PF Global

Immersive study

Video games: the new 'local' for a generation of disillusioned young men

An immersive study of young men in online gaming spaces

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01 Introduction

> Loads of them just don't work, mate. There's fuck all around here.
>
> @Harvey_04, mechanic, Middlesbrough

We've asked a young man playing an online video game what his friends do for work. His response is indicative of how his generation views life in Britain. Up against spiralling costs, lacking employment opportunities, and depressed about the decline of their local areas, many are deeply disillusioned with their lives and their future prospects. Plenty are out of work or education altogether, but even when they are working, a large number no longer congregate in the same spaces their parents used to: the pub, the club, the high street.

Life is very different. Now, instead, cash-strapped and cut off from the sense of local community that previous generations enjoyed, they log on to play computer games. For many disaffected young men, an online gaming lobby has become their new 'local': one where they catch up with friends and meet new people. Hidden from public view - not just from the people they live amongst, but often, via online

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anonymity, to those they play games with - they pursue a hobby which often completely dominates their waking hours.

Much has been speculated about these young men and their views, but little research has been conducted in the places where they actually spend their time, talking to them directly. More than half a million young men are not in education, employment or training.[1] Yet they are among the hardest people in Britain to hear from. They rarely answer polls or come to focus groups, and are harder to find in the pubs and town centres where PF Global's immersive research usually takes place. Researchers have to completely rethink the rules of research to meet them.

By meeting them in the games and accompanying online voice chats where they spend their evenings, our researchers were able to hear from them directly. Between March and September 2026, we spent more than 50 hours in these lobbies, interviewing over 100 young men from 18 countries. We wanted to understand this group who increasingly sit outside of the mainstream of society: their daily lives, the communities they were now forming online, and how they viewed politics.

50+
hours spent in gaming lobbies, March to September 2026

100+
young men interviewed

18
countries they came from

Our interest was primarily in young British men, but one of the most interesting aspects of this research - and indeed this cohort of young men - is that they are exposed to an international "friendship" group which their parents and grandparents never even vaguely experienced. While playing these games online, young men are regularly interacting with young people from places as far apart as the United States and the Middle East. Their conversations inform what those in other countries think about Britain - and, more importantly, what these young men think about their own country. We therefore include conversations with these international gamers where it helps contextualise the behaviour and views of the young British men.

[1] ONS, Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: August 2026 (https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/august2026): 530,000 young men aged 16 to 24, April to June 2026

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It's hard to get across the sheer scale of the online gaming world to those who aren't familiar with it. It's massive. *Grand Theft Auto V*, one of the games we played the most, has sold almost 235 million copies[2] while *Discord*, an online platform we used for our research, says its users spend 1.9 billion hours a month gaming.[3] Not only are there vast numbers of young men (and women) playing these games, but many spend their whole day playing games and interacting - one way or the other - with those they play games with.

As such, this piece of research merely scratches the surface of this world. Our observations and conclusions are necessarily tentative and should be treated as such; others will build on this research. However, even on this relatively small scale, significant trends were visible. We set them out here for discussion and to guide further research.

[2] Insider Gaming, GTA 5 Sales Reach Almost 235 Million Copies Since Launch (https://insider-gaming.com/gta-5-sales-reach-235-million-copies-since-launch/), November 2026
[3] Discord, Social SDK press release (https://discord.com/press-releases/social-sdk-ingame-communications), August 2025

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02

Methodology

How we conducted our research

Using a team of eight researchers, this study explored the views of young men who play video games over a six-month period from March to September 2026. With a focus on capturing the interactions and behaviour of video gamers without a predefined hypothesis, this research sought to understand how young men use these spaces and what they think about their lives and how they view issues such as politics. The lack of a specific hypothesis allowed the researchers to remain open to emerging themes and patterns.

Although this is fundamentally a qualitative study and rich in detail, we also conducted national polling to extrapolate our findings. This included a representative online survey of 2,050 UK adults and a boost of 526 men aged 18-30 to give us a robust base of 731 men in this age category for analysis.

Research design

Adopting a flexible approach, the research was structured around intensive one-to-three-hour 'gaming' sessions across a selection of popular video games, with most hours being clocked up playing *Grand Theft Auto*, *Call of Duty*, *Terraria* and *Rocket League*. These games were selected due to their popularity with young men. As mentioned in the introduction, *Grand Theft Auto V* has sold almost 235 million copies,

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while the *Call of Duty* series has sold more than 500 million[4] and *Terraria* over 70 million.[5] *Rocket League*, which is free to play, in January 2026, recorded more than a million people playing at any one time.[6]

Researchers were themselves reasonably experienced players of these games, which meant conversations could happen naturally, as one gamer to another.

These sessions captured a wide spectrum of social interactions from small close-knit groups where old friends spent time together, to more chaotic spaces where up to a dozen strangers would be talking over each other at the same time. While research was predominantly carried out in the early evenings (between 5pm and 9pm), we also conducted sessions in the early afternoon to ensure we reached a broad range of gamers.

This was ultimately a relatively short period of research, with researchers only using publicly available gaming spaces. As this report acknowledges, there are many online communities which are closed off, and these were not the focus of our research.

Data collection

Data collection was varied and combined 'immersive' interviews with over 100 young men with direct observation.

Field notes were recorded via handwritten or typed notes in the game setting, capturing details of the physical environment, conversations and interactions, behaviour and habits of players, and any notable events observed.

Conversations with participants took place informally and respectfully to ensure voluntary engagement and anonymity. Interviews took place within video game lobbies and popular chat applications like Discord where young men with an interest in video games socialise. The selection of games covered a broad range of environments, attracting young men with varied interests to ensure a broad sample was achieved.

Preliminary findings were reviewed regularly, allowing researchers to adapt their focus and techniques as needed to explore emerging themes.

The nature of our research project meant that we obviously could not obtain informed consent from participants during the observational research, although consent was explicitly gained during the immersive conversations. At all times we ensured that our research was not intrusive, we did not probe or make participants feel uncomfortable.

