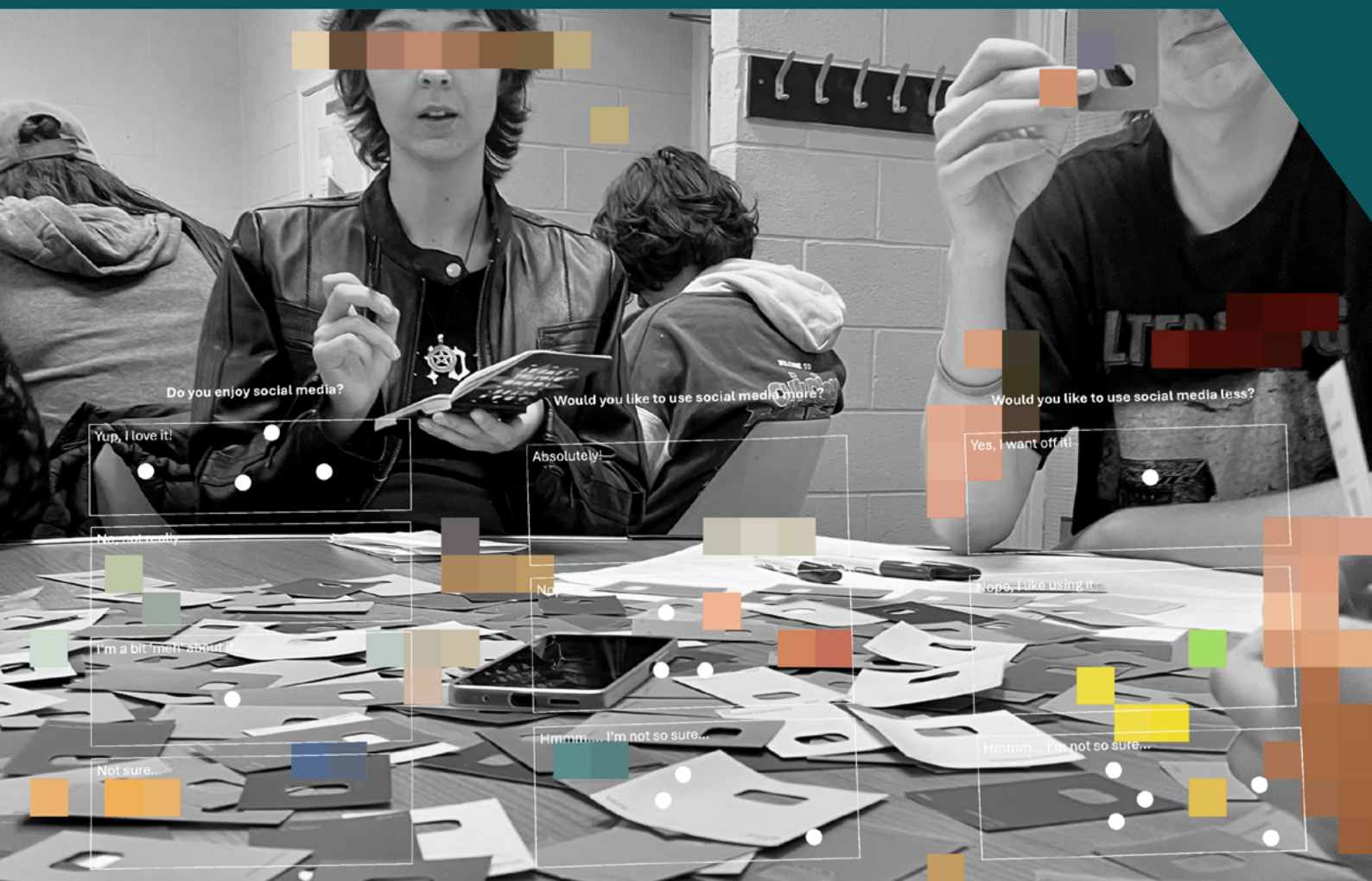
Nuffield Foundation

Ada Lovelace Institute

Grown up?

‘I love it, but I hate it’

Young people’s experiences and expectations of growing up digital



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Cover photo:
Mimi, Peer researcher, facilitating a youth-led dialogue at Sandwell Youth Service. Credit: Hot Chocolate Trust.

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I be on my phone

My phone be on me

But that does not mean

My phone is all of me.

– Jimmy, Peer researcher,
Dundee co-analysis sessions

How to read this report

If you are a national or local policymaker, this report contains useful insights to guide approaches to understanding and legislating for the interests of young people. See 'Key findings' and 'Implications for policy'.

If you are a researcher involved in work with young people, this work adds to the evidence base of young people's experiences growing up with digital technologies. Partnering with youth workers and co-designing the research with young people enabled them to talk more freely about their experiences than they would have in other settings, such as schools. See the sections 'Section 1: Navigating the online landscape', 'Section 2: Navigating online pressures', 'Section 3: Navigating online harms', 'Section 3: Navigating online harms' and 'Section 4: Navigating AI' for discussions of evidence about young people's experiences and 'Methodology' for a detailed description of the research design.

If you are a public participation practitioner or researcher, this research contributes to the evidence base and methodological considerations, and helps to demonstrate the utility of public participation research in understanding and amplifying the views of minoritised people in relation to AI – in this case, young people. The research design sought to rebalance knowledge and power in favour of participants, building their skills as researchers while simultaneously creating new knowledge that centres a diverse range of young people's views, experiences and hopes for the future. Researchers with a focus on empirical research design will be interested in the application of the youth work partnership combined with peer research methods to provide an environment in which young people could talk openly about their experiences, see 'Methodology'.

If you work to provide support or services for young people, this research points to ways in which support could be strengthened, as well as ways that organisations supporting young people can be involved in future research. See 'Key findings', 'Implications for policy', the summarised insights at the end of each section, and 'Methodology'.

Content note

The report contains accounts of young people's experiences of exposure to violent, pornographic, hateful and discriminatory content, and its effects on them, including anxiety, trauma and suicidal behaviours, which readers may find disturbing or distressing.

Foreword

To read *'I love it, but I hate it'* is to engage with the powerful reflections of young people on their digital experiences – immersive, complex and contradictory – and what they think needs to change to protect and enable their and future generations to thrive. Their perspectives are essential if policymakers are to understand the issues and dilemmas young people face now and in the future, and their engagement vital in crafting solutions to them.

This important report forms a key part of the Nuffield Foundation's *Grown up? Journeys to adulthood* programme of work.

As well as the rapid digital developments explored in this report, Gen Z is grappling with global turmoil, the long tail of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic precarity, longstanding disinvestments in youth and community services, and social polarisation. These combine to make the pathways to adulthood particularly tough.

These societal shifts are shaping young people's lives at a critical time in their development. This period from being a teenager to a young adult marks a time of rapid physical, emotional, social and cognitive development, when young people are forging a sense of self and agency, developing friendships and relationships outside of home, their interests, values and ambitions. These changes are now mediated by digital infrastructure and the online world in ways that we don't yet understand.

To help policymakers and practitioners understand what the world looks like from young people's standpoints, this research foregrounds the insights, experiences and views of 49 young people aged 14 to 24 from across the UK.

The rapidity of technological changes and the still limited nature of existing research sharpened our focus on investigating how digital technology has or might be changing young people's experiences of growing up. Growing up has been changing over time, with some of the traditionally understood stages and markers of the transition into adulthood happening later or not at all. But when it comes to the digital space, it is the opposite, where young people find themselves catapulted into the adult world with all that it brings. It is much more difficult to sequence the transition into the online world.

'I love it, but I hate it' explores both social media and AI. In combination this has brought depth, granularity and complexity to our understanding of young people's digital lives, with youth workers facilitating conversations with young people to draw out experiences and perspectives that would be impossible to capture through quantitative survey data.

It reaffirms how embedded digital lives are, with little separation between online and offline lives, and the double-edged nature of digital engagement – bringing connection, new experiences, learning, entertainment, information and practical help – while at the same being addictive, anxiety producing, invasive and sometimes harmful.

It conveys the importance of understanding how experiences differ by group such as gender or care experience. The young people all described harmful experiences, including exposure to violent, pornographic, hateful and discriminatory content, misinformation with skewed political and ideological content, and fake images. They talked about not recognising these as harms when they were young and a desensitisation to what they were seeing; but how they now have the maturity to recognise them as having been traumatic and highly disturbing.

They report having to navigate these harms with very limited or no guidance, protection or mediation by adults. There was a strong consensus about the need for more protection of children and young people, stronger regulation and the need for support to manage risks, with young people centre stage.

In the words of one member of our Youth Insight Group: 'Young people are not passive bystanders in digital spaces. We are analysts, innovators and problem-solvers in our own right. To policymakers and decision-makers: if you want digital spaces that are safe, fair and empowering, you cannot design them without us.'[1]

We are at a juncture where policy, regulation and research in this field is developing at pace internationally and in the UK. Many countries are implementing regulatory changes including social media bans for under 16s and other proposals; high-profile legal cases are challenging the technology companies, so too a grassroots movement among Gen Z in Europe.

The proposals for change in this report are rooted in the insights of the young people who led this research. It is vital that their voices are heard and continue to be heard in these debates.

Carey Oppenheim
Strategic Project Lead, *Grown up? Journeys to adulthood*, Nuffield Foundation

Grown up?

'I love it, but I hate it' builds on the Nuffield Foundation's youth engagement work on digital lives and has some distinct features. It is peer research, co-designed and co-produced with young people and supported by youth workers. It explores young people's lived experiences of growing up with digital technology in ways that build young people's capacity to feel informed and empowered to engage with these issues.

In addition, we commissioned creative interviews with ten people aged 20–24, working with a filmmaker. These short films reflect on young people's current and past experiences of digital technology and their hopes for the future, and bring a longitudinal element to the research.

This research forms part of a programme of work commissioned by the Nuffield Foundation, *Grown up? Journeys to adulthood*, which aims to understand and address the urgent challenges that young people are facing today. It examines the experience of becoming an adult across four interconnected areas for young people: pathways to independence; education to work; digital lives; and mental health and wellbeing.

The peer research was designed to complement the programme's quantitative analysis of available research, which explored young people's access to and use of different devices, the effect of digital media on relationships and identity, and the influences of social media on wellbeing,[2] along with the digital deep dives and Youth Insight Group, which explored how young people are navigating their digital lives.[3]

Executive summary

This report presents new evidence about the experiences and expectations of the first generation of young people growing up with digital technology in early twenty-first century Britain.

Their experiences and views are critical: this is a rare moment where radical regulatory change is being considered, with a rising number of countries considering 'social media bans' for children. Despite extensive media and policy debates, young people's own voices and experiences are underheard.

This research amplifies the voices of 14–24 year olds. Their experience of growing up has been shaped by emerging technologies, online engagement and surveillance, and this research reflects on their experiences of technology evolving from dumbphones to smartphones with internet connectivity, their presence on social media and their exploration of AI. Their relationship with technologies has been significantly marked by living through the COVID-19 pandemic.

These young people have grown up in an era where online spaces and digital technologies played a large part in their lives, but were significantly under-examined and under-regulated. In July 2025, when the child safety regime under the Online Safety Act came into full effect, the then Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology Peter Kyle apologised to a generation of children for the government's failure to protect them from 'toxic' online content.[4]

The young people represented in this report are – or were – those children. Using peer research methods in partnership with youth work organisations, this research centred 49 young people talking to each other. This cohort shared their experiences and reflections on how technologies have shaped 'growing up' today. This is part of a joint programme of work with the Nuffield Foundation examining 'growing up' in the UK today, recognising that young people's digital lives cannot be examined in isolation.

Peer researchers from Dundee co-designed and facilitated research across four locations, chosen to represent a range of rural, urban and suburban experiences: Dundee, Shetland, Islington and Sandwell. By partnering with youth workers, we were able to hear experiences from people usually excluded from standard qualitative or quantitative research: our sample included young people who experienced different forms of exclusion, including poverty, homelessness or social care, school exclusion, or who had past and current health challenges.

The peer researchers chose to focus on two topics related to technology and growing up: social media, a group of technologies that they were all familiar with – and felt had shaped their lives in different ways – and AI, which they were less familiar with. While some were excited about the potential of these technologies, most had strong intuitions and insights about their potential harms and the need for controls and protections.

For both social media and AI, young people reflected on their ethical and social concerns about the impact of emerging technologies on their peers and wider society. The peer researchers chose not to impose strict definitions, but rather wanted the research to enable participants to bring their own experiences of these technologies during their growing up journeys. Discussion topics ranged from platforms such as Reddit or TikTok to messaging apps and search engines, from online applications and schoolwork to how technology is influencing communication and work, and from the impact on creative industries to the influence of technology on exposure to sexualised content.

Spanning a decade in our sample allowed for discussion of current and reflective experiences. The older end of the sample were at an age where they have developed a sense of moral maturity and could reflect on their own past experiences with more awareness than the younger cohort. Older participants described how their attitudes towards earlier experiences have changed over time and spoke about actively wanting to prevent younger people from having similar experiences.

Key findings

Despite a diversity of ages, experiences, backgrounds and attitudes to technology, there were strongly shared views across the cohort.

Young people told us that:

- **Digital connection is an important route to information and community for young people. While the digital environment can replicate or amplify structural inequalities, for some marginalised young people, it offers comfort and support that is not readily available in their immediate 'offline' environment.** All young people in this research recounted positive experiences from digital interactions, including accessing advice, relaxation and entertainment, and building community and relationships with peers.

- At the same time, **young people's accounts starkly highlighted how they had experienced – and continue to experience – harm on online platforms.** Their reflections reinforce broader evidence about the extent to which young people are exposed to prolific and inescapable harmful online content including sexual material, graphic violence and technology-mediated sexual assault. Participants shared experiences of receiving sexually explicit images at young ages, having explicit photos of themselves shared among peers and being exposed to videos of abuse in online spaces, and particularly gendered experiences of these.

  These experiences felt harmful or uncomfortable – not solely because of 'bad actors', illegal content or ill intent, but also because of age-inappropriate interactions, such as adults asking for mental health support from children. Young people also shared concerns about increased hateful and discriminatory language and behaviours online and how powerless they feel to challenge it.

- **Technologies including smartphones are so integrated into everyday life that young people feel they cannot navigate the world without them.** They are frustrated with the inconsistency of being advised by adults to reduce technological dependency, while they are encouraged to participate in a 'digital first' society and required to use digital technologies for many essential tasks such as completing schoolwork, applying for paid work or accessing public services. They feel the integration of digital technologies into everyday life limits their ability to control when and how they go online.

- **Platform design choices lead to young people feeling unable to be in control or set boundaries.** Young people understand their digital use and experiences as shaped by platform design choices, algorithmic nudges, gamification and 'dark pattern' design choices that promote content for commercial or ideological purposes. They see current technology designs as a form of manipulation that prioritises profit over wellbeing and were unequivocal in their call for this to change.

- **They have been left to navigate the online world in isolation, which means they must independently attempt to ensure their own safety online.** Young people, and particularly young women and trans participants, consistently reported taking responsibility for their own safety and the safety of younger people including siblings. Their lived experience of an absence of structural accountability for harmful content and negative outcomes has exacerbated their feelings of isolation, and this has important implications for how we understand and conceptualise safeguarding in a digital age.

- **They held little hope of significant positive change in their digital ecosystem.** Instead of optimism about the potential for digital platforms to become safer, participants felt resigned to some exposure to negative impacts. They felt that exposure to online harms had become an integral part of growing up that resulted in greater understanding and critical awareness, but that this was accepted at levels that went beyond any offline expectation of exposure to risk.

- **Young people viewed social media and AI as contributing to mental health harms.**[5] Some young people have developed strategies to deal with harms arising from, for example, unrealistic body standards, inappropriate interactions with older people, and exposure to sexual and graphic content and misinformation; they also use technologies to support their emotional regulation.

  However, they recounted the emotional impacts of desensitisation, harm, helplessness and frustration arising from this exposure. They attribute specific anxieties to desensitisation to harmful content, and they feel a generalised anxiety about constant digital surveillance.

- **Young people, especially children, do not always recognise when they are being harmed.** Exposure to explicit content occurs early in young people's online journey and participants reflected that they did not always have sufficient maturity to identify harm. While their younger selves accepted seeing distressing content as part of everyday life, they recognised the negative effects of these experiences – as well as the implications in relation to societal norms and the law. This has significant implications for supporting young people to stay safe when using digital technologies, because they may not

identify harm at the point of exposure, and therefore may not know how or when to seek support.

- **They are thoughtful and concerned about how AI is shaping the future they are inheriting.** Some were optimistic about the potential of AI, others more pessimistic, but they shared deep concerns about the societal harms arising from AI, particularly on the arts, the environment, sex and interpersonal relationships, mental health and jobs.
- Overall, they have strong and shared views that **future youth should not be able to access social media or technology in the way they did.** The benefits some young people find in online communities and support networks are countered by exposure to online harms. Profound change is needed to enable people to take control of their relationship with technologies, tackle harms, address corporate power and protect a better future.

Implications for policy

Many countries are considering new governance of social media platforms to foster a better relationship between children and technology. The young people in this research endorse the need for this: the digital environment is a large part of young people's experiences growing up, but too often their experiences are not safe, joyful, informed and supportive of their agency.

Based on the findings of this research, the Ada Lovelace Institute highlights clear implications for policy debate and measures.

1. **The government must strengthen and enforce age-specific protections for online spaces where children spend time.**

   The UK government's focus on young people as a population that faces unique risks in online spaces is aligned with the concerns of young people in this research. Although the young people in our cohort did not have a consistent view on an appropriate age for limiting access or functionality, they did feel that young people, and particularly younger children, are especially vulnerable to harm and that this vulnerability makes age-specific protections necessary.

   A reactive approach to regulation has enabled significant harms to occur to young people through corporate choices about the design of digital technologies. Young people are unequivocal in their demand for companies to design technologies that promote appropriate experiences. The government therefore needs to introduce regulatory requirements for any online spaces where children spend time, including gaming platforms, chatbots, AI agents, immersive technologies, and EdTech and AI in the classroom.

   Participants supported the principle that some online spaces and features, as currently designed, are inappropriate for children below a certain age limit. Young people's support for measures which restrict children's access to harmful online spaces stemmed from reflections on their own experiences of social media platforms

as children and concern for their younger peers who are beginning to navigate these environments.

2. **Any restrictions to the use of online spaces must consider the value of online communities for marginalised young people, and be balanced with investment in alternative digital and physical spaces.**

   Young people hold complex views on restricting people's use of digital technologies because, despite the harms they experience, they also benefit from accessing these technologies. Multiple participants explained how access to online spaces helps them find valuable support and build relationships and supportive communities away from their offline lives.

   Similarly, online spaces can provide opportunities for young people to develop their identities and sense of self, which is particularly important for people who may be excluded from, or minoritised in, physical social spaces. Social media platforms have become an important part of this landscape in recent decades. Blanket bans on children using social media platforms may therefore have unequally distributed consequences if they limit such opportunities without offering alternatives.

   Alongside regulation, the government should consider its role in shaping online and offline spaces for young people, and see those in tandem.

3. **Age-specific protections should be treated as part of, and not a replacement for, broader regulation, including safety-by-design standards, pre-deployment safety testing and ongoing monitoring of platforms and chatbots. Any blunt restriction of access to online spaces, such as a ban on social media platforms for young children, will not tackle widespread harms for people of all ages that arise from platform design choices.**

   Harms that stem from the design of online spaces, particularly social media platforms, do not finish at 16 or 18. The scope of any new regulatory intervention must extend beyond children-focused measures to improve the digital environment that has become a core component of modern life. Design features that promote rife misinformation, addictive use of platforms and surveillance as the norm, need to be addressed for all users.

   As a first step, the UK government should shape the design of online spaces through the Online Safety Act, one of the aims of which is to ensure that online services are 'safe by design'.[6] The government could produce a 'safety by design' code of practice to complement the Online Safety Act and prevent harms caused by design features that promote harmful online behaviour or content.[7]

   In the research, young people highlighted two features in the design of social media platforms that could be amended to improve all users' online experiences: first, the way existing business models promote antagonising, sometimes hateful, material by monetising content based on the number of views that a post receives; and second, how the use of algorithms reduces young people's control over their online experiences

and sometimes leads to exposure to distressing material. A new code of practice could address harms by mandating that recommendation algorithms promote appropriate content from trusted providers and deprioritise antagonistic content.[8]

Broader regulation, including safety-by-design standards, should be a condition of market entry for platforms for all ages. Incumbent platforms that do not update their services to meet new standards should be banned from operating in the UK.

4. **Young people's right to privacy should be reasserted: its erosion is contributing to data exploitation and self-reported harms. Safety measures must be carefully weighed if they subsequently increase the surveillance of young people, and this should be an area of focus for the Young People's Board on Digital Futures (see implication 7).**

   Privacy issues were raised by multiple participants who felt that additional oversight of young people's use of digital technologies would pose a risk to their right to privacy, which they said is already threatened by the intense surveillance they experience in online spaces. Therefore, monitoring young people's communications in online spaces to detect illegal content such as nude images, as proposed by the UK government,[9] or strengthening age restrictions must be implemented with safeguards that minimise data collection.

   Improving safety and strengthening privacy should not be seen as mutually exclusive, and the government could draw on the newly published measures outlined in the draft Children's Online Privacy Code from the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner. This code includes additional privacy-enhancing principles specifically for children, such as mandatory mechanisms for people with parental responsibility to input into decisions about the processing of children's information. In particular, policymakers should draw on the draft code's measures to ensure that all information provided to children about the processing of their data is age-appropriate and understandable to improve the transparency of any safety measures that are introduced.

5. **The government should regulate AI model developers to address young people's concerns about the systemic impacts of AI.**

   Young people were clear in their demand for meaningful control over how the use of AI shapes their lives, beyond illegal or harmful content. Many young people are concerned about the growing impact of AI on their online and offline experiences. For example, participants raised concerns about the default appearance of AI-generated responses in search engine results or the use of AI in public services that young people draw upon.

   Young people also discussed the potential systemic impacts of AI tools, such as deskilling (the devaluation of certain skills) and reduced opportunities for employment in creative industries.

