.4. Young people's experience of online risks

Neurodivergent young people had concerns about their gaming habits (Figure 15), with becoming addicted to gaming (35%, n=169), personal data being collected (33%, n=159) and gaming preventing them playing outside and getting physical exercise (31%, n=150) being the main concerns.

Over a quarter had concerns about being contacted by strangers (29%, n=137), being bullied (29%, n=137), playing the same games repeatedly (28%, n=135), the amount of money spent on games on in-game purchases (27%, n=131) and spending too much time playing games (26%, n=126).

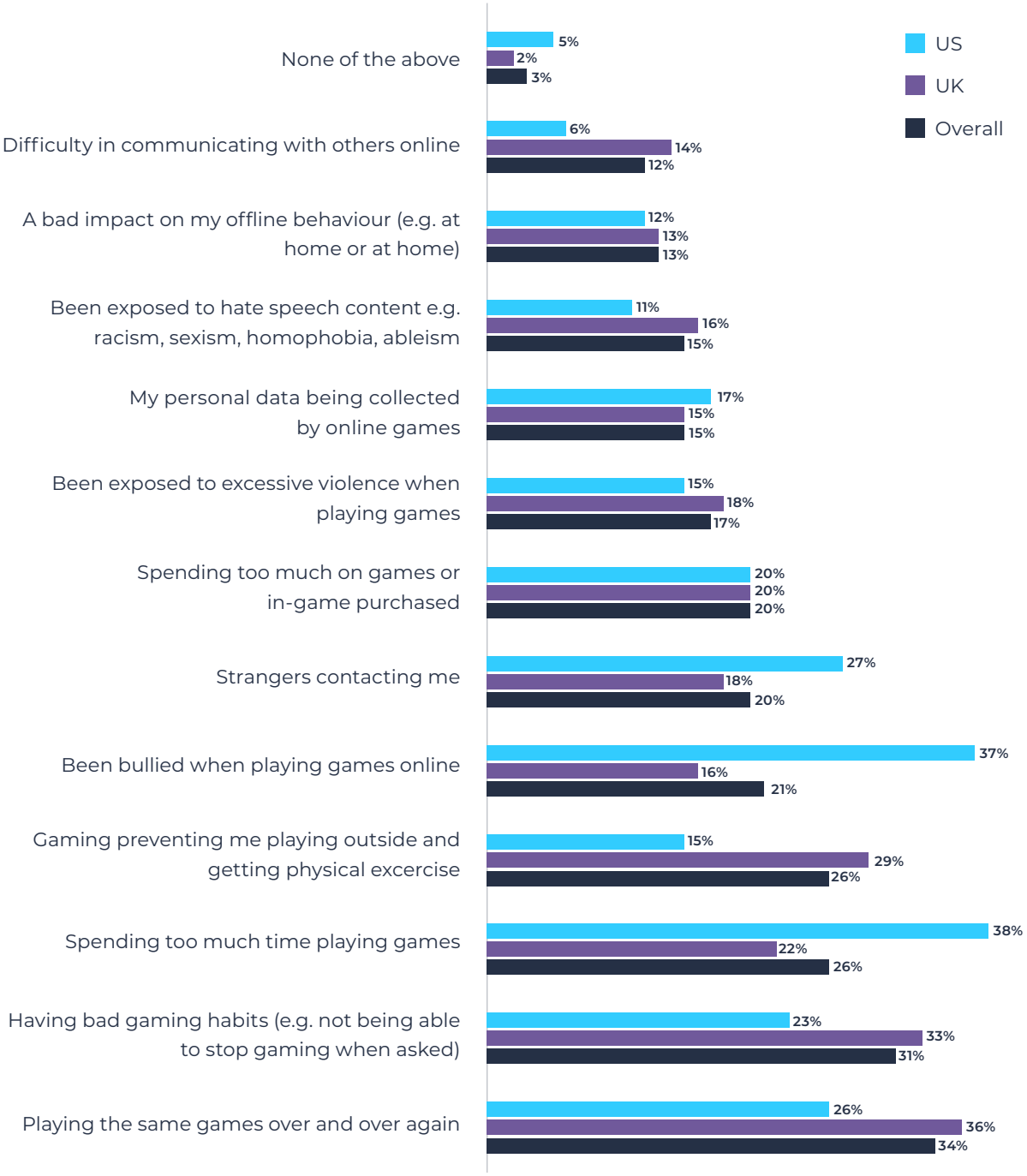
Figure 16: Here are some concerns playing games on game consoles and mobile devices can have on people. Thinking about your own gaming experience, which of the following concerns you about gaming?



Source: Young people survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

Young people's exposure to risk online was varied. Over 2 in 5 young people (44%, n=210) often saw or heard bad things when gaming online (24% disagreed, 32% neither agreed nor disagreed). Qualitatively, there were mentions of hearing inappropriate language including rude and derogatory language.

Figure 17: And which, if any, have happened to you when gaming online?



Source: Young people survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

Quantitatively, young people's experience of issues whilst playing games online were related to their own gaming habits and behaviours, particularly the time they spent gaming and the impact on other activities, reflecting the challenges discussed earlier in the report. Neurodivergent young people can show patterns of repetitive behaviour and a third (34%, n=163) reported playing the same games repeatedly. Spending too much time gaming (26%, n=125) and it preventing them playing outside and getting physical exercise (26%, n=125) were also identified as issues with gaming by neurodivergent young people. Having bad gaming habits (31%, n=149) was also mentioned which may include young people finding it difficult to stop gaming to do other tasks, or becoming frustrated by games they were playing.

Around a fifth or less of young people had experience of issues such as bullying online, being contacted by strangers, and exposure to violence and hate speech. Qualitatively, parents mentioned their children experiencing inappropriate conversations, engagement with violent games, and being hacked.

Where neurodivergent young people had experienced an issue when playing games online, many had told their parents (39%, n=169) or reported the content or users (35%, n=153). Setting personal time limits was also common (31%, n=135) reflecting the issues with gaming habits that many young people mentioned (see Figure 17).

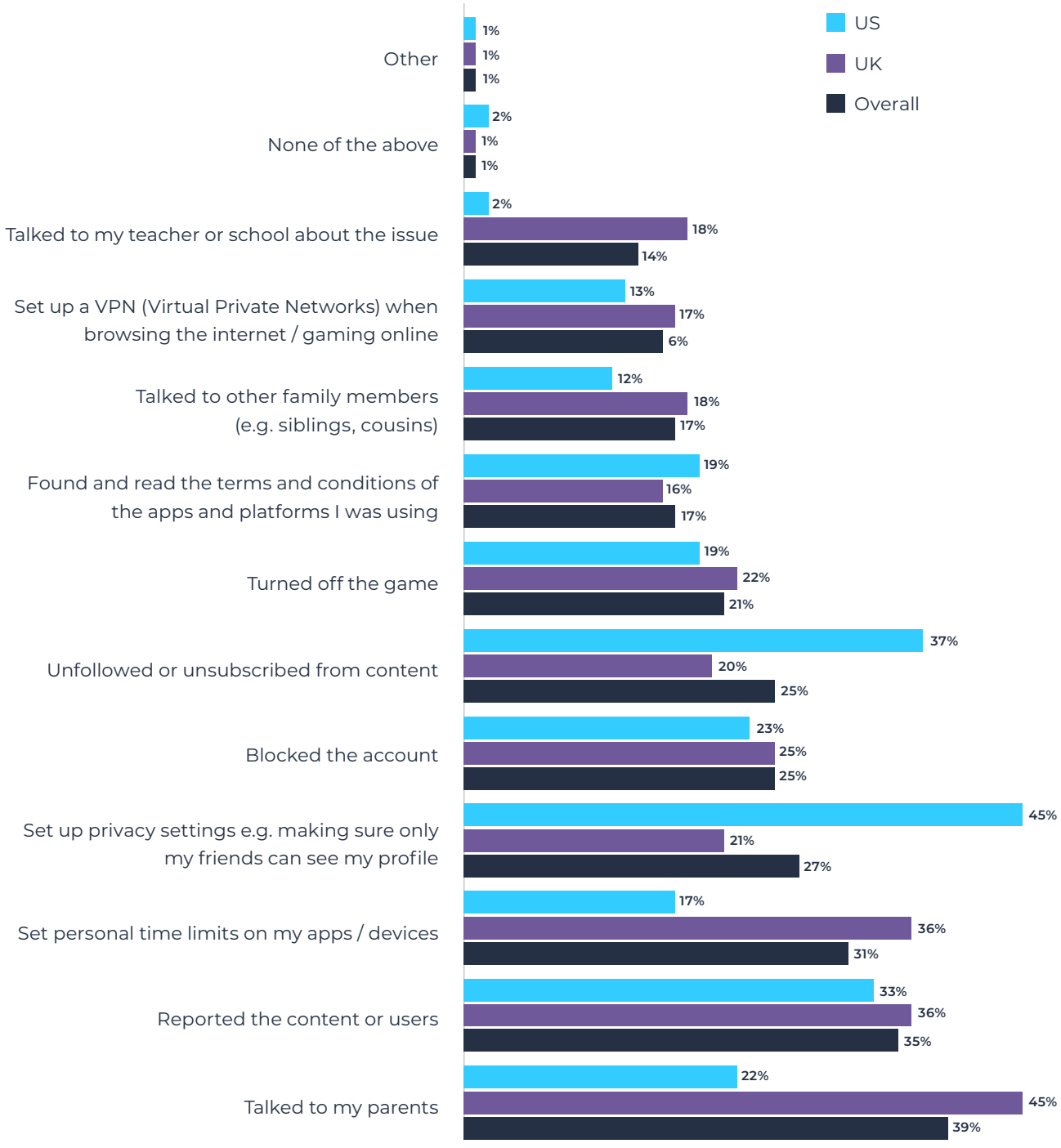
For young people in the focus groups, feelings of safety whilst playing video games were broadly positive. Where issues had arisen this included worries about being hacked, others using inappropriate language, or threats of violence. Young people appeared pragmatic about these experiences and most, although not all, did not feel that it had affected their feelings of safety and were able to talk confidently about assessing the severity of the experience and then making a decision about whether to take action (e.g. reporting to a moderator or telling their parents).