[4] Washington Post, Call of Duty passes 500 million copies (https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/video-games/2024/10/30/call-of-duty-black-ops-6-500-million-copies-sold/), October 2024
[5] GamesRadar, Terraria sells over 70 million copies (https://www.gamesradar.com/games/simulation/as-terraria-sells-over-70-million-copies-devs-are-done-with-promising-final-updates-and-say-theyll-continue-beyond-1-4-6/), May 2026
[6] Players, Rocket League hits 1 million concurrent players for the first time in five years (https://players.com.ua/en/news/rocket-league-hits-1-million-concurrent-players-for-the-first-time-in-five-years/), January 2026

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Whilst we were using a thick description methodology we ensured participants were not identifiable in this report. We have changed every "username" / alias in this report, making it completely impossible for anyone to recognise anyone featured.

Ethical considerations

In the field, researchers refrained from noting down any personal information or conversations where people were discussing sensitive information that may have made them identifiable. Researchers also did not engage with participants under the age of 18: they would ask participants their ages up-front before conducting interviews.

Researchers also initiated conversation with transparency about what they were looking to achieve, asking directly if they could ask participants questions about their experiences in both online and offline spaces.

To stress, all participant usernames / aliases have been changed.

Authors and acknowledgements

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03

Daily life

For 10 minutes there is no real conversation, only occasional rushed communication: calling out enemy positions on the battlefield, coordinating their own assaults, and muttering swear words when killed. Three men are playing the popular action video game, *Call of Duty: Black Ops 7*.

Set on a modern-day battlefield, two opposing teams of players in special forces fatigues attempt to kill each other using all manner of weapons. When a player dies they immediately regenerate at another point on the map. The team with the most 'kills' at the end of the round wins. These three men are all on the same team, up against a side of strangers the game has randomly matched them with online. It is fast-paced and the screen is lit up with explosions while gunfire blares from the speakers.

The round ends and the mood immediately relaxes. Two of the three, @Ellis_92 and @Zak3077 (all usernames in this report have been fictionalised to protect identities), announce in a matter-of-fact way that they are going to make coffee before the next game begins. None of the players are in the same room. They are playing online and in theory could be joining from anywhere in the world. On this occasion they all live in Wales, *"over the bridge from Bristol"*, @Ronan1902, the one not making coffee, explains. They are firm friends, and all aged in their 20s and 30s.

As they are playing remotely and communicate only by audio (picture a young man wearing a headset), players often need to explain what they are physically doing to the rest of the group. This might happen 'in game' through the console's chat system

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or through an unaffiliated messaging app, where players form groups based on their interests. *Discord* is a popular platform for this and we used it extensively in our research. In these spaces, players can pop in and out of gaming servers: communities built around a particular game or interest, ranging from a private server for a group of friends to publicly accessible ones where anyone can join, provided they are prepared to play the same game. Each server contains groups, a bit like different rooms, where players can drop in and out on audio call with each other.

@Ellis_92 and @Zak3077 return with their coffees. Later, between games, @Ellis_92 starts laughing at a post he has seen on another messaging app, *Snapchat*, and reads it aloud to the group:

> Thank you everyone for the concern and the messages. For those who don't know I was recently robbed at a petrol station, had my wallet stolen and I ended up passed out. Eventually, I woke up and the police came. They said 'did you see who did it?' I said yeah, it was pump number four.

All three laugh loudly.

The date is 17 March 2026, and the Iran war has been underway for just under a month. There is wall-to-wall coverage of the conflict in the media. Sensing an opening, we ask about fuel prices. There is a collective grumble in response.

> It's so expensive even though we have the North Sea right above us. We don't use it but Greenland does, fucking everyone does it but we don't - they all take it and then sell it back to us.

The next game starts and the friends immediately switch back into gaming mode, resuming the familiar patter of tactical calls, profanities and frantic cries for support.

Over the six months of our research we spoke to more than 100 young men like this group of friends. We asked them all about their lives, how they felt about the future and the challenges that they faced, as well as their views on politics. Although they were drawn from different backgrounds and cultures, what was common was a sense of powerlessness and resignation.

Young men across the country, and, interestingly, those they play with abroad, were united by a pessimistic outlook on their lives. They were largely downbeat about their job prospects and the local areas where they lived. They used harsh language to describe their towns and cities, and would often laugh when asked about job opportunities beyond service roles at supermarkets or fast-food chains. While we

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spoke to players from a wide geographic spread across England, Scotland and Wales, it was noticeable that relatively few participants lived in the big cities such as London, Manchester, or Leeds. Small towns were well represented and the gamers (where it was possible to ascertain) were from working-class backgrounds and many spoke with regional accents.

There are countless online servers where men spend time playing video games and talking. Lots of these conversations are about the games which they are playing, but between rounds, dialogue tends to wander. While these conversations can feel very random, we often hear them express grievances about their lives. We found these young men to be completely preoccupied by the cost of living.

Players need little encouragement to air their frustrations. @Ty1er was born down south, but has spent the last six years living in Edinburgh, and has recently moved to a place near Dundee. Before we get the chance to ask, he quickly starts complaining about his energy bills:

> I've only been in my place five months and I keep getting emails about [energy bills]. I don't work. I cannot deposit money into my bank. I can deposit £18... I just spent all of my money [on energy bills].

We ask what he makes of the cost of living crisis and his reply is utterly disillusioned:

> I don't watch the news, just don't find it appealing - half of it is bullshit, half of it is not. I'm just in a cut scene now [the game will shortly resume].

This casual derision towards the news is something we will hear time and again.

The open nature of these spaces - and their global popularity - means that people from across the world will play together, and talk on *Discord* and elsewhere. Twenty years ago a young man from Burnley or Plymouth may have spent his evenings talking to friends or colleagues in the pub or at their local football or rugby club. Now, from their bedrooms, they are talking to friends, acquaintances and strangers from all over the world whom they have never met in person.

As well as Britons, we interviewed men from 17 other countries, and it would not be uncommon to find a shared call where all the players came from different parts of the world. The amount of time these young men are spending together is undoubtedly playing a role in them developing a similar world view, regardless of where they live.

