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Published online: 10 Aug 2023.

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Digitally Un/Free: the everyday impact of social media on the lives of young people

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an original contribution to the crucial question of how digital media impacts children and young people's everyday lives. Focus groups with young people aged 11–21 years, and interviews with teachers in schools in England revealed digital media can be a source of contention between young people and their parents or carers. Our research revealed that children and young people have a paradoxical relationship with the Internet because they feel both free and unfree online. They reported the Internet offered a 'safe haven' and form of 'escape', and at the same time they were also concerned about how their data was being used and described feeling the need to conceal their online activities.

Introduction

Children are often the first to engage with the fast-developing digital world (Livingstone, Lansdown, and Third 2017, 3), and they are considered both pioneers and innocent victims of the digital age (Livingstone and Third 2017, 658). In their annual *Children and parents: media use and attitudes report,* Ofcom reported that '[n]early all children went online in 2021 (99%), with the majority using a mobile phone (72%) or tablet (69%) to do so' (2022, 2). Children are growing up online and experiencing an array of digital dangers. The EU Kids Online survey revealed some of the negative online experiences children are exposed to include: 'online sexual content, aggressive content and other types of unwanted content; inappropriate contacts; online harassment and bullying; hacking; sharing personal information; damage to reputation; and also viruses, spam, pop-ups and online advertisements' (Smahel et al. 2020, 45). The report highlighted that these experiences 'cannot be conclusively defined as generally positive or generally negative. Rather, the same activity can have positive consequences for one child and negative consequences for another […] what is defined as a potential risk for some may be seen as an opportunity for others' (Smahel et al. 2020, 43). Additionally, there are several factors which can impact a young person's ability to learn from their online experiences, build resilience and recover when things go wrong, such as, whether they are able to access appropriate levels of support to aid their recovery.

Evidence of the impact of these online experiences on children and young people's lives is now beginning to accumulate. For example: screentime has been associated with obesity, low mood and poor cognitive and socio-emotional development and educational performance (Stiglic and Viner 2019, 1). Kostyrka-Allchorne et al.'s research also confirmed that digital technologies have changed how adolescents learn, work, play and socialise, and this has coincided with an increase in adolescent mental health problems (2023, 22). They found that 'young people find it difficult to self-regulate their digital engagement and their digital experiences can exacerbate psychological difficulties or lead to the normalisation of pathological behaviour' (Kostyrka-Allchorne et al. 2023, 22). Furthermore, young people who identify as LGBTQ+, ethnic minorities and those with disabilities are generally the worst affected by digital challenges (Nominet 2022, 4). Our research suggests that certain groups are more vulnerable online because they are lacking offline support structures and are thereby more reliant on online spaces (Bibizadeh and Procter 2023, 11).

There are comprehensive attempts to hold tech companies accountable for keeping individual users and particularly children safe online. Interventions range from digital regulations such as the *Online Safety Bill* (2023) currently working its way through Parliament, and the *European Digital Services Ac*t (2022) which will require Big Tech companies to submit independent yearly audits to ensure greater scrutiny and accountability. There are also guidelines that focus on protecting children such as the *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment 25* (2021) that sets out how children's rights apply to the digital world, and the Broadband Commission's *Child Online safety* (2019) which aims to 'advocate and assist in setting the right policy, strategy, operations, technology solutions and implementation conditions to ensure child online safety' (3). Another assistive guideline is the *Council for Europe's Handbook for policy makers on the rights of the child in the digital environment* (2020), which supports those responsible for making political or strategic decisions in respect of the well-being of children in the digital environment. The Information Commissioner's Office also published the *Age Appropriate Design: a code of practice for online services* (2 September 2020), this statutory code of practice 'seeks to protect children within the digital world, not protect them from it' by positioning the best interests of the child as the primary consideration in the design and development of online services that are likely to be accessed by a child (2020, 5–7). The importance of accountability is highlighted by the 5Rights Foundation's *Pathways: How digital design puts children at risk*, which emphasised that there is a 'profound carelessness and disregard for children, embedded in the features, products, and services – the norms – of the digital world' (2021, 5).

Alongside these regulations and guidelines there are measures that seek to shape the design process such as the UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) *Secure by Design Code of Practice* (2018) that targets the technical aspect of consumer products, and the Australian *Safety by Design Principles* (2019) that assess online risks and harms from the social angle of digital technology. These measures signal there has been a significant departure from an over-reliance on self-regulation to an acknowledgement of the need to establish a duty of care. We argue that regulatory frameworks for online safety will benefit from an honest assessment of social media regulation within the home and school from those in receipt of it.

The aim of this study was to create a space for young people to reflect on their experience of social media regulation, and how social media affects their everyday lives, to gain a more nuanced insight into their experiences, views, and concerns. The study was conducted before the pandemic, and as such pre-dates the interventions noted above, but its findings remain relevant.