> *"Depends on the situation. If it was very bad, then I'd probably tell someone like a moderator or my parents. But if it wasn't that bad, then I'd probably move on quite quickly."*
> **(UK Young Person, 11-14 years old)**

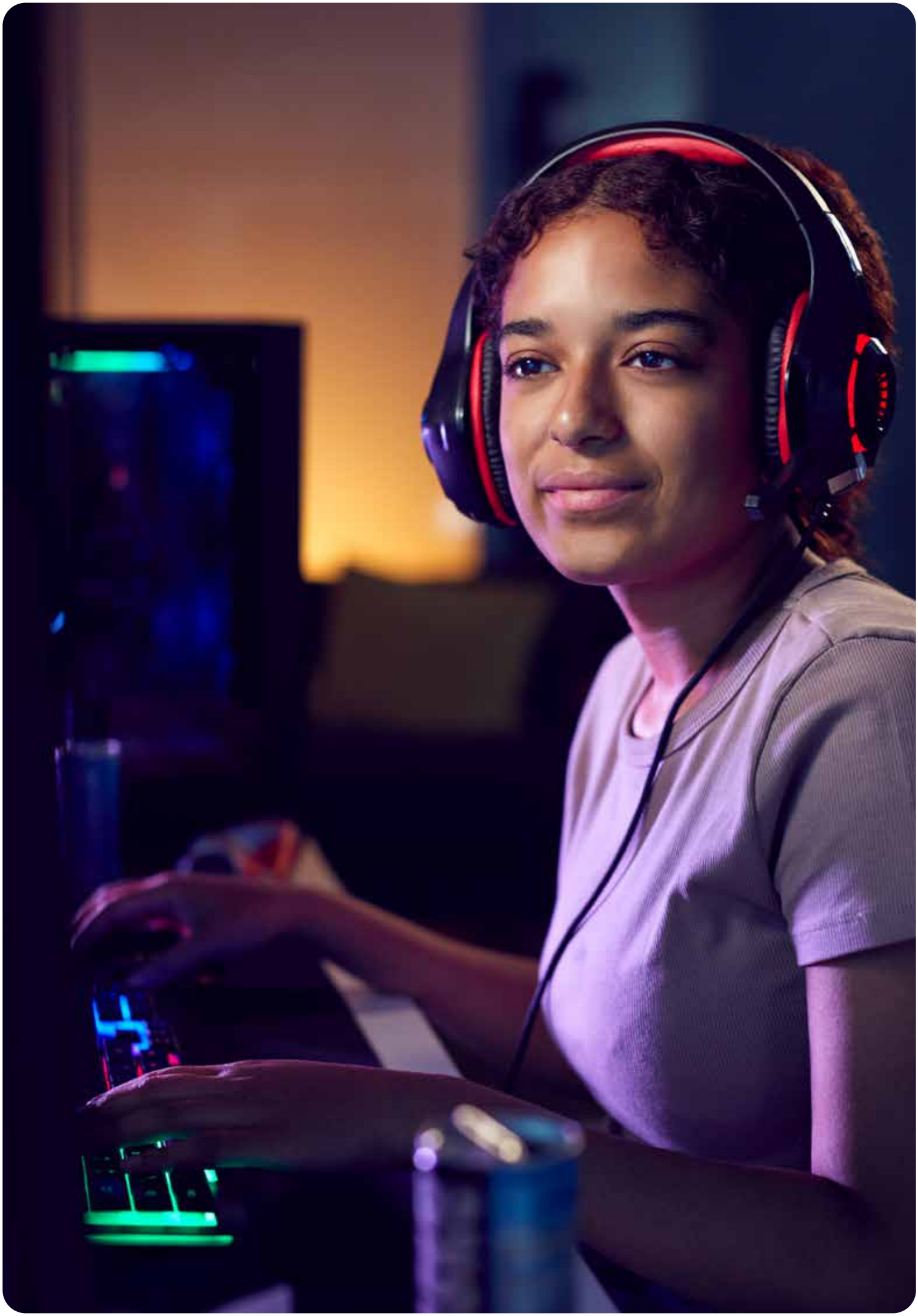
> *"I usually never felt unsafe on the platform before, but if I was to feel unsafe, I would definitely tell my mother or one of my family members about "*
> **(US young person, 15-17 years old)**

> *"I've normally felt unsafe in games like {online game} because people could easily hack into your account and take one of your things that you worked really hard on. I'm always careful to see scams, see if something's worth more than the other to those things".*
> **(UK Young Person, 11-14 years old)**

Figure 18: You mentioned that you've experienced an issue when gaming online. What did you do as a result?



Source: Young people survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.



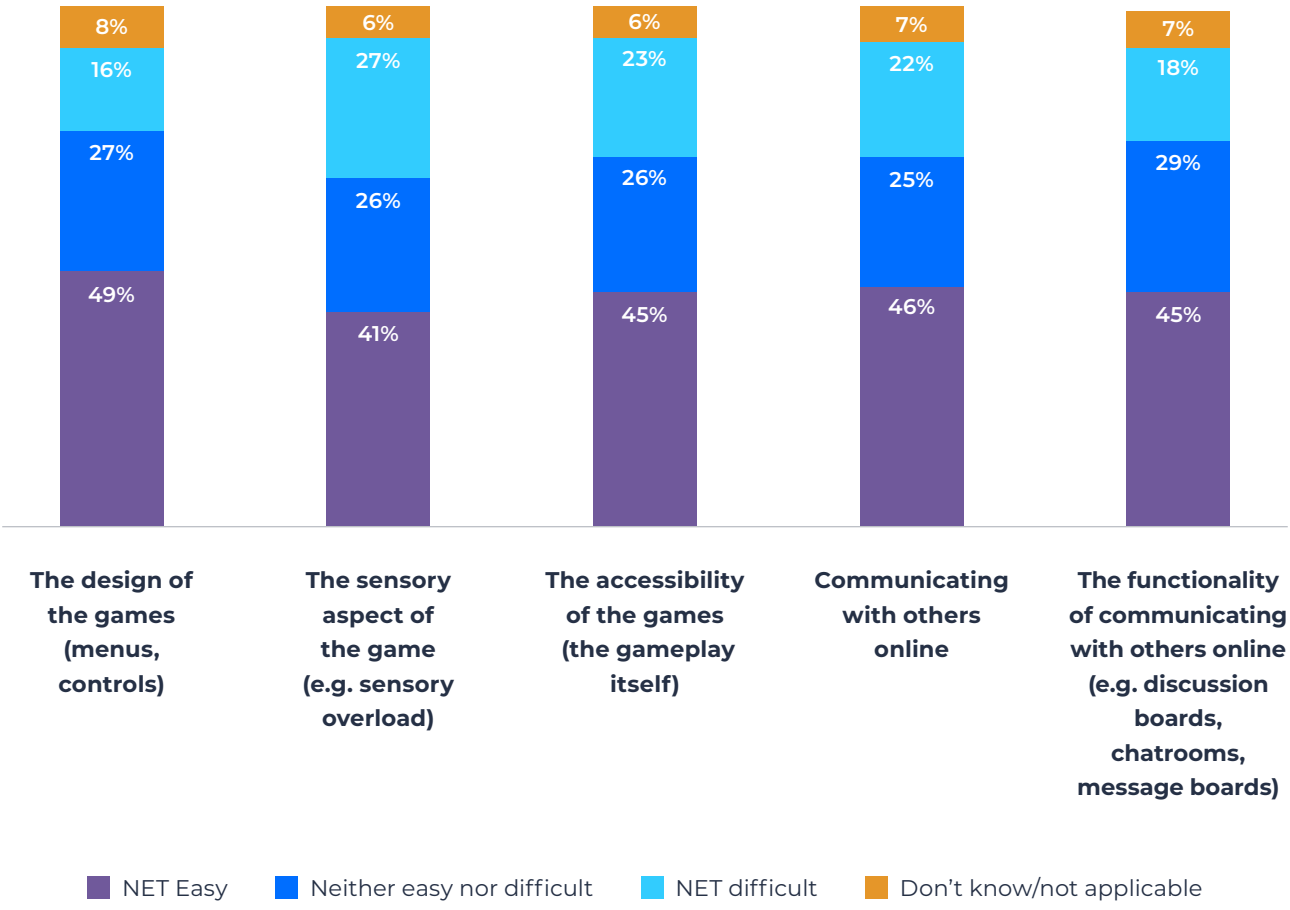
5. Supporting neurodivergent young people to be safe whilst playing video games

This section of the report focuses on the aspects of playing games online that neurodivergent young people find difficult, and the types of support or resources that would be helpful in ensuring that neurodivergent young people can game safely and positively.

5.1. Accessibility of online games for neurodivergent young people

Young people found the sensory aspect of gaming the most challenging (27% rated as difficult, n=130), followed by the accessibility of games (23% rated as difficult, n=110) and communicating with others online (22% rated as difficult, n=106).

Figure 19: When gaming online, which, if any, of the following parts of gaming do you find easy or difficult?