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In our research we would hear the same issues repeatedly from UK and international players, but also the same perspectives and language.

In one of these spaces, we join a *Call of Duty* match with a group of Dutch players. During the match, we ask @R0WAN how things are going in his country:

> It's so fucking expensive. Like the gas money for example. Everything is so expensive at the moment.

He gives an example:

> Pack of cigarettes here is always €20.

It isn't the Iran war pushing prices up, he says, but tax: *"they increased the taxes"*. Go to Luxembourg and *"it's half [the] money"*.

Cost sentiments were echoed even further afield. Two friends in Texas, @JKevo and @Kaden2501, are messing around in *Grand Theft Auto*, an open-world crime game set in a fictional version of Los Angeles where players online can roam around the city, run criminal enterprises, race supercars and team up on heists together. They are particularly to-the-point about the state of the US economy. @JKevo works as a mechanic while @Kaden2501 lost his job in the spring and has been looking for another ever since. @JKevo starts:

> Everything costs so much now: groceries, gas and rent.

@Kaden2501 agrees:

> My rent went up like 300 bucks and my pay ain't moved.

@Kaden2501 is glum when talking about his employment prospects. There are jobs around, he says, but *"it don't pay nothing"*. Bringing it back to fuel again, he concludes that the price of gas can make taking the jobs that are available barely worthwhile.

@JKevo chips in:

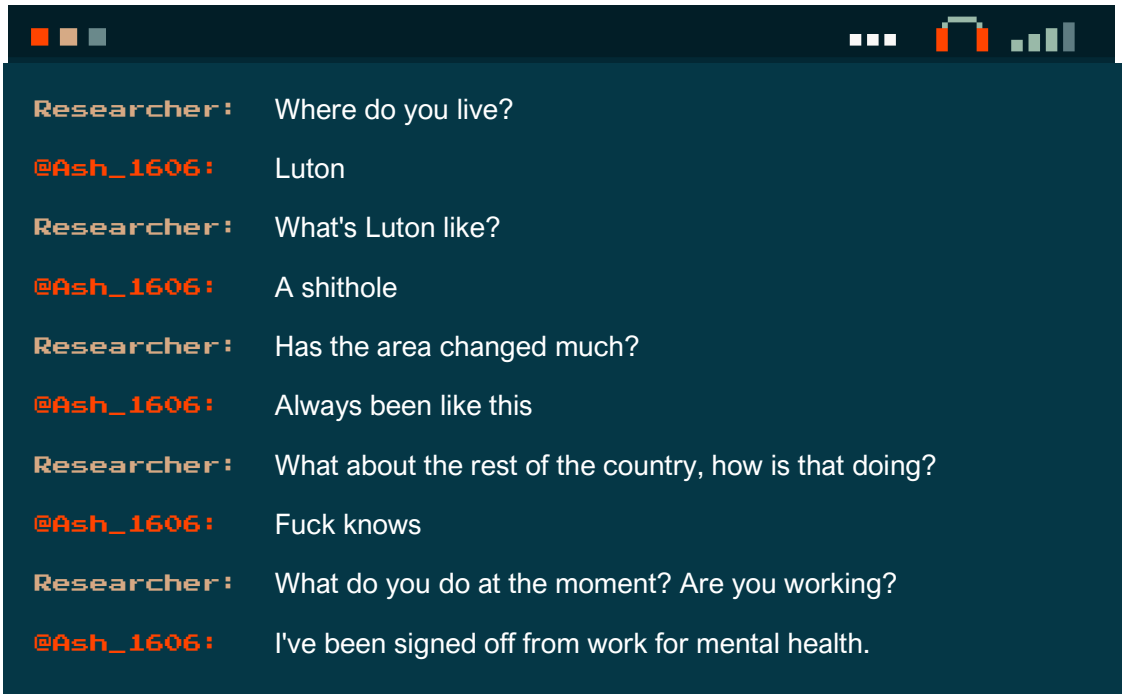
> Some of these jobs, bro, they want you to work 40 hours and it's like, that ain't even rent money no more.

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Cost concerns were the single most common refrain among these apathetic young men. Unlike views on politics or work which we teased out in conversation, fuel, energy and grocery costs were top of their minds across borders and came up by and large unprompted. This did not budge as an issue throughout the six months of the project. However, as we will explore in more detail in the chapter on politics, the anger was for the most part directionless, and offered with no real hope or expectation that things would ever really improve.

That these young men should be concerned about the cost of living should hardly come as a surprise; these concerns are shared right across the country, largely regardless of social background. However, there was an intensity to their comments on the cost of living; it was as if they *really felt* the pressures. This reflected the broader personal circumstances that many of them discussed. Concerns over work and job prospects, or the lack of them rather, were almost as prevalent as the wider cost of living.

@Ash_1606, a 25-year-old in Luton, is waiting in a lobby for others to join so he can play *Call of Duty* as a team. The conversation is gruff, but reflective of many we heard among young British men.



He explains that he initially did a construction course, but got mixed up with the *"wrong people"*. He's away from that now, but is living by himself and out of work. With a hint of sarcasm he lists the job options open to him in Luton: Sainsbury's,

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Tesco and McDonald's. Still, he maintains that he wants to get back into work, and would think about it if the right opportunity came along.

> If someone offered me a job and [inaudible] amount per month, I'd take it straight away.

We heard a similar story from another young man (@Y2K_56) in a small town outside of London who had planned to be an engineer but has been out of work caring for his mother. He also uses *"shithole"* to describe where he lives.

> I live on the outskirts of town, but in the town itself, there's lots of homeless people around.

Asked what his friends do, @Y2K_56 explains:

> One of them works at a scrap metal place, one of them's a boxer, one's just out of work and another has just been made redundant. Everyone does different things, really.

The young men we spoke to found themselves in a variety of circumstances: some were out of work and looking (some not looking), some were in education, and some were in work. But even those who were in work felt the precariousness of their positions and were often quick to point out that they were the lucky ones.