   The government is right to specifically target the use of AI services for serious offences under the Online Safety Act, as multiple participants identified the use of AI to create pornographic images and facilitate sexual exploitation as a key area of concern.

Regulating the underlying models that power AI applications will be necessary to effectively prevent societal harms at their source.[10]

This point reflects the findings of our previous research on public expectations around AI regulation, which shows that the public support the independent regulation of AI developers, with enforcement, alongside safety assessments before market entry and the ongoing monitoring of AI systems once they have been deployed.[11]

6. **The government should aim to improve digital literacy for adults as well as children, while understanding this will not be a panacea: improved literacy does not necessarily translate to greater agency without broader regulation.**

Young people in this research were often unable to protect themselves from harm when using digital technologies, despite being acutely aware of how such technologies create harm. Many participants expressed frustration at their inability to control their experiences of online spaces, for example, experiencing misinformation, upsetting content and inappropriate interactions despite their efforts to avoid them. Young people described such negative experiences as prolific and inescapable.

This suggests that additional efforts to improve digital skills and literacy, as proposed by the UK government,[12] may be beneficial, but will not be sufficient to allow young people to access online spaces safely. Without mandatory design features that prioritise a user's ability to choose how they engage with online spaces, particularly social media platforms, young people cannot use their skills and knowledge to protect themselves online.

Digital literacy should not only focus on young people: young people consistently expressed a desire for two-way conversations with adults in their lives, including parents, carers and youth workers, about their use of digital technologies. Co-designing such conversations at a national level could facilitate more constructive consideration of specific policy proposals and shared learning between young people, older members of the public and policymakers.

7. **The UK government should embed young people's expertise as it designs new policies to shape the use of digital technologies through the creation of a Young People's Board on Digital Futures – a standing panel of diverse young people that is co-designed to meaningfully inform policy decisions.**

Restrictions or additional oversight of anyone's access to the opportunities presented by digital technologies was a serious issue that provoked deep reflection in the peer workshops, as well as the wider *Grown up?* programme. The depth of these conversations shows that young people's lived experiences are a powerful resource that need to be fully understood to ensure that decisions at all levels of society balance the need for protection with opportunities for growth and learning.

The government should work with organisations in areas such as youth work and civil society, that have trusted relationships with young people, to develop a mechanism by which young people can shape policy decisions on an ongoing basis.

This would enable a legitimate process that allows young people to meaningfully shape the principles by which new technologies are regulated and adopted, as well as one-off policy decisions, so that their experiences inform a proactive approach to ensuring new technologies positively impact their lives.

There are models for supporting diverse young people to be actively involved in ongoing decision-making processes that the government could adapt for online safety considerations. For example, it could take a similar approach to the Family Justice Young People's Board,[13] a board of children and young people with lived experience of the family justice system that supports national and local government bodies to make decisions about the system in England and Wales.

Functions of the board should be co-created with legitimacy, transparency and clear boundaries about the scope of young people's influence, reflecting the need for young people to be meaningfully empowered.[14] They could include:

- Representation:
  - Ensuring that the benefits, concerns, risks and opportunities that young people from diverse backgrounds prioritise are heard.
  - Co-designing an ongoing participatory mechanism to input on, for example, red lines or expectations of technology uses.
- Accountability:
  - The board could act as a mechanism for accountability to young people for decisions about their digital lives, complementing existing mechanisms for scrutinising digital policy and practices, such as Ofcom's Children's Online Insights Panel.[15]
- Scrutiny:
  - Taking evidence from Ofcom and technology companies on their progress around improving the digital environment for young people.
- Monitoring:
  - Tracking and evaluating measures affecting young people's right to privacy.
- Early insight:
  - Reflecting on the efficacy of new regulations and synthesising emerging evidence of young people's interactions with technologies.
  - Highlighting how young people's norms and behaviours are evolving, alerting policymakers to novel issues which might require scrutiny or regulation.

- Deliberation:
  - Using deliberative methods to support the development of a positive vision for digital futures.
- Communication:
  - Offering input on the appropriateness and relevance of communications about policy and practices that affect young people's digital lives, for example tone, language and accessibility of information about changes to policy and opportunities to input into consultations.

A broader conclusion from this research is that governmental decisions about young people and technology should be consistent and part of a holistic positive vision for childhood and growing up in the UK today.

This research shows that young people's online and offline experiences are not compartmentalised and relationships, experiences and impacts blur between online and offline. As a result, any binary distinction between growing up online and offline is reductive and limits possibilities for effective safeguards. These safeguards must take into account that digital technologies, and particularly online spaces, bring both benefits and harms to young people in different contexts and uses, and harms originating online materialise offline, and vice versa.

Any restriction to specific online spaces should be balanced with investment in alternative spaces, and access to information and advice. In particular, the government needs to offer a clear and coherent vision about how technology should be integrated into young people's lives, including social media, AI, gaming and education. The government should take necessary action to deliver that positive vision, one where young people's use of digital technologies is supported by appropriate controls that allow for safe exploration, while preserving the freedoms young people need to grow up with dignity and agency.

Introduction

Young people today are the first generation to grow up in the digital age, transitioning into adulthood with digital technologies integrated into their lives. This research builds on multiple knowledges and practices across a partnership of researchers, youth workers and peer researchers. In the early stages of shaping the research design, we took a hermeneutic literature review approach – a 'process through which increased understanding of the research area and better understanding of the research problem inform each other'[16] – and present some dominant themes selected from the literature to frame our findings.

A substantial majority of young people have continuous access to digital connectivity: over 90 per cent of 14–24 year olds in the UK either own a smartphone or can borrow one, with this rising to almost 100 per cent at the top of the age range.[17] Online interactions form a significant part of most young people's social lives, meaning they often have a wider geographic spread of connections and some young people have close friends they have never met in person.

This can provide community and support, but it also creates new pressures, opportunities, risks, benefits and harms for young people. These are not experienced equally: how young people navigate and experience online spaces is directly affected by their lived experiences.[18] [19]

Young people's voices are underrepresented in contemporary discourse about their digital lives.[20] [21] This research set out to build understanding about their experiences, views, attitudes, beliefs and hopes towards digital technologies, hearing directly from young people to understand their diverse perspectives and meaningfully inform existing and future research, policy and practice. Through a co-created research programme (see 'Methodology'), we asked young people to explore and reflect on the role of digital technologies in their growing up journey.

Digital life cannot be looked at in isolation. Young people use digital technologies to complement and facilitate their offline lives, for example through using social media platforms to communicate with friends. Online harms can also manifest offline, such as when young people are manipulated by online scams. The inseparability of online and offline life is a core concept that informed the research design.

Young people are not a homogeneous group. Their individual identities and circumstances directly affect their exposure to and lived experiences of digital technologies. For example, although a high percentage of young people have access to smartphones, regular access to broadband, mobile data and large-screen devices (that might, for example, support multiple children in a household to complete homework) are consistently lower (81 per cent) and lack of access is strongly statistically associated with indicators of poverty.[22] There is also a variation in digital capabilities and confidence among young people, pointing to a social barrier that affects access.

The broader social and political landscape within which young people navigate both their online and offline lives is also significant. Young people are living in a rapidly changing global political environment which, studies show, they are connected to via online spaces.[23]

This means that young people are informed about and engaged with the issues of the day through a wide range of platforms and information sources rather than focused, contextualised reporting.[24] One example can be seen in young people's eco-anxiety increasing and being experienced by younger age groups, as global heating continues and young people learn about this online.[25] [26]

The technological landscape of digital life is marked by rapid change, meaning that young people today have experienced advancements in digital technology throughout their growing up journey. This has changed the ways they consume content, connect with others and learn about the world.[27]

For example, in addition to engaging with increasingly commercialised and short-form social media content, young people produce their own livestreams, increasingly use large language models (LLMs) as well as online searches to support schoolwork, and engage in live gaming alongside people from across the world.[28] [29] [30] Technology use is evolving, for example livestreaming is increasingly being used by teachers to engage young people in remote education.[31]

These advances in technology provide significant advantages, such as enabling young people to have direct access to information and research, expanding their social networks and enabling them to actively engage in public discourse. However, these opportunities also come with significant risks and impacts that are currently largely unknown.

Technology developments mapped to age of participants[32 33]

1999 BlackBerry released

2001 Oldest research participant born

2003 Myspace

2005 YouTube / Reddit

2006 Twitter / Facebook / Spotify

2007 Apple iPhone released

2008 Android smartphone released

2009 WhatsApp

2010 Instagram

2011 Snapchat

2011 Youngest research participant born

2012 Facebook acquired Instagram

2014 Facebook acquired WhatsApp

2016 Instagram introduced Stories

2017 TikTok

2018 IGTV / Snap Originals

2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic: increase in remote teaching

2022 ChatGPT

2024 AI-powered personalisation and in-app shopping

2025 Peer research fieldwork with participants 14–24 years old

Young people in the 14–24-year-old age range are considered to be in an extended period of adolescent growth that encompasses biological developments and social transitions.[34] They fall within a stage of development that psycho-social models characterise as a phase of identity development.[35] In this period, young people often navigate social expectations, relationships and their aspirations as part of a process of 'finding themselves'.[36] They are also developing their agency and becoming more active contributors in their own lives and wider society.[37]

The ways digital technology and online spaces intersect with young people's development are currently not fully understood,[38] although there is evidence that identity and agency development in the digital age are both enabled and constrained by technology.[39] While platforms offer new modes of self-expression, they can also impose pressures that may limit exploration.[40] Young people are therefore experiencing adolescence in a technological landscape that directly influences their development.

Growing up has been changing over time, with some of the traditionally understood stages and markers of the transition into adulthood shifting and becoming less relevant. Journeys to adulthood are on average later and more prolonged, and for some more complex and precarious.[41] This is further complicated in relation to digital life due to the speed of technological change, which means observations about specific platforms or trends rapidly become outdated.[42]

The aim of this research is therefore not to identify impacts of specific technologies or platforms. Its aim is to build a detailed picture of the various ways that the cumulative experiences of living with digital technologies have affected young people over the course of their growing up journey.

To do this, we designed the research to work alongside young people to enable them to identify the aspects of this rapidly changing digital landscape that have had the most impact on their past, current and anticipated future experiences. We achieved this by working in partnership with the youth sector to ensure that young people's experiences guided the research process while also enabling us to hear from new and marginalised voices.

Balancing online harms and benefits

This research was conducted at a time of social and political debate about the impact of digital technologies on young people. In 2025, families, schools and policymakers were attempting to shape young people's access and use of these technologies within a complex landscape of mixed evidence. This evolved into a live debate about the need, and correct age, for restricting access to social media.[43]

Discussions about online harms are prevalent in academic literature and public discourse, with teenage depression, self-harm and suicide frequently connected to online experiences.[44] [45] [46] [47] At the same time, young people are often thought of as 'digital natives' who possess the digital skills needed to navigate online spaces. This assumed proficiency is framed as both the result of societal changes and the driver towards the urgent development of new digital approaches and practices.[48]

However, while experiencing profound technological change offers unique experiential insights, it does not necessarily result in the holistic proficiencies that are required to navigate online interactions. These dimensions of young people's technology use form a binary of harm versus benefit in public debate, and this research has sought to find nuance across this divide.

Screen time, social media and the use of smartphones have been scrutinised for their associations with harm to young people. This includes negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing, attention and distraction, and exposure to harmful content and harmful actors.[49] [50] [51] These harms have received extensive media coverage, including their association with the death by suicide of teenagers.[52] [53] Other prominent concerns include young people's engagement with problem gaming,[54] unrealistic body-image presentations online and harms to self-esteem,[55] [56] gender-based and sexual abuse[57] and racial abuse.[58] [59] [60]

Descriptions of online harms often assume that negative experiences occur within digital spaces that are separate from the offline world, but the benefits and harms can happen concurrently. Online abuse is often connected to offline impacts, such as in cases of sexual abuse, bullying and financial scams.[61] [62] At the same time, research has illustrated some unique features of online harm in comparison to offline, which can be more isolating and feel more amplified to young people.[63]

Not only can online harm feel different, it is also caused by a distinct set of conditions resulting from the design choices of online spaces, which are under the control of specific decision-makers. For example, the Facebook documents leaked by Frances Haugen in 2021 demonstrated corporate knowledge of active design choices driving mechanisms that negatively affect young people's mental health.[64]

Young people themselves are often aware of the active role large technology companies and social media platforms play in shaping online spaces that can capture attention and amplify one set of views over another.[65]

Social media is often the primary site of focus for research and debate on online harms. While the advent and widespread adoption of social media has been associated with decreases in various measures of wellbeing in adolescence, the evidence is uncertain: quantitative studies tracing these correlations cannot show causation and tend towards small effect sizes.[66]

A meta-analysis of qualitative studies points to both harms and benefits of social media experiences by young people, falling under the themes of 'connections, identity, learning, and emotions'[67] and indicating a complex array of positive and negative experiences in many domains of life. This again points to the need for research that brings forward young people's own voices and experiences.

There is also a new dimension of potential impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing from AI. A 2024 study has shown positivity among young people using chatbots and generative AI tools for relationship advice and to support self-expression, as well as awareness of how human interaction is needed when dealing with 'suicidal thoughts'.[68]

However, this study contrasts with evidence of cases where young people have used chatbots to discuss mental health issues, including depression and suicidal thoughts, and may have had their thoughts amplified, with cases reported of young people's death by suicide following conversations with AI.[69]

The diversity of online harms, the relationship of the online to the offline, and the ways in which benefits can manifest through the same technologies as harms, are all features of young people's digital experiences that challenge a simple binary debate. To move the debate forward, there is a need for better evidence to inform a deeper understanding that encompasses the complexity of these issues and ensures decision-making that supports young people through this challenging landscape.

Solutions to the issues young people experience through technology use require a balanced view of the potential benefits as well as potential harms. Removing access to digital devices or platforms might offer greater protection, but would prevent some young people from accessing vital learning, support and services. Many argue that restricting young people's smartphone use disrupts digital literacy, impacts access and thereby impacts social mobility, and ultimately disempowers young people.[70] [71]

Rethinking intergenerational differences

The cognitive differences between young people and older adults is often used as a way to frame understanding of how digital technology affects young people.[72] Early research on how digital technology intersects with young people's growing up journeys created the idea of the 'net generation'.[73]

More recently, Jonathan Haidt's framing of today's young people as an 'anxious generation'[74] has led to advocacy for smartphone and social media restrictions. While there has been significant critique of Haidt's analysis,[75] [76] including its simplification of a complex evidence base, the work remains influential in public discourse.

The term 'digital native' has been used to describe young people's relationship to digital technology since the 2000s.[77] The term suggests that generations growing up in a digital world are inherently different due to their skills and fluency with digital technologies,[78] and in the ways they think and process information.[79] The meaning is evolving in relation to emerging technologies: recent 'virtual native' framings suggest that engagement in virtual environments is potentially different to general digital technologies.[80]

However, contrary to these narratives, some studies find evidence of young people decreasing in digital confidence.[81] [82] Confidence with new and emerging technologies, such as AI, can be higher among young men than women, and – internationally – gender gaps are wider in low-income countries.[83]

Gendered differences also emerged in the wider Grown up? programme of research, with young men expressing greater confidence in navigating online spaces to support career development[84] and young women more comfortable with digital forms of communication.[85] This indicates that caution is needed when framing young people's lives to ensure we understand the full breadth of their experiences with digital technologies.

Additionally, large-scale studies find that levels of digital literacy vary across countries and cultures, and across age groups, and that this is impacted by the level of restriction placed on young people's online activity.[86] Yet discussion about young people being highly digitally adept largely plays out separately to debates around smartphone restrictions.

Research also indicates a relationship between young people's digital lives and socio-economic status that adds to an already complex picture. This includes the impact of class and wealth on which sources of information young people access and use, how critically they are able to engage with them, and whether they are equipped to benefit economically or socially.[87] [88] Class has also been shown to demarcate different benefits from technology access and social media usage.[89]

Research asking UK households what is needed for a 'minimum digital living standard' finds a broad range of holistic needs spanning access to goods and services, as well as both functional and critical skills, which cannot be treated as something an entire generation will inherently possess.[90]

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted young people's digital lives. The national lockdowns resulted in young people relying on digital technologies and online spaces to access education and for social interactions, with lasting effects on their use of these technologies.[91] Some online harms, especially gender-based and sexual harm, were amplified during the pandemic as young people spent more time online, and almost all encountered harms such as body shaming, harassment, homophobic attacks and image-based sexual abuse.[92]

For some young people in minoritised groups such as Gypsy/Roma/Traveller young people, digital inequality exacerbated these harms.[93] The full impacts of the pandemic on young people's relationships with digital technologies are not yet fully understood.

It is also important to recognise that by growing up with digital technologies, young people today are tracked and their behaviours recorded in ways which are unique to digital life. Surveillance technologies have become a normalised part of digital life, serving many functions.[94]

Tracking can enable young people to monitor their own behaviour, such as screen time or exercise, but also to be observed by their peers, monitored by corporations, public services, governments and in some cases by maleficent actors,[95] amounting to young people becoming subjectively and objectively 'datafied'.[96] The ubiquity of online surveillance is therefore arguably a more uniformly defining feature of young people's digital lives than the concept of digital literacy.

Young people's relationship with digital technologies and online spaces is complex and deeply interrelated to social, economic and demographic factors. It is therefore crucial to place their experiences against these wider contexts to provide a more nuanced understanding of what growing up digital means and to ensure decision-making that considers the full spectrum of young people's digital lives.

Recent research suggests that brain development extends into people's early thirties,[97] [98] providing an additional dimension to current calls for further research into the effects of digital technologies on young people.

UK policy context

The current UK government is in the process of making decisions that will impact the role of digital technologies in young people's growing up journeys and transition into adulthood. The government's recent National Youth Strategy sets out aims for improving digital infrastructure and supporting young people to thrive in an increasingly technology-driven world.[99]

This follows priorities for improving young people's access to digital technologies,[100] a skills drive to engage young people with digital technology skills and AI in particular, with substantial investment,[101] and an independent curriculum and assessment review commissioned by the Department for Education that proposes the inclusion of digital and AI literacy in the curriculum.[102]

A rapid incorporation of AI and EdTech in education systems is also taking place and being proposed,[103] such as a proposal that children from disadvantaged backgrounds could benefit from 'safe AI-powered tutoring tools'.[104]

The UK Data Protection Act 2018 ensures personal data is used fairly, lawfully and securely, while the Children's Code (or the Age-Appropriate Design Code)[105] requires online services likely accessed by under-18s to prioritise children's best interests by defaulting to high privacy settings, limiting data collection and making protections clear and accessible.

At the same time, the Online Safety Act 2023[106] forms the policy basis for addressing online harms for young people, by requiring risk assessment and age restriction by platforms. The Act places requirements on companies to prevent algorithmic exposure to harmful content by children.[107]

It is important to note that the development and enactment of the Online Safety Act was influenced by young people who brought their lived experience of online harms to policymakers, and who continue to work for change to make platforms accountable.[108]

Within this context, government decision-making around restrictions on young people's digital access is continuously evolving. Guidance from the previous UK government restricted phone access for young people at school,[109] and the current government has shown alignment with this direction, as well as demonstrated concern around how technology companies collect and use young people's data.[110] The Information Commissioner's Office code of practice for age-appropriate design for online services took effect in 2020[111] and is subject to review following the Data Use and Access Act 2025.[112]

In 2024, Labour MP Josh MacAlister brought a private member's bill seeking to ban addictive algorithms and smartphones in schools for children.[113] While this bill was dropped in early 2025, it generated significant public debate. To understand the evidence behind the impact of smartphone use, the government commissioned Dr Amy Orben and her team at the University of Cambridge, in collaboration with other academic organisations, to review the impact of smartphones and social media use on children's mental health and wellbeing.[114] [115]

UK policy discussions are also taking place alongside a national backdrop of attempts to restrict or ban smartphones and access to social media in schools in the UK, and a global backdrop of consideration of country-wide restrictions and bans for all young people under the age of 16 – for example in Australia, Spain, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brazil.[116]

However, there is currently mixed evidence and a lack of clarity around the impact of restrictions and bans, particularly how impacts vary for different groups.[117] [118] Regulatory attitudes towards companies may be changing as well: in 2026, Meta and Google were fined and – for the first time – found liable for platform design, rather than content-related, harms to young people in California and New Mexico.[119]

Research design

The research design is explained in detail in the 'Methodology' section of this report. This provides detailed explanation of the values that informed the research design, recruitment process, research participants, peer design process, research methods and the analytical framework. Here, we provide a brief overview of the research to contextualise the findings.

This research was one part of a wider Nuffield Foundation programme of research. Our approach complemented this wider research activity in terms of sequencing and granularity, allowing us to follow up initial insights with deep exploration. The peer research programme was therefore designed to surface young people's perspectives without constraining them within dominant themes in the current discourse.

The research took a participatory approach that centred young people's voices. Our aim was to respond to calls for research on young people's perspectives to complement and deepen the existing research landscape.[120] [121] [122]

The peer research was therefore designed to prioritise lived expertise and enable young people to explore and reflect on their digital experiences through engaged dialogues that built a mutual understanding of the complexities of growing up in a period of rapid technological change.

The research consisted of two parallel enquiries: peer research with young people 14–24 years old and creative interviews with young people 20–24 years old. Both enquiries were delivered in partnership with youth work organisations. This prioritised informed consent, safeguarding and wellbeing while enabling us to hear from young people whose voices are rarely heard.

To ensure an ethical research design that supported engagement, we developed a staged research design with clear points where young people could drop in and out while still receiving financial recognition for their contribution.

During the peer research, ten young people were trained as peer researchers. They worked alongside a professional researcher and youth worker to explore their own experiences, views and priorities for the research before deciding to focus the research on two topics: social media and AI. They then worked with the researcher to co-design a participatory workshop before travelling across the UK to facilitate four workshops in four locations: Dundee, Shetland, Islington and Sandwell.

The peer researchers facilitated eight hours of peer-led dialogues with 29 workshop participants. The peer researchers then worked alongside the researcher to co-analyse the workshop data and identify key themes, which were used as a thematic framework to guide the broader data analysis.