The home is the most prominent location for Internet use (O'Neill and McLaughlin 2011, 3), and it is also the most challenging location for regulating a young person's Internet access. Historically it has been argued that '[t]he governance of children is conducted at a distance through the family, formalising both 'parental responsibility' and a stand-off role of the state' (Bernard-Lewis 2012, 247). Research suggests little has changed, Livingstone and Blum-Ross found: 'parents' sense of being left 'to their own devices' in coping with a challenging present and an uncertain future is not so much a result of individual actions. Rather, it is a product of the long-term trends in individualisation and neo-liberalism that, together, divide parents from each other and 'responsibilise'

them for the effects of social transformations' (2020, 172–173). The most recent Ofcom study (2022) identified that parents use a combination of approaches to mediate their child's access to, and use of, online content and services, such as: imposing rules, talking to their child regularly, supervising their child, and checking what they are doing online (61). Leila Green et al. contend that it is important to recognise that not all forms of parental mediation practices are negative, a parents' active engagement with their child's online activities can in one context be a form of control, and in another allow privacy and encourage autonomy (Green et al. 2021, 4–5).

National findings indicate levels of parental supervision, mediation, and knowledge of online risks varies according to educational attainment; socio-economic status; age; the gender of the child; disability; ethnicity; and family structure (Bond and Rawlings 2016, 31). More recently, Nili Steinfeld also observed that parental backgrounds impacted online safety education in the home, she identified that older parents, parents from rural areas and less digitally literate parents experience more difficulties mediating Internet activities for their children, and parents with higher socioeconomic status implemented more rules to regulate their children's Internet use (2021, 1899). Steinfeld also noted that parents do not always model positive Internet habits and instead often engage in unsafe Internet behaviours and excessive phone use (2021, 1899). Overall, research demonstrates that parents feel ill-equipped to support both a positive online engagement and potential negative impacts (Third et al. 2019, 5). The presupposition, therefore, of the parent as a protector and all-knowing teacher does not translate to digital environments where children often have more experience than their parents (Zamen and Nouwen 2016, 7), and begin gathering this experience while very young.

Within formal education, where regulation and surveillance may be more embedded through policies and technologies (Hope 2015; Steeves and Jones 2010), the development of young people is no less complex. Today, young people within compulsory education have a paradoxical dual identity; they are often perceived as a 'digital generation' confident and competent online, whilst simultaneously being regarded as at risk and vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. This duality, we contend, was not adequately addressed in online safety education in schools. Although it is widely accepted that young people are actively using the Internet and social media from a young age, there has been a tendency in online safety education to focus on the risks and vulnerability of young people, rather than acknowledging the benefits and opportunities the Internet creates. This approach assumes risks can only be resolved through preventative and prohibitive measures such as regulation and surveillance.[1] Ultimately, this homogenises all young people as though they are naive users of the Internet and social media, who are therefore in need of protection and control. This ideology is only exasperated by the fact that the digital products and services are not safe places where children can be encouraged to take risks, stretch their capacities, push boundaries, navigate uncertainty (Livingstone and Pothong 2021, 67), and thereby, build digital resilience. We argue it is reductive to polarise young people into the role of knowledgeable or naive, because these contradictory narratives fail to acknowledge that an individual can be both. These binary concepts also fail to recognise the diversity and plurality of identity and experience.

The relationship young people have with technology is complex, alongside being social actors and consumers, they are also already utilising online and networked media to shape the kind of society they wish to live in (Third and Collin 2016, 45). Kidron and Rudkin identify the need to capture 'all the experiences and anxieties that children and young people face. They are early adopters of technology and their voice should be at the forefront of research' (2017, 6). Educational policy, policies within individual schools and educational resources tend to focus on adult identified harms. For example, some scholars have also identified the limitations of the contemporary regulatory legislation in the *Draft Online Safety Bill* (2021).

> The traditional research base underpinning policy has tended to polarise practices as 'healthy' or 'harmful', and effects of media as 'good' or 'bad'. The lack of nuance in this approach means that legislation and other interventions proceed apace while understanding little about what young people are actually doing online, their motivations, or their experiences (Smith, Attwood, and Scott 2019, 5).

The UK government have pledged to empower users, but this strategy is flawed because while the government has consulted a range of stakeholders, 'there is little indication that young people will be invited to contribute meaningfully to that strategy' (Smith, Attwood, and Scott 2019, 14).

To move away from adult identified digital dangers that tend to dominate educational policies and strategies, we created a study that aimed to better understand students' knowledge and needs so as to inform school and government policy, teaching practice and educational content. The research questions we sought answers to included: (How) does social media impact the everyday lives of young people? (How) do young people experience social media regulation? (How) does the 'prohibitive' agenda and its impacts become visible in participants' descriptions of their online safety awareness?