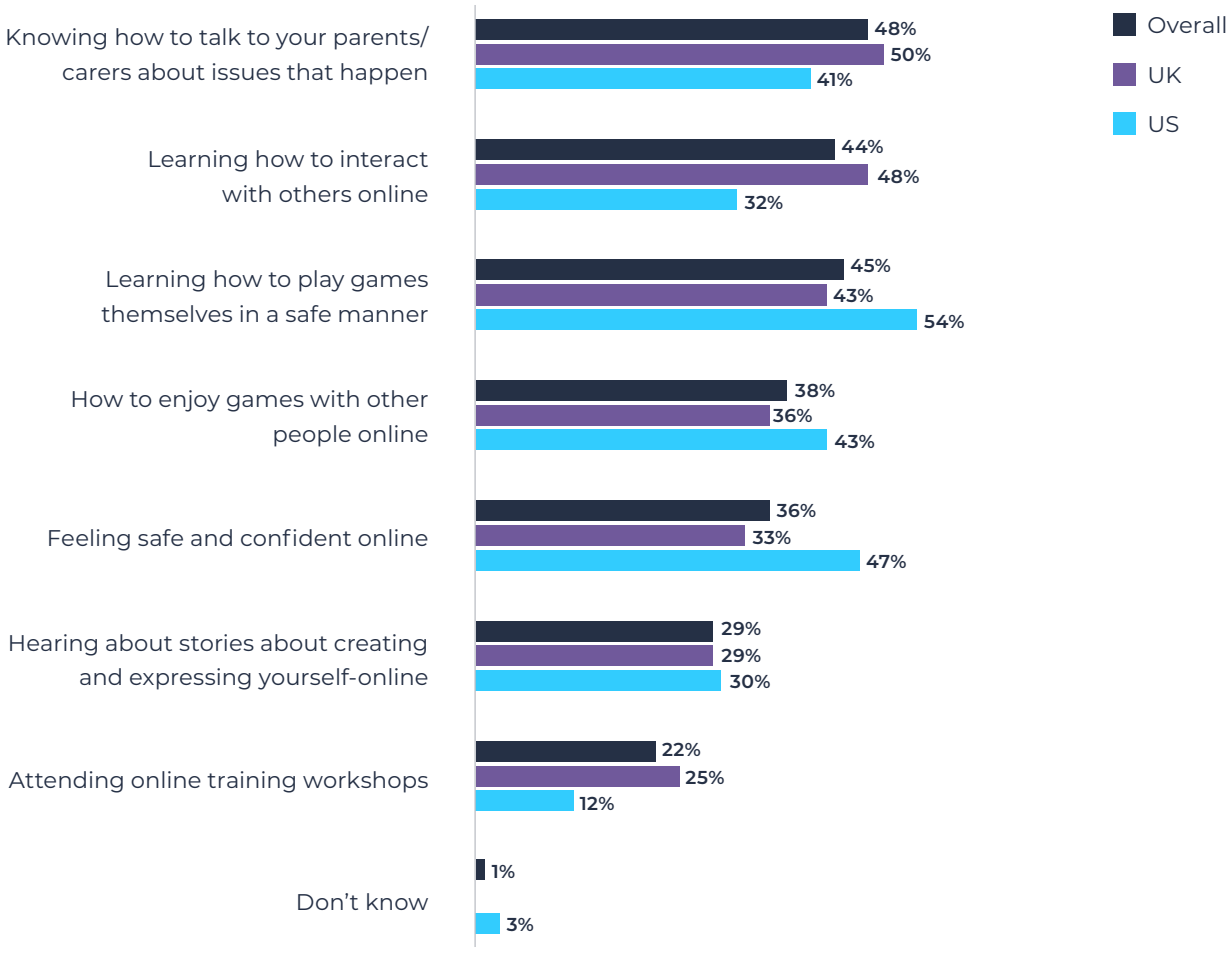


Source: Young people survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

5.2. Sources of support and resources for young people

Young people wanted more help with knowing how to talk to their parents/carers about issues that may happen whilst they were playing online games (48%, n=229). Support with learning how to interact with others online (44%, n=213) and how to play games in a safer manner (45%, n=217) was also important. Young people had less interest in attending online training workshops and hearing stories about creating and expressing themselves online.

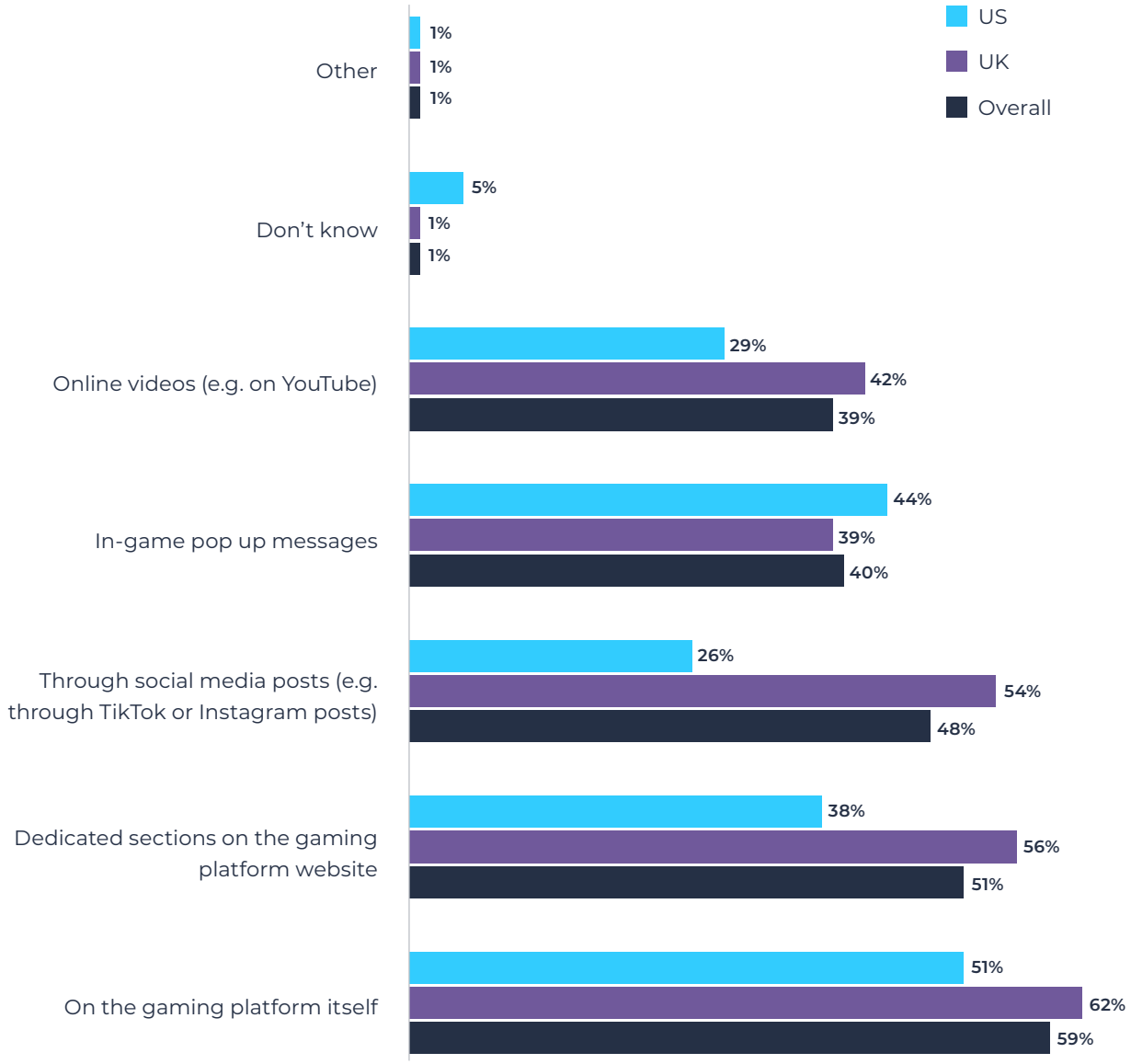
Figure 20: Thinking about how to learn to keep yourself safe online whilst you game in the future, what would you see as important to you?



Source: Young People survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

Over half of young people would like to find out about online safety on the gaming platform (59%, n=284), or through dedicated sections on the gaming platform website (51%, n=247). There was also good support for online safety information being provided through social media posts and online videos from UK young people.

Figure 21: Where would you like to find out about online safety?

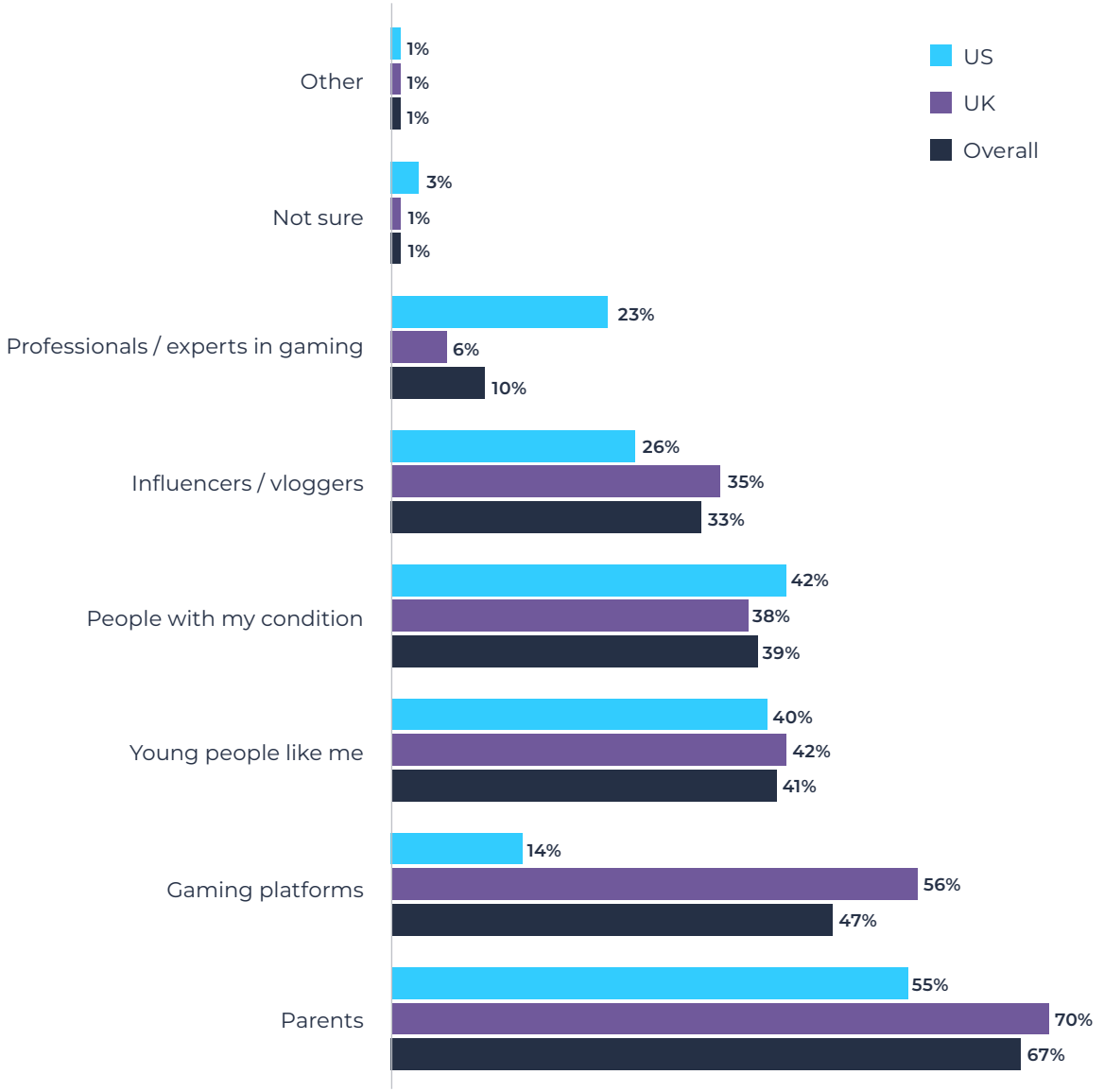


Source: Young People survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

Most neurodivergent young people thought their parents were best placed to speak to them about online safety (67%, n=320), although this was much higher amongst UK young people (70% UK vs 55% US). Gaming platforms as a source of online safety information was of more interest to UK young people, with over half (56%, n=208) reporting that gaming platforms would be best placed to talk to them about online safety, compared to just 14% (n=16) of US young people.