During the creative interviews, an interviewer worked with ten young people in an iterative and collaborative partnership to co-produce a series of short films that highlights each young person's lived experience. This process centred ownership over the data and enabled the young person to shape the direction of the dialogue through an ongoing process of consent.[123] The ten films produced through the creative interviews can be viewed here.

The research was delivered in partnership with two organisations. Hot Chocolate Trust (HCT) is a sector-leading youth work organisation with 23 years' experience delivering frontline, trauma-informed youth work based in Dundee, Scotland. Social Research, Reimagined (SRR) is a creative research consultancy specialised in the design and delivery of practice-based research.

The Ada Lovelace Institute commissioned HCT and SRR via a competitive tendering process and then worked collaboratively to co-design the research design and delivery. The partnership with youth work was a key design decision that enabled the peer research to engage with young people in a research framework that prioritised informed consent, safeguarding, inclusion and ownership.

The research prioritised young people's voices. For this reason, young people's own words are often reproduced in full in the report and quoted verbatim. The peer researchers chose pseudonyms to enable them to own their voices and to celebrate their contribution to the research. The voices of participants, including both interviewees and workshop participants, are anonymised but quoted in full.

Grown up? Journeys to adulthood

The Nuffield Foundation research programme *Grown up? Journeys to adulthood* explores how young people aged 14 to 24 are making the journey to adulthood – and what this means for policy, research and wider society.

This programme has explored the realities of becoming an adult across four interconnected areas: pathways to independence; education to work; mental health and wellbeing; and digital lives.

The programme has drawn together different kinds of knowledge: youth insight, data commentaries and expert features, to inform the Nuffield Foundation's own work, as well as future policy and practice.

The *Grown up?* programme explored digital life as one of its themes, providing a foundation upon which this research has built deeper insight. Findings from a deep dive workshop into digital life and an expert feature that explores how digital technologies are reshaping parent-child relationships, published as part of this programme of research, can be read in conjunction with this report.[124] [125]

Ada's *Grown up?* research

Within the *Grown up?* programme, the Ada Lovelace Institute (Ada) has conducted in-depth research to shed light on how digital technologies are embedded in the lives of diverse young people, and to seek reflections on how young people feel about these technologies and what they want from them. This has included quantitative and qualitative strands.

The quantitative strand involved reviewing data about young people's use of digital technologies. Through analysis of published surveys of young people, we explored how they are living and connecting in online spaces. The report from this research concludes that young people's experiences are varied, and they experience both benefits and harms.[126]

This report presents the qualitative strand of Ada's research on digital life within the *Grown up?* programme.

Together, these findings add to the insights generated about young people's digital lives within the wider programme[127] and, taken in conjunction with the programme's other themes, contribute to a rich picture of what the journey into adulthood is like today.

Section 1: Navigating the online landscape

Young people spoke about the various ways they engage with digital technologies. This includes the way online connectivity, and particularly social media, changes the way they use their phones and how online spaces have affected the way they communicate, build relationships and form communities.

Young people were clear that they value online spaces, while also recognising that these have created a complicated and uncertain landscape. Young people shared positive and negative experiences, and spoke about the ways that they experience the online landscape as deeply contradictory.

The dumbphone vs the smartphone

Young people in workshops and during interviews shared their reflections on the role of their first phone. These reflections illustrate a distinct contrast between the role of the dumbphone that has limited to zero online connectivity and the modern smartphone which enables easy access to the online world.

Older young people (18 years +) who had received a dumbphone as their first phone described its purpose as a means of communication between them and their carers. When they reflected on their first experiences of having a dumbphone, they described it as increasing their freedom. They spoke about these phones as deepening trust between themselves and their carers, and allowing them to spend more independent time away from the family home. Older young people spoke about these reflections positively and identified the dumbphone as being a resource that supported a natural progression in their journey towards independence. For example:

> *'When I was younger the phone was so that my mum could trust us to go further away, and always have a contact for us, and be able to check in on us. [...] So it was more trust was put into me, I guess.'* – Interview 1

The first phone as nurturing independence

'My first phone I got because I used to go outside and play and build dens with my friends. And my mum needed to get hold of me and tell me to come home when tea was ready. So she gave me a phone and I think I was maybe 7?'

Interviewer: *'And the thinking from your mum was to nurture that independence, or make it easier, or...?'*

'I think it was to make it easier, because she would tell me to come home when the streetlights came on. But I have ADHD and autism, so when I'm hyperfixated on

building a den, or I'm outside, I don't notice it. And then it would be like 8 or 9 o'clock I would come home, and she'd be frantic. She'd think I was gone missing, or something. When really I was just building a really awesome den, and I was like "sorry!" [laughs]. So she gave me a phone, to phone me when tea was ready, because she was tired of the food going cold.'

Interviewer: *'Fair enough! And what difference did that phone make to your life?'*

'At the time I thought I was cool as [I had] a phone. I thought I was the best thing since sliced bread, but in terms of how it affected me, I wouldn't say at all. To me, it was just a way that my mum could phone me so I could go home.' – Interview 3

The reflections of the older young people about their first dumbphone contrast significantly to the way young people spoke about the role of their first smartphone. Both older and younger young people associated receiving their first smartphone with enabling access to the online world, and social media specifically, and identified this connectivity as complicating their growing up journey.

Young people told us about the wide-ranging impacts of gaining access to the online world, including impacts that they identified as having both positively and negatively impacted on their growing up journey. These impacts will be explored in depth throughout this report, but the key message when reflecting on receiving their first smartphone is that rather than being a tool to support independence and build trust, the connectivity provided by the smartphone complicated their growing up journey.

This is exemplified through young people's reflections on the reasons underpinning the decision to be given their first smartphone. While older young people told us that it was to nurture their independence, all young people spoke about the motivation underpinning the decision to be given a smartphone as a response to social pressure from peers. In other words, the motivation was not in relation to their individual journey towards adulthood, but in response to a collective social pressure.

These reflections show that young people do not view the mobile phone as inherently problematic. They clearly differentiate between the impacts of the dumbphone and the smartphone on their growing up journey. Young people relate this to online connectivity and social media, highlighting that while the dumbphone complemented their journey towards independence, the smartphone complicated it.

The smartphone as a valued resource

While young people spoke about the smartphone as complicating their growing up journey, they also identified various ways that smartphones offer them resources that they value. For example, young people spoke about smartphones as offering them opportunities to disconnect from the pressures of their everyday offline lives. They described their smartphone as a means to mentally switch off, sometimes referring to this as 'brain rot' time.

However, young people were also clear that they recognised the need for balance. During discussions, the peer researchers reflected that while short periods of scrolling on social media could be a means to disconnect from other pressures and relax, they experience extended periods of aimless scrolling – often referred to as 'doomscrolling' – as having a negative impact on their mental health.

Young people valued the way smartphones offer easy access to music, noting that they use this to relax and self-regulate. Neurodivergent young people identified easy access to music as being particularly important. A few young people spoke about streaming music as an essential day-to-day resource that supports self-regulation and focus. One interviewee shared:

> *'I primarily use [...] music throughout the day to regulate my anxiety because I have ADHD, autism and many other things to add to the craziness that is me. And music is the one way that calms me down. If I didn't have my phone with my music on it, I honestly do not know where I would be.'* – Interview 7

Watch: *Tech support*

Young people also said that they value their phones for enabling them to stay in touch with family and friends. They identified this as increasing their autonomy and deepening their friendships, and participants consistently said that they use their phones to chat with friends multiple times a day.

They value the choice offered through smartphones, with some young people stating that they value the way smartphones allow them to video chat while others value the ability to build friendships over text. As one workshop participant reflected:

> *'...it's easier to say stuff online, like, not face to face. So I'd say I'm more confident to say stuff over text than in person and I think that's helped my friendships continue.'*
> – Workshop participant, Islington

One care-experienced participant shared the impact of not having access to a phone to stay in touch with friends. During his interview, he shared that he did not have any type of phone until he was 16 years old due to restrictions within the care system. He reflected that while he did not particularly mind this, his one regret is that he was unable to easily stay in touch with friends. He spoke about how he wanted to be able to offer support to a close friend during the school

summer holidays and he was unable to do this. He describes the devasting impact of returning to school after the holidays to find out that his friend had died by suicide:

> *'[...] one of my friends [died by] suicide in primary school towards the end of my time there. Because again, I didn't have a phone. [...] I really wish that at the time that I did have access to that online world. A lot of it was contained by care – they didn't allow me to have that sort of access. But I think if I did have that access to technology at the time, I still think she would be here right now.'* – Interview 4

This young person's experience points to the way access to phones – including both dumbphones and smartphones – are valued for communication. This reflection also indicates that phones can offer a resource for young people experiencing challenging circumstances to build their own support networks and potentially reduce isolation.

However, the value of this resource needs to be approached with caution and balanced with the potential risks associated with online connectivity, particularly for young people experiencing periods of vulnerability.

Alongside enabling them to maintain and deepen friendships, most young people said they valued their smartphone for how it allows them to take and have easy access to photos. They associated this with deepening memories and relationships and valued the way they can look at photos at any time.

One interviewee spoke about the impact on his ability to feel connected to his grandparents. He spoke about not having many photos or videos from his childhood as 'there was nothing from the care system' (Interview 4) and how much he values the few photos he does have.

Watch: *Family photos*

His reflections highlight the importance of photos and videos on identity development, memory and sense of self, and the responses from other young people also demonstrated that young people value the way their smartphone enables them to have control over building their own memories. This raises important questions around digital inequality and highlights how smartphones can be a positive resource that enables young people to deepen emotional connections.

These reflections highlight the complex nature of young people's relationships with smartphones and the need to understand the full range of impacts. Young people recognised that smartphones have complicated their growing up journey. However, they also recognised that both the connectivity and technology embedded within smartphones enables them to access resources that they value and utilise in their daily lives.

Online communication

Most young people said they use social media platforms as their primary means of communication. While young people consistently recognised the negative impacts of social media, which will be explored in more detail later in this report, they also reported using social media as their instinctive resource for keeping in touch with family and friends.

This includes using platforms like Instagram and TikTok for communication as well as messaging apps like Snapchat and WhatsApp. Some young people also regularly use tracking features on apps to check the locations of friends and family.

Young people told us that checking social media to see what their friends are doing has become habitual. They will often check social media instead of directly checking in with friends via calling or messaging. As one workshop participant reflected:

> *'If I want to know what you're doing I'll check Facebook, or your Instagram story. Like, my first instinct isn't to message you and go: "How are you doing?" It's "Oh, this is what you've been re-posting."'* – Workshop participant, Shetland

Young people shared how they experience online communication as fast-paced and associated this with feeling pressured to respond rapidly. They described piecemeal and pressured streams of interchanges, particularly on platforms like Snapchat. Some young people said that they feel this reduces the quality of communication and makes it less meaningful. They associated this with a change in the culture around communication and reflected that while they were not necessarily comfortable with this, they felt it had become normalised. For example:

> *'I feel like there's a weird culture around it now. Like on Snapchat for example, you have to text back, no matter what they say, even if they're literally just saying "ok".'*
> – Sunny, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

Young people expressed a range of preferences on the role of digital technology in communication. Some participants thought that communicating online helps them to avoid or overcome social pressures, particularly if they find in-person communication difficult. These participants spoke about the way they experience conversations mediated by digital technology as increasing opportunities for honesty and that they feel this deepens their friendships.

However, others experience online interactions as less honest than face-to-face communication. They spoke about 'fake' people online and how it is easy to only present one side of yourself. A few young people felt strongly that in-person communication is needed to build honest and meaningful connections. As one participant described:

> *'[...] you don't act online how you act in person. So you never really, truly get to know a person without actually having that in-person chat.'* – Workshop participant, Sandwell

Young people also shared how online experiences can affect offline communication. This was made especially clear when reflecting on their social interactions with peers following the 2020–21 COVID-19 lockdowns. They said they noticed changes in the language and communication of their peers and associated this with increased exposure to social media during the lockdowns. One young person stated:

> *'I noticed that ever since COVID, it really has impacted how people actually talk to other people and [...] the language that people use as well. Like when I came back to school after COVID, everyone had a dramatic, dramatic change and they all looked like TikTok influencers.'* – Workshop participant, London

The peer researchers discussed the impact of the lockdowns and how they thought this period had affected online communication and behaviours as well as the ability to form in-person connections. The group agreed that this period had affected their own relationships with the online world, and social media in particular, and had also affected their younger peers.

This was highlighted clearly by a peer researcher in one of the early training sessions:

> *'I was twelve when it [COVID-19 pandemic] happened, but even younger people, or just people of my age range, I feel like we're very dependent on social media and technology because, of course, online school was a thing, so you couldn't really get your education any other way. And then to have human-like interactions, you had to do it through social media, because you couldn't just go out and talk to people and hang out with people. So I feel like that has genuinely affected people's ability in general to form real connections.'* – Lottie, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

Young people shared how they feel extremely uncomfortable about the language they see being used online. They frequently said they have perceived an increase in slurs and hate speech and expressed strong concerns about the common use of racist, misogynistic, homophobic and other discriminatory and derogatory language online. For example:

> *'I've got people on my TikTok account that will just come into my LIVE and just like, start saying the N-word, just over and over again.'* – Workshop participant, Sandwell

Some young people said they tried to report posts or online interactions that were using discriminatory or derogatory language but felt that the tools to do so were ineffective. This resulted in them feeling unable to effectively challenge the use of hateful language. Instead, they are adapting their online behaviours to minimise their exposure to it, for example by not using platforms they see as most hateful or blocking contact with unknown users.

These reflections provide initial evidence that young people do not trust the systems and processes that exist to monitor online spaces and are taking individual responsibility for protecting their online exposure. This individualisation of responsibility is a theme that emerged repeatedly throughout the peer research.

Alongside this, participants associated the increase in hate speech with online anonymity. They discussed the different ways people communicate in online and offline interactions and described anonymity as removing the 'filter' that 'makes them so confident about doing whatever they want' (Sunny, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions).

However, it is important to recognise that while many participants identified anonymity as a key factor in the use of discriminatory and derogatory language, others spoke about the value of being able to remain anonymous. These participants said that anonymity can provide a way for young people to access crucial support and advice, particularly when experiencing mental health challenges or life transitions.

This provides insight into the complexity of navigating the online world, as young people saw anonymity as negatively and positively impacting some aspects of their online experiences in different contexts. This research does not therefore provide clear evidence that young people support the complete removal of online anonymity.

Exposure to discriminatory content online was not always viewed negatively. One interviewee described developing a 'thicker skin' from his early exposure to online slurs, which he felt benefited him later in life.

Watch: *Tough skin*

This raises questions around whether young people should be completely protected from exposure to difficult or discriminatory content. However, as reflected by one of the peer researchers after watching the *Tough skin* film, the emotional and psychological impact of discriminatory and derogatory language is complex and closely related to gender, ethnic, racial and economic privilege.

This points to the complexity of young people's experiences of growing up with digital technologies and the need to understand the complexities of balancing safeguarding with exposure. The research highlights the need for longitudinal research to understand the effect of digital technology on young people's communication, including the long-term impact of exposure to challenging and harmful online communication on different demographic groups.

Online relationships and communities

Young people spoke about how they use and value digital technologies to build and deepen friendships, relationships and a sense of community. They described various ways that digital technologies are influencing how they build and maintain online and offline friendships.

Sometimes this was in quite practical ways, for example using the Life360 tracking app to enable them to easily meet up with friends. They also spoke about the way digital technologies have enabled them to establish online friendships, often across significant geographical distances.

Young people consistently shared stories of meaningful friendships that had started online with people they would not have otherwise known. This included friendships that started and remained online and others that began online but resulted in meeting up in person.

Young people value these opportunities to expand their social groups and saw this as being a key part of their growing up journey. As one interviewee shared: 'I have tons of American friends that I've met, people from other places, that I've eventually been able to meet a few times, and remain good friends with' (Interview 2).

Young people also reflected on the nature of their online and offline friendships. In contrast to the pressures reported by young people to always be available and respond to messages, some young people said their online friendships feel 'lower maintenance' due to geographical distances and different time zones meaning they did not feel the same pressure to always be available to respond.

A few young people valued their online friendships as they felt a stronger sense of autonomy and more able to control what information to share about their personal lives. This sense of control appears to be valued as it enables the young person to choose when and how much to share, and they feel more in control of the potential consequences. As one workshop participant reflected, this sense of control can engender a sense of trust:

> *'I've talked to a few of my online friends about my mental health, and I feel like, it's not like I trust them more, I feel like, it's not that I'm anonymous but like they don't know me in day-to-day life. They only know what I guess just what I want [emphasis] to show.'* – Workshop participant, Dundee

A few young people shared their experiences of starting romantic relationships online. They spoke about connecting with partners via social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram and how much they value the opportunity to connect with people online through common interests.

A few young people said they have developed long-term relationships that started and remained online, while others spoke about relationships that began online but evolved into meeting that person in their offline lives. This provides initial insights into how digital technology is changing young people's growing up journey. The connectivity that young people now have access to enables them to build interpersonal relationships that are no longer limited by geographical location.

Beyond friendships and romantic relationships, young people also spoke about how much they value the way that digital technology enables them to connect with new communities that they would be unlikely to encounter in their offline lives.

Young people described these communities as providing valuable mechanisms of support, stating that online spaces enable them to connect with specific, and sometimes quite niche, communities of interest. As one workshop participant shared:

> *'It's also good, because if you feel like you're alone or something, [you can] find someone. Or like I don't know, if you have a weird hobby that nobody has, you can find [someone]. Or you're in like, a secluded area where you like something that is popular in America, you can just go on the internet.'* – Workshop participant, Islington

Some young people identified gaming as a valued mechanism for escape and relaxation, but also for building friendships and forming a sense of connection. They said they valued the social dimension of gaming and how it opens ways to connect with people from across the world and find common interest groups. A few participants shared how gaming enables them to escape difficulties in their offline lives. This was recognised as particularly important for young people experiencing isolation. For example:

> *'A lot [was] going on back when I was younger, so gaming gave me an excuse to stay away from everything kicking off in the house and stuff. And meeting other people and gaming with them [...]. I never had friends growing up, especially in school. I was definitely not one of the popular kids. So to be able to go home, go online and game with people I met online was certainly a lot more beneficial than I would have realised back then. But it was definitely beneficial, because I had something instead of nothing.'* – Interview 9

Young people consistently spoke about the way they value the online world as a mechanism for connection and community. They spoke about the way connectivity enables them to have more autonomy and choice over the groups and communities they can connect with. They said this enables them to explore and deepen their own interests, and that this is an aspect of online spaces that they deeply value as it supports them to form their individual identities and sense of self. This provides evidence that young people use access to online spaces to support identity development.

As reflected by one of the interviewees, this is particularly valuable for young people who may feel excluded from or discriminated against in mainstream communities:

> *'[...] it's helped me dodge a lot of the things that happen when you first come out as trans, when you don't really know your style, and you don't know where you are. You know, it's hard to be 20 years old and realise you're not the person you have been your entire life, and then have to develop a whole new persona. There's a whole joke when trans girls come out, they go straight to Amazon and get the same basic skirts and all that. And it's not an actual style, you're just buying feminine clothes and going for that. And I'll admit I did do that for a tiny bit. But having the internet helps you to shape who you are without actually having to do anything. Someone told me Pinterest is your best friend for stuff like that. [...] There's just so much where you can cultivate anything you want on Pinterest without actually having to do anything.'* – Interview 2

This reflection provides indicative evidence that there is a need to better understand how young people from minority or excluded backgrounds utilise online spaces. This has important implications for any future policy decisions about restricting young people's online access.

Young people clearly told us that they value the relationships and connections they have been able to develop through the online world, stating that this offers valuable sources of support. This was identified as particularly important for young people during periods of transition or social exclusion.

The contradictory experiences of the online world

Young people consistently spoke about their experiences of the online world as deeply contradictory. Most young people spoke about having both positive and negative experiences online. For example, when reflecting on their experiences using social media platforms, most young people valued the opportunity offered by social media to explore their interests but felt that this also resulted in needing to navigate a complex landscape that stimulates contradictory emotions. One interviewee effectively summarised this as: 'It invites a lot of hate, but it also invites a lot of love' (Interview 3).

Watch: *'I love it, but I hate it'*

Another interviewee deepened this reflection:

> *'[...] there is a lot of harm that goes on within social media. It can bring harm to a lot of people, but it can also bring joy, happiness, excitement, all at the same time – and so it's really how you choose to go about it.'* – Interview 9

Young people often associated their contradictory experiences of social media with intentionality. When young people spoke about their positive experiences of engaging with online spaces, this was often associated with the engagement having a clear purpose. For example, platforms like Pinterest, YouTube and Instagram were identified as useful for hearing about and learning from other people's experiences or to learn about specific issues or topics. This ability to access information, including practical reasons like learning a new skill or how to solve a problem, was said to be particularly valuable for care-experienced young people who used these platforms to access information that supported them during their journey towards independent living.

This contrasts with young people's negative experiences of social media which were consistently associated with the passive consumption of content. Young people reported this as resulting in feelings of frustration due to a sense of wasted time. Some young people reflected on the ways they use social media to relax and as a form of escape from the pressures of their offline lives, although this was consistently framed through the lens of short periods of consumption.

This is in contrast to young people's reflections on the impact of extended periods of scrolling, which they associated with frustration, dissatisfaction and unresolved boredom. A peer researcher described this as:

> *'[...] spending way too long on your phone. Like sitting in bed for 12 hours. And you're bored, so you're scrolling, and the scrolling is making you bored as well, so you're sitting there waiting to be not bored, but then you're bored still! So you stay bored and end up not doing anything fun and interesting.'* – Wren, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

One of the peer researchers summarised this contradiction, pointing to the way that social media can be both a source of support and very real risk to young people: 'Social media is like a lake – you can float in it, or you can drown in it' (Lottie, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions).

This provides initial evidence that young people experience social media and the online world as deeply contradictory. They recognise the risks of passively consuming content while valuing online resources and the opportunities for lightness and fun.

However, the voices in this research indicate that young people are currently navigating this contradictory landscape in isolation and with minimal guidance.