One man, @Harvey_04, who lives in Middlesbrough and works as a mechanic, is relatively upbeat in comparison to most other players in the *Discord* calls. He says the job is *"alright"*. He got into it because he wanted *"something practical rather than staying in education"*. He likes working with cars and feels glad to have a job at all. Happy to talk to us, he explains that a lot of his friends are in a much less secure position.

> Loads of them just don't work, mate. There's fuck all around here.

He goes on to explain that while some friends are still looking, or drifting from job to job, others have given up altogether. It is especially hard for young people who lack family connections or formal qualifications.

He doesn't dislike Middlesbrough, but work dominates how he thinks about the area: *"if you've got a decent job, you're sound. If you haven't, there's not much going on."*

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He goes on to point out that some of his friends spend most of their time playing video games because they have very little else to do during the day.

This is a familiar refrain. Elsewhere, a mixed group of men and women in Cornwall are playing *Terraria* (a crafting game, similar to *Minecraft*, where players work together to build structures and defeat 'bosses'). The pace of the game is slower than action shooters like *Call of Duty*. One of them, @connorr_, has just finished an apprenticeship and used it to secure a job working remotely for a university. Despite his success, he too is quick to point out his position as an outlier, and suggests that options are limited for most of his peers.

> There is fuck all down here unless you work in retail or building.

Continuing, he bemoans the local economy's reliance on tourism, suggesting that the only work available for his friends are seasonal tourist roles. What's more, he thinks the influx of wealthy tourists actually makes things harder for the young locals, pointing out that he spent £7 for a few hours of parking that afternoon.

> If you live down here, everything is more expensive down here, it has to be imported - our wages are worse than everywhere else in the world - it is cheaper to buy lager in London than here.

We hear concerns about work from young men across the country, and at different stages of education, including those who are still studying. It's September and we join a busy *Grand Theft Auto* call with players from Portsmouth (UK), Wisconsin and South Korea. Most of the talk is about getting everyone into the same session, running sales missions for their in-game businesses, and a shared interest in bikes. When the chat drifts away from the game, we ask what everyone does when they're not playing. @Dex4991, an 18-year-old from Birmingham (UK) who is still at college, gives a bleak outlook on the job market for young people. Unlike @Harvey_04 and @connorr_, he has yet to find work.

> Trying to find, like, any entry-level position for part time work is basically impossible now.

He says he has been looking and has found nothing suitable, with roles advertised well above what he considers genuinely entry-level. The majority of his friends are still at college. The ones who do have jobs often work for family businesses.

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He attributes much of this to AI, explaining that most entry-level positions have now been phased out, leaving employers looking for people who already have experience. He says this is not just something he has picked up online.

> That's my teacher's opinion as well. Like he's been seeing this happening for a while now.

Despite this, he thinks he could still get an apprenticeship if he really pushed for one, so does not see his own position as hopeless even if he does expect the problem to get worse. Eventually, he thinks companies will find themselves unable to fill senior roles since nobody will be coming up through the career ladder to replace those leaving.

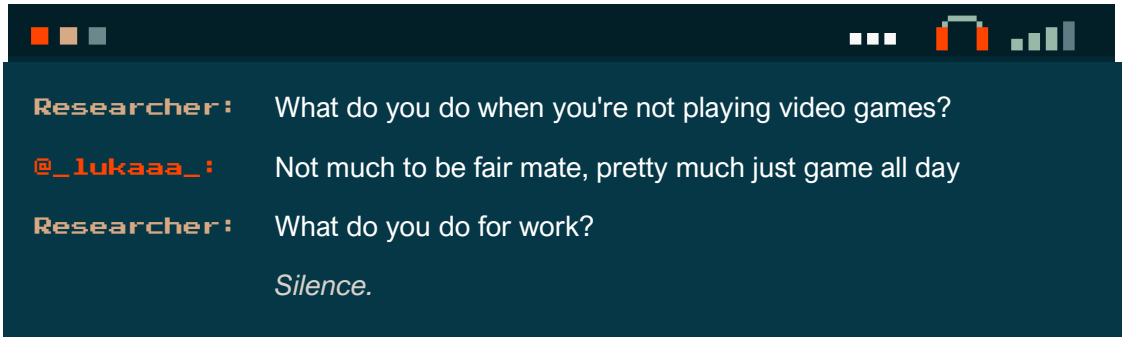
Regardless of circumstance, the vast majority of those we interviewed wanted to get a job either now or in the future, but a combination of high barriers to entry and perceptions of there being very few local opportunities meant that expectations, and indeed ambition, were very low. Often young men felt the jobs that were available to them, usually in retail or service industries, were not enticing. This had led to a number of them seemingly giving up, spending their days playing video games and waiting for things to improve. While millions play video games casually for fun, the poor prospects of many young men mean that they take up far more hours, becoming a source of connection and a means of filling other gaps in their lives.

For most of the gamers we spoke to, playing online video games allowed them to meet friends, make new ones and pass the time outside work, study or the search for a job. Chats were busiest in the evenings and at weekends (but people could still be found at all hours), and for many these spaces offered an escape from their worries and a chance to let off steam. Players from the UK and around the world who once would have been in real life social settings now play and talk together. They talk about all manner of things, but when it comes to their material circumstances and their daily lives, they typically talk in the same bleak way.

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In absence of work or other social structures, playing video games has now become a major part of many young disaffected men's lives.

We're chatting to @_lukaaa_ from South London, who is rattling off his gaming habits; his favourite game is *Fortnite* (a battle royale shooter game).



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04

An online community

It's a September evening, and we are breaking a man out of prison. The Prison Break is one of *Grand Theft Auto's* most challenging missions. Two of the crew drive a prison bus through the gates of Bolingbroke Penitentiary, one disguised as a guard, the other as an inmate, and then fight their way to a prisoner called Rashkovsky. Meanwhile, the rest of the team steal a plane and a helicopter to fly him to safety. We've joined a multinational group of gamers from the UK, Canada and Denmark for the mission. There is plenty of admin before we can start, making sure we are all in the same session, our roles are assigned, and our sound is connected. The atmosphere is amiable and the players sound like they are enjoying each other's company. As we set up, we chat to our teammates about their online social lives.