Around 2 in 5 young people in both the UK and US (28% and 42% respectively) felt that other people with a condition like them would be best placed to talk to them about online safety.

Figure 22: Who do you think would be best to talk to you about online safety?



Source: Young People survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

5.3. Parents' use of educational resources and views on what would help

On the development of new educational resources, parents thought the following would be helpful:

- Game-specific resources – what particular features of a game parents need to know about or consider.
- A tutorial (for each game) that young people can watch that focuses on potential dangers to look out for, and where to find the safety features within the game etc.
- Using a YouTuber/influencer to deliver online safety messages.
- A focus on how to report concerns to the gaming platform.
- More clarity within gaming platforms about where to find safety tools and how to use them.

5.4. Young people's views on educational resources and what would help

Qualitatively, young people found it challenging to describe their requirements for a new resource to support their safety online whilst playing video games. Older teens were more likely to report feeling safe online already and others gave a mixed view on whether they would use a new resource, as opposed to speaking to their parents about online safety.

Young people suggested that a resource should:

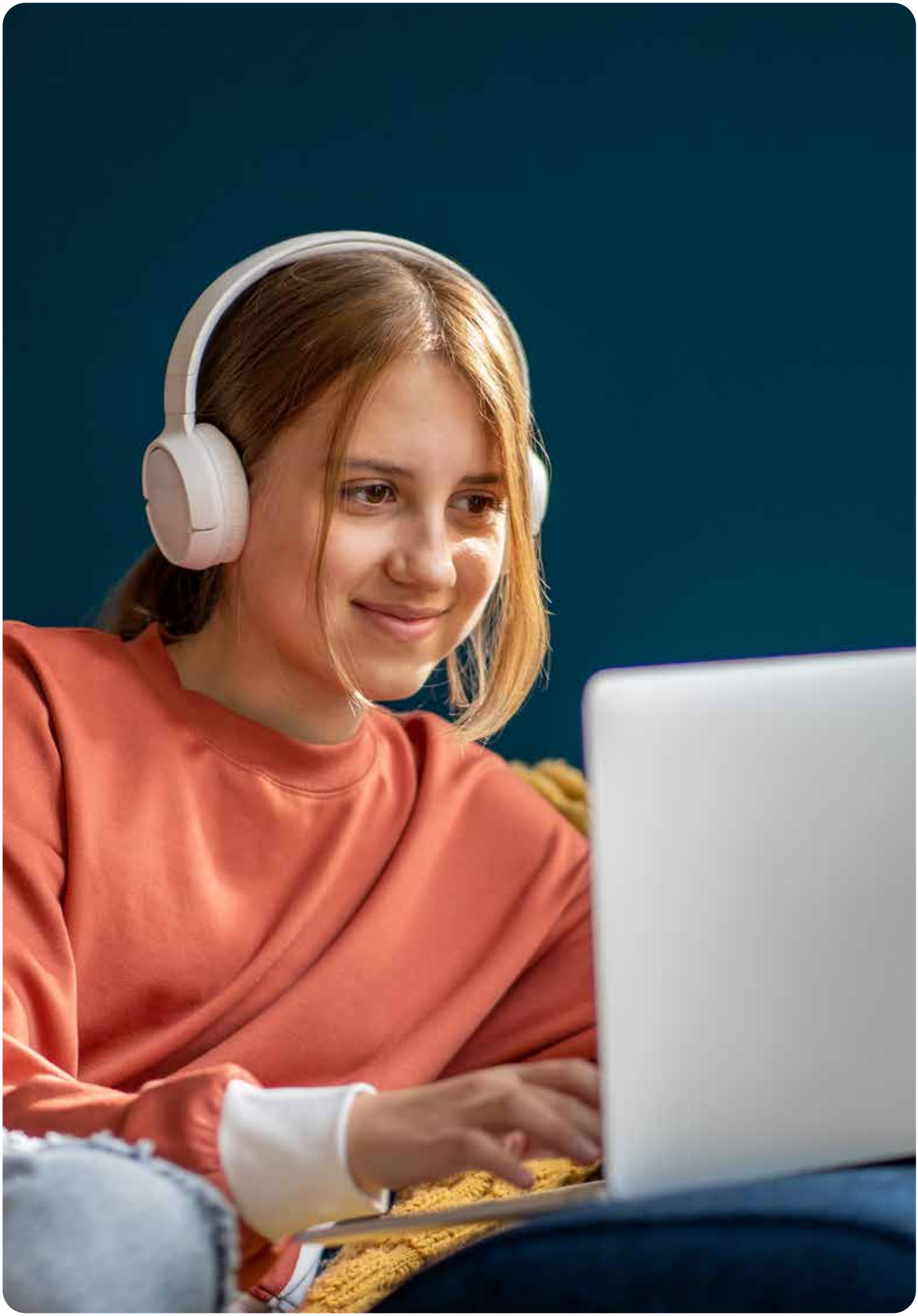
- Not be too formal or look like something they would encounter at school.
- Include short videos (less than a minute), similar to YouTube which young people can relate to and engage with more easily.
- Include practical real-life examples that are relatable.
- Be age-appropriate and not too babyish.
- Be interactive – e.g. with the opportunity to click on things – so it's more engaging.
- Have clear and non-patronising messaging (for example, steer away from 'do not talk to people online', but instead 'how to talk to people online').

5.5. The role of gaming platforms

Qualitatively, parents were not always sure that gaming platforms were doing enough to keep young people safe online. Some felt that gaming platforms placed too much focus on keeping children interested and less focus on safety. Others thought that safety features were not always intuitive, and that it could be difficult to find parental controls.

> *"Yeah, it's not automatic. It's not a quick, easy thing to find. You have to go through different lists and try to find the information you need or the block that you need, and then sometimes it blocks too much and you're like, then you can't do anything"*
> **(Parent)**

> *"And from my understanding, a lot of games on the small amount I have read, a lot of games are actually designed by autistic people so they know what appeals to them. I was told that [name of game] was designed by someone that was autistic and so they know how to get their attention, they know how to keep them wanting to play it and what have you, which is great. But what about all the other things? What about all the risks out there?"*
> **(Parent)**



6. Neurodivergent young people and Roblox

In this section we discuss how neurodivergent young people are currently using Roblox, including how frequently they were playing, views on safety and how Roblox could better support neurodivergent young people on the platform. This section also presents the findings from Internet Matters bi-annual tracker which surveys 2,000 parents and 1,000 young people aged 9-17.

6.1. Young people's engagement with Roblox

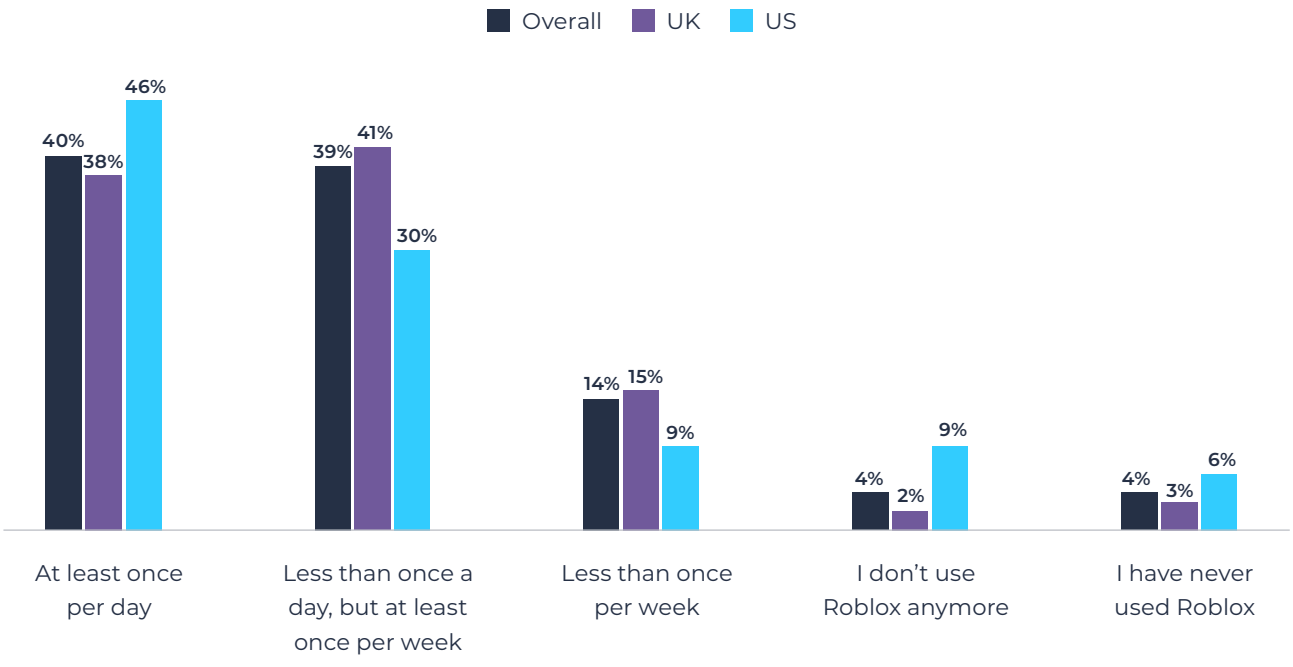
The majority of 12-17 year old neurodivergent young people who responded to the survey were currently playing Roblox (92%, n=441). Only 4% (n=19) had never used Roblox, and 4% (n=19) had used Roblox previously.