Methodology[2]

The project used a multimethods approach involving in person focus groups and one-to-one interviews. In total there were 109 participants in the study. Table 1 shows the data collected from the research sample. The purpose of having three groups of participants was to triangulate the data, participants included students recently out of school, students in school and teachers' perspectives.

In the first phase of data collection we conducted two focus groups with a small sample of eleven undergraduates at a UK university on different degree programmes. They were recruited using generic purposive sampling, the criteria for inclusion in the focus groups was that all participants were British and educated in England within three years of their secondary education. The participants were encouraged to critically analyse their use of social media and their experience of social media regulation within the home and school. We employed two methods of collection. For the first activity, each student was given a whiteboard marker, and asked to respond to three questions displayed on whiteboards: (1) What are the advantages of using social media? (2) What are the disadvantages of using social media or problems it presents? (3) What are the solutions to the problems identified? Students then participated in a group discussion, where they discussed their experiences using social media, their online safety education, and possible policy solutions for how social media should be governed, if, indeed, they felt this was appropriate. The audio of the focus groups was recorded and transcribed.

Five schools were recruited to participate in the second phase of the data collection using generic purposive sampling. We aimed for diversity in terms of age including students aged 11–18, the type of school (two state, and three fee-paying), and approximately equal numbers of male and female participants. We focused on creating an appropriate sample of participants in terms of the research questions, rather than the statistical adequacy of the sample. We did not assess whether these variables affected online behaviours and experiences, instead we chose to focus on the content of what the participants decided to share.

In the second phase students were given three post-it-notes to respond to three questions, before posting their answers on the wall next to the questions around the room. The questions posed to the students were: (1) What is one positive thing you associate with social media? (2) What is one negative thing you associate with social media? (3) What is one thing you would like to change? Students then worked in groups of no larger than six to form a youth jury. Students were asked to discuss, debate and deliberate a point, to reach a conclusion and put forward a recommendation, proposal or idea that flowed from their group discussions. They were asked to make recommendations or

Table 1. Research sample.

Research Phase	Participants	Total	Data collected
Phase 1	Students aged 18–21	11	Focus groups (abbreviated to *fg* in text)
Phase 2	Students aged 11–18	91	Focus groups
Phase 3	Teachers	7	One-to-one interviews

share their ideas for protecting or enabling their 5Rights. We utilised videos created by *The Internet on our Own Terms* project commissioned by 5Rights to initiate their discussions in the youth jury exercise. This was the first time our participants were introduced to their 5Rights. These discussions were recorded and transcribed.

The Internet on our Own Terms project commissioned by *5Rights* aimed to avoid the assumption that researchers already know what the problems are: 'the *5Rights* were devised as a way of broadening the policy debate beyond the discourse of fear and risk' (Coleman et al. 2017, 9–10). The youth jury method for promoting digital literacy utilises co-creation to give young people a voice and the space to decide what is important, discuss how the scenarios relate to their own personal experiences, and encourage critical thinking to devise recommendations for how the Internet could be made better for young people (Dowthwaite et al. 2019, 12). The *5Rights* are: the right to remove, the right to know, the right to safety and support, the right to informed and conscious use, the right to digital literacy. These rights were portrayed with the use of dramatic scenarios, which were used to inspire the discussion for the youth jury. The recorded videos that accompanied the project were also utilised as part of our study. For the 'right to know' we also asked the students to critically review Snapchat's terms and conditions.

For the third and final phase of the project we interviewed seven teachers who organised their schools' participation and attended the data collection with their students. We asked them to consider the challenges they experienced in relation to their students' use of social media, including whether it was ever a useful tool in education. These discussions were also recorded and transcribed.

A thematic analysis of all the data was undertaken whereby an initial coding scheme was developed. The first author initially coded the transcripts to identify positive and negative experiences on social media. The categories were developed and refined in an iterative process. Written summaries of thematic categories informed the interpretation of the data.

Findings and discussion

Four themes were identified during the data analysis, these were repeated concerns expressed by participants in at least two of the phases:

1. Generational Divisions
2. Digitally Free
3. Privacy and Powerlessness
4. Living Online-Offline

We will take each of these in turn to probe how we might better support young people online.

Generational divisions

In the introduction we pointed out that digital media frequently becomes a conflicted site of intra-familial power relations, particularly because children are often more digitally literate than their parents (Livingstone, Lansdown, and Third 2017, 26). As a result of this knowledge discrepancy between children and their parents or carers, young people often regard digital environments as a space of refuge and relative freedom. The young people in our focus groups expressed feeling liberated online, for example, one student said online '*we are free' (13, male, fg).* Undergraduates also conveyed the same sentiment, as they described social media as '*an escape' (20, male, fg)*, whilst others said, '*it's like your safe haven' (19, female, fg).* This suggests that the young people in our focus groups felt the Internet was a 'safe' space that empowered them to feel 'free' to be themselves, explore and creatively shape their identities. This concurs with current research that refers to young people's online spaces as a 'third sphere' where young people 'hang out' to escape the strictures of

home and school, and adults perceive young people to be absorbed inside their own online world (Livingstone and Sefton-Green 2016, 32).