@M4RC0, from the UK, says he had spent the previous half hour *"just talking with people on Discord"* before actually joining the game. He left his previous conversation in the end because the group was too frantic with people *"talking over the top of each other"*.

@JonEv0ns08 says this kind of chaotic behaviour happens *"every day"* on the general chatting server. However this server - where we are speaking - is calmer and there are *"not really that many trolls"*, at least *"not anymore"*. While they don't mind the busier chats sometimes, by and large these two gamers prefer the quieter ones which feel more relaxed and it is easier to have normal conversations.

The game begins. We start strongly and make it inside the prison walls, but within minutes the guards have us pinned down, forcing us to restart at the nearest

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checkpoint repeatedly. Our teammates descend into blaming one another, and it's over.

It is striking how easy it was for us to join the mission, but also how quickly we were welcomed into the conversation. The warren of servers and groups which surround video games allows young men to instantly find others online to socialise with. While some groups are very private, there are plenty that you can join at a click. And once in, newcomers melt into the group. Many groups are filled with young men socialising with people they have just met. They might move fluidly between hanging out with established friends (perhaps from childhood or that they have met online) in one group and joining another full of strangers who share an interest in a particular game or topic.

These isolated gamers who would likely once have hung out in a pub, shopping centre, or park, have instead, like @Hux1ey, who works in a warehouse in Pennsylvania, sequenced their social lives around online gaming: *"I work, come home, get on here."* In doing so, they have much more freedom in whom they speak to. Rather than being stuck with those who live geographically closest, it is not uncommon for these gamers to jump from call to call, depending on what game they are playing, and they can speak to a dozen or more new people over the course of a single gaming session.

We find these behaviours are borne out when we poll young men too. In our poll, 89% of men aged 18-30 in the UK have spoken to a stranger while gaming and 38% have done so in the past week alone. By comparison, 58% will have spoken to their neighbours and only 34% have spoken to another person in their local area beyond saying 'hello'.

89%

of men aged 18-30 have spoken to a stranger while gaming

47%

have had a deep or meaningful conversation with a stranger while gaming

61%

feel part of a community through online games

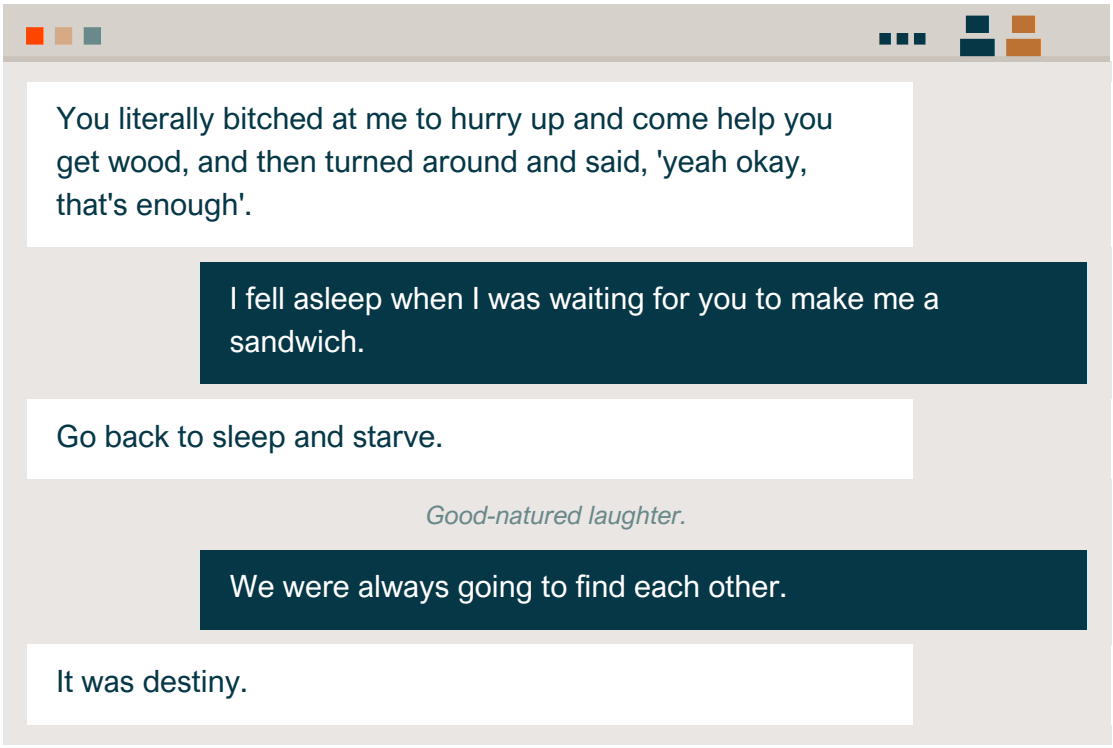
Source: PF Global polling of 2,050 UK adults with a boost of 526 men aged 18-30 (base 731 men aged 18-30). Fieldwork 2 to 12 October 2026.

These relationships are often not trivial or fleeting. Nearly half of men in that age group (47%) say they've had a deep or meaningful conversation with a stranger while playing an online video game. Notably, 61% say they feel part of a community through online games.

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Even where close communities form, many servers still remain public for others to join. We've been observing a group of friends playing *Terraria* for over half an hour. It's not clear where they are from in the UK, but they are all British. They are building a *"boss arena"* and work studiously at the task. The pace of the game is gentler, and the players are able to talk leisurely with each other as they prepare to fight the boss known as Skeletron.

The players are clearly an established friendship group, calling each other by nicknames, and sharing plenty of jokes that would only be understandable to those who were part of the group. They constantly interrupt one another with sexual jokes. However, much of the conversation is inane. At one point they spend several minutes arguing over whether the colour orange is named after the fruit or vice versa. Issue unsettled, they return to the task of collecting the resources needed for the game, and mid-banter reflect warmly on finding people like themselves online.