Young people were playing Roblox frequently with 2 in 5 (40%, n=193) playing at least once a day and this being even higher amongst US young people (46% vs. 38% of UK young people).

According to the survey, the most popular games amongst young people playing Roblox were:

- Adopt Me! (61%)
- Tower of Hell (57%)
- Brookhaven (51%)
- Meepcity (14%)
- Shindo Life (11%)

Figure 23: Frequency of Roblox play

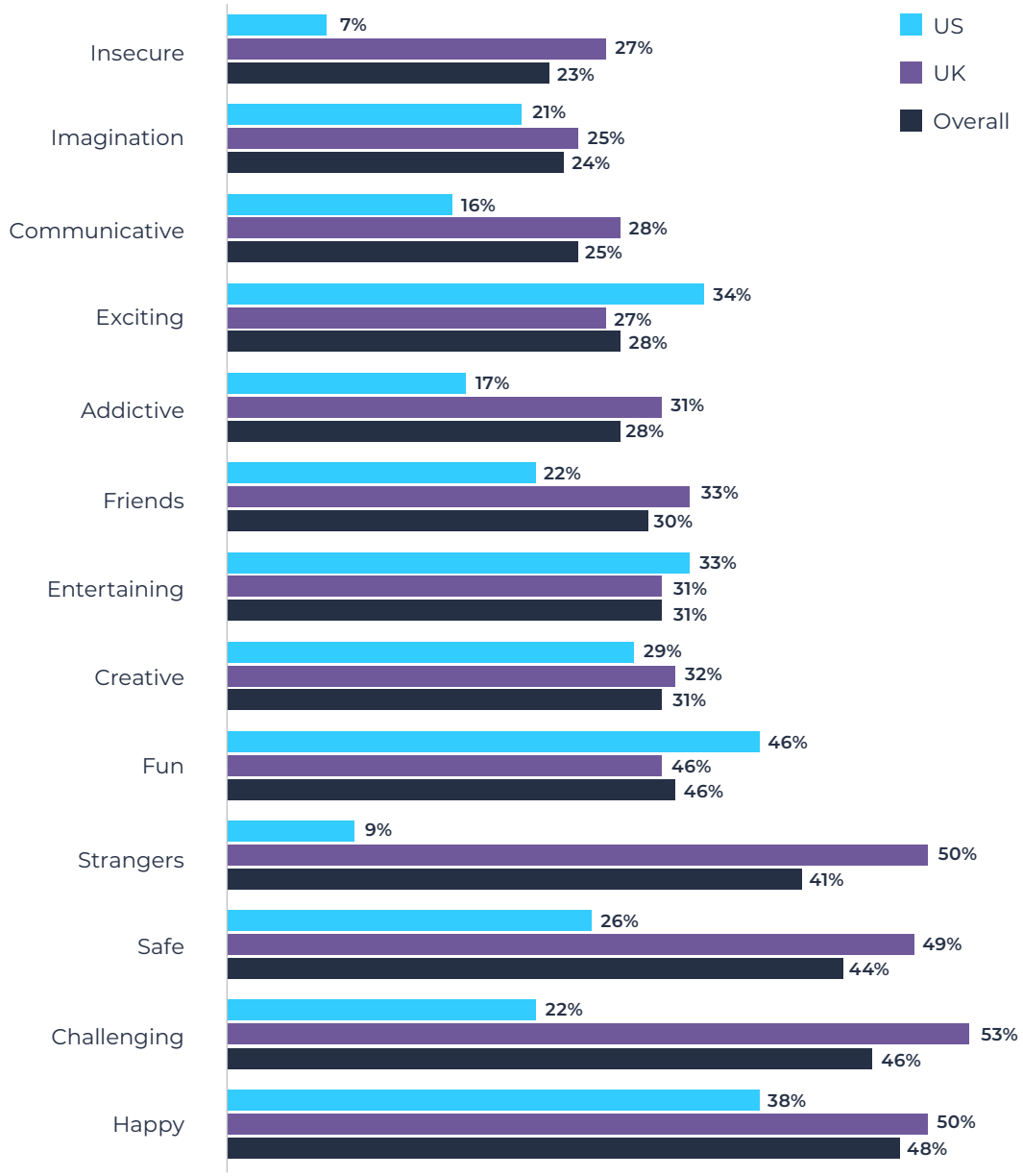


Source: Young people survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

6.2. Perceptions of Roblox

Neurodivergent young people associated Roblox with being happy (48%, n=212), challenging (46%, n=205) and safe (44%, n=196). Around 2 in 5 young people (41%. n=183) associated Roblox with 'strangers', although this was mainly amongst UK young people (50% UK young people vs 9% US young people).

Figure 24: Words associated with Roblox



Source: Young People survey. Base: all respondents who play Roblox UK 350, US 94.

Young people in the focus groups spoke positively about the variety of games on Roblox, the ability to role play, and the opportunities it provided to connect and communicate with others whilst playing.

> *"I like having the experiences, such as role-playing, hanging out with my friends or family members. People can make games for each other for other people to play".*
> **UK young person, 11-14 years old)**

6.3. Safety on Roblox

Qualitatively, young people had mixed views about how safe they felt whilst playing Roblox. For a few young people, Roblox was a place where they felt very safe.

> *" I enjoy the platform because it's extremely simple to use. It's a great way to meet other people outside of other circles. And also it's a pretty universal way to connect that doesn't take much experience from anyone. You can introduce people to gaming that way, people who aren't so tech savvy, et cetera, et cetera. And I feel safe playing it".*
> **(US young person, 15-17 years old)**

Some spoke of Roblox being young people's "happy place" or feeling like "therapy", further suggesting feelings of safety.

Others were less positive about their feelings of safety on the platform with mentions of toxic players, limited moderation and hacking.

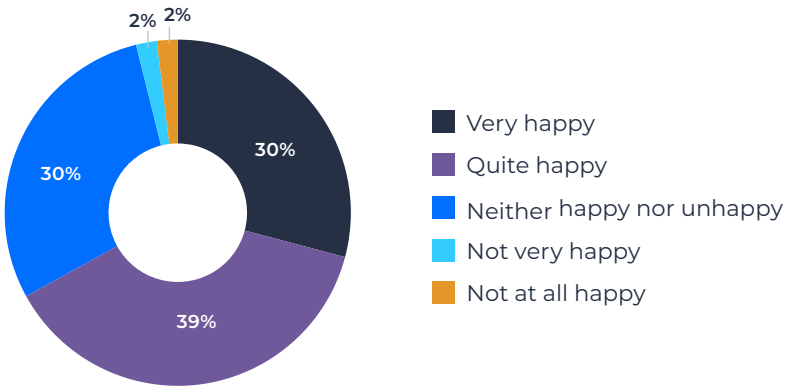
> *"I think Roblox, and I don't mean this in a really harsh way, but it does seem a lot more unsafe than most other games in that I hear a lot more about safety issues in Roblox than I do in other games. And that may just be down to how the game is. I mean there are hundreds, there are millions of smaller games within games and the player base is massive so it may just be really difficult to moderate everything, but I feel like if they wanted to, they could put some more money and energy into making it a bit safer, which I don't know if they do. I feel like they almost turn a blind eye to it"*
> **(UK Young person, 15-17 years old)**

Young people suggested ways in which they felt they could be better supported by Roblox. These included:

- Strengthening the moderation of games
- Clearer signposting to the 'report' button within the platform
- Introducing a report button for spamming
- Quicker responses and resolutions to complaints/issues
- Addressing the issue of the term "autistic" being used as an insult within the platform
- Development of a Roblox platform that is solely for neurodivergent young people

Over four in five (85%, n=410) young people had looked for advice online on how to stay safe when playing Roblox. As shown in Figure 24, 69% (n=283) had been very happy or quite happy with the outcome.

Figure 25: Have you ever looked for advice online on how to stay safe when playing Roblox; if so, how happy or unhappy were you with the outcome?



Source: Young People survey. Base: all respondents who have looked for advice when playing Roblox: 410.

6.4. Perceptions of Roblox – Feedback from the Internet Matters tracker

An additional insight into UK young people's attitudes towards Roblox was achieved through the inclusion of specific questions in the Internet Matters bi-annual tracker – a nationally representative survey of approximately 2,000 parents and 1,000 young people aged 9-17. Care should be taken in the interpretation of these findings, due to the differences in the sample group for the tracker (including a wider age range and the focus on the general population rather than just neurodivergent young people) and the difference in the methodological approach taken to the tracker survey.

Of the 1,000 young people who completed the Internet Matters tracker in November 2023, 37% (n=369) had played Roblox. Of these 12% (n=43) had an autism (n=26) or ADHD (n=17). We present below the findings from all young people who reported playing Roblox, alongside those specifically who are neurodivergent (i.e. those who say they have autism or ADHD).