Many students were keen to correct common misconceptions about their lives online. When we asked school students: 'What should adults know about the way young people use social media?' One student responded: *'not all kids are irresponsible and unaware' (14, male, fg)*. Another student said that:

> it is oftenly used by everyone and [adults] have to accept that, [and] instead of discouraging the use they should try and learn more about it themselves and become involved. We aren't stupid when we use it, and they should have more trust in children that they are being safe and know what they are doing (17, male, fg).

Focus group participants from phase two reported that they felt there was a knowledge divide between adults and young people, and emphatic phrases such as '*they have to accept that*' or '*not all kids*' emphasise the sense of disparity in understanding.

Our findings support current research into digital media and children that highlights cyberbullying is a part of life for young Internet users today whether it is through communication with classmates, unknown social media users, or online gaming partners (Green et al. 2021, 460). In the post-it-note activity (see Figure 1), when asked 'what is one negative thing you associate with social media?', thirty-eight of the ninety-one that participated wrote 'cyberbullying'. Cyberbullying was also identified by undergraduates who participated in the focus groups (see Figure 2). School students identified that despite cyberbullying being a concern shared by many, they often felt there were inadequate provisions to support them. As one student explained: '*Adults don't understand cyberbullying, the way it works, and you know when adults say 'oh yeah kids always say we don't understand this', well you don't' (14, male, fg)*. Another student stated: '*Older people think they know a lot more about the dangers [of] social media than younger people do – which isn't necessarily true' (17, male, fg)*. The repetition of phrases such as: 'don't understand', 'you don't', and 'think they know', emphasises that some young people feel that the adults in their lives assume knowledge rather than asking questions and listening to them, which we can infer only serves to alienate young people from potential sources of support.

'Connectivity' was a theme identified in young people's responses during the data analysis of phases one and two. This coincides with contemporary research that emphasises the proliferation of new technologies has increased possibilities for new forms of communication, interaction, and participation, giving people the opportunity to speak, write and share what is happening in their
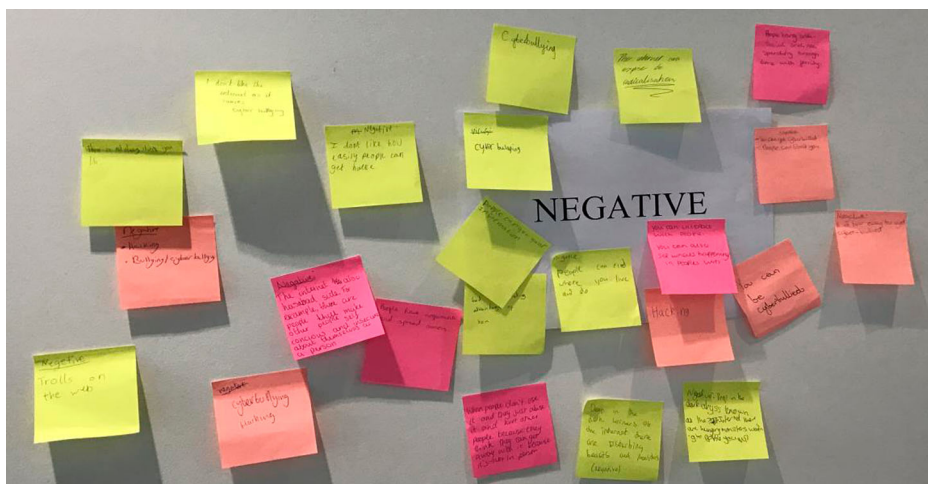
Figure 1. Image taken of post-it-note activity, 'cyberbullying' was a popular concern raised by the students.
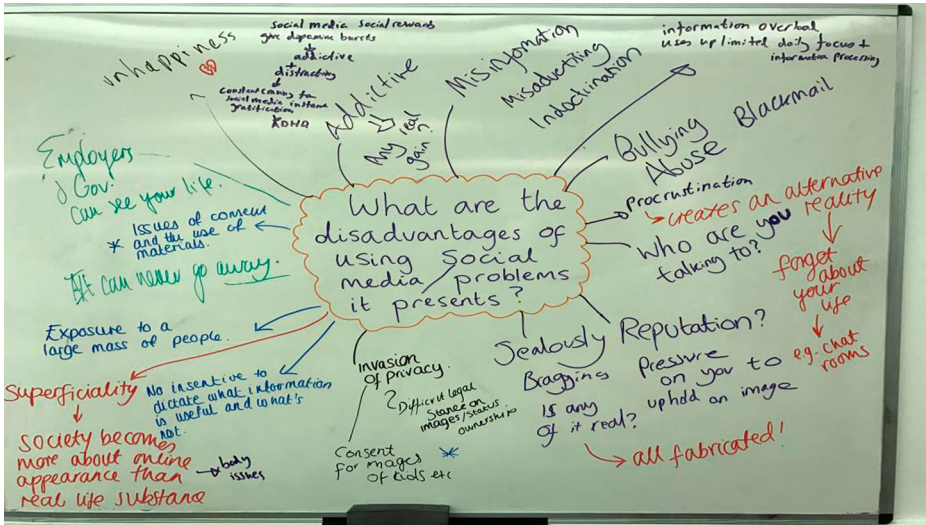
Figure 2. Image of whiteboard activity with undergraduates. Cyberbullying was a recurring concern expressed by the students.