We found that many young men evidently feel confident expressing themselves in these places. Unlike other social areas like the pub or the park, in these communities they are able to make their own rules and police the space to their liking.

While these spaces allow for social connection and are widely used by disaffected young men to form communities, they can still be lonely places. The *Discord* app we are using for the research shows us how many gamers are in a channel before we join: typically two to four people. It's nearly 9pm on a Wednesday evening and we find @reece.wav sitting alone in a channel.

As we join the call, his voice immediately pipes up with excitement. He's looking for someone to play an older version of *Grand Theft Auto* with. The newer, *"enhanced"* version of the game has graphics that are too sophisticated for his current computer

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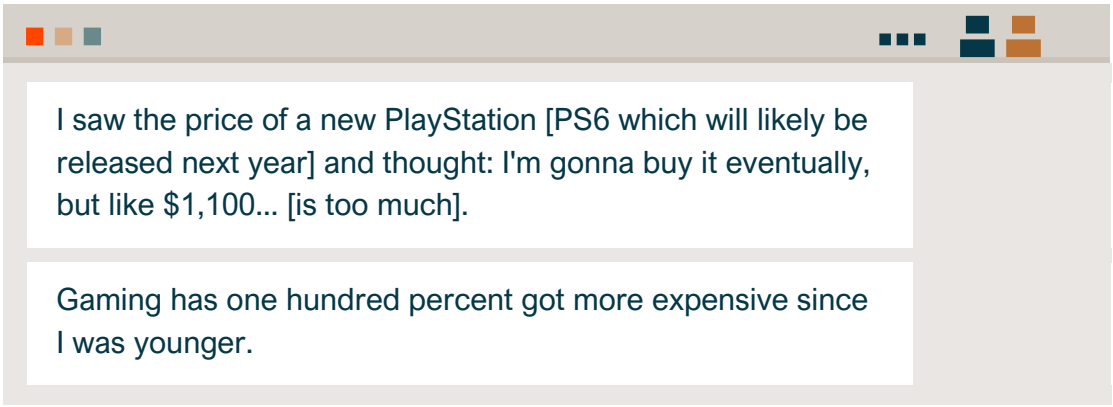
to run. He explains to us that he can't afford a new PC so is stuck playing this old version of the game.

He's been on this call for nearly two hours now, alone, waiting to find anyone who still plays this older version of the game. A short time later, he gives up and leaves the call.

As we saw in the chapter on daily life, cost is the biggest concern for the young men we spoke to. With the average cost of a pint of beer at £5.50 in the UK and an Xbox or PlayStation online membership only setting them back £6 or £7 per month (although they need to spend more to buy the console and games), it is unsurprising that they choose to socialise here. But these costs are still enough to threaten some people's access to their online community.

We get talking to @Kobe_1408, who is playing *Resurgence*, a specific mode in *Call of Duty: Warzone*, which is crucially, free-to-play. He was born in Brooklyn and has always lived in New York. He comes across as warm. Instantly chatting amiably, he explains that he has been gaming *"pretty much my whole life."*

The cost of playing video games is on his mind.



He does not particularly blame the gaming companies for the price rises, and instead puts it down to *"the overall economy"*. Going into detail here, he suggests demand caused by gaming popularity, and game makers not being able to get the needed materials *"because of war [in Iran]"*, have all contributed.

As we talk to @Kobe_1408, other players keep popping in and out of the call in search of different *Call of Duty* groups. When they discover he is playing *Resurgence*, they immediately leave. He is unbothered by this, and unprompted announces that he has *"met some good friends on Discord..."*. Before he can finish his point, he shouts at the game *"what the fuck is it man? I was behind him!"* and throws himself fully back into the action.

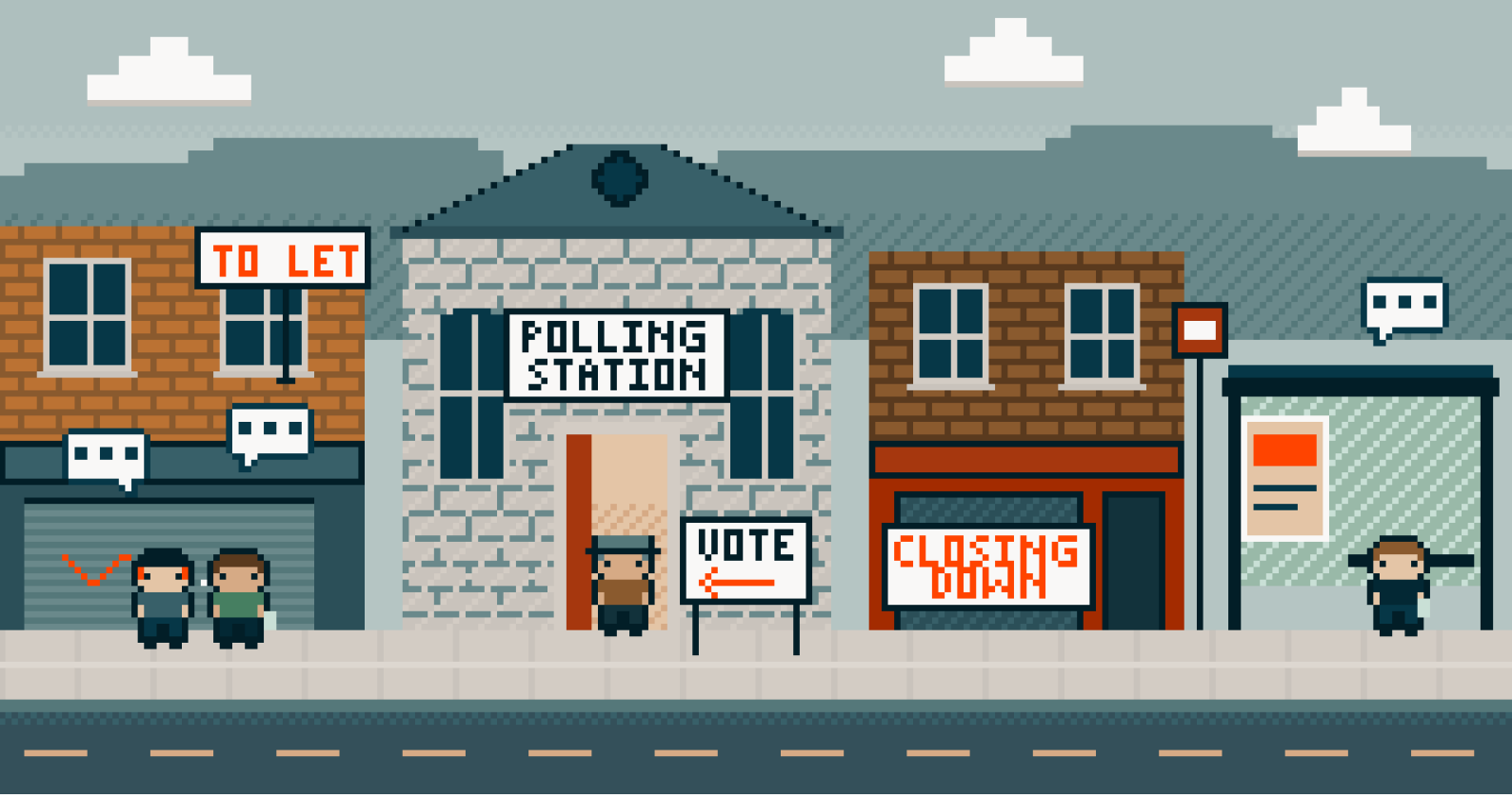
While we did hear grumblings like these about gaming costs, the barriers to entry for young men to play video games and chat to and make new friends online remain relatively low - particularly when they feel the cost of every other aspect of their lives