6.4.1. Benefits of Roblox

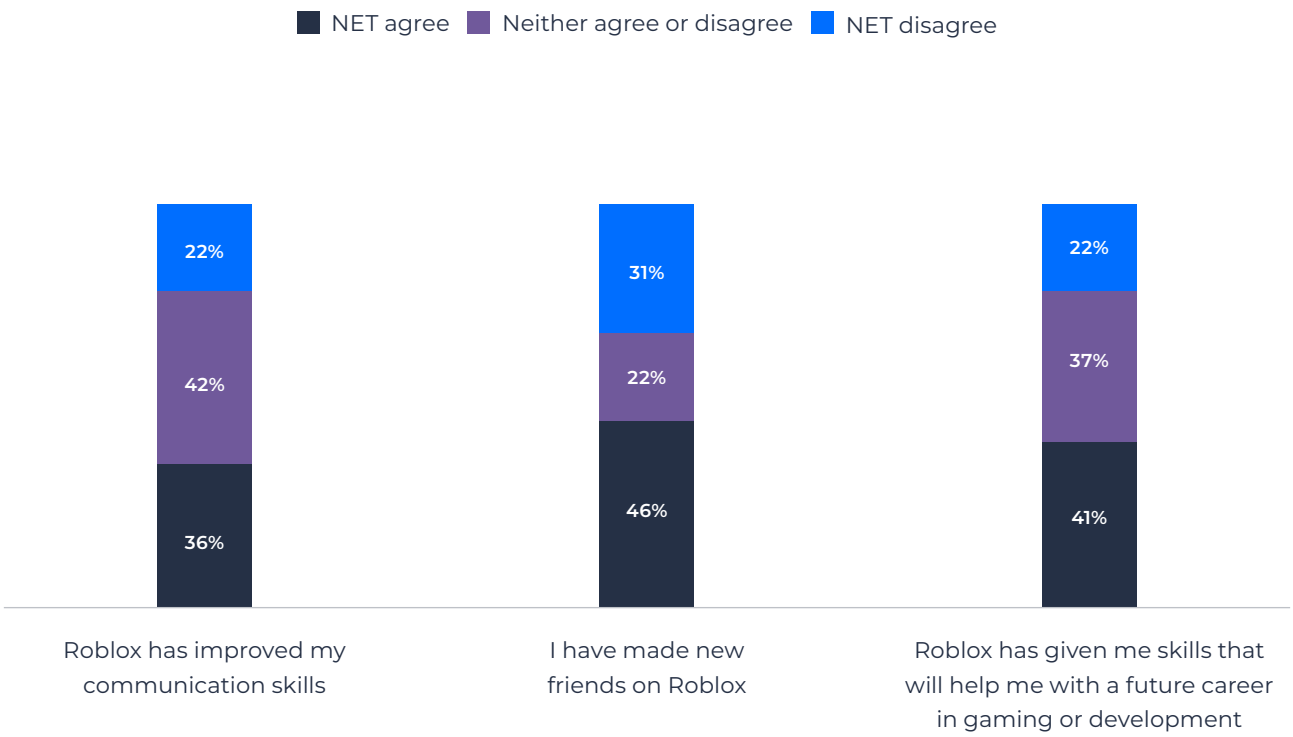
Around half (47% agreed, n=172) of young people did not feel they were playing Roblox too much, although 31% (n=113) did feel they were. Neurodivergent young people were more concerned about the time they spent playing Roblox (51% thought they played Roblox too much).

As shown in Figure 26, nearly half of young people who played Roblox were positive about the benefits of playing on their development of friendships (46%, n=171), although 3 in 10 disagreed that this was the case (31%, n=116). This broadly reflects the views of neurodivergent young people (46% agreed they had made new friends on Roblox, 22% disagreed).

Around 2 in 5 young people felt that Roblox had given them the skills to help them in a future career in gaming or development (41%, n=135), compared to 46% (n=20) of neurodivergent young people.

Over a third of young people thought Roblox had improved their communication skills (36%, n=133), although over 1 in 4 disagreed (22%, n=81). Slightly more neurodivergent young people felt that Roblox had improved their communication skills (44%, n=19).

Figure 26: Benefits of Roblox – Internet Matters Tracker



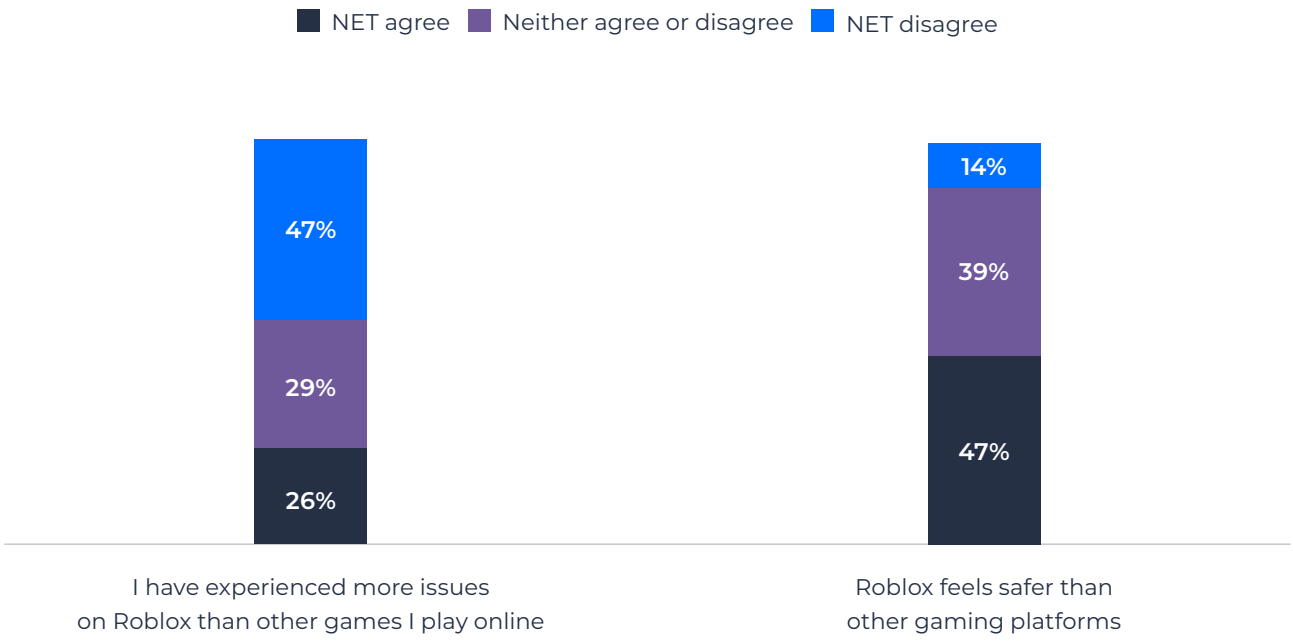
Source: Internet Matter tracker. Base: Young people who play Roblox (369)

6.4.2. Safety on Roblox

Young people were broadly positive about safety whilst playing Roblox. Only a quarter of young people (26%, n=96) had experienced more issues on Roblox than other games they played online, and 47% (n=173) thought that Roblox felt safer than other gaming platforms (39% were unsure).

Neurodivergent young people were more likely to report facing issues on Roblox, with over a third (37%, n=16) agreeing that this was the case – but over half (53%, n=23) said that Roblox feels safer than other gaming platforms.

Figure 27: Safety on Roblox – Internet Matters Tracker



Source: Internet Matter tracker. Base: Young people who play Roblox (369)

7. Our conclusions and response

Amongst all the activities available online, playing video games is one of - if not the most - significant and popular for young people.[7] This is true generally, but perhaps especially so for young people who are neurodivergent, including autistic young people.

We undertook this research to better understand how neurodivergent young people experience playing video games online: what they enjoy about it, which aspects they find difficult or risky, how they try to stay safe and the support they would like to see. This insight is vital if we are to ensure that neurodivergent young people are able to enjoy the many benefits of playing online games safely and positively, while avoiding the risks as much as possible. Speaking to parents has enabled us to gain another perspective on these important questions, with agreement in many areas but disagreement in others.

Based on everything we have learned, below are the key findings and how Internet Matters and Roblox are responding.

Online video games offer neurodivergent young people both benefits and risks, some of which are closely intertwined.

It was very welcome to hear from so many young people participating in this research about all the ways in which playing online games enrich their lives.

One of the most striking positives was its role in supporting young people to connect and communicate with others – something which many said they struggle with in 'real life'. Parents were also very quick to recognise this as a significant benefit. All but 2% of young people who answered our survey said they communicated with others when gaming online, suggesting that gaming platforms are just as much about social networking as they are about the gameplay itself.

But while connection offers neurodivergent young people many benefits, on the other side of the coin, it can also be challenging and risky. Parents were quick to identify concerns in this area, including the potential for young people to be exploited by those who mean them harm, or young people simply becoming too invested in their online friendships – perhaps to the detriment of connecting with others offline. Evidence from young people backed up some of these concerns: A fifth of young people said they found online communication difficult to master, and a similar proportion said they had been contacted by strangers.

Young people identified concerns of their own, particularly their struggle to balance time spent gaming with other hobbies and obligations – something which parents also felt was a significant challenge.

All in all, these findings reinforce previous research from Internet Matters (including from our Digital Wellbeing Index) that vulnerable young people (including those with health conditions) may experience particular risks from being online, but they also experience particular benefits. For this reason, the right course of action is to support them to enjoy the benefits safely, rather than to simply exclude them from online spaces.

Broadly speaking, neurodivergent young people feel safe online – although there are clear support and knowledge gaps.

A key message from this research is that the majority of young people feel they know how to stay safe online. Virtually all young people said they were confident with at least one action they could take to stay safe when gaming, such as making use of privacy settings, reporting upsetting content or users, and blocking accounts. Parents were also of the view that their children knew how to stay safe online and described their own actions to support this – predominantly having regular conversations with young people and putting rules in place for gaming.

7. *Ofcom. Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes (2023). https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/255852/childrens-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2023.pdf*

Although it is positive that many young people (and their parents) feel that they know what to do to stay safe online, it is important to reflect that this does not necessarily mean that they actually have that knowledge in reality, or that they act upon it. This is supported by the evidence, which points to areas in which young people's safety when gaming online could be improved. For example, whilst parents frequently reported having conversations with young people, half of young people said they kept back certain things about their gaming from their family, which raises questions about how effective the conversations are.

Furthermore, although virtually all young people know how to take at least one action to stay safe when gaming, there is clear room for their knowledge to be broadened – for example, less than half of young people know how to report issues to platforms. Similarly, the use of technical tools (such as parental controls) amongst parents to help support safe gaming was low.

It is therefore unsurprising that young people reported less positive experiences whilst gaming online. Most commonly, these were on the theme of being unable to control the time they spent gaming and having bad gaming habits, but significant minorities of young people said they had been bullied, contacted by strangers or spent too much money.

Greater support from parents and gaming platforms is vital

Many parents already go to great lengths to help their children stay safe online. But it can be extremely challenging, given how quickly the tech landscape evolves and the number of other pressures and concerns parents need to think about – particularly when their child is neurodivergent. Young people clearly value the support they do already receive, given that the majority tell us that parents are best placed to talk to them about online safety.