life anytime, almost anywhere, and at minimal cost (Green et al. 2021, 152). When we asked students to identify the advantages of social media, sixty-seven of the ninety-one that participated cited the ability to stay in touch and communicate. This was also a popular response amongst undergraduates during the whiteboard activity. As can be seen from Figure 3, students repeated 'communication', 'connection', and 'keep in contact with people all over the world' in a number of similar formulations. Healthy social connections were a pronounced advantage of the Internet for the young people in our study, and 'communication' for them seemed to imply a sense of support and community, as the 'connection' with family and friends online prevented them from
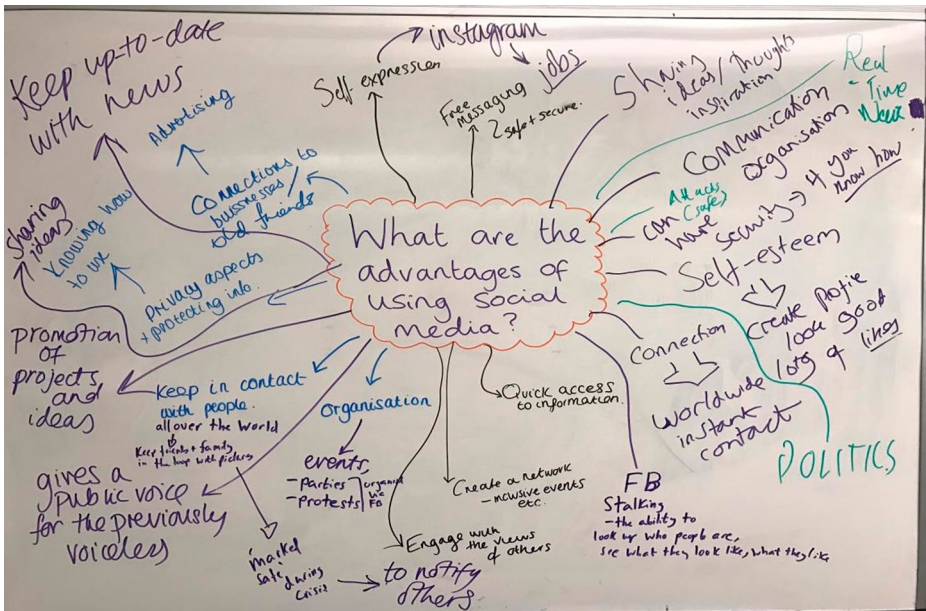

Figure 3. Image of whiteboard activity with undergraduates, 'connectivity' was a popular advantage identified by the students.

feeling alone. Research suggests that the importance of online communication and interactions are often driven by a desire for 'online togetherness', that is 'a sense of being together online' (Green et al. 2021, 158). Our findings demonstrate that most students have both positive and negative experiences online, and that young people's online lives are in a state of flux.

The teachers we interviewed shared that they found the age when children start to use digital media was lowering: '*pupils are starting to use social media and the Internet younger and younger, without receiving much education around it' (teacher, interview)*. We asked school students in phase two 'at what age did you start using social media?' Forty-seven of the ninety-one that participated said they were aged between eleven to twelve, twenty-six said they were aged ten or younger. This corroborates with national studies that show 'nine in ten children owned their own mobile phone by the time they reached the age of 11' (Ofcom 2022, 11). A teacher we interviewed conveyed that it can be difficult to deliver online safety education when there are such vast differences in digital media use, attitudes and understanding amongst the young people they teach. She explained:

> you've got to make sure you cover for those that are active users who've been up to all sorts of things discovering and experimenting, and then you have the innocent creatures whose parents say the age restrictions apply you're not using it (teacher, interview).

The teacher in this interview associates an innocence online with restrictive and authoritarian parental mediation and this is juxtaposed to the 'active users' who are allowed to self-regulate their usage. Accordingly, we might conclude that the differences in parental mediation strategies of young people's digital behaviours further complicates the delivery of online safety education.