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is unreasonably high. There are many games that are free to download and play, while *Discord* is also free to use. A player will still need to buy the console, but with this, there are many people online who will be able to socialise with whenever they want.

The lack of barriers allows these young men - who face blocks in other areas of their lives - to make friends with those who they would never otherwise have met, with backgrounds which differ vastly. A young disillusioned man from Barnsley can now spend his evenings talking with a man from Texas, and perhaps another from Rabat. These men are building relationships and communities which are invisible to all those outside of the games they are playing and the chat applications they are using. For them, online video games have replaced other more traditional social spaces such as the pub or the club, as the place to while away their free time. It was not uncommon to meet gamers who confessed to spending more than twenty hours a week in these spaces.

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05 Politics

YOU CAN FUCK OFF - not you mate [the researcher] - the twat that just jumped out the helicopter - I don't care I got sweet potato fries!

We're talking to @kier4n and @Sami_088, who are playing *Call of Duty*. They are replying between intense combat moments. @kier4n explains he is from *"Planet Thanet"* (in Kent) and @Sami_088 simply says *"up north."*

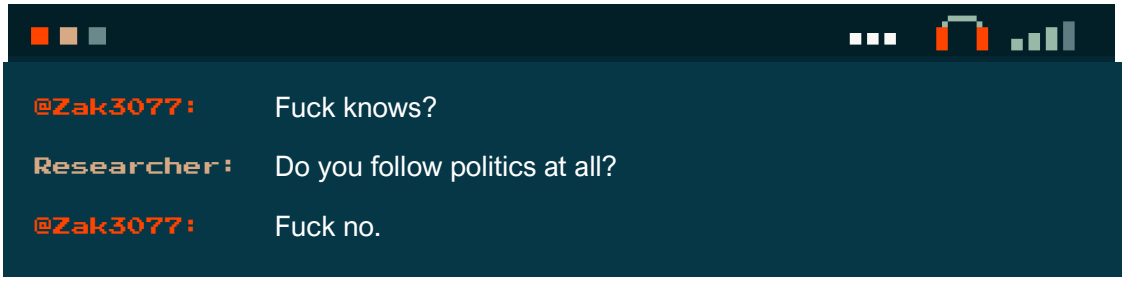
We try to steer the conversation on to politics.

> I ain't got a clue about local elections - I don't watch the fucking government.

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It's 6 May, the day before voters across England, Wales and Scotland go to the polls in a major set of local and devolved elections. These elections are passing the young men we speak to entirely by.

@Zak3077, one of the Welsh group we interviewed, who had been laughing at the petrol station joke, offered a similar response when asked for his view on the then upcoming Senedd election:



It was a phrase we heard again and again during our gaming sessions, often in a bemused tone, as if it were strange to be asked what they thought about politics. As we have discussed, the young men we met over the course of the research were deeply depressed at the state of the economy, their job opportunities and the state of their local areas. This also extended to politics. The vast majority are not political in any real way, and have an instinctive cynicism towards politics, politicians and the media. Even to mention politics in some of these groups would be enough to completely shutdown many of the conversations we had in their tracks.

@Harvey_04, the mechanic in Middlesbrough, who until that point in the conversation has had plenty to say, goes noticeably quiet when politics is mentioned:

> They're [politicians] all full of shit, aren't they? They're all the same to me. They promise the world, but nothing ever changes.

Pushed on what it is about politicians that makes him feel that way, he explains that he does not think any party is particularly interested in people like him and assumes politicians will say whatever they need to say to get elected.

Despite his strong language towards politicians, he does not come across as angry, just cynical and deeply disengaged. He says he might vote if there were someone he actually believed in, but at the moment there is nobody he does.

> I don't trust any of them enough to care.

In conversations like this, the way they talked about politics mirrored the way they talked about their own lives. Men would often use the same brutal language they

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used to describe the state of the economy, the opportunities available to them and the cost of fuel, when asked to offer their views on politics. Typically accompanied with the word 'fuck'.

Where we were able to get players to talk about politics, it was interesting that - with the exception of scathing criticism of Keir Starmer as Prime Minister - right-wing leaders such as Rupert Lowe and Nigel Farage were mentioned the most of all UK politicians (Donald Trump was brought up across our research regularly by players from all countries).

It's late March and we've just joined a group where a young British gamer by the username of @Oskar_44 is playing *Grand Theft Auto* as part of a larger team. He was born in Slough but moved to Bristol for work.