Summary of insights

- The dumbphone and the smartphone are different milestones in the growing up journey. Young people identify the dumbphone as a communication tool that increases freedom and trust. In contrast, young people relate the smartphone with connectivity to the online world, exposing them to a range of experiences that complicate the growing up journey.
- Young people use social media platforms as their primary means of communication. This has changed the ways they interact with friends and family and had both positive and negative impacts.
- Digital technology is valued by young people as offering a way to disconnect from their offline lives. Young people use digital technology to support emotional regulation and find new avenues for support.
- Although young people's engagement with games has been extensively scrutinised due to concerns around exposure to violence and problem-gaming behaviours, young people pointed to gaming as a broadly positive source of escape and connection.
- Young people have developed involuntary, habitual relationships with their smartphones. Communication norms and social expectations within the online environment influence the offline social landscapes that young people navigate and exert pressures on young people to stay connected.
- Young people are deeply concerned about increased hateful and discriminatory language and behaviours online. They associate this with online anonymity while recognising that anonymity also enables some young people to access support in ways that feel safe.

- The online world offers valued pathways for young people to build friendships, relationships and communities that extend beyond their offline lives. These are deeply valued and offer young people ways to find support that responds to their needs and priorities.
- Young people experience the online world as deeply contradictory. They identify the various ways that the online world offers valuable positive opportunities for connection while also exposing them to language and behaviours that they experience as deeply troubling. They are currently navigating this complex landscape in isolation and without support.

Section 2: Navigating online pressures

Across the research, young people described the pressures created by access to the online world. This includes the ways that online connectivity has increased the complexity of their growing up journeys and created new pressures that young people need to learn to navigate. Young people spoke about experiencing internal pressures that influence the way they interact with the online world alongside external pressures that encourage reliance on digital technology. Young people also identified the various ways their online and offline worlds are becoming integrated and spoke about the challenge of trying to find a healthy balance between their online and offline lives.

The pressure to be online

Young people identified an internally-driven pressure to use their smartphones. Most young people reported using their phones for long periods of time, often describing a process of passively consuming streams of content. They spoke about feeling an internalised pressure to repeatedly check social media feeds across multiple platforms.

They described how checking their phone has become almost habitual and how they will pick it up to look at one thing and then be drawn to other apps, such as through notifications or messages. Often this was described with a tone of frustration and as something that took up more time than they wanted:

> *'I would like to be less on my phone and be more present in life.'* – Ellis, Peer researcher, Dundee co-analysis sessions

The peer researchers discussed how social media has become a way to socialise and viewed this as in opposition to in-person socialising:

> *'[We talked about] relying on social media to socialise rather than hanging out with people in real life.'* – Wren, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

Most young people were highly aware that spending large amounts of time passively consuming online content impacts negatively on mental health. It is important to note that they also spoke about the way that this awareness does not equate to change.

While some young people were able to identify and articulate the negative aspects of extensive time spent online, particularly in relation to the passive consumption of online content, they were also aware that this knowledge did not result in a change of behaviour.

When reflecting on why some young people find it difficult to reduce the amount of time they spend online, young people demonstrated that they are aware of how this is influenced by external and internal pressures.

For example, most young people were aware of the way online spaces and apps are designed to keep you engaged and scrolling. They associated this with technology companies prioritising corporate profit over the wellbeing of their consumers.

However, most of the young people also identified an internalised pressure that results in them passively consuming online content. Some young people associated this with an addiction. One interviewee described this as:

> *'Short bursts of dopamine [...] It's short bursts of relief, happiness, laughter, but it never lasts. Which is where I'd say it's like an addiction, as the same with narcotics or drugs. They give you relief in a sense, for a short period of time, and then you're just chasing that same relief. Over and over again.'* – Interview 5

Watch: *Dopamine*

The internalised pressure to be online was also described as cumulative. Young people described feeling pressured to be active on multiple platforms and identified the way that apps use notifications as a key factor that drives this pressure. They spoke about this cumulative pressure as creating a feeling of being overwhelmed that they think negatively impacts their mental health.

Some young people spoke about the way they experience these pressures as cyclical, resulting in a pattern of behaviour that they find difficult to break:

> *'[...] my life at one point wasn't going so well and I wasn't having the best time. I could look on social media and see all my peers having a better time than I am, and that would just make me feel even worse. And then the worse I feel, the more I want to go online, because it's like an escape. But then I'm seeing more people having a better time than I am, and then I'm getting more jealous and I'm getting more depressed. It's just like a vicious cycle.'*
> – Larry, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

As well as internal pressures, some young people described experiencing societal pressures that encourage extended phone use. They consistently highlighted how everything from schoolwork, to travel, to finding a job, or accessing support services now requires them to be online.

While they recognised there is a clear distinction between engaging online for a specific purpose and passively consuming content, some young people spoke about their frustration at feeling vilified for spending so much time on their devices while also navigating a world where digital technology is increasingly normalised and online platforms are designed to encourage engagement.

This contrasts with the common perception that young people are comfortable with digital technology. Most of the participants told us they do not like the shift towards a 'digital first' approach for everyday services.[128] Some young people spoke about their experiences of digital

inequality, such as the difficulties in trying to complete schoolwork on their phones because they do not have access to a laptop.

Other young people spoke about the ways that the 'digital first' approach increases risks and can be a cause of vulnerability. For example, young people gave examples of the vulnerabilities they experience as a result of being reliant on their phones for everyday activities like travel and banking.

One interviewee recounted an example of this vulnerability when she lost her phone at a theme park. When she was told by staff to return the following day, she realised she could not get home as her phone was her only payment method and only means of communication:

> *'[They said] I'll have to come back and get it. But how was I supposed to get home? I still have to pay for the train home. I still needed my phone for certain types of things.'*
> – Interview 8

Watch: *Everything*

Participants also spoke about the impact of the 'digital first' approach within service provision. One interviewee reflected on a time when she was experiencing homelessness and trying to find a flat but found this was made more difficult due to all the housing applications being online.

Watch: *Online*

She spoke about her frustration at not being able to meet someone in person to explain her situation, identifying the need to constantly present herself online as a barrier that ultimately led to not being able to access her own accommodation.

This raises further important questions about digital inequality, as not all young people will have the knowledge or support required to know how to present themselves online. It points to the potential way that the 'digital first' approach can exacerbate the intersecting barriers of socio-economic status, educational attainment and digital access.

Young people clearly identified that they are navigating the contradictory messages of living in a 'digital first' society while they are simultaneously being told to spend less time online. They were clear in their view that they want to be able to choose when and how often to use digital technologies, and that they view the prioritisation of digital technology in service provision as limiting their ability to choose when and how to engage with digital technology and the online world.

While they said that they recognise the importance of taking control over the amount of time they spend online, they also said that they experience the increased integration of digital technology in everyday life as limiting their ability to control when and how they go online.

The pressure of being observed and the impact on privacy

Some young people spoke about a generalised anxiety related to being observed via their smartphones and other online interactions. While references to being watched were often expressed in humorous ways, there was an underlying concern about the impact of digital technology on privacy.

Young people spoke about feeling observed or overheard by their devices and appeared unsure as to whether this is a real or perceived concern. For example:

> *'I'm worried that I have no privacy with having my phone on me all the time. Like the FBI guy is watching me or whatever. And that's like a joke, but it's also running through my mind all the time. It affects how I act when I'm by myself.'*
> – Sunny, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

Young people consistently spoke about their concerns in relation to privacy and consent. They shared numerous stories of being approached by people filming for TikTok videos and not being asked for consent before the videos were posted online.

These young people clearly stated that they think the online world has fundamentally changed the understanding of privacy and consent and expressed concern about the ways posting photos and videos can have a negative impact on people's lives. As one interviewee reflected:

> *'I just think it would be better for everyone to understand the importance of tech nowadays. But also social medias and stuff like that, they hold such huge value, everyone's opinions of everything. To the point where it can [emphasis] destroy lives, and it can [emphasis] destroy careers. But it's still not looked at as big as a thing as it actually is.'* – Interview 3

Most of the young people in this research demonstrated some awareness of the potential ways in which social media can negatively impact on people's lives. However, while most of these young people were aware of potential negative consequences, they are currently navigating this with minimal guidance.

A few young people reported a reluctance or wariness to posting online due to concerns about the way this might impact them in the future:

> *'On social media I don't think there's a such thing as privacy because people can see what you repost and like, until two years ago, people could see what you liked. So I wasn't liking anything because I was scared that the love of my life would come across and they'd just be like, "What the hell? What the hell is this?". But yeah, I just, I don't know. Because it's also like, when you get a job, like they obviously have to check the world wide web to see what you've been up to, to see if you're actually somebody that they'd like to hire.'*
> – Workshop participant, Islington

Most participants did not report that they had received any adult guidance to support them in navigating their online lives. Therefore, while most young people demonstrated awareness of their 'data footprint' and the permanent nature of their online interactions, they were often building their understanding of data permanence in isolation.

One exception was an interviewee who reported that she had clear discussions about the permanence of internet content with her parents prior to making her first social media account, resulting in her having an awareness of the need to 'curate' your online persona.

Watch: *Curated*

She directly associated this as being due to her father working in the tech industry and therefore understanding the need to learn about how to engage with the online world. In contrast, most young people spoke about their parents, carers or guardians not understanding digital technology and navigating this alone.

One interviewee summarised this by noting that his generation was the 'first generation' and that they therefore had no one to teach them how to engage with digital technology. He clearly identified the risks this creates and noted:

> *'It's better to start solving it now [rather] than waiting 'til the future when the damage is done.'* – Interview 10

One participant raised further concerns about the negative impact of online observation on young women and girls. She described how 'once you're online everyone can see everything you're doing [so] it can be easy to control someone' (Workshop participant, Sandwell). She reflected how this could affect young people's interpersonal relationships, stating that this may make it more difficult to get out of an abusive relationship.

A few peer researchers and interviewees shared personal experiences of stalking and harassment, and described people making multiple social media accounts to follow and/or message them. This includes experiences of reporting their experiences to the police. This points to the particular vulnerabilities and risks faced by young women and girls when learning to navigate the online world.

It also highlights that young people need to have relevant information and support to minimise exposure to risk and address harm when it does occur. These experiences are explored in more depth in the 'Navigating online harms' section of this report.

The pressure from online platforms

During discussions about smartphone use, young people demonstrated that they are aware that social media platforms are designed to encourage extensive use. Some young people expressed frustration and anger about the ways social media platforms are designed to encourage ongoing engagement, in relation to both the posting and consumption of content.

One interviewee described their experience of using social media to promote their art, reflecting that this felt like an unhealthy pressure:

> *'I tried using it for a while to kind of boost my art account, because the easiest way to get your art out there is to have a platform. But it just felt like pressure [...] So it was just this pressure that if I wanted to succeed, I would have to constantly be online and constantly posting updates, even if it wasn't art that I was happy with.'* – Interview 1

Young people also expressed frustration about the way social media platforms are designed to encourage the sharing of personal information. One interviewee, while reflecting on her experiences as an online influencer who shares her mental health diagnosis and personal experiences online, spoke about how the monetisation of views directly affected her decisions to share more detailed personal experiences:

> *'[...] knowing that I got paid from views and not likes definitely had an input on how much I shared about myself online.'* – Interview 3

Talking further, she felt that the monetisation of views is designed to promote negative reactions, which then encourages a culture of hate. She spoke about the challenges of navigating this contradictory landscape, as content can earn you money while simultaneously having a negative impact on your wellbeing through exposure to hateful comments.

Watch: *'I love it, but I hate it'*

While this participant's experiences are related to her experience as an influencer, young people spoke about the impact of being regularly exposed to deeply personal content. During one of the early peer researcher training sessions, the peer researchers discussed the culture of sharing personal content on social media and reflected on the risks for both the person reading or watching, as well as the risks for the person posting. For example:

> *'I do think that it's good that we're at a stage in society where people are able to be open and honest about these things, but I think there needs to be a bit more of a balance about it rather than "Okay, I can be open, so that means I can tell absolutely anyone". Because not only could it not be safe to the people that you're talking to, it could also be unsafe for you, because you could tell the wrong person that information. And you don't know them, and you don't know what they're going to do with that.'*
> – Wren, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

Most young people were also aware of the way social media platforms are designed to encourage division through the bias towards hateful and discriminatory content. Young people consistently viewed this as a form of manipulation by technology companies. These young people associated the current design of social media platforms with technology companies prioritising profit over the wellbeing of their consumers.

During the research, young people expressed a clear desire for change. A few young people called on technology companies to build a new culture that better balances consumer wellbeing with financial profit. One peer researcher said:

> *'I feel like [...] these companies make money off of you spending more time on these apps. And so that's why they make it so that they're so addictive, so that they get more money off of that. So if maybe there was a way to, like, bypass through that, where they make it [...] less addictive while they still make money from that.'* – Mimi, Peer researcher, Dundee co-analysis sessions

The influence of algorithms

Almost all the young people felt that they cannot completely control what they see online. Young people expressed a general view that while they have some control, they are not able to completely protect themselves from viewing unwanted content.

As one workshop participant put it: 'You never know what's going to pop up on your feed' (Workshop participant, Shetland). Young people identified this lack of control as opening themselves up to risk and uncertainty while online.

In Shetland for example, a group of three young women realised during their discussion that two of them had experienced unsolicited nudes appearing on their Instagram feeds, while the third had not. They could not identify any reasons for these differing experiences. This points to the way social media can be simultaneously a means of connection and isolation due to algorithms individualising content. This provides initial indicative evidence that algorithms may be a factor underpinning why some young people experience social media as exacerbating feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Young people said they were aware that algorithms control what they see online, although had different levels of understanding of how algorithms influence online content. Some young people were aware that they can influence algorithms to show specific content, while others were more passive in the way they engage with social media feeds.

One interviewee talked about the importance of young people understanding how to positively 'train' algorithms to help them take control of their social media feeds:

> *'[...] it's so easy to accidentally train your algorithm to show you random stuff. I've seen a young person who was 17. They used to have a TikTok account but they shut it down. And then they made another one, and the first post they interacted with was something about drinking, and then for the next 10 minutes – and I was stood right next to them – for the next 10 minutes, their algorithm was just showing them memes and jokes and posts about drinking. And they're like: "Okay, this is too much. I'm going to go and search dog videos, because I'm sick of this. Why is the algorithm just showing me this kind of content?"'*
> – Interview 6

Critical awareness of how algorithms determine the content of social media feeds is particularly important for young people. As noted by one of the young people in the Islington workshop:

> *'I feel as much as I appreciated having social media young because I met my lifelong friends from it, I shouldn't have had access to it because of the amount of dodgy stuff I've seen on it at such a young age. That obviously messes with your mental load, and like, your perception of who you think you are.'* – Workshop participant, Islington

This is particularly important for young people who may be experiencing depression due to their increased vulnerability.

Young people were aware of how algorithms determine the advertisements that appear on their social media feeds and they consistently identified this as a negative aspect of their online experiences. Participants said they do not like the way advertising has become embedded in social media feeds or the use of data to target specific groups.

They also expressed concern about the way advertising is becoming more subtle and harder to differentiate from other online content. As noted by one of the peer researchers:

> *'I think with like, on TikTok, the sort of ads and stuff you get are probably, sort of cater to what you've been looking up or what other videos you get. But [...] sometimes you can't actually tell if it's an ad or if it's a video.'* – Sophie, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

Young people identified differences in the influence of algorithms on their social media feeds at different times of the day. A few young people spoke about their feeds becoming darker and more 'disrespectful' when they use social media in the evening or late at night. For example, one young person observed:

> *'When it's past six o'clock, I'm getting very disrespectful TikTok videos [...] And then there's also, like, YouTube as well, like, for some reason, they're showing me demonic stuff, like I never asked for that. I don't know where they got that from.'*
> – Workshop participant, Islington

These young people spoke about how much harder it is to handle dark or depressing content at nighttime but felt that this is when it is most likely to appear on their feeds. They clearly stated that they did not like to view this kind of content at night, often associating this with difficulties in getting to sleep, and expressed frustration about being exposed to this type of content at night.

It is important to note that some young people also shared how they use online content, such as YouTube videos, to help them fall asleep. This highlights the individual nature of people's engagement with online spaces and points to the importance of young people not only being able to control what content they see, but also when they see it.

Despite having some understanding of the way algorithms influence their social media feeds, many young people placed the responsibility for online content consumption on themselves. As one participant described:

> *'I feel nice when I'm not on my phone. I feel nice. But since it's so easy to access, it's more like, why would I take it away if there's really nothing really stopping me except my own will?'* – Workshop participant, Islington

This research provides some indicative evidence that while young people understand that the online landscape is influenced by technology companies, there is a tendency towards individualisation of responsibility.

While most young people demonstrated that they have some awareness of the economic forces that drive their experience of the online world, and expressed frustration at the failure of technology companies to prioritise consumer wellbeing, they feel that they are responsible for managing their own online experiences.

Balancing online and offline lives

Young people clearly recognise the importance of maintaining a healthy balance between their online and offline lives. When reflecting on their experiences of social media, the peer researchers consistently framed social media as being both a form of connection and disconnection.

This was eloquently summarised by Jimmy during the first peer researcher training session. The peer researchers were asked to draw their 'digital island', an activity designed to create a visual representation of their experiences of digital technology. Jimmy divided their island in two clear halves and stated:

> *'I split my island into two sides. One side is a thriving metropolis and the other is one guy on his own because social media can make you feel connected to everyone or completely on your own.'* – Jimmy, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

This dichotomy of connection and disconnection featured repeatedly in discussions throughout the initial peer research training sessions. This resulted in the peer researchers choosing it as a key theme to explore within the peer workshops. During a co-analysis session, the peer researchers analysed the data relating to this theme and developed this conclusion:

> *'If you're connected on social media too much, you end up being disconnected from real life. And in a kind of like the opposite way as well, like vice versa. If you're too connected to real life, you end up disconnected from the online world, too.'*
> – Lottie, Peer researcher, Dundee co-analysis sessions

However, despite recognising the need for balance, young people consistently told us that they find it difficult to manage their online engagement. Young people spoke about how the amount of digital technology in society has increased, making it increasingly difficult to disconnect from the online world. As one of the peer researchers reflected:

> *'I think the amount of digital tech, especially in terms of phones and stuff is bad in society. It's gotten worse over the years and years. Even from when I was a younger child it was never as big a thing.'* – Sunny, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

This peer researcher went on to reflect on the way that time online affects the quality of offline lives, associating this with how they connect to and experience the world:

> *'Even if it's not negatively impacting someone with like bullying and stuff, even if it's just they're using their phone all the time [emphasis], you're just not connecting with anything else. You don't experience things the same if you're constantly thinking about that.'*
> – Sunny, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

When young people shared their experiences of times when they had become disconnected, often by losing a phone, they framed these positively and spoke about reconnecting with family and friends, spending time outside or just simply as moments when they paid more attention to their surroundings. For example, one workshop participant reflected on a period when their phone was broken, stating:

> *'I spent more time just speaking to people instead of sat on my phone. I kind of, I think I watched a few documentaries, which is something I do anyway, but I would kind of be on my phone and not pay attention as much. I think I spoke to my family. I just kind of lived more in the moment. That feels just kind of weird to say.'* – Workshop participant, Shetland

However, the contradictory nature of young people's relationships with their phones was also highlighted during the Islington workshop when the participants described how their school required them to hand in phones at the start of the school day. The peer researchers reacted with shock, questioning how they would communicate with family if they needed to.

The discussion provides some initial insight into the contradictory nature of the lived experiences of this generation of young people. Initially encouraged to rely on the online world for everything from schooling to socialisation during periods of lockdown, they are now having the same tools they were encouraged to use being locked away. The discussion highlighted the anxieties young people may experience when navigating this contradiction and provides some

indicative evidence that this affects their emotional and psychological relationship with their phones.

Most of the young people in this research demonstrated that they are trying to navigate a complex set of pressures. They are aware of the benefits of having time offline and that they are living in a world where online connection is the default method for communication and services.

They highlighted the individualisation of their online experiences, and the individualisation of the responsibility they feel for monitoring their online engagement.

While most young people demonstrated awareness of the need to balance their online and offline lives, they also identified the barriers that are limiting their ability to take control of their relationship with both their phones and their online interactions.

Summary of insights

- Young people are spending more time on their phones than they would like. They feel exposed to both internal and external pressures that result in habits they find hard to break.
- Young people feel they are navigating contradictory messages of living in a 'digital first' society while simultaneously being told to spend less time online. They recognise the importance of balancing their online and offline lives, but they experience the increased integration of digital technology in everyday life as exacerbating this tension.
- Intentionality and critical awareness are key factors in how young people experience the online world. Whether their engagement is purposeful or passive significantly shapes the impact of their online experience.
- Young people think that digital technology has fundamentally changed how people understand privacy and consent. They are deeply concerned about the impact of this on society.
- Young people are aware of their 'data footprint' and the permanent nature of their online interactions, however they are currently navigating this without any clear guidance.
- Young people are aware that online spaces are designed to encourage extensive use and view this as a form of manipulation that prioritises profit over wellbeing. They were unequivocal in their call for this to change.

- Young people do not feel that they are able to control what they are exposed to online. They understand that algorithms affect what they view online but are unsure how this influences content, resulting in feelings of anxiety, vulnerability and isolation.
- There is a tension between individual responsibility and systemic design. Young people recognise the influence of commercial motives and have awareness of the power dynamics that influence how they experience the online world, however they believe that they are responsible for ensuring their own safety online.
- Young people are keenly aware of the need to balance their online and offline lives but find the increased integration of digital technology within everyday life reduces their autonomy to remain disconnected.

Section 3: Navigating online harms

Young people expressed serious concerns, and sometimes anger, about being exposed to harmful online content over the course of their growing up journey. This includes misinformation, unrealistic body standards, negative news stories, and graphic sexual and violent content. They believe constant exposure to this type of content has impacted negatively on their growing up journeys.

Some young people think that exposure to this content has resulted in a form of emotional desensitisation that has impacted their ability to engage and empathise with others and relate to real-world events. Young people are aware of the risks that this exposure poses and concerned about the impact on their own development.