Parental regulation within the home was a reported concern for many of the teachers that participated in the study, one teacher pointed out that '*there's a big difference between the tech savvy and the least tech savvy parents' (teacher, interview)*. This teacher outlined a common concern expressed by both parents or carers and educational professionals that only the 'tech savvy' can help young people navigate their lives online. However, research has shown that the most important factor in keeping young people safe online is 'open communication' (Steinfeld 2021, 1901). A female undergraduate in the focus group reinforced that intergenerational knowledge discrepancies might be addressed through education that facilitates a dialogue between parents and children:

> You could encourage them to go home and teach their parents about it or just talk to them like, 'I learnt this in school', to set up a dialogue between them and their parents; then it's a dialogue that's not evasive and won't go into the child's privacy, and they'll always have that talk, and that availability of information, and then the kids will then have a solution to go to in the worst scenario (19, female, fg).

If we are to bridge the disparity in knowledge between parents or carers and children, we need to focus on developing educational strategies that empower young people to make safer choices, and our research identified that one way of achieving this is through facilitating honest communication between parents or carers and children.

Digitally free

In 'Generational Divisions' we point out that many of the students we met over the course of our study described the liberation they felt online, but they were also conscious of the ways in which they felt their agency was limited within these online spaces. The undergraduate students were concerned by how online consumer culture has shaped their online identity. When students discussed creating an online social media profile they compared the experience to the creation of a 'product': '*it kind of strips you of your humanity, […] it's almost like a commodification of you, and your personality, you know. […] I've become a product, […] I'm selling myself literally, literally selling myself' (20, male, fg)*. This student felt social media profiles are objectifying, as they represent a carefully curated version of an identity fashioned for consumption.

Furthermore, some undergraduates disliked that their online safety education encouraged them to conceal their identities online in order to protect their relationships and future career prospects:

I think it's very problematic to be telling people to self-censor themselves in their private social space, like yeah, I would hate to be like, on social media I'm not gonna say stuff I wouldn't want my employer to know (19, female, fg).

This undergraduate student goes on to capture the merging of their 'offline' and 'online' lives by explaining: '*To me that social space is part of you, it's part of the social arena*', (19, female, fg). She drew no distinction between the two spaces; it was intrinsically interconnected to her sense of self. The student discussed the internalisation of the 'preventative' messages received, '*rather than enforcing peoples' right to privacy to be like, oh, don't say anything you don't want your mother to hear or your grandmother to hear' (19, female, fg).* Such messaging seemed to exasperate the pressure to shape the perfect identity online that simultaneously reveals and conceals.

The marketisation of young people's constructed identities online was not their only concern. Both undergraduate and secondary school students were conscious of the role digital spaces played in the formation of their political views, beliefs and knowledge production. One undergraduate explained: '*Facebook has been quite politically biased. […] It's the same thing with twitter, you've got this confirmation bias' (19, female, fg).* Undergraduates in the focus groups were mindful of how these virtual public spheres created a tunnel vision of reality:

you're following the people who you like, who are within your echo chamber, and you don't get exposure to anything else, so I think the problem with this is social media can often confirm your own world view, they don't challenge it (19, female, fg).

Our results indicate that young people are aware that digital media platforms are not neutral or objective.

Secondary school students were more troubled by the contrast between the materials censored compared with those that were permitted within these spaces. One student emphasised that they were worried about how online spaces were regulated because they had noticed that certain material was being incorrectly censored:

Some social medias don't do their job properly and even abuse their power of taking [down] videos. For example: they could take down a video which is innocent e.g., breast feeding, but then keep a video which is extremely explicit which is e.g., physical assault, swearing. That sort of social media should be fined as it [is] their job (14, female, fg).

At the same time, she advocated for more people to be employed to monitor these spaces and penalise users posting inappropriate content. The student acknowledges the struggle to correctly identify what should be censored, and advocates for a review of what and when content should be censored: '*There should be more people joining the social media jobs, they need to view what everyone is about to post. A solution could remind you that kids are watching, and you could receive a serious penalty' (14, female, fg).* Our research suggests that young people are eager to understand what values are prioritised in automated decision-making systems, because they are noticing that some of these digital decisions tend to reinforce oppressive social relationships and promote values that are openly discriminatory.

Young people are not passive consumers, but actively engaging in analysing, challenging, and critiquing the digital spaces they inhabit. These digital spaces have politicised them and given them a voice. During a focus group discussion two female secondary school students discussed their disappointment with their experience of social media regulation. One student noted:

There was this whole age restriction thing with YouTube, I got really annoyed because they banned LGBTQ+, they banned people from seeing it. They put the age restrictions on. I got really annoyed, that's why I put it on my Snapchat stories' (14, female, fg). Another student agreed: 'You know a boy and a girl kissing that's fine, but two men kissing that gets banned. […] They are banning the wrong stuff (13, female, fg).