We ask him how things are going.



@Oskar_44:	Shit mate.
Researcher:	Why is that?
@Oskar_44:	UK's shit mate, we need that Restore Britain - he's [Rupert Lowe] gonna get rid of all the illegal immigrants.
	He continues at pace.
@Oskar_44:	Farage is a dick mate, don't like him, he's full of shit mate ... I know from a lot of people and my dad specifically: Farage is just a cunt, chats a load of shit. Rupert Lowe I've looked into him and a lot of people support him.
Researcher:	Where?
@Oskar_44:	It's all over [online]. I'm kind of a right wing person so I like people that speak their minds. I like people that are not afraid to say what the truth is and what they think. Whereas I don't really like people...well look at Keir Starmer, met Trump and couldn't do a handshake, guy was fucking nervous.

We hear similar views elsewhere. A few months later, on a hot summer evening in late July, Britain is grappling with a heatwave and Keir Starmer has recently resigned as Prime Minister. We speak to @Jonah_99, a university student who is back home in Reading for the holidays. He studies business management and plays *Grand Theft Auto* in his spare time.

We ask him what he thinks are the biggest issues facing the country.

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He hesitates.

> You'll think I'm racist.

Continuing, he says that immigration is *"the main one"*, particularly small boats. He sees videos *"every day"* on social media and thinks other problems, including the NHS and the economy *"all kind of comes back to that"*.

Asked about politics, he says he admires Rupert Lowe's hardline rhetoric on immigration. Why?

> He actually means it.

He explains how he is delighted that Keir Starmer has resigned. He thinks the former Prime Minister is a *"traitor"* due to his failure to *"stop the boats"* for *"ordinary British people"*.

Andy Burnham, who has just taken over from Starmer, doesn't fare much better.

> He looks like more of the same... basically just Starmer with a northern accent.

The politicians these men were drawn to often reflected their view of themselves. Outside of the societal mainstream and unafraid to be direct with their views on perceived harsh truths. Few had any strong sense of loyalty or attachment to the actual politicians, rather they felt radical solutions were needed to see any change in their lives, and when pushed, these were the people who they felt talked boldest (particularly on immigration). That said, the strongest attraction to these politicians was their perceived authenticity. Disillusioned young men find it easier to connect with politicians who in their eyes 'say it how it is' than the mainstream options who they feel have done little for them and speak a language they cannot relate to.

Interestingly, the sense that Britain was in decline, and immigration and crime were 'out of control' was only encouraged by the international friends and acquaintances the young men spent their evenings playing with.

It's mid-June and we're playing with @N4SH, a 27-year-old from Yemen who lives in Kuwait and works as a physical therapist. He mainly plays *Grand Theft Auto*, but

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doesn't see himself as a regular gamer. We've spent the last 20 minutes learning about his life in Kuwait, but he now turns to what he has heard about life in the UK:

> News [we hear about the UK] is if there is a stabbing or something like that.

He's also been told that parts of London are not safe to visit. *"America: guns and schools. UK: pocket knives"* he jokes.

Two months later we're playing *Warzone* with a group who again hail from a number of countries, including @c0le, from Texas, USA and @R1LEY, from British Columbia in Canada. When we ask them what they think about the UK, neither is able to name the current or previous Prime Minister (Andy Burnham has been Prime Minister for just under a month), and @R1LEY asks if *"Kings and Queens are still in charge"*.

@c0le is unemployed, though a course he is doing is finishing shortly and he hopes to get a job soon. He's not been to the UK but has friends there whom he met playing the video game *Fortnite* and affectionately describes as *"cracked"*.

Asked what his friends have told him about life in London, he replies quickly.

> They said there are a lot of stabbings.

@Aleks3j, a Hungarian student in the Netherlands with whom we are conducting another *Grand Theft Auto* heist with (this time robbing a casino rather than breaking into a prison), is particularly blunt about the state of the UK. He once considered the country as a possible European destination to move to. Not anymore.

> I'm glad I didn't move to the UK because it's chaotic.

He thinks Britain's political situation looks *"even worse than in Hungary"*.

As if to underline the point, he adds:

> Hungary had corruption, but at least there was no chaos.

These sentiments were echoed consistently by gamers from all over the world, with a remarkable number instantly raising knife crime. Not all of them spoke negatively of the UK - some had positive things to say about the quality of universities; others mentioned free healthcare; many liked Brits themselves as people. Nonetheless, the

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clear prevailing view was that Britain was in decline and crime and immigration were major problems.

Plenty of these gamers spend considerable amounts of time socialising with British men, talking about their lives, sharing jokes and gently mocking each other. The widespread, negative views that international gamers held about the state of Britain only compounded the bleak view British gamers already had of their own country. It was notable that one American succinctly described Britain as a *"shithole"* in a mixed group which included British gamers. We heard Britons use the same term to describe their own areas regularly, including @Ash_1606 and @Y2K_56 in the chapter on daily life.

Yet despite the sympathy for right-wing parties we encountered in these spaces, it feels unlikely that many of these young men will actually vote. @kier4n from 'Planet Thanet' reflected many conversations when he complained angrily about *"small boats"* and said he likes Reform, but ultimately thinks that *"elections will do fuck all"* and won't be voting. @Dex4991, the 18-year-old from Birmingham, doubts his own vote would make any meaningful difference and jokes that if he does vote at the next election, he might *"choose the most random one"* and *"put a dice roll on it"*.

The young men we met in these groups are not looking to politics to fix their problems. In truth, they're not really looking anywhere. Like the older generations we speak to across our research, they constantly worry about the cost of things, what their future looks like, and are depressed by the decline of their areas. They often use the same language too.

What's different is that while their older peers blow off their frustrations in the pub, younger men are instead spending their evenings (and often their days) playing online video games. Here, at relatively little cost, they can escape from their lives and socialise at length with friends and make new ones. And while older generations may make their views heard at the ballot box or in their local pub, the views of these disillusioned young men - including their desires for bold actions - remain online.

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