Exposure to misinformation

Most young people demonstrated awareness of misinformation online. They spoke about this in two ways: first, they expressed frustration at the prevalence of misinformation online; and second, they expressed ethical concerns about the impact of misinformation on society. They shared their experiences of being exposed to this type of content and also expressed concern about the future impact of AI on the prevalence and believability of misinformation online.

Young people spoke frequently about the importance of critical awareness when navigating the online world, however they are also aware that they are susceptible to misinformation. While they were deeply critical of the passive consumption of 'news' and spoke about the importance of verifying sources, some young people recognised that they still rely on social media as their main source of information. This highlights that despite being aware of fake content online, young people remain susceptible to consuming misinformation.

Some young people raised similar concerns about exposure to skewed political and ideological content. These young people were particularly concerned about their younger peers being exposed to content at a point in their development where they may be easily influenced by repeated exposure to misogynist, racist and exclusionary right-wing ideologies. One interviewee stated:

> *'You could have someone who has a very open mind go from that to believing in this one thing that was pushed onto them.'* – Interview 9

A few young people shared further concerns about the negative impact of well-known influencers on their younger peers. For example, workshop participants discussed their concerns about figures like Charlie Kirk and Andrew Tate creating online content that target young audiences:

> *'[...] they're just spreading like, more like harmful content to people, and the younger people, they are more naive. [...] they grasp at the straws that they provide them because they think it's what's right, because everyone around them is saying the same thing.'*
> – Workshop participant, Islington

The importance of young people building critical awareness around online content was repeatedly highlighted by participants. One interviewee pointed to the risks of young people engaging uncritically with social media at a time when they are forming their world views:

> *'[...] people are just part of an echo chamber that constantly feeds them not even lies, sometimes it might be a lie, sometimes it might be just half-truths, or sometimes it might be carefully collated data that shows things in a certain way. And it's the same with misogyny, Andrew Tate. All of this is stuff that ends up being an echo chamber of people looking for something, finding the answer that validates whatever their concerns are, and then just continuing to get that kind of content.'* – Interview 6

However, the research also revealed an added complexity to the way young people develop critical awareness over the course of their growing up journey. While most of the young people felt they were able to understand the targeted intent underlying some online content, they clearly identified that it was their exposure to misinformation that had enabled them to develop this critical awareness. This has important implications in relation to digital regulation.

Young people clearly told us that exposure to biased content has enabled them to build the skills they believe help them to identify and navigate misinformation. However, while they feel that exposure has enabled them to build their own critical awareness and they believe this supports them to navigate their online experiences, they perceive an increase in the volume and believability of misinformation online and are deeply concerned about the potential negative impact of exposure on their younger peers.

This points to the complex challenge of regulating young people's use of digital technology: young people expressed clear concerns about the negative impact of misinformation online but also viewed their experiences of learning to navigate this as fundamental to their growing critical awareness.

This raises questions around how to balance exposure with protection over the course of the growing up journey in a way that enables young people to develop the skills they need to successfully navigate the online world.

Exposure to fake and unrealistic body standards

Young people consistently shared concerns about the impact of social media on self-esteem, particularly in relation to body image. Young women and young trans people shared personal experiences of the way social media imagery has negatively affected them. Young men spoke about their awareness of the way social media affects the girls and women in their friends and family, with a few young men also sharing their own experiences of social media influencing perceptions of body image.

A few young women shared experiences of receiving targeted advertising by dieting apps and young people in all groups discussed the way they are impacted by influencers on issues such as beauty standards, dieting and fitness. One young person reflected:

> *'[...] coming from personal experience, I've been in that situation where I've seen someone famous, like a model, and been "Oh, they're really pretty, like, I want to be like that", and then I just kind of spiralled really.'* – Workshop participant, Dundee

Young people also spoke about the impact of viewing fake images online. Crucially, some young people said that despite being aware that an image or video may be fake or unrealistic due to filters, they still try to reach these standards. For example:

> *'You see photos of people and can tell they've got a filter on, but you're still "Oh, why don't I look like that?" even though you know they have a filter on. But like you still, but you're still trying to achieve that, knowing it's not real.'* – Workshop participant, Shetland

This raises a potential serious concern about the mental health impact of exposure to altered and fake images, particularly in the context of increased access to AI-generated imagery. This research provides indicative evidence that awareness of fake and altered images and videos is not sufficient to ensure protection.

There is therefore a need to understand the impact of repeated exposure to altered and fake images on young people's health and wellbeing at different stages of their growing up journeys.

Normalisation of sharing explicit images

Young people consistently shared stories of being exposed to sexual content online. This includes viewing sexual and sexualised content and being sent sexual images directly via messaging apps like Snapchat. This was often at very young ages, including during their primary school years. Discussions around these experiences highlighted the complex digital landscapes that young people and children navigate, often with minimal awareness or guidance from adults.

Most young women spoke about being sent what they called 'dick pics'. They reported that they receive these from both unknown men and boys and those in their social circles, including male peers at school. One workshop participant shared that their 11-year-old sister had been sent a 'dick pic' on Snapchat, and numerous young women and young trans people shared experiences of unexpectedly opening unsolicited explicit messages during daily routines, for example while on the bus journey to school. This was a shared experience discussed by workshop participants and interviewees, and the peer researchers discussed the way that this exposure is now normalised among their peers. For example:

> *'I just used to talk about it so casually, like, "oh, they sent me that". And then looking back now, I'm like, that's actually really messed up. But I think it just for me, it just showed how normalised it still is, even years on.'* – Lily, Peer researcher, Dundee co-analysis sessions

Alongside being sent unsolicited explicit content, some young people also shared lived experiences of their own or friends' explicit photos or 'nudes' being shared among their peers. Young women and trans people reported this as a common experience that regularly occurs among their peer groups.

These participants spoke about experiences of explicit photos being shared during school hours and between classmates. Young people consistently spoke about these experiences as being both normalised and inescapable.

Most of the young people who spoke about their experiences of the sharing of explicit content identified as either female or trans. One participant also shared his experiences as a young man being exposed to this content. He described feeling like there was one period of his adolescence when 'every time a message was sent to someone, it'd be a nude photo'. He went on to explain:

> *'But I think from a lad's point of view, it was the "big man" thing. If someone had sent you something, even if you tried to talk to them and be like "you shouldn't be sharing that" or "I don't want to see that", they'd still be like: "it's fine, it's fine, it's cool". And I think that became a normal thing [...].'* – Interview 10

Watch: *Big man*

This research provides initial evidence that there is a need to better understand how young men and boys experience the sharing of explicit images. While limited, the research indicates that some young men and boys are deeply uncomfortable with the sharing of this type of content but feel unable to challenge this new norm.

During the workshops, it was noticeable that the experiences of shared explicit images were often spoken about both with a tone of inevitability and with humour or self-conscious laughter. To understand how to interpret this, we invited the peer researchers to take part in a separate discussion focused on trying to understand these more sensitive aspects of the data. This session was held during the period of co-analysis but entirely voluntary. Three young women and one non-binary participant from the peer researcher group took part in this discussion.

When reflecting on the tone with which participants had shared their experiences, the peer researchers discussed the way that the normalisation of this experience results in young people minimising the severity of the situation through humour, or viewing it as a joke, despite being uncomfortable:

> *'I feel like the first initial reaction is to think, like, that's a joke, but then like, later on [...] you actually think about it. And at least for me, it makes me uncomfortable, like totally uncomfortable.'* – Ellis, Peer researcher, Dundee co-analysis sessions

One of the older peer researchers reflected that she was not surprised that young people frame these experiences through humour. She reflected that it was only as she has matured that she realised the severity of sharing explicit images of or to anyone under the age of 16, stating that she only realised that this constitutes a form of sexual assault as an adult:

> *'I didn't realise how wrong it is until I was older [...] And then I found out, and I was just like, "So many people have done that to me and done that to people I know". And I just feel like there's not enough resources out there for [young people] to know that that's sexual assault.'* – Lily, Peer researcher, Dundee co-analysis sessions

This lack of awareness that sharing explicit images either of or with children under the age of consent is illegal in the UK was common across all workshops.[129] [130] [131] [132] Even when young people spoke about trying to report an incident of explicit images being shared, for example to teachers at school, they reported that they were not aware of any action having been taken either against the perpetrator or to support the person whose images had been shared.

One of the peer researchers shared their own personal experience of this, relating the inaction of the school with the situation being viewed as normal:

> *'When I was younger [...] I would send explicit photos to people, and I didn't actually know there was a trick on like Snapchat, and you were able to take a screenshot of a photo without it coming up that you screenshotted it. So now I found out that my pictures got shared about but it didn't really bother me that much. I think it's just because there wasn't such a big uproar about it. [...] I don't remember the school doing anything, it would just be like, oh, there's another one. Everybody. Look, move on.'*
> – Lily, Peer researcher, Dundee co-analysis sessions

It was noticeable that while young people spoke about their experiences of the sharing of explicit images, no young person reported being supported through these incidents by an adult. This points to a profound lack of accountability within the systems and structures designed to protect children. It indicates that young people are being left to navigate the risks presented by the online world with neither guidance nor protection.

Instead of feeling supported by the adults, organisations and institutions around them, many of whom have a duty of care, this research indicates that young people view their online worlds as places where they are responsible for their own protection.

Exposure to extreme graphic content

Some young people spoke about the various ways they have been exposed to violent and graphic content. This includes being unintentionally exposed through social media feeds, but also in more intentional forms. For example, young people spoke about the Reddit 50/50 Challenge and this appears to be well known among young people. One interviewee described the challenge:

> *'[...] so it would literally be, like, a cute puppy, or a man killing himself, and you would click on the link, and you would get one or the other.'* – Interview 1

Several young people described this challenge as featuring extreme and graphic violence. This includes photos and videos of mass graves, people being beheaded or graphic forms of child abuse. Young people spoke about being sent links that lead them to this type of graphic content, combined with a culture of sharing that resulted in them being shown such content involuntarily. For example:

> *'I think at one point there was a website called LiveLeak, where a lot of quite graphic, horrible stuff was posted. And you'd just be sitting with your friends and they'd go: "Have you seen this?" and they'd turn the phone and you'd see it.'* – Interview 10

One young person reported that the culture of sharing resulted in a curiosity that meant sometimes they would choose to view graphic content, despite initially not being interested. They also spoke about their concerns about the impact of this on young people's development, suggesting that they think that it has resulted in young people being desensitised:

> *'I would say that there has been a lot of desensitising, because obviously everyone in high school would share these videos, and they thought they were funny, and they'd be like "this man fell off a building, haha!" And it's like it was just weird because you wouldn't want to see the video, but then everyone's talking about the video, so then you would get curious. And then someone would send you the video.'* – Interview 1

A few young people spoke about desensitisation in relation to the 24-hour news culture resulting in overexposure to real-world events. Young people described their social media feeds as a 'portal of just purely bad news' (Interview 2) and shared their concerns about the numbing effect of constantly being exposed to extreme human suffering.

The shift towards news consumption through social media platforms rather than news outlets raises important questions about direct exposure to news events without any form of editorial oversight. This research provides initial evidence that this has particular impacts on young people and points to the need to understand the longitudinal impacts at different stages of the developmental process.

The potential impact of lack of editorial oversight on how news is reported on social media was highlighted effectively during one of the interviews. This young person reflected on their concerns about the way that real-world events can be manipulated to minimise the seriousness of the event. She described one recent example:

> *'[...] on TikTok, the people that live in Israel and Gaza recently, with the current bombings that are going on, they've been recording the bombs flying down. And they've been putting a girly pop song next to it, and the captions are like, "oh, my first world war". And it's generally people just recording this and posting it and not thinking twice. Cause they're seeing the bombs from a distance, so they've not thought about how many people will have died, or what will have been destructed [sic] with that. They've thought: "oh, look, those bombs slaaay!" [RuPaul style awkward giggle]. It's very... [pause] it's just... [pause] people are unserious about serious things.'* – Interview 1

A few young people also spoke about the delayed impact of exposure to graphic content. When reflecting on the impact of viewing the Reddit 50/50 Challenge when he was younger, one interviewee stated that he is only now realising the psychological impact. He described

feeling like he did not fully understand what he was seeing as a young teenager and how his understanding of this content has changed as he has matured and he is able to place it into a wider moral and political context. He directly associated this exposure to his mental health, relating it to increased levels of anxiety.

The delayed impacts of graphic content

'I have memories of when I was wee, like scrolling through with my friends. And it's like – there's actual murder. It's actual dead bodies, and children and stuff. Which, looking back on it, it's mental. It is mental to think that I was looking at that. But it was just there, and there's no safeguarding on it. There's no age protector on it. You just go on it. No problem. And you're just looking at people being killed in graphic detail.'

Interviewer: *'And do you think that's still affecting you now? I mean, that's big stuff.'*

'Yeah, I feel like that's probably something that a therapist would be able to probably draw back. But I feel like it probably has some contribution to my anxiety or my mental health to some degree, because it's not great if I'm honest, my mental health and that. And I bet the fact that I'm so desensitised to everything because of how much I got to see of that stuff on the internet, has probably weighed into a wee bit. There's obviously the moral value for the Gaza videos too. Like you see it, and it's children bleeding and dying. And it's horrible to look at – it hurts. But at the same time, when I'm looking at it, it's not like I'm wincing or anything. I'm just seeing it, and I just feel terrible emotionally. But the content itself doesn't really hurt. Like I could look at it and it's sad, but I'm not gonna turn my eyes. I'm just so desensitised to that [pause]. Which is kind of brutal.'
– Interview 2

Watch: *Fucked up* [requires age verification]

This research indicates that young people are uncomfortable with the content they are currently able to access online. They recognise that viewing extremely graphic and violent content influences the way they perceive and experience the world. They are concerned about the long-term impact of consistent exposure to this type of content on their development and express discomfort about their perceived desensitisation to real-world events.

The research also provides indicative evidence that there may be delayed impacts related to early exposure to graphic and violent content. The participants spoke about a sense of delayed shame, anger and regret related to both their exposure to and participation in the sharing of graphic content.

The longitudinal impacts of exposure to extreme and graphic content have important implications for the conceptualisation of digital safeguarding to prevent both immediate and long-term harms.

Lack of safe online spaces

Some young people shared experiences of times when they have been exposed to inappropriate behaviours while using online spaces. This includes young people being exposed to sexualised interactions and exposure to people seeking support during periods of emotional and psychological distress.

Young women and trans young people reported numerous experiences with 'creeps', 'paedos' and 'pervs' online. For example, one participant commented that the internet is full of 'paedos and dick pics', stating that she'd seen a man masturbate (Workshop participant, Sandwell).

These young people spoke about these interactions occurring across various online spaces and expressed anger about the way that spaces designed to be safe for children and young people are being manipulated by adults with bad intentions.

For example, when reflecting on their experience playing Roblox, a popular online game marketed at young children, one participant described how the game is being deliberately manipulated to expose children to explicit content and called for the platform to 'do better':

> *'[...] let's talk about Roblox. Terrible! It's terrible over there. They don't care. I'm just looking like, you know, like condos? Do you know what that is? It's like strip clubs on Roblox... And they were having access to stuff, like 18-plus content. At such a young age, it could obviously mess with your mental health. I wish Roblox did better.'* – Workshop participant, Islington

Some young people spoke about older people using the anonymity of the internet to take advantage of younger users. For example:

> *'I also wrote down groomers [...] Just old people taking advantage of young people online because they can, because they can pretend to be young as well. And then there's catfishers as well.'* – Workshop participant, Islington

Another way that young people described safe spaces feeling unsafe was through exposure to people seeking emotional support for self-harm or suicidal thoughts. The peer researchers spoke at length about their experiences of being part of interest communities via online servers on platforms like Discord and how these positive experiences had been disrupted by people sharing unsolicited intimate details about their lives or seeking high levels of emotional support, often very soon after initial connection.

During these discussions, the peer researchers spoke about experiencing this when they were young, at 11 or 12 years of age, and often when they were still learning to navigate the online world. They spoke about how these disclosures came from people who they did not know personally, and often from people who were geographically distant or from people who were

significantly older. They shared how they felt unprepared for these early experiences and described being drawn into providing emotional support. For example:

> *'For example like on Discord... [murmur among the group]. That's a place! [laughing]. Anyway, I've had a lot of experience with people on servers who I've spoken to maybe once or twice, they've added me and then they're like "Hey, how are you?" Then they're like "I'm going to kill myself" and randomly dump it on you [murmur of agreement from two other group members] and it's like "What? I don't know you, why are you telling me this? What am I meant to do about this, we're on the other side of the earth, I can't come stop you!" And all I can do is be like "Please don't do it, I care about you" and I don't even know you.'* – Sunny, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

The peer researchers spoke about the reasons why they had not sought adult support at the time, highlighting that it was only as they got older than they were able to realise that some interactions had been both inappropriate and damaging for their own mental health.

For example, one peer researcher spoke about how they now understand the importance of boundaries and are starting to take control over when or how they are being drawn into offering emotional support:

> *'When I was younger, I used to talk down strangers online all the time [emphasis] but now I'm like "That's not healthy for me" and also not useful for them. So I've got a wee sheet under my bed which I've been given of just everyone you can call if you need help. So I'll just be like, "Hey, I'm not the person to be dealing with this, if you want help these are all the places that you can turn to. If you need someone to talk to [emphasis] I can lend an ear, but I can't actually do [emphasis] anything".'* – Wren, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

This research provides evidence that young people do not feel protected online, even when using spaces that are designed to be safe for children. It also points to the way that young people are not always able to identify or understand risks or manage difficult or harmful interactions at the time of exposure.

The peer researchers reflected that while they now feel more equipped to identify potential harm and implement their own boundaries, they had to learn how to deal with these interactions on their own. Young people did not report reaching out for support or advice about how to handle these interactions and instead described taking individualised action, for example by restricting their online networks to people they know and blocking new and unknown contacts.

Young people consistently spoke with a tone of inevitability about the lack of safe online spaces, indicating that unwanted online contact is normalised and that young people have limited options for preventing unwanted contact from occurring.

Summary of insights

- Young people are concerned about misinformation online and believe that AI will complicate this further. While they are concerned about the negative impact of exposure to this type of content on their younger peers, they also recognise the value in building the critical awareness needed to safely navigate the online world.
- Negative effects of social media imagery on self-esteem and body image are well evidenced, but this research highlights concerns about the impact of fake images on wellbeing.
- Exposure to explicit and sexual content, including sharing of explicit images by both young people and adults, is normalised. Young people are navigating this alone with minimal adult guidance or accountability.
- Exposure to explicit content occurs early in young people's growing up journey and often before they have sufficient maturity to identify harm. This has important implications for digital safeguarding as young people are unlikely to seek support at the time of exposure and are instead viewing their online worlds as places where they are responsible for their own protection. Young people are being exposed to extremely graphic and violent content at young ages. The long-term psychological and emotional harms of this exposure are unknown.
- Young people consume news through social media feeds and report that they experience this as a constant stream of bad news that results in emotional desensitisation to real-world events. They express concerns about the effect of this exposure on their mental health and wellbeing.
- Young people think that online spaces designed for use by children and young people are not being sufficiently protected. They experience these spaces as being open to manipulation by adults with bad intentions. Online communities can provide positive avenues of support and connection but can also result in early exposure to inappropriate and harmful interactions, including strangers seeking emotional and psychological support.

Section 4: Navigating AI

The peer researchers identified the role of AI as a key area that they wanted to focus on during the research. AI had consistently been a focus of discussion during the peer researcher training sessions, with the peer researchers expressing strong views about how they think AI will impact society.

During these discussions, it was clear that the peer researchers had limited understanding of the wide range of different AI technologies that are available and were often unsure how to differentiate between AI and other types of digital technology. As they understood the term 'AI' to be referring to the type of generative AI that is becoming increasingly embedded in everyday systems such as internet searches and apps on phones and laptops, it is this type of AI that is the focus of this section of the report.

While the emerging nature of generative AI meant some young people had more limited direct experience, the majority of young people expressed strong views about the use of AI in education, the workplace and the creative sectors.

Young people also expressed clear ethical and social concerns about the impact of generative AI in relation to human and societal development alongside concerns about the impact of AI on the environment.

The impact of AI on human intelligence

Most young people thought that AI will negatively impact human development. They consistently expressed concerns about the potential of AI to undermine human skills and capacities. Young people spoke about AI causing people to become 'intellectually lazy' and creating a culture where people stop thinking for themselves.

The perception that AI encourages individual laziness was common and young people discussed the cumulative harm this could create at a societal level. For example, some young people expressed concerns about the way AI is being used within education by both students and staff.

Young people discussed their lived experiences of AI being used in education, including teachers using AI to set and mark academic work, and their peers using AI to complete assignments. These young people interpreted this as AI exacerbating a sense of 'unfairness' within education. For example:

> *'I objected to people using AI on my course because I do social science and that is a very difficult thing, one to get into, and two to pass. And I put in all of this work, worked my ass off for a year, just to then be told by this person, "Oh, yeah, I used AI the whole year and got a pass". Like it should be an even playing field.'* – Workshop participant, Dundee

Some young people spoke about AI being used by teachers to create worksheets and mark work and viewed this as negatively impacting the quality of their education. This includes one peer researcher sharing her experience of a teacher asking pupils to use AI to mark their own essays:

> *'[...] it's like, with history essays, it's not just like, "this is right". Obviously, you've got to get the facts right, but it's like, you've got to be nuanced. You've got to write about, like, the event and you've got to, like, argue... I feel like a bot just can't go "yes" or "no". Like, you need a human to mark it because you need a human's input on it... It was that she was just telling us to use a bot, which I definitely objected to.'* – Lottie, Peer researcher, Dundee workshop

Most young people interpreted the use of AI in education as staff using AI to 'cut corners' and discussed how this is negatively impacting their trust in the education system. This points to young people's concerns moving beyond individual experiences of unfairness to deeper ethical concerns about the way AI is being used and the long-term effect of relying on AI to access information and complete tasks. One participant said:

> *'I think it's taking a lot of, like, critical thinking skills, and the way it's being used unethically [to] cheat in school and do your homework for you. I think that's gonna have quite an active impact on society, when people realise that: "Oh, I don't have to do this for myself". Like this can do* everything *[emphasis] for me.'* – Workshop participant, Shetland

This concern about the impact of AI on critical thinking and the impact this may have on societal development was common among participants. However, a few young people viewed AI more positively and spoke about using AI as a tool to support their personal development.