The repetition of 'banning', 'banned' and 'annoyed' conveys both students' disappointment at the prejudicial treatment of marginalised people in digital records. The proclamation by one of the students that this needed to be highlighted to her peers in her 'Snapchat stories' demonstrates that

some young people expect social media companies to do better. Young people are designing their digital identity and consequently the spaces this identity inhabits; within these spaces they feel the possibilities are limitless. Digital spaces offer them the chance not just to make sense of their economic, social and political environment, but also to challenge it.

Privacy and powerlessness

Privacy was a popular concern amongst our participants; however, this did not translate into an awareness of how their data was being used. We asked students as part of an activity during the whole day school events to review Snapchat's terms and conditions; their responses during group discussions were particularly revealing. One student alerted her group to a problematic term:

> I've found a red flag. They are saying we've granted them a license to use our photos. I don't think it's in the adverts, they didn't ask for that, they just get it, so you're letting them use your photos (13, female, fg).

When one student uncovered what they characterised as a '*red flag*' in the terms and conditions, the others inquisitively probed how this might affect them. One student responded:

> So you're saying if I take a photo of me with my family they can go and post it somewhere?' […] You should have the right to know what's been used about you' (13, female, fg). Another student concurred: 'You should know where it's used (13, female, fg).

The repetition of the personal pronoun '*you*' emphasises an acknowledgement of the affect this could have on their usage, and the repetition of '*should*' denotes the obligation they feel '*they*' [Snapchat] have towards protecting their privacy. The student who first noticed the 'red flag' emphasises the irony: '*Then they say your privacy matters to us […] You never know when you're selling your soul to a company*' (13, female, fg). This statement incites laughter from the rest of the group. The derisive sarcasm might suggest disappointment at the deceptive promises they were familiar with, but the subsequent laughter acknowledges the irony and suggests a sense of powerlessness. It is apparent that young people have clear ideas about how these digital spaces should be governed. They feel free in these spaces, but this liberation is being exploited, and there is a lack of awareness and comprehension of the future impact this may have upon them.

Privacy remains an unresolved issue and was a popular topic of discussion with all participants in our research project. For example, undergraduates in our focus groups reported that they often felt frustrated when automated updates would change the settings on their social media profiles resulting in them needing to relearn how to make their profiles private. One student explained: '*the rules are constantly changing it's hard for people to keep up with how to make different forms of social media private, you have to keep checking every time it updates*' (20, male, fg). Having ownership over their data, and knowledge and control over how it is being used was of great importance to our participants. Young people feel free online to express themselves; it is their space, and they want to maintain ownership over their online identities, and misuse of their data is a clear threat to their sense of enfranchisement online. Young people expect privacy online, but, whilst privacy may be an expectation, it is not a reality.

Participants were clear in their definitions of what 'privacy' means to them, with one participant stating: '*Any information about you, you should know where it's going and what's being done with it*' (18, female, fg). Another student conveyed the same sentiment: '*At the end of the day it's your content you should be able to do what you want with it*' (20, female, fg). Young people have clear expectations for their digital privacy, but they are not conscious of how the reconfiguration of these traditional concepts are being exploited and consequently misused online.

Living online-offline

A teacher emphasised that young people '*don't see a separation between the social media existence and their regular existence, […] they just see it as life, it's all part and parcel of who they are and what*

they're doing' (teacher, interview). Our findings suggest that the terms 'online' and 'offline' are out-dated, because for young people there is no distinction, as they fluidly move between these two spaces. The merging of young people's online and offline lives is supported by research into online behaviours which has found that young people do not tend to perceive there to be a division between their 'online' and 'offline' lives, instead they define the distinction according to their school and social life (Phippen 2017, 55). The 'online' and 'offline' spaces may not be distinguishable for young people, but Coleman et al. contend 'children and young people expect their online experi-ences to be governed by the same moral standards as the offline world' (2017, 42). In fact, whilst the difference between 'online' and 'offline' lives are blurred, some student participants perceived there to be a differentiation between how they behave in these two spaces, and what is regarded as acceptable in one may not translate into the other. For example, two school students explained: '*Don't take anything seriously, what happens in social media stays there, don't worry about it, it isn't real*' (13, male, fg), '*[social media is] where you kind of say what you want*' (15, male, fg). These state-ments may have been made in jest, but ultimately, it is implied that there is relatively more freedom online than offline, and potentially less consequences.

Peer-pressure to always be online was also a recurring topic of discussion during the youth jury activity with secondary school students. One student explained that the pressure to remain con-nected to your peers was combined with feeling a need to project a certain image that reflects online trends: '*People often think of it as you have to have this, you're seeing all these things, and I bought this, I bought that' (15, male, fg)*. Another student described feeling pressured into using certain forms of social media to keep up with their peers: '*You don't want to be left out, so you download it' (*14, male, fg). The repetition of the pronoun 'you' implies that the feelings they describe are often shared by their peers. For the young people in our focus groups, images on social media have a cur-rency and their identities are often a product of their consumption. Social media profiles are per-formative, they offer a space for re-invention and re-creation, where individuals can design an online identity they believe will be well received by their peers.