After parents, young people indicated that gaming platforms themselves were the second most important route for them to learn about how to stay safe online. Many gaming platforms have sought to improve their safety features in recent years, but this research suggests ways that these could be further enhanced, especially for neurodivergent young people. Young people often raised the need for clearer signposting to the reporting function and for complaints to be actioned more quickly, while parents mentioned the need for parental controls to be easier to use.

There was also an appetite for greater education on-platform, more closely integrated into its design. The topics young people were most interested in learning about were how to talk to parents/carers about issues that occurred when gaming, followed by advice on interacting and communicating with others safely.

How Internet Matters and Roblox are responding

This research has provided a wealth of insight into how neurodivergent young people experience online gaming, and how they can be better supported to enjoy the benefits safely while avoiding the risks as far as possible.

Response from Internet Matters

On the basis of this research, and with support from Roblox, Internet Matters has created a new suite of resources aimed at neurodivergent young people and their parents. These include three videos on the themes identified by neurodivergent young people as most important: how to talk to parents about gaming, how to interact safely when gaming and how to report concerns on Roblox. This advice is summarised in a factsheet and accompanied by another factsheet aimed directly at parents. All these resources are available here.

Response from Roblox

The purpose of Roblox supporting this project was to better understand the experience of neurodivergent individuals, in online games generally, but also on Roblox, so we can improve their and their families' experiences.

At Roblox, communication and connection with others is an essential part of almost every experience. When people interact on Roblox, we want them to feel like

they're together. People can create an avatar they love that fully expresses their individuality and represents how they want to be seen on Roblox. We also support all formats of communication from text to chat with voice to full avatar animation. We also provide options to communicate both publicly and privately. Allowing everyone to express themselves and connect with others in a safe way is central to our mission.

We are starting to iterate and innovate on ways to encourage more appropriate civil behaviour online. For text chat, we employ comprehensive text filters that block the sharing of inappropriate words, phrases, and personally identifiable information in accordance with our Community Standards. For voice chat, users must be 13+ and phone verified to access this feature. To address additional safety measures, we are starting to leverage our audio ML (machine learning) technology to reduce policy-violating behaviour in voice chat through real-time user feedback, education, and consequences, such as voice suspension for repeat offenders.

In addition, we will continue to create bespoke resources to support all of our community, including neurodivergent individuals and families, that help support areas of opportunity discovered in this research. Families can access these resources as they become available on the Roblox Civility website.

In addition to the planned co-created resources with Internet Matters for parents and youth, this project has highlighted some specific areas we will be exploring in more detail. We plan to look into how we can help neurodivergent young people feel more in control of their time spent on Roblox, being clearer on how our moderation systems work, how we can better support sensory issues, and a deeper dive into how we build on the positive communications elements raised in the report. This project is just the beginning of our work in this area, and we look forward to sharing more research and supportive advice and resources!

Internet Matters and Roblox are committed to ensuring that our research is accessible, especially to neurodivergent young people and families themselves. Therefore we are also publishing a short summary of the key findings, as well as a more visual infographic, which can both be found here. We welcome further engagement on the findings of this research and how it can be leveraged to improve the experiences of neurodivergent young people when gaming online.

Areas for further work and exploration

Given the breadth of the subject matter, these research findings have raised questions which merit further exploration than we could achieve within this project. Further research is needed to explore these issues in depth and contribute to an ever more supportive environment in which neurodivergent young people can engage in online gaming safely. These questions and issues include:

- The impact of different lengths of online gaming time on the wellbeing of neurodivergent young people.
- How different types of gaming affect self-regulation amongst neurodivergent young people.
- The opportunities presented by engagement in gaming to support wider changes that could increase neurodivergent young people's wellbeing (e.g. using tech to attend school more flexibly).
- The extent to which neurodivergent young people's voices can shape wider developments in online safety that could benefit everyone.

There is also a need for further work focused on particular aspects of neurodivergence. This research focused on autistic young people and young people with ADHD, but more work would be needed to explore the different views and experiences of these groups, in addition to other types of neurodivergence which are not a focus of this report.

Annex A – Survey sample profile

Table 2: Parent survey profile

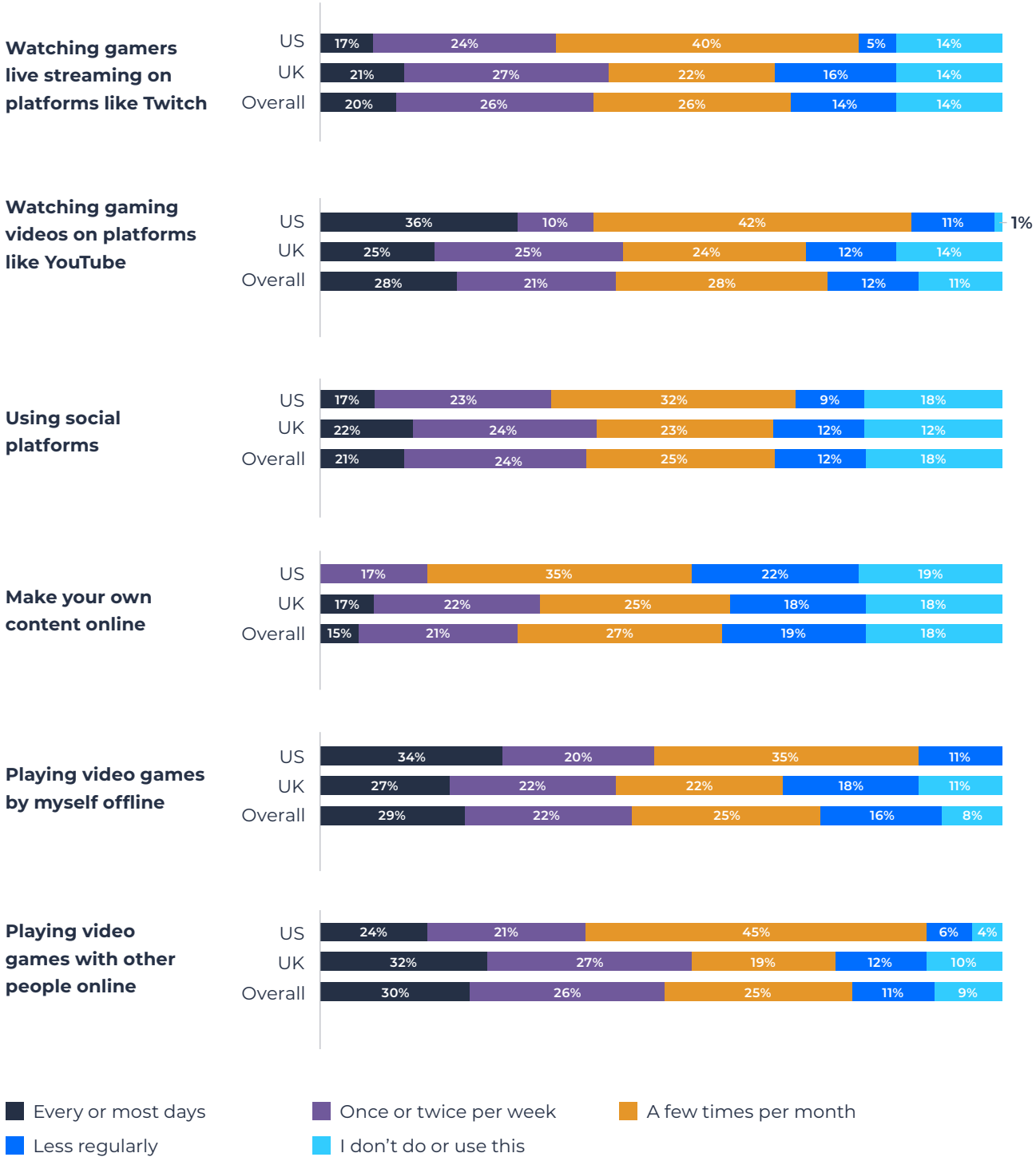
	Nos	%
Male	254	53%
Female	221	46%
Non-binary	2	<1%
Prefer not to say	3	1%
25-34	10	2%
35-44	204	43%
45-54	241	50%
55-64	23	5%
Prefer not to say	2	<1%

Table 3: Young person survey profile

	Nos	%
Male	320	67%
Female	153	32%
Non-binary	5	1%
I describe my gender in another way	1	<1%
Prefer not to say	1	<1%
12	50	10%
13	37	8%
14	44	9%
15	250	52%
16	47	10%
17	52	11%