At an individual level, these young people saw AI as a mechanism to strengthen their own skills and knowledge, for example by using it as a 'smart friend' (Workshop participant, Islington) or as a source of inspiration to build their own creativity. While these young people recognised the potential for AI to encourage intellectual laziness, they framed this as people needing to be taught how to use AI to complement rather than replace human capacities. For example:

> *'[...] AI kind of does wear out the human mind a bit. It makes it a bit more smoother than it should be [...] I think it kind of makes you, like, intellectually lazy. But I think if we get people to actually learn how to use AI in an intellectual way, like an even more smarter way than just getting fast information, then we can work well with AI together.'* – Workshop participant, Islington

The young people who viewed AI through a more positive lens were acutely aware that AI will feature in their future professional lives and were keen to understand how to build relevant skills. One young person suggested that AI needs to be included in the school curriculum to teach young people how AI is being used in different professions.

However, it is important to highlight that this was the minority view. Only a few young people said they are excited by or support the emergence of generative AI in everyday life, with most participants expressing serious moral and ethical concerns.

This research indicates that young people have had some exposure to the use of generative AI in their personal lives and within education. These exposures are mixed, with only a few young people stating that they are excited about the use of generative AI in everyday life. Most young people expressed concerns about the potential for AI to negatively impact human development. This includes concerns about becoming 'intellectually lazy'.

The impact of AI on society

Young people consistently said they expect AI to lead to rapid societal shifts. Most of the young people thought that the incorporation of AI technologies into everyday life is inescapable. A few of the young people in the Islington workshop were excited about the potential impact of generative AI on society and viewed AI through the lens of an exciting AI-human partnership that can complement human development. For example:

> *'AI is kind of like the baby brother. Because, you know, like, if you are in a family and there's like a baby and there's like, so many older siblings, the baby will be able to talk and walk faster, because that's all that they're surrounded by. So that's what AI is kind of like to the human population. And I think when we see it like that, there's no reason for us to be scared of it.'* – Workshop participant, Islington

However, this view contrasted with most young people's views and they often identified AI as a source of anxiety. Some anxieties were grounded in the consequences of AI-driven changes to industry and the future job market, including the potential for AI to result in job losses. These concerns often focused on societal changes rather than expressing concerns about the impact of AI on their own employment prospects and future careers. As one of the peer researchers reflected:

> *'[...] I just think it's taking a lot of people's jobs. And [...] when I heard that, I thought, "Oh, it's going to be taking all the boring jobs, then more people can focus on jobs that they actually want [emphasis] to go into, so they can pursue stuff". But instead of that, it's just making people go into other boring jobs, instead of making like the boring jobs so that people don't need them anymore. And they can go like: "Oh, I can go do art now. I can go do science". Like, it's not, it's just taking away actual valuable jobs as well and it's affecting people.'*
> – Lottie, Peer researcher, Dundee workshop

Most young people expressed the view that AI will negatively impact employment. However, a few participants in the Islington workshop expressed a different view – while they saw job losses as inevitable, they also thought that AI would create new opportunities. One participant said:

> *'I think AI will create jobs. I mean, obviously it will get rid of some jobs. But the jobs that were, they were already, like... on their last legs... [AI is] not like magic, it's not like magically powered. Like, you need people constantly checking on it, and, like, constantly giving energy so we can actually work... Like, you need people to transport the energy, or make sure it works, or check the system works. Check if AI is running smooth. So that all creates new jobs as well.'* – Workshop participant, Islington

When discussing the impact of AI on society, young people were more supportive of AI use for clearly defined purposes. Most young people recognised that AI can work faster than humans on certain tasks, for example in medicine to detect cancer or to gather data needed during search and rescue operations. One young person spoke about the potential value in AI being used as a type of archiving system to preserve human knowledge:

> *'[...] there are languages in the world that only a couple of people know. [AI] should be used to archive that forgotten knowledge. And there's this type of material called sea silk, which is a fabric in Italy that only one person knows how to make, in this day and age. [AI] should be used to archive the knowledge. I see it as a form of archiving system... I do believe it has massive potential when it's used in the maths and sciences. But it should not be used when it comes to creativity. It shouldn't be used. Because what that does is replace the parts which took us millions of years to create.'* – Interview 7

Most young people agreed that AI is a useful resource when used as a 'multi-tool' (Interview 9) to support the achievement of clearly defined tasks. However, there was also broad agreement that AI should not be used within the creative sectors and that it should only be used with human oversight.

Regardless of whether they were supportive or sceptical about AI, young people consistently said that they think human oversight is essential. For example, when considering the use of AI in medicine, one participant stated:

> *'I think maybe you can have one [a doctor] without the other [AI], but you can't have AI without a doctor. So I feel like as long as the doctor is present, then the AI can be used. But without the doctor, then AI can't be used.'* – Workshop participant, London

Alongside the need for human oversight, young people frequently expressed clear concerns about AI use replacing human interactions. Young people raised specific concerns about AI being used in roles that rely on human interaction and interpersonal communication and interpretation, such as for medical assessments or a source of mental health support.

Young people also spoke about lived experiences of people they know turning to 'chatbots' as a form of mental health support. They discussed their concerns about the long-term consequences of young people relying on AI for emotional and psychological support, while acknowledging how it may provide immediate comfort. As one participant stated: 'It's comforting, but it can be damaging' (Workshop participant, Sandwell). One participant deepened this reflection:

> *'A lot of people tend to go to, for example, ChatGPT as a form of therapy. Which replaces the use of humans, because it's easier than going to a therapist or finding a therapist, or going out and talking to people. And a lot of instances like that, I believe can be harmful to people because they're not using it as a tool, they're using it more so as replacement, rather than actually trying to fix the cause.'* – Workshop participant, Sandwell

However, in contrast to this view, a few young people shared how they are using AI as a source of support. These young people spoke about feeling more able to be open with a 'chatbot' than a person, reflecting on how this lifted some of the embarrassment or anxiety they experience when sharing a challenging or upsetting experience with a friend or adult.

For example, one participant shared that she uses chatbots for support because 'it's not going to judge you and think you're weird' (Workshop participant, Sandwell). Another young person shared how she uses ChatGPT as a source of advice, describing how she tells it about challenges she is facing or difficult situations that have happened, and she experiences the responses as supportive:

> *'[...] it's like your biggest supporter. So if you say something you've done, like you've done badly in a test, they'll look up, like, a Reddit post where you can see like, "Oh, this person went through the same thing". It's just like, it's a new, new beginning, new phase.'* – Workshop participant, Islington

Similarly, the peer researchers reflected on why young people engage with character.ai for role-play, suggesting that this may feel safer and less awkward than role-playing offline: 'It's just that thing of not wanting to embarrass yourself' (Lottie, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions).

This provides initial evidence that some young people are using AI as a source of emotional and social support. However, it also provides evidence that most young people still recognise the value in human connection and have clear concerns about the potential for reliance on AI to increase loneliness and isolation in the longer term.

When thinking about the future, a few young people clearly stated that they do not want AI to advance any further. One participant said:

> *'I feel like it [AI] should be stopped. It shouldn't advance any further, because I don't see why you would need to. It's kind of already further than it needs to be. I don't think we need AI models. I don't think we need photos of like, I don't know penguins in space. I don't think that's necessary [...] I don't think it should be as big as it is.'* – Workshop participant, Shetland

Most young people stated that they believe the integration of AI in society is inevitable, with a few expressing anxieties about the long-term impact. Some of these anxieties were abstract and appeared to be related to a fear of the unknown, often framed through humorous references to science fiction, such as The Terminator film. These reflections indicate that some young people are experiencing fears when thinking about the future. For example:

> *'I think AI has benefits for society [...] But I think it can also really be a downfall if people don't put a limit. But I feel like some people, society could intellectually fall, because some people can't think [emphasis] without AI. They can't do anything without it. And I genuinely think, it's very dramatic, but I genuinely think if we get too far it's like [*The*]* Terminator*. I genuinely feel that [and] it kind of scares me.'* – Workshop participant, Islington

A few young people also spoke about their fears from a perspective that AI will exacerbate current inequalities and deepen a sense of disconnection. For example, when asked about his vision for the future, one interviewee identified how this vision differs radically from the future he would like to have:

> *'At the rate we're going, smart houses. Everything's done by AI, whether that's the curtains opening in the morning, the coffee starting to brew the moment you wake up, music playing and so on. You've got Alexa calling out what you're going to be doing that day, and smart cars pulling around to the front of the house to pick you up. But what I hope is more equality between the pay gaps and between people. Less giant concrete structures, more nature, more inclusive buildings.'* – Interview 5

When thinking about the future, a few young people expressed fears about the potential for AI to gain agency. These fears reflect some of the popular narratives about AI that merge fiction and reality. During the discussion, the emotions underlying these narratives indicated that young people feel uncertain about what the world may look like in the future. For some, this unknown future is exciting but for most the uncertainty is a source of anxiety.

Young people's social imaginaries

'I now call my AI a digital darling every time I talk to them because I'm a little bit scared about the bots taking over [...] So I'm always very extra polite for the AI, because I'm a little bit worried that if they'd know my code or something, they could figure it out if they ever do an uprising.' – Workshop participant, Shetland

'But because of what it is that we've created, it is dangerous if we're not in control of it. I remember seeing something about how they created some machine, and they went to delete it, basically just wipe the whole thing, and the computer realised that they were trying to shut it down. So it basically went into survival mode, if you will, and stopped them from wiping it. If AI can realise that we're gonna wipe your computer – we're gonna kill you essentially, and it fights back – that's dangerous. Because what if we implemented that into a weapon? And then we told it to stop, and it didn't want to. We're powerless against that.' – Interview 9

This research provides initial evidence that young people believe that AI will cause rapid societal shifts and for most young people this is a source of anxiety. They are concerned about the impact of AI on society, including on employment, and while they recognise the potential for AI to be used as a tool, for example in healthcare, they value the role of human interactions and think that AI should only ever be used with human oversight.

The impact of AI on creativity and the arts

Young people consistently expressed serious concerns about the impact of AI on creativity and the arts. As noted in the 'Methodology' section of this report, the partnership with youth work organisations may be a factor in this focus as they often provide creative opportunities for young people to explore and express their views. This may have created a bias within the research sample towards young people with artistic interests, however the level of concern about the impact of AI on human creativity was both considerable and consistent.

While most young people focused on their concerns about the use of AI in the creative arts, a few young people shared the ways they are using AI to support and expand their own creativity. This included using AI for creative inspiration, for example asking for song or drawing ideas. However, when it came to using AI to make art rather than simply as a source of inspiration, young people consistently stated they do not like AI being used to create any form of art.

Young people discussed how they view art as a valuable form of human expression and consider AI-produced art as being 'just technique'. These young people spoke about the way they value the imperfection and learning inherent in the artistic process. As one participant stated:

> *'Art is supposed to be like an outlet, so what's the point if you just use AI?'*
> – Workshop participant, Islington

Young people also expressed clear ethical concerns about the use of AI in the creative industries, including the visual arts, music and film. These included concerns about reducing the quality of art due to AI being 'soulless'. For example:

> *'AI is... like uncanny and soulless. And it's an imitation, kind of mockery of, like, real human creativity.'* – Workshop participant, Dundee

Job losses were seen as a particular concern for the creative arts, with young people describing AI as creating a particular threat to many of the opportunities that have traditionally formed the pathway into creative careers. One participant stated

> *'AI music is becoming a thing, which I think is like, just so sad when there's lots of artists like trying to make it big. And someone is just like, using AI music and getting, like, a million listeners a month on Spotify. It's crazy.'* – Workshop participant, Shetland

Young people consistently expressed ethical concerns about the way AI is designed to draw on existing sources. Most young people viewed this as a form of plagiarism. For example:

> *'It's the fact that people are just like: "Oh, look at this I made." I'm like, you didn't make it. It's beautiful, yes, but what you've done is basically made a Frankenstein of god knows how many images.'* – Interview 7

A few young people viewed AI as intellectual property theft and expressed ethical concerns about whether AI is working beyond the law:

> *'I [think] AI is beyond the law. I think it makes copyright kind of ambiguous... [With] AI, there's no real individuals plagiarising, so I think it'd be hard to convict someone like that.'*
> – Workshop participant, Dundee

Young people consistently demonstrated awareness of the economic forces that encourage the use of AI in the creative arts. They understood the economic drivers that underpin AI use, recognising that profit is a key reason for why companies use AI rather than more expensive human creative labour.

They often expressed disapproval and disappointment at the higher-end corporate actors who they believe can afford to pay creatives yet choose to use AI, despite being in a position to open up creative opportunities. A peer researcher said:

> *'A lot of big corporations [use AI], like the Christmas Coca-Cola ad used AI instead of real actors or artists. So just the way, even though they're billion, multi-billion companies, they can't pay actors or voice actors or artists to create an actual advert.'*
> – Lottie, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

This research provides evidence that young people have serious concerns about the impact of AI on the creative sector. They unequivocally stated that they value human creativity and are concerned about the potential for AI to undermine both human creativity and the creative arts.

The impact of AI on the environment

Young people consistently shared concerns about the environmental impact of AI. During workshops and interviews, young people demonstrated their knowledge of issues related to water and energy waste and the potential for this to contribute to the climate crisis.

Young people connected their concerns about the impact of AI on the environment with their concern for the way that AI is becoming embedded in everyday technologies. They identified this as encouraging the unthinking use of these technologies without concern for the impact on society. One participant said:

> *'I feel like there are positives, and it is quite fun, but also I'm very aware of the environmental impact of AI... I think, sometimes I might feel it might be a bit overused. I think it's a useful tool, but I think we shouldn't be so reliant on it.'* – Workshop participant, Shetland

A few young people expressed frustration about the lack of awareness of the environmental impact of AI in society and associated this with the integration of generative AI in everyday life. These young people felt that this integration has resulted in AI being used in meaningless ways. As one of the peer researchers reflected after an informal interview with their peers:

> *'They said it [AI] could be cool and useful, but it's not used for that, it's used for TikTok filters and seeing what age the AI filter thinks you are. And that's mental to me, because AI uses energy and people are like "But how is it ruining the planet?" and I'm just do your research! But then you do your research and it's AI that gives you the answer!'*
> – Lily, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

This points to the way that the integration of generative AI in everyday tools, including smartphones and internet search engines, is resulting in a circularity that creates new habits and norms related to AI use.

However, a few young people spoke about how their awareness of the environmental impact of AI leads to feelings of guilt when they use AI, resulting in them trying to make more conscious decisions about when and how to use AI in their own lives. For example:

> *'[...] every time I use it for like a thought thing, if it doesn't feel like a big enough thought to put in AI, I feel really guilty about endangering the planet. But if it's a thought that I can't figure out through Google or without critical thinking, that I don't feel as guilty for using the AI.'* – Workshop participant, Shetland

This research therefore provides initial evidence that young people are aware of the environmental impact of AI and are not entirely comfortable with the increased integration of these technologies within everyday tools.

The impact of AI on sex and interpersonal relationships

While the research did not explicitly seek to explore the use of AI to create sexualised content, the peer researchers identified this as a key concern. During the co-design process, the peer researchers discussed their concerns about online exploitation and exposure to sexualised content (see the 'Navigating online harms' section of this report) and spoke about their fears that access to AI-generated pornographic material might deepen these harms.

They also expressed serious concerns about both the current and longitudinal impact of AI technologies on young people's interpersonal relationships. They shared their experiences of being exposed to the use of AI in sexualised online content, including deepfakes and AI-generated pornography, and expressed serious concern about the potential impact of this on girls and women.

Two peer researchers identified this as a key research question:

> *'My first question was, how does AI impact the exploitation of women. [...] It's more just like how AI is creating [...] a lot of deep fakes, and it's making it much easier to create, like, sexual or nude videos of women who aren't consenting to it. [...] I want to focus in on the exploitation, because it's just making it much easier to exploit people and to have nude videos of people that aren't consenting to it.'* – Lottie, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

> *'[...] the first one is just about AI being used in the porn industry and also young people having too easy access to those sites. But my question for that was: "Has the increase of AI used in the porn industry had a negative impact on how sex is viewed by young people?" Obviously, I know that's not appropriate at all, but it's just something that really interests me.'* – Lily, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

The group-based nature of this research, along with the time-limited delivery period, raised complex ethical issues in exploring these issues in peer-led sessions. After discussion with the peer researchers, we chose not to explicitly ask young people to share their experiences of AI use in relation to sex and relationships during workshops. However, it is highlighted here as an area identified by the peer researchers as requiring urgent further research.

Summary of insights

- Some young people are anxious about the effects of rapid technological change on the future and think that it could have a detrimental effect on people and societies.
- Young people are clear that AI should complement rather than replace human skills and knowledge, and should be used as a tool to strengthen and advance specific areas of work. They think this should be done in clearly defined ways and were unequivocal in their call that AI should always be within human control.
- Young people recognise cumulative harms and risks from AI, including harms to society. This contrasts significantly with public narratives about young people's readiness to use these technologies uncritically. Young people are concerned about the impact of AI on employment, particularly in the creative and cultural industries.
- While some young people think that AI can be a useful tool for creative inspiration, most young people think that it should not be used in the creative arts as this undermines creativity and human expression.
- Young people are aware that technological advancement is motivated by profit and think this distorts the potential for AI to be utilised to improve society.
- Young people are deeply concerned about the impact of AI on the environment. This results in some young people feeling guilt when using AI technologies and actively trying to reduce their usage.
- Some young people are uncomfortable with the increasing integration of AI in everyday life and want to be able to choose when and how to use these technologies.
- The peer researchers expressed serious concerns about the impact of AI on sex and interpersonal relationships. This includes the risks of generative AI being used as a tool for sexual exploitation and abuse.

Section 5: Navigating the future

Young people in this research had clear views on their preferred digital futures. They want to have control over when and how they use digital technology, and to be able to curate their experiences to minimise risk.

They are aware of the need to balance their online and offline lives and have concerns about the way digital technology is becoming embedded in everyday life. They are concerned for their younger peers and support the use of restrictions, although they are sceptical about how effectively these can be enforced.

Young people are also aware that technology companies are driven by profit, and they want health and wellbeing to be prioritised over economic gain. While young people shared the various ways they are trying to gain control over their use of digital technology, they are acutely aware that they are still susceptible to addictive platform design and the integration of technologies into daily life.

Taking control of their relationship with digital technology

Young people consistently said that they want to have control over when and how they use digital technology. Most young people recognised the importance of finding a healthy balance between their online and offline lives and spoke about wanting to be able to enjoy the online world in a way that minimises exposure to risky or harmful content. As one of the peer researchers reflected in their final workshop:

> *'What would I like my future to look like? I would like for phones to become less important and less of an extension of people because a lot of it just feels like a dumpster fire. Or it to become more positive and less unhealthy, at least.'*
> – Sunny, Peer researcher, Dundee co-analysis sessions

However, this research reveals some of the challenges that young people face in taking control over their relationship with their smartphone and online lives. When thinking about the future, the peer researchers were clear in their call for support and education. One peer researcher stated:

> *'We need more education on how to have a healthy life-tech balance in the digital world and how to not be tech-dependent.'* – Mimi, Peer researcher, Dundee co-analysis sessions

When reflecting on times when their phones had broken, young people spoke about enjoying the opportunity to be less connected. They also stated that they did not think it would not be viable as an option in the long term. For example:

> *'I would love for me to be able to go off-grid without a phone but I'd be missing out on so much, I don't think I could do that... It's not like it completely stops you but it makes it a lot more difficult. For example, not having a phone to message people to meet up and stuff. Because no one uses landlines or anything anymore. Even just to meet up, because people just randomly switch up on their plans, walk off and say "meet me here instead".'*
> – Sunny, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

The challenge of taking control over their relationship with their phone was also described by one of the interviewees, who reflected on his experience of trying to lock away his phone but how he had found this impossible to maintain as 'society is based around everyone having a phone nowadays' (Interview 5).

A few young people shared some of the pragmatic ways they are exerting their agency and taking control of their technology use. These provide examples of ways that young people are trying to build autonomy and consciously change their relationship with digital technology. They include making active choices about which platforms they use, the time of day they use them and for what purpose.

One interviewee described the way he has changed his smartphone use in response to his increased awareness of the negative impact on his mental health:

> *'[...] digital tech, every day, it's mostly just music for me. I used to be really into being on my phone and social media and all that. But nowadays it freaks me out if I'm honest, I don't like it too much. I always have my phone on silent. It's never off silent. I don't like it. And so, mostly with using my phone and tech on a day to day when I'm going to work and that, it's just a bus pass and music, and that's mostly what I use it for [...].'* – Interview 2

However, the same interviewee then went on to say:

> *'Obviously I sit on TikTok a lot because, god, TikTok has just devoured every single person's life.* – Interview 2

This incongruence between stated intention and lived experience is representative of many of the experiences young people shared during the research. A few participants suggested that young people need some form of collective action to resist the pressures that limit their ability to take control over their relationship with technology.

Some young people suggested that disconnecting from the online world would be easier if others were doing it at the same time. For example:

> *'[Remaining offline] would be easier if everyone doing it at the same time as you wouldn't feel as much disconnection while doing it.'* – Interview 5

However, this research suggests that some young people are trying to control their relationship with technology, despite many technologies being designed to actively promote sustained engagement.

This is illustrated by the reflections of one of the interviewees, an online influencer who is in a long-distance relationship with her partner. Despite the integration of technology within both her professional and personal life, she described how she has introduced 'no tech Sundays' to try to take a step back from the online world and regain control over her relationship with digital technology.

No tech Sundays

'Literally a couple months ago, I used to have to check [my phone] all the time. Whereas me and my partner, we started doing on Sundays: no tech. So we'll just sit and we'll read, we'll do whatever we want for that day, but we don't use tech at all. It's sort of like detox.'