Undergraduate participants also agreed that they felt peer pressure to perform online:

> One of the worst things about social media is that […] it gives people a warped perception of what other peoples' lives are really like. And what happens is, they try to outdo them, by posting things about their life that is really great, which then has a vicious cycle on their network, because everyone thinks everyone around them is happier, so they become sadder; which then in turn makes everyone sadder; it's just a vicious cycle […] it's one big online competition between people and I just find it quite disturbing really (21, male, fg).

The architecture of social media encourages intensified forms of comparison; young people live their lives online, and place great importance on connectivity but this, in turn, results in a reliance on social media for validation, as popularity and power are defined by their ability to successfully navigate this space.

The Internet offers young people the opportunity to communicate, self-educate, a space to be creative, and learn about the world around them. At the same time, young people are aware of the risk and harm they might fall victim to or perpetrate. All participants identified with the struggle to switch off. When we asked the secondary school students 'How often do you post, read or send a message using social media?' the most popular response was '*several times an hour*', with thirty-four students picking this option, and nineteen picking '*several times a day*'; thus, social media perme-ates their everyday lives.

The addictive nature of social media was another unsolved problem frequently repeated in discus-sions between, and with, participants. The undergraduates who participated in the focus groups described feeling out of control of their social media use: '*I've got Facebook, I can't delete it, even if I wanted to, like a heroin addict couldn't just come off, I can't just come off of it, I'd have serious withdrawal symptoms, I think that's worrying' (20, male, fg)*. The hyperbolic comparison between social media and heroin addiction emphasises the intensity of the dependency, the repetition of '*I can't*' highlights the significance of this compulsion in their lives, and an inability to 'switch off'. The young people in our

study were aware of how social media companies actively encourage users to remain online. We contend there is a need to empower young people to become conscious users, whereby young people remain 'free' within their online identities and spaces, rather than controlled by them.

Conclusion

We began this project seeking to encourage young people to talk about their online lives, and we discovered that often little encouragement was needed. Young people are desperate to be heard. Digital spaces are transformative, young people can continually invent and re-design their digital identities, they perceive this ever-evolving process of creation as liberational, it gives them a voice so often absent within the classroom and at home.

The key findings are as follows:

1. Intergenerational knowledge discrepancies have resulted in young people perceiving the Internet as their space of freedom, a 'safe haven', and an 'escape' from the regulation they experience at home and in school. The disparity in understanding can be reduced by open communication between adults and young people.
2. The concept of an online identity being defined by, and through, consumerism, results in that identity becoming artificial, and their self-creation becomes a performance. Young people are regulating the social construction of their identity; accordingly, any agency or freedom is arguably another performance
3. Young people are aware of how they are influenced and exploited by social media, and have a view on who is to blame, but they are not always able to remain in control.
4. Young people do not see a distinction between their online and offline lives. However, crucially, our research also suggests that young people do consider there to be a marked difference in their online and offline identities. Appreciating this distinction between their identities will help parents or carers and educational professionals understand young people's online usage.

Our research has identified that there remains a tendency within online safety education to focus on the risks and vulnerabilities of young people, which it is assumed can only be resolved through preventative and prohibitive measures such as restricting, monitoring, supervising, and controlling. However, as Frank La Rue, the former UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, contends, the Internet is '[a]n important vehicle for children to exercise their right to freedom of expression and can serve as a tool to help children claim their other rights' (2014, 16). We will not succeed in bridging the disparity in knowledge between young people, parents or carers, and education professionals if we rely on discourses of prevention and safeguarding that are innately prohibitive. The regulation of digital spaces has historically resulted in inconsistent educational strategies, which do not acknowledge the complexity of the relationship young people have with social media and the Internet.

The young people who participated in our study have not been pacified by social media; rather, they feel they have been empowered. Hence, seeking to intervene in these spaces and how they are governed in a prohibitory fashion will only serve to further alienate and isolate young people within these spaces, making them vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation. We need to generate resources in collaboration with young people that are not just aimed at young people, but education professionals and parents or carers. These resources should be continually evolving and transforming with social media. They should encourage young people to critically engage in analysing these digital spaces and facilitate the formation of their voice and identity online to avoid young people being defined by, and through, social media.

Notes

1. See for example the Keeping Children Safe in Education (18 January 2021) in which they state 'it is essential that children are safeguarded from potentially harmful and inappropriate online material. As such, governing

bodies and proprietors should ensure appropriate filters and appropriate monitoring systems are in place' (24).
2. The study received ethics approval from the University of Warwick's Biomedical and Scientific Research Ethics Sub-Committee.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

Funding

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