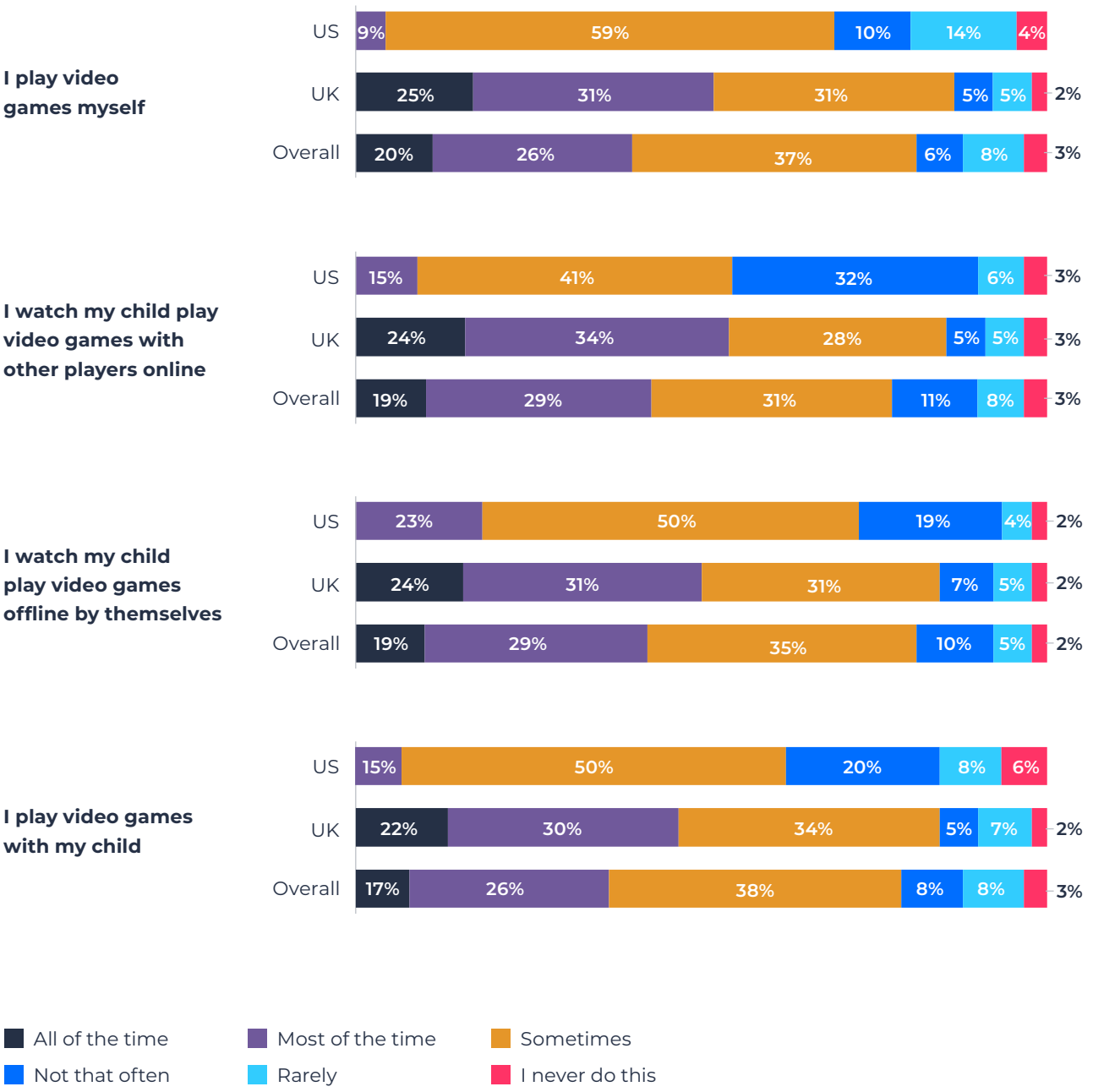
Annex B – Further data from the survey

Figure 28: Frequency of Young people's engagement with gaming and other online activity – young people survey



Source: Young People survey. Base: all respondents n=480, UK 369, US 111.

Figure 29: Parents' role in gaming

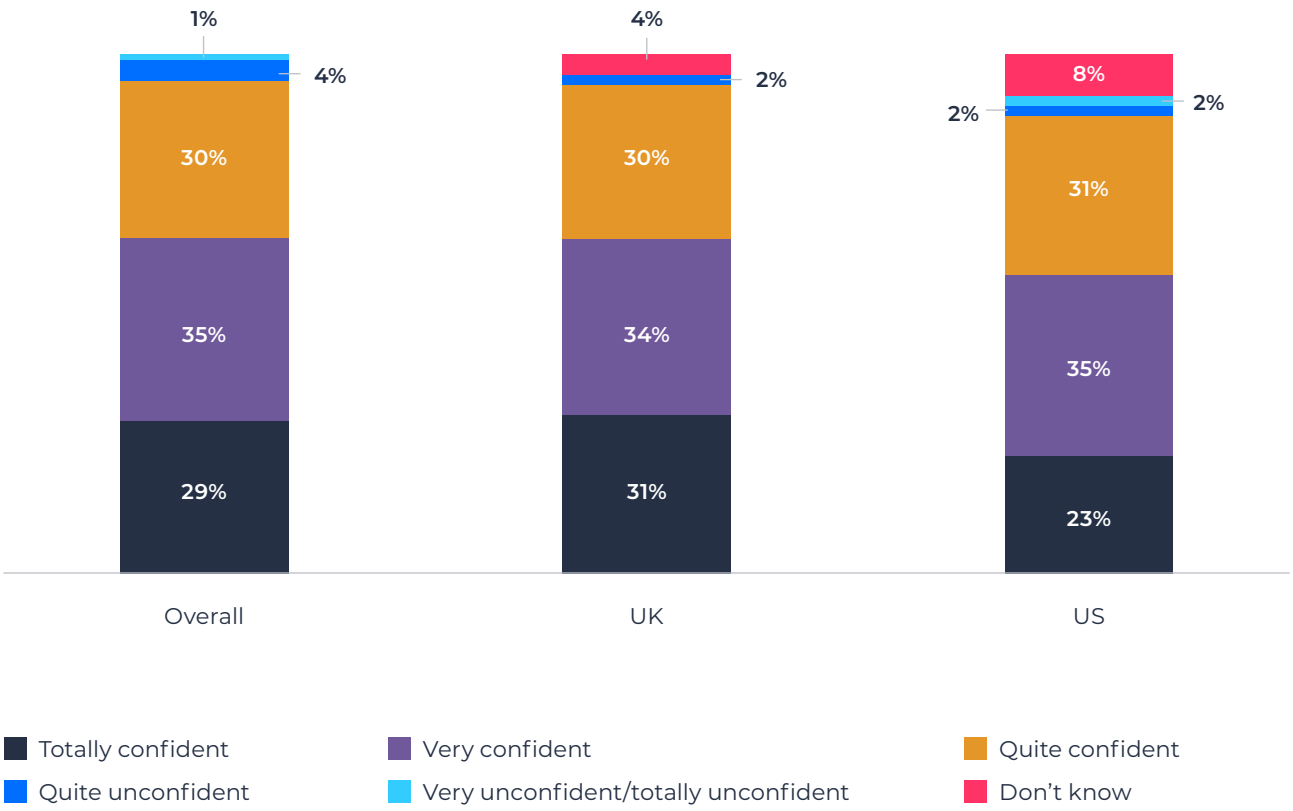


Source: Parent survey. Base: all respondents n=480, UK 369, US 111.

Table 4: Amount of time spent playing video games on weekdays and weekend

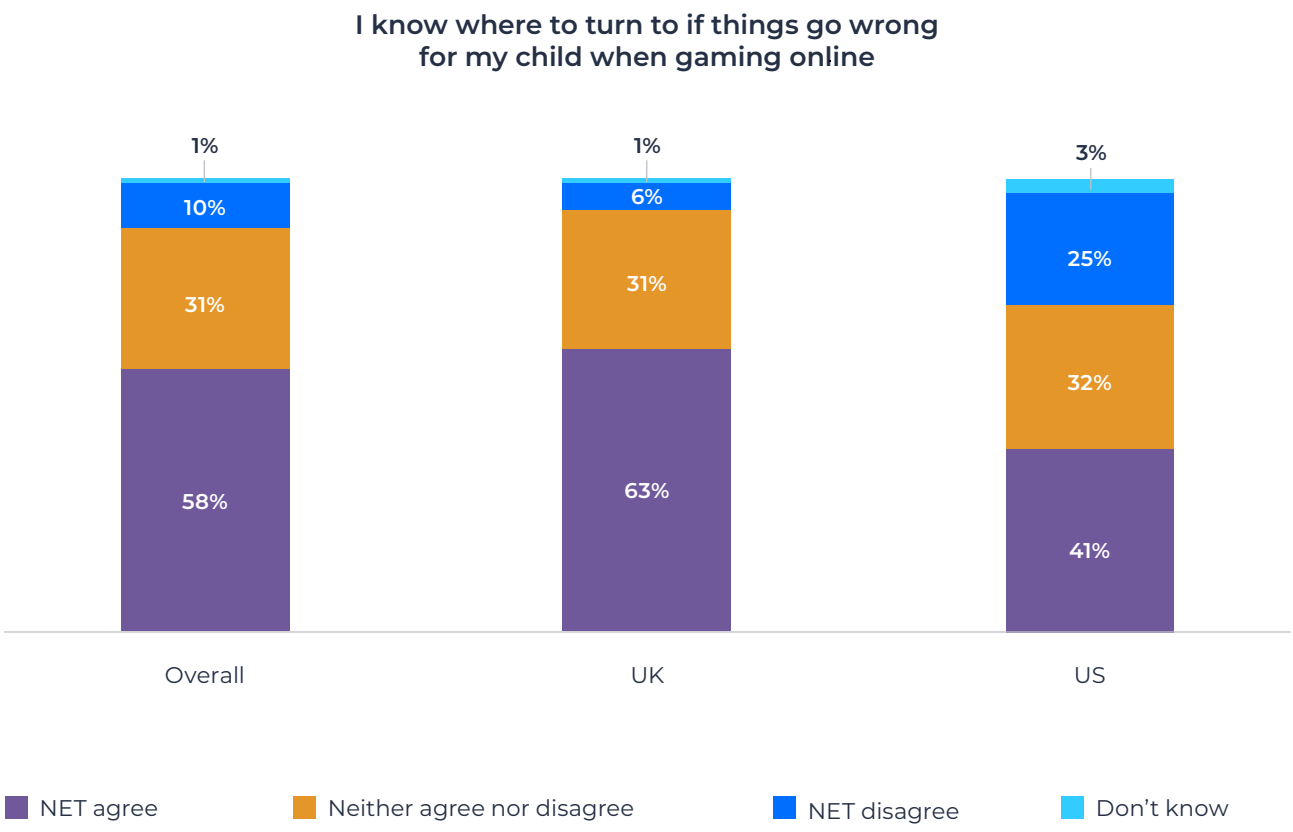
	UK	US
On a weekday	**170.65 average minutes**	**202.16 average minutes**
Less than an hour	9%	13%
1 to 3 hours	66%	32%
3 to 6 hours	16%	50%
6 to 9 hours	6%	5%
More than 9 hours	3%	1%
On a weekend	**196.91 average minutes**	**325.95 average minutes**
Less than an hour	7%	1%
1 to 3 hours	64%	13%
3 to 6 hours	13%	50%
6 to 9 hours	7%	28%
More than 9 hours	8%	8%

Figure 30: Young people's confidence in staying safe online



Source: Young People survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

Figure 31: Thinking about your child's safety when gaming online, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Source: Parent survey. Base: all respondents UK 369, US 111.

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