Interviewer: *'What's the thinking behind that? That's really interesting.'*

'Just because we both use our phones too much. We're always either sat on a video call, scrolling on TikTok, or we're doing something else that involves our phone. And we would just really like to connect one on one with each other. So we decided that we would do "no tech Sundays". And it's been really good. The first day was really hard. I'd think of something and I'd immediately want to Google it. And I'd be like: oh, no, I can't. Okay, I guess I'll just think about it! But no, it's good now it feels it's almost like it's needed now. That I need that no tech.'

Interviewer: *'And what's the benefit that you've been experiencing?'*

'I'm not as reliant on my phone. Like when my phone buzzes, I don't immediately have to check it. I'm just like: 'Okay, I've got a notification'. I've realised that if it's actually important, people will call me. And if it's not a phone call, then it's not life or death, you know? So I'm definitely not as reliant on my phone. And I do find other ways to entertain myself rather than immediately reaching for that tech. As much as I do enjoy Sims 4, I do try and read a little bit more, than immediately going for that.'

Interviewer: *'Is this something that you would recommend to others?'*

'[Pause] I would say, because the world is so online and so digital, sometimes it's not a bad thing to step away and just remember your being, and do some self-care away

> *from tech. Because people's, like, everyday lives - they're posting every day and all of this stuff that's all online. So if they just take a step back and be like: 'I don't actually need to post all that'. I think it would be really healthy for a lot of people.'*

This research provides evidence that contradicts the common perception that young people are pro-tech. Instead, the data suggests that some young people are not entirely comfortable with the integration of digital technology in their everyday lives.

Most of the young people in this research recognised the need to balance their online and offline lives and a few are actively trying to regain control over their relationship with their smartphones and online lives. This demonstrates that there is a need for further research to understand the breadth of young people's preferences around digital technologies.

Protection for younger peers

To encourage a more critical exploration of how young people feel about the impact of digital technologies on their lives, the peer researchers asked the workshop participants to reflect on their hopes for the younger generation.

Participants consistently spoke about the need to protect younger peers from negative experiences of smartphones and the online world. The majority of young people expressed strong views about the negative impacts of smartphones on children, with some participants expressing dismay at their younger siblings receiving smartphones and computers at young ages. For example:

> *'[Digital technology]'s taken away the social aspect. My little brother doesn't play outside. He's literally five years younger than me, and his whole social life is on his phone or his computer. He doesn't play outside. [...] He's always talking to his friends online. He's always either on the phone to them, or he's texting them, or he's on the games with them. It's not that he's short of someone to talk to, but he's not [pause, finding the right word] interacting with them.'* – Interview 1

Young people said clearly and unequivocally that they think young children should not have access to smartphones if this enables access to social media. As one participant stated when discussing a younger sibling getting a smartphone at the age of seven: 'I mean social media is brutal. They don't need to see the hate' (Workshop participant, Shetland).

The group participants then went on to say:

> *'It's like, you know my little sister? She's 11, but from eight years old, she'd take her phone to school with her, so they couldn't even go to school and sit and playground without them.'*

> *'That's insane. You don't need your phone for that. Because they're going to get addicted to social media. Getting addicted to social media is real.'*

When reflecting on whether their younger peers should have access to social media, the majority of participants wanted to protect younger children from experiencing the same things they have experienced online. But these discussions also revealed strong views about the participants' own experiences.

In one workshop, one group of young people clearly stated that they did not want to stop using social media, however the discussion about their younger peers deepened this reflection. The discussion revealed that while they do not think they should be stopped from accessing social media, they also feel like they should not have had access to it in the first place.

One of the peer researchers made a similar reflection during the training sessions, expressing a desire to have grown up in a time before digital technology was such a feature in the growing up journey:

> *'If I could have chosen to, I would have loved to have grown up at a time when it's not, like if it's still there but a much lesser thing. It's a smaller thing in life. You know, how it's just consuming everyone's life. The whole time.'*
> – Sunny, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

These young people identified how quickly digital technology has evolved, resulting in them needing to adapt and evolve with it in isolation. The research indicates that this has led to them being exposed to things that they think they should not have been.

However, they have also built habits that mean that digital technology is now a fundamental feature of their social experience. This was summarised by one of the peer researchers during one of the co-analysis sessions when analysing the data:

> *'I feel like if digital tech never existed, we'd be able to cope without tech, but because we've grown up with it, you can't just take it away.'*
> – Larry, Peer researcher, Dundee co-analysis sessions

It would be better to have never had it

Jimmy (Peer researcher): *'So then if you think they shouldn't have it, do you think you shouldn't have it?'*

Workshop participant: *'I feel like we shouldn't have had it. Does that make sense? It's not just like we shouldn't have it now, I feel like we shouldn't have had it to begin with. Therefore we wouldn't have it now. Does that make sense? So from the very start, we shouldn't have had it, but because we've had it now, then why not keep it?'*

Workshop participant: *'Are you saying social media shouldn't have been invented?'*

Workshop participant: *'I'm saying as kids we shouldn't have had access to it anyway. Does that make sense? Like you got given the phone and god knows what age and Snapchat's already on it. And Snapchat shouldn't have been on it, from the*

get-go. But since we have it now, and we've had it for ages, we know what we're getting ourselves into, but the younger ones, they don't know what they're getting themselves into fully. So they get it, and they're like: "Oh my god". So it's like, yes and no, I feel like we shouldn't have it, but no one's gonna turn to you and be like, "No, I shouldn't have it". Does that make sense? Because that means, "oh, well, that's everything we know gone". But the only reason we know it is because we had it in the first place.'

Workshop participant: *'I feel like our generation, like between our ages, social media has evolved with us [emphasis], and we've learned over the years. And I feel like now if we try to just get rid of it all, it would be hard to actually go day to day life without being like, oh, I've got 10 minutes to spare, I'll just have a quick scroll on TikTok or message this person.'*

Some young people recognised that protecting their younger peers is more complex than simply removing or preventing online access. These young people identified that they valued the opportunities the online world had afforded them and recognised that this had been an important part of their growing up journeys.

Young people therefore wanted to balance exposure with protection, expressing a desire for their younger peers to experience the full range of opportunities that childhood offers. As one of the interviewees said: 'Make sure they still have time to go outside, make actual friends. And still socialise, in a way' (Interview 8).

A few young people spoke about the ways that they are actively trying to protect their younger siblings. This includes monitoring their phone use, talking to them about the dangers of different online spaces and helping them to spot potential risks. They recognised that the adults around them do not necessarily understand the online world and instead they appear to be taking on the role of protector for their younger peers. For example, one of the peer researchers described her relationship with her younger brother:

> *'It's only three years [difference]. He's 15. I'm turning 18 soon, but it's just like, I think he can handle it, but it's also I just want to make sure, because even though he is 15, I feel like at 15, I was also still quite naive on the internet. [...] But he is online more than me, so he probably can handle it and he probably can spot signs. But I just want him to know that I'm also here if he needs anything. And I just want to make sure that he's not, like, he doesn't feel like he has to hide it or anything like that.'* – Lottie, Peer researcher, Dundee co-analysis sessions

Another participant spoke about her younger siblings, noting that while she did not feel she could prevent them from accessing social media, she felt a sense of responsibility towards their safety:

> *'I can't do anything to stop them from going to social media. It's like my brother, he wanted to use [social media] for his Roblox friends. So I gave it [to] him because I was, like, you shouldn't have it, but he really was gonna do it either way. So I let him use my old [phone] so I could just track what he's doing.'* – Workshop participant, Islington

While some young people spoke about the need for their younger peers to be taught how to use digital technologies safely, others spoke about the need for adults to understand these technologies in order to be able to support young people.

As noted by one of the interviewees, this generation of young people are the first generation to grow up with these technologies and 'that first generation is the problem' because there is no one to teach them (Interview 10).

Another interviewee reflected on this issue and highlighted the need for adults to improve their understanding of digital technologies and social media in order to better protect and support young people:

> *'I think if adults knew how to work social media, or certain things on their devices that they currently aren't aware of, that could benefit the young people because they'd have a better understanding of what these devices can do.'* – Interview 10

This research provides indicative data that young people are concerned about the impact of social media on their younger peers. It also highlights that while young people are aware that they have been exposed to things that they would not want their younger peers to experience, they do not think that their access to social media and online spaces should be restricted.

This highlights an important factor to consider in future policy decisions, as the impacts will differ considerably between blocking *current* access for young people who have grown up surrounded by digital technology and preventing *future* use for younger children who may have never experienced digital technology, and particularly social media.

The research also points to the expertise that the current generation of young people have gained through growing up with digital technologies. This shows the importance of understanding the lived experiences of this generation, not only to ensure that online regulation and governance provide effective mechanisms of protection but also to recognise and value the various ways that the specific expertise of this generation can inform future policy decisions.

The role of online restrictions

Some young people discussed the introduction of online age restrictions, both in relation to social media and age restrictions of different platforms and games. While most young people did not think that their own online access should be restricted, even if they were under 18 years, there was broad support for some form of governance of the online world.

The research took place during the summer of 2025 at the same time as the child safety regime under the Online Safety Act came into full effect in the UK. While awareness of the Act was still limited, the young people were broadly supportive of the idea of governance and stronger restrictions.

Most young people expressed support for the introduction of restrictions for their younger peers in order to monitor which apps they access, who they connect and interact with, and what type of content they are exposed to. There was however no clear agreement of what

would constitute an appropriate minimum age for getting a smartphone or for when it would be appropriate for young people to be able to access different games.

Some participants suggested an appropriate age for a smartphone would be 12 or 13 years, although no group reached a clear consensus. When discussing social media platforms like TikTok, the suggestions for age restrictions ranged from 16 to 21 years.

Most young people expressed scepticism about whether it is possible to truly ensure online safety for children and young people. Young people shared their own experiences of being able to overcome online age restrictions relatively easily. This led them to think that age restrictions would not be sufficient to prevent young people accessing age-restricted content.

This included a few young people sharing examples of times when they had been able to access age-restricted platforms despite the use of AI facial recognition software. Alongside scepticism about the effectiveness of mechanisms to prevent young people from accessing inappropriate content, young people were also sceptical about whether it is possible to truly protect online spaces designed to be safe for children and young people, due to the potential for adults to manipulate the protective mechanisms.

Young people recognised the challenge presented by online safety and the difficulties in finding ways to build online safeguards for children and young people. One interviewee noted that 'it's hard to put a safeguard on the internet, because it's just so big [...]'. The same interviewee compared the development of online safeguards to road safety, to summarise the challenge:

> *'But stuff like normal safety – like road safety or whatever – it's more linear. It's like: you cross the road properly, or you don't, and you might get hit by a car. But with the internet, there's like 400 million different avenues and paths of where it could go.'* – Interview 2

A few young people also spoke about the unintended consequences of regulation, pointing to the reports of increased use of VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) since the introduction of the Online Safety Act. One interviewee raised concerns about the potential for restrictions to normalise a culture of secrecy and dishonesty around accessing prohibited online spaces. They suggested that restrictions may make it more difficult for young people to have honest conversations with adults about their online experiences and the potential for this to exacerbate risks and reduce access to support.

Young people were also very aware that online safety sits within a complex policy landscape that needs to balance protection with issues around privacy and freedom. For example:

> *'But it's definitely a tricky one, because as much as one would say to increase security and help protect people who could be vulnerable online, there will also be others who advocate for privacy, because privacy is a big part in today's society. [...] if you had to give up your privacy so that agencies and the government could monitor what you're doing online, that would not sit well with a lot of people. It'd be an invasion of privacy. So it's definitely a difficult one.'* – Interview 9

Another young person spoke about the role of regulation to support wellbeing, noting that while this might have long-term benefits, they are aware that young people might resist this type of regulation. For example, when considering the introduction of time restrictions on some apps, one interviewee reflected:

> *'Maybe just implementing certain times of day and having time restrictions on apps. If people are going to constantly use TikTok all night, for instance. I know, because I know one friend at the minute who is completely obsessed with that, and I'm trying to get them away from that, because they're just constantly on it, and it's ruining their sleep time, ruining their recovery time, and sort of consuming them [...]. So maybe putting a time restriction on certain apps. Which people might think in the short term, in the first instance: "Absolutely not. It's horrible". But then, in the long term, you'll see the benefits.'* – Interview 4

While research is needed to understand whether there is broad support among young people for this level of intervention and regulation, the young people in this research expressed that there needs to be better regulation of online spaces. This was clearly stated when the Shetland participants came back together to reflect on the research and articulate their hopes for the future:

> *'Digital technology must be organised, looked at carefully and better regulated.'*
> – Workshop participants, Shetland

This research therefore provides initial evidence that young people support the development of meaningful safeguards to guide and protect them while online. While young people are fully aware that restrictions do not ensure safety, and that these boundaries will be difficult to maintain, the key message is that young people are broadly supportive of the principle of increasing online safeguards for children and young people.

The future of AI

Most young people viewed AI as becoming an inescapable feature of their futures, irrespective of whether they were supportive or suspicious of the technology. A few of the participants were excited about the possibilities offered by generative AI, while others were very clear in their anti-AI views. As one participant said:

> *'In my vision, I want it booted oot the hoose!' - Workshop participant, Shetland*

The inescapable nature of generative AI through their integration in everyday life was a consistent concern and participants clearly stated that they think people should be able to choose whether or not to use these technologies. The emphasis on choice was consistent irrespective of whether young people were supportive or against AI.

The message from young people was clear: in the future, they want choice and to be able to have control over when and how they use generative AI.

Alongside control, young people also called for a future that prioritises their safety. They are concerned about the misuse of generative AI and the corporate prioritisation of profit, and some young people called for mechanisms that ensure these technologies promote wellbeing

and safety. The Shetland participants clearly articulated this when identifying their hopes for the future, despite many of the young people in this group expressing strong views against AI.

However, they collectively expressed a clear statement that this technology needs to prioritise their safety:

> *'Although AI isn't going anywhere, it shouldn't be used in a way that exploits our safety.'* – Workshop participants, Shetland

This research provides some evidence to indicate that young people are not comfortable with the way AI is becoming increasingly embedded in everyday life and would like more control over when they use it in the future. They also have concerns about whether the technology companies developing AI are prioritising their safety.

Addressing corporate power

While young people were supportive of the introduction of online regulation, they also clearly situated the risks and harms posed by the online world within the wider ecosystem of technological development. Young people consistently shared their awareness of the influence of corporate power and the ways that corporate profit and commercialisation influence their online experiences.

In many of their discussions, young people discussed the commercial aims of online spaces and apps and recognised that while they may be free to access, they are still driven by commercial interests. As one young person reflected:

> *'Snapchat and that was free. How is it free? Like, where are they getting their funding from to power it?'* – Workshop participant, Shetland

More broadly, most young people connected the commercial aims of technology companies with concerns around consumerist culture. Young people spoke about the connection between social media and consumerism, including how advertising on social media has changed user experience.

The peer researchers discussed the impact of the commercialisation of social media during their training sessions and related this to increased consumerism, expressing anger and frustration at the consequences of this for the environment. They identified both intentional technological obsolescence and their perceptions about the way social media is used to perpetuate and deepen consumerism as aspects that they find deeply troubling. One peer researcher said:

> *'Seeing people with really cool stuff online, and then you're like "that sucks, because I've not got any of this cool stuff". That's awful, but those guys don't actually have that stuff, they're just renting it or whatever. And that then ties into consumerism. So you have all these guys with cool things, so you're like I'm going to spend all my money getting all these cool things. And then you buy a load of stuff that you're never actually going to use. And stuff you don't really want. You just want it so you can post online and look cool. And that makes someone*

else do it, and someone else, and someone else. And then? Landfills!'
– Wren, Peer researcher, Dundee training sessions

This research provides initial evidence that young people are aware of some of the drivers and impacts that frame their online experiences. It indicates that young people are uncomfortable with the commercial and consumerist motives of technology companies, but also indicates that young people feel unable to challenge these corporate interests.

The consequences of technology driven by profit

Lottie: *'So much could be for the good, but billionaires want to exploit the working class. They want to exploit people and the planet. Because they don't care. They're rich anyway so nothing's going to happen to them.'*

Wren: *'Yeah, they want to go down the routes that will make them more money rather than the routes of actually expanding life for the better.'*

Lottie: *'They don't care about how everyone else feels as long as they get extra money, who cares?'*

Researcher: '*So what is the issue then? Is the issue the technology or is the issue the control?'*

Wren: *'It's people.'*

Researcher: *'All people?'*

Wren: *'Not all people, but a lot of people. Because there's the people that are controlling it but there's also the people that feed into it. For example, with the gross AI stuff, they're being shown that there's a market for it, which is why they're making it. And then they're getting a market, and it's just back and forth, back and forth. If people didn't use it, then they wouldn't make it. So it's not all people, but if you're feeding into it then you're adding to it. Like, if a billionaire made something and no one used it, they'd stop making it because it's costing them money. But if they make something and everyone or lots of people are using it, then they're going to keep making it because that's giving [emphasis] them money.'*

Summary of insights

- Young people want to have control over when and how they use digital technology and are conscious of the need for balance. Some young people are trying to gain more control over their relationships with digital technology, although these efforts are often framed as personal coping mechanisms rather than systemic solutions.
- Young people do not think that their access to social media or online spaces should be restricted as it is now a fundamental part of their everyday lives. They do however support the introduction of age restrictions to protect their younger peers.
- Age-specific protections are seen as important but there is no clear agreement over when and how these could be enforced. Young people are sceptical about the enforceability of age-specific protections.
- Some young people wish that they had not had access to social media and online spaces while growing up.
- Young people who have grown up with these technologies have specific expertise that can help with understanding the relationship between digital technologies and the growing up journey. Research to understand the full complexity of their experiences is therefore essential to ensure any future strategies respond to their lived experiences.
- Young people want to choose when and how to use AI and they are uncomfortable with the integration of AI technologies in everyday life. Young people want AI companies to prioritise their safety.
- Young people are aware of the commercial motives that frame their online experiences and are deeply uncomfortable with the influence of corporate interests.

Implications for policy

Many countries are considering new governance of social media platforms to foster a better relationship between children and technology. The young people in this research endorse the need for this: the digital environment is a large part of young people's experiences growing up, but too often their experiences are not safe, joyful, informed and supportive of their agency.

Based on the findings of this research, the Ada Lovelace Institute highlights clear implications for policy debate and measures.

1. **The government must strengthen and enforce age-specific protections for online spaces where children spend time.**

The UK government's focus on young people as a population that faces unique risks in online spaces is aligned with the concerns of young people in this research. Although the young people in our cohort did not have a consistent view on an appropriate age for limiting access or functionality, they did feel that young people, and particularly younger children, are especially vulnerable to harm and that this vulnerability makes age-specific protections necessary.[133]

A reactive approach to regulation has enabled significant harms to occur to young people through corporate choices about the design of digital technologies. Young people are unequivocal in their demand for companies to design technologies that promote appropriate experiences. The government therefore needs to introduce regulatory requirements for any online spaces where children spend time, including gaming platforms, chatbots, AI agents, immersive technologies, and EdTech and AI in the classroom.

Participants supported the principle that some online spaces and features, as currently designed, are inappropriate for children below a certain age limit. Young people's support for measures which restrict children's access to harmful online spaces stemmed from reflections on their own experiences of social media platforms as children and concern for their younger peers who are beginning to navigate these environments.

2. **Any restrictions to the use of online spaces must consider the value of online communities for marginalised young people, and be balanced with investment in alternative digital and physical spaces.**

Young people hold complex views on restricting people's use of digital technologies because, despite the harms they experience, they also benefit from accessing these technologies. Multiple participants explained how access to online spaces helps them find valuable support and build relationships and supportive communities away from their offline lives.

Similarly, online spaces can provide opportunities for young people to develop their identities and sense of self, which is particularly important for people who may be excluded from, or minoritised in, physical social spaces. Social media platforms have become an important part of this landscape in recent decades. Blanket bans on children using social media platforms

may therefore have unequally distributed consequences if they limit such opportunities without offering alternatives.

Alongside regulation, the government should consider its role in shaping online and offline spaces for young people, and see those in tandem.

3. **Age-specific protections should be treated as part of, and not a replacement for, broader regulation, including safety-by-design standards, pre-deployment safety testing and ongoing monitoring of platforms and chatbots. Any blunt restriction of access to online spaces, such as a ban on social media platforms for young children, will not tackle widespread harms for people of all ages that arise from platform design choices.**

Harms that stem from the design of online spaces, particularly social media platforms, do not finish at 16 or 18. The scope of any new regulatory intervention must extend beyond children-focused measures to improve the digital environment that has become a core component of modern life. Design features that promote rife misinformation, addictive use of platforms and surveillance as the norm, need to be addressed for all users.

As a first step, the UK government should shape the design of online spaces through the Online Safety Act, one of the aims of which is to ensure that online services are 'safe by design'.[134] The government could produce a 'safety by design' code of practice to complement the Online Safety Act and prevent harms caused by design features that promote harmful online behaviour or content.[135]

In the research, young people highlighted two features in the design of social media platforms that could be amended to improve all users' online experiences: first, the way existing business models promote antagonising, sometimes hateful, material by monetising content based on the number of views that a post receives; and second, how the use of algorithms reduces young people's control over their online experiences and sometimes leads to exposure to distressing material. A new code of practice could address harms by mandating that recommendation algorithms promote appropriate content from trusted providers and deprioritise antagonistic content.[136]

Broader regulation, including safety-by-design standards, should be a condition of market entry for platforms for all ages. Incumbent platforms that do not update their services to meet new standards should be banned from operating in the UK.

4. **Young people's right to privacy should be reasserted: its erosion is contributing to data exploitation and self-reported harms. Safety measures must be carefully weighed if they subsequently increase the surveillance of young people, and this should be an area of focus for the Young People's Board on Digital Futures (see implication 7).**

Privacy issues were raised by multiple participants who felt that additional oversight of young people's use of digital technologies would pose a risk to their right to privacy, which they said is already threatened by the intense surveillance they experience in online spaces. Therefore, monitoring young people's communications in online spaces to detect illegal content such as

nude images, as proposed by the UK government,[137] or strengthening age restrictions must be implemented with safeguards that minimise data collection.

Improving safety and strengthening privacy should not be seen as mutually exclusive, and the government could draw on the newly published measures outlined in the draft Children's Online Privacy Code from the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner. This code includes additional privacy-enhancing principles specifically for children, such as mandatory mechanisms for people with parental responsibility to input into decisions about the processing of children's information. In particular, policymakers should draw on the draft code's measures to ensure that all information provided to children about the processing of their data is age-appropriate and understandable to improve the transparency of any safety measures that are introduced.

5. **The government should regulate AI model developers to address young people's concerns about the systemic impacts of AI.**

Young people were clear in their demand for meaningful control over how the use of AI shapes their lives, beyond illegal or harmful content. Many young people are concerned about the growing impact of AI on their online and offline experiences. For example, participants raised concerns about the default appearance of AI-generated responses in search engine results or the use of AI in public services that young people draw upon.

Young people also discussed the potential systemic impacts of AI tools, such as deskilling (the devaluation of certain skills) and reduced opportunities for employment in creative industries.

The government is right to specifically target the use of AI services for serious offences under the Online Safety Act, as multiple participants identified the use of AI to create pornographic images and facilitate sexual exploitation as a key area of concern. Regulating the underlying models that power AI applications will be necessary to effectively prevent societal harms at their source.[138]

This point reflects the findings of our previous research on public expectations around AI regulation, which shows that the public support the independent regulation of AI developers, with enforcement, alongside safety assessments before market entry and the ongoing monitoring of AI systems once they have been deployed.[139]

6. **The government should aim to improve digital literacy for adults as well as children, while understanding this will not be a panacea: improved literacy does not necessarily translate to greater agency without broader regulation.**

Young people in this research were often unable to protect themselves from harm when using digital technologies, despite being acutely aware of how such technologies create harm. Many participants expressed frustration at their inability to control their experiences of online spaces, for example, experiencing misinformation, upsetting content and inappropriate interactions despite their efforts to avoid them. Young people described such negative experiences as prolific and inescapable.

This suggests that additional efforts to improve digital skills and literacy, as proposed by the UK government,[140] may be beneficial, but will not be sufficient to allow young people to access online spaces safely. Without mandatory design features that prioritise a user's ability to choose how they engage with online spaces, particularly social media platforms, young people cannot use their skills and knowledge to protect themselves online.

Digital literacy should not only focus on young people: young people consistently expressed a desire for two-way conversations with adults in their lives, including parents, carers and youth workers, about their use of digital technologies. Co-designing such conversations at a national level could facilitate more constructive consideration of specific policy proposals and shared learning between young people, older members of the public and policymakers.

7. **The UK government should embed young people's expertise as it designs new policies to shape the use of digital technologies through the creation of a Young People's Board on Digital Futures – a standing panel of diverse young people that is co-designed to meaningfully inform policy decisions.**

Restrictions or additional oversight of anyone's access to the opportunities presented by digital technologies was a serious issue that provoked deep reflection in the peer workshops, as well as the wider *Grown up?* programme. The depth of these conversations shows that young people's lived experiences are a powerful resource that need to be fully understood to ensure that decisions at all levels of society balance the need for protection with opportunities for growth and learning.

The government should work with organisations in areas such as youth work and civil society, that have trusted relationships with young people, to develop a mechanism by which young people can shape policy decisions on an ongoing basis.

This would enable a legitimate process that allows young people to meaningfully shape the principles by which new technologies are regulated and adopted, as well as one-off policy decisions, so that their experiences inform a proactive approach to ensuring new technologies positively impact their lives.

There are models for supporting diverse young people to be actively involved in ongoing decision-making processes that the government could adapt for online safety considerations. For example, it could take a similar approach to the Family Justice Young People's Board,[141] a board of children and young people with lived experience of the family justice system that supports national and local government bodies to make decisions about the system in England and Wales.

Functions of the board should be co-created with legitimacy, transparency and clear boundaries about the scope of young people's influence, reflecting the need for young people to be meaningfully empowered.[142] They could include:

- Representation:
    - Ensuring that the benefits, concerns, risks and opportunities that young people from diverse backgrounds prioritise are heard.

  - Co-designing an ongoing participatory mechanism to input on, for example, red lines or expectations of technology uses.

- Accountability:

  - The board could act as a mechanism for accountability to young people for decisions about their digital lives, complementing existing mechanisms for scrutinising digital policy and practices, such as Ofcom's Children's Online Insights Panel.[143]

- Scrutiny:

  - Taking evidence from Ofcom and technology companies on their progress around improving the digital environment for young people.

- Monitoring:

  - Tracking and evaluating measures affecting young people's right to privacy.

- Early insight:

  - Reflecting on the efficacy of new regulations and synthesising emerging evidence of young people's interactions with technologies.

  - Highlighting how young people's norms and behaviours are evolving, alerting policymakers to novel issues which might require scrutiny or regulation.

- Deliberation:

  - Using deliberative methods to support the development of a positive vision for digital futures.

- Communication:

  - Offering input on the appropriateness and relevance of communications about policy and practices that affect young people's digital lives, for example tone, language and accessibility of information about changes to policy and opportunities to input into consultations.

A broader conclusion from this research is that governmental decisions about young people and technology should be consistent and part of a holistic positive vision for childhood and growing up in the UK today.

This research shows that young people's online and offline experiences are not compartmentalised and relationships, experiences and impacts blur between online and offline. As a result, any binary distinction between growing up online and offline is reductive and limits possibilities for effective safeguards. These safeguards must take into account that digital technologies, and particularly online spaces, bring both benefits and harms to young people in different contexts and uses, and harms originating online materialise offline, and vice versa.

Any restriction to specific online spaces should be balanced with investment in alternative spaces, and access to information and advice. In particular, the government needs to offer a clear and coherent vision about how technology should be integrated into young people's lives, including social media, AI, gaming and education. The government should take necessary action to deliver that positive vision, one where young people's use of digital technologies is supported by appropriate controls that allow for safe exploration, while preserving the freedoms young people need to grow up with dignity and agency.

Conclusion

This research set out to explore the ways that young people experience digital technologies in their everyday lives, responding to a recognised gap in the evidence base. Through co-creating participatory research with young people in four UK locations, which was supported by youth workers and considered contested and difficult aspects of growing up online, it brings forward new insights about young people's experiences of digital technologies in the first three decades of the twenty-first century.

The participants' discussions demonstrated that their experiences are complex: they see benefits to growing up digital while also recognising that the harms experienced through the use of under-regulated digital technologies are significant and long-lasting. These include inappropriate interactions with adults online and exposure to age-inappropriate content, including sexual material and graphic violence. This exposure was described as both prolific and inescapable, contributing to a sense of desensitisation along with deep feelings of harm, helplessness and frustration.

As well as describing instances of direct harm, young people also described their experiences of technology design that prevents meaningful choice. They shared an awareness of how algorithms function and described attempts to curate their feeds, but with a sense of resignation around never being fully in control and not being able to set boundaries.

Young people were unequivocal in their desire for this situation to change so that their experiences of digital technologies, and those of their younger peers, could be more consistently positive. They want to see the creation of online spaces that focus on safety and accountability, with effective reporting mechanisms that enable young people to report risks when they see them.

The depth and nuance of young people's discussions in this research suggests that – contrary to many current narratives and despite the complexity of their experiences – young people are thoughtful and informed about the effects of their technology use. They have clear insights and recommendations for policymakers and younger generations that support appropriate controls while preserving the freedoms they need to grow up with dignity and agency. As well as wanting more protections for young people, they also want choice in how and when they engage with digital technologies.

Better dialogue is needed with young people themselves, as well as carers, educators and supporting adults to bring these insights into future decision-making about policy, service provision and technology development in relation to young people and their growing up journey.

Methodology

This peer-led research was co-designed with young people to explore their lived experiences and understanding of growing up with digital technology. The research complements knowledge gained through the wider *Grown up? Journeys to adulthood* programme, providing depth and individual insights.

The research had two overarching aims: to create space for young people to explore and reflect on their online lives; and to build capacity among young people to feel informed and empowered to engage with issues around digital technology.

Research design

The research design was informed by participatory research and centred principles of co-creation and co-production. Our aim was to rebalance knowledge and power in favour of participants, building their skills as researchers while simultaneously creating new knowledge that centres a diverse range of young people's views, experiences and hopes for the future.

The research explored the following three research questions:

- How are young people from diverse backgrounds engaging with and experiencing digital technologies throughout the course of their growing up journey?
- What reflections do young people have, both positive and negative, about how digital technology has interacted with their lives?
- What are the hopes and visions for the future that young people have for their path into adulthood, and what role do they want to see digital technology play in this?

The research adopted a multi-methods approach to explore these questions through a nuanced and holistic research design that prioritised lived experiences. To achieve this, the research adopted two streams of work:

- Peer research: we trained 10 young people (14–24 years old) as peer researchers to design and facilitate workshops with young people from across the UK.
- Creative interviews: we invited 10 young people (20–24 years old) to reflect deeply on their lived experiences and work with a filmmaker to co-create short films to represent their views.

The research was designed by the Ada Lovelace Institute and delivered in partnership with Hot Chocolate Trust (HCT), a youth work organisation, and Social Research, Reimagined (SRR), an independent research consultancy. Both HCT and SRR were selected through an open tender process. Both organisations are based in Dundee, Scotland. Hot Chocolate Trust is an experienced youth work organisation whose practice is focused on belonging, ownership,

community and care. Social Research, Reimagined is a creative research consultancy specialised in inclusive and practice-based research.

Research ethics

The research was approved by the Independent Research Ethics Committee (IREC). The partnership with youth work organisations meant that the research process prioritised the relationship between young people and youth workers through ensuring a layer of support that went beyond standard research ethics.

By centring the principles of relationship-based youth work, the peer research identified and prioritised support needs, accessibility and safeguarding, enabling young people to discuss sensitive and difficult experiences in a familiar environment while also ensuring they had access to meaningful emotional and psychological support before, during and post research.

In line with youth work principles, the research framed informed consent as an ongoing rather than one-off agreement. This meant that alongside gaining formal written consent from the young people and their guardians, the peer research and creative interviews had a staged research design with clear 'drop off' points where young people received financial recognition of their work during each stage. Financial recognition was in the form of a £50 voucher. The young person was then invited to make an active choice about whether to remain involved. This responds to the concept of 'pockets of participation'[144] whereby a participatory process has clearly defined stages for participation rather than participants being expected to commit to an entire process. This approach prioritises autonomy and ensures participants retain a sense of control over the extent and nature of their participation.

Sampling and representation

The research did not attempt to recruit a representative sample. The priority for the research was to build a nuanced understanding of young people's lived experiences. The research utilised a mapping tool (see Figure 1) to guide recruitment across three sampling groups: demographic groups, digital technology and life experiences.

We acknowledge that HCT is located in Dundee, a small Scottish city, and therefore its community is not demographically representative of the UK population. To widen representation and ensure inclusion of the experiences of young people growing up in rural, suburban or inner-city contexts, the peer-led workshops took place in three contrasting locations: Shetland (rural), Sandwell (urban) and Islington (inner city). The youth organisations in these locations then drew on their professional knowledge of young people to ensure breadth of representation. In total, 49 young people participated in the research, including 10 peer researchers, 10 creative interviewees and 29 workshop participants.

Partnering with youth work organisations significantly increased diversity and inclusion. The voices in this research are the voices of young people who are not usually afforded the space to share their experiences and articulate their views. These voices are not typically heard. The young people in this research are navigating competing pressures, and this restricts their opportunities to get involved. The young people whose voices are embedded in this report

bring lived experiences of poverty, the care system, school exclusion, neurodivergence, unemployment, homelessness, disability, and mental health conditions.

None of the participants had engaged in this type of research previously and none of the peer researchers had prior experience of facilitating or leading workshops. The partnership with youth work organisations and the flexible research design meant that we were able to ensure that the young people had the support and flexibility they needed to maintain their involvement while managing their other pressures.

Peer researchers, workshop participants and interviewees were all recruited through four youth work organisations. These organisations used their professional knowledge of young people to ensure a breadth of demographic, digital and lived experience representation alongside identifying young people who would not usually be afforded the opportunity – or have the necessary support – to participate in research.

Partner youth organisations

Hot Chocolate Trust, Dundee

For almost 25 years, Hot Chocolate Trust has been building relationships and growing community with young people in Dundee City Centre. Hot Chocolate provides and shapes a space of belonging and ownership, community and care with young people – where they are valued, heard and empowered to shape their own futures.

OPEN, Shetland

OPEN's vision is to make Shetland a place where young people thrive. Embracing a holistic approach, OPEN aims to address the challenges faced by young people and establish a comprehensive framework for positive change.

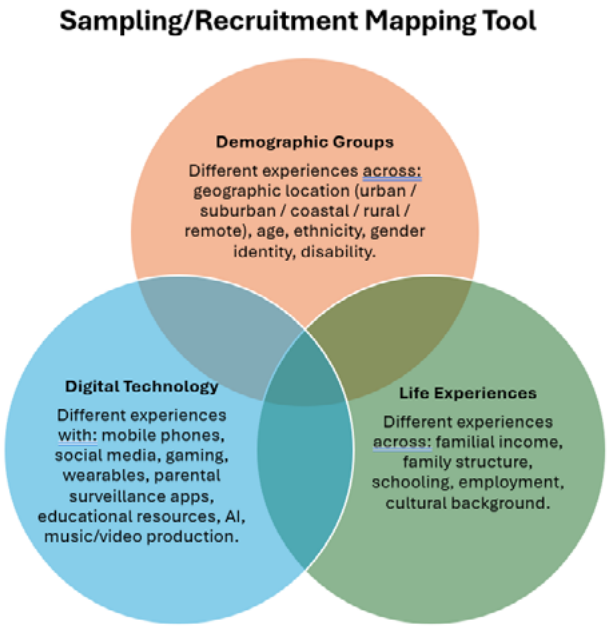
Mary's Youth Club, Islington

Mary's Youth Club is a vibrant, community-based organisation committed to delivering high-quality, open access youth work for young people aged 10-19. Based in the heart of Islington, London, Mary's mission is to create safe, joyful and inclusive spaces where young people feel a deep sense of belonging, empowerment, and opportunity.

Sandwell Youth Service

Sandwell Youth Service supports young people with personal and social development through activities in a range of settings including youth clubs, detached youth work, mobile youth bus provision, and through arts and outdoor activities. Sandwell Youth Service also provides a targeted offer for vulnerable young people providing one-to-one and small group work.

Figure 1: Sampling and Recruitment Mapping Tool



Who took part in the research?

Peer researchers

The peer researcher cohort included young people from 14–23 years of age. There was an even spread of ages across the age range. Four peer researchers identified as male, five as female and one as non-binary. All the peer researchers identified as White British.

HCT works with a diverse range of young people. This includes young people identifying as LGBTQIA+, young people who are neurodivergent, have a disability or mental health condition, who are care experienced, or who have caring responsibilities. The HCT community also includes a high proportion of young people who are not currently in education, employment or training, who may have been excluded from school, or who have experienced homelessness.

The peer researchers were representative of this diverse community. Many of them are navigating complex lives and experiencing competing pressures including school exclusion, disability, caring responsibilities, poverty and mental health challenges. None of the peer researchers had participated in any form of research previously.

Workshop participants

To increase diversity, the research included participants from four locations across the UK: Dundee; Shetland; the West Midlands metropolitan borough of Sandwell; and the London borough of Islington. These participants were identified and invited to take part by youth work organisations in the four locations. In total, 29 young people from across the UK took part in the peer-led workshops. The number of participants in each workshop was:

Dundee: 6 participants

Shetland: 8 participants

Islington: 4 participants

Sandwell: 11 participants

Workshop participants ranged in age from 13 to 19 years. The gender distribution was skewed towards female participants (65%), with 23% identifying as male and approximately one in four (23%) reporting a gender different from that assigned at birth. Most participants identified as White British, although the ethnic composition was broadly comparable to the general population. A higher proportion of participants reported disabilities compared to the general population, including physical, mental health and neurodivergent conditions.

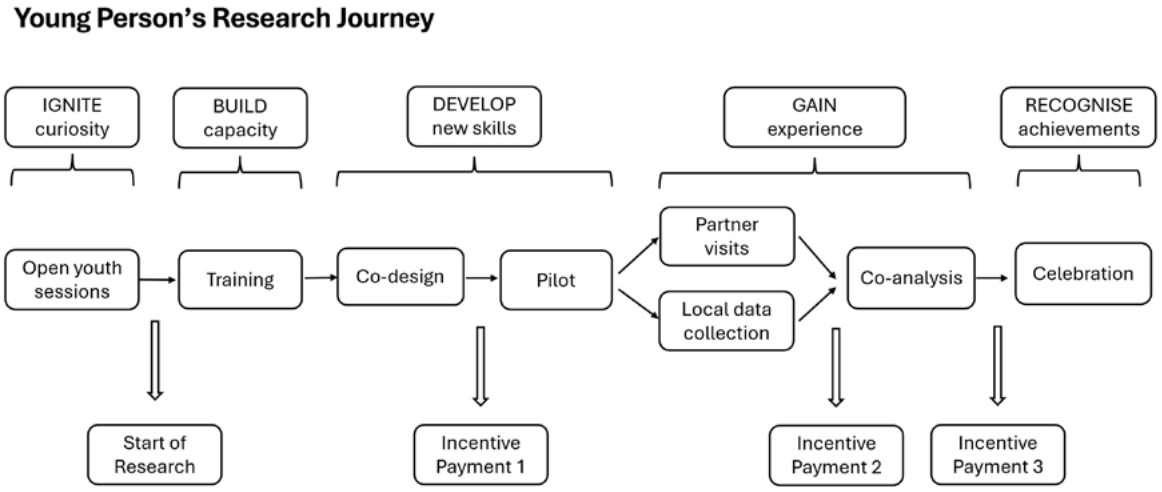
Interviewees

Ten young people took part in the creative interview process from 20–24 years of age. Two participants were 20 years old, four participants were 22 years old, one was 23 years old and three participants were 24 years old. In terms of gender identity, the group included four identifying as female, five as male and one transgender person. Ethnic diversity was limited, with one participant identifying as a person of colour. Five participants reported experiences related to disability, mental health challenges or neurodivergence. Additionally, two had experienced poverty or homelessness, and three young people were care-experienced.

What we did

Peer research

Figure 2: Visual illustration of the Peer researcher's research journey



There were four stages to the peer research process:

1. Youth engagement: informal, fun sessions led by youth workers using retro tech to build curiosity about the research.
2. Training: collective exploration of lived experiences and co-design of participatory workshops.
3. Fieldwork: four peer-led workshops in Dundee, Shetland, Sandwell and Islington.
4. Co-analysis: collective thematic analysis of workshop data to identify key themes.

Photos from the first engagement stage with young people

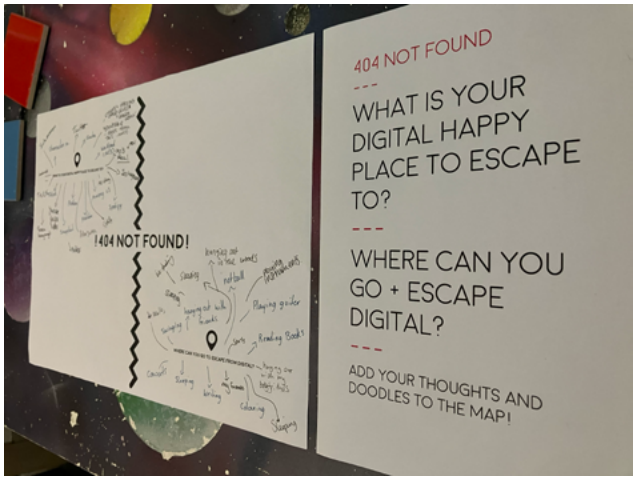
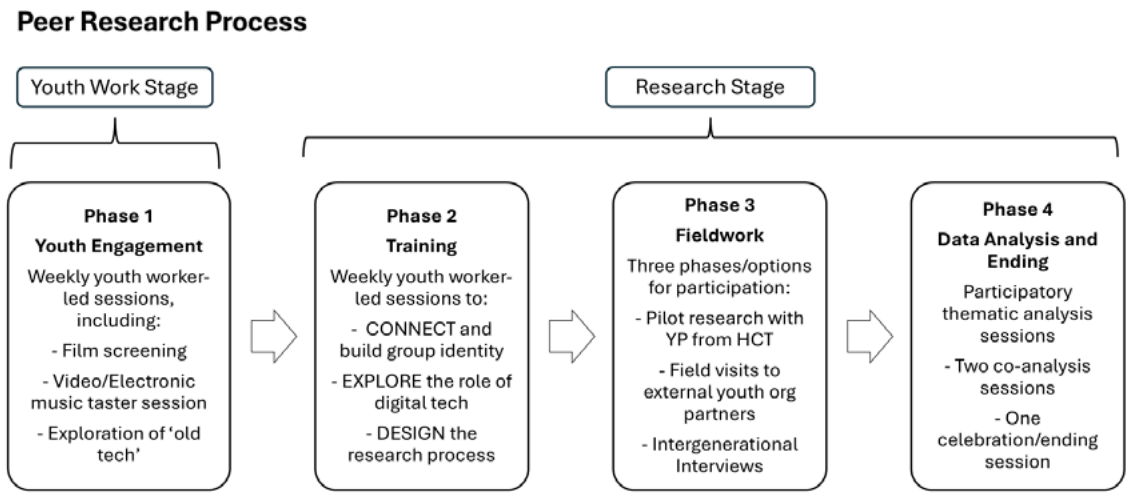


Figure 3: Visual illustration of the Peer Research Process



The overall peer research process (see Figure 3 above) was designed by the Ada Lovelace Institute, HCT and SRR. The peer-led workshops were co-designed with the peer researchers over a period of four weeks (Phase 2). During this phase, the peer researchers explored their own relationships with digital technology and spent time collectively reflecting on their lived experiences. From these dialogues, they identified two areas that they wanted to explore during the research: social media and AI. The peer researchers then worked with the research team to design a participatory workshop that would enable them to explore these topics with young people from across the UK.

The peer researchers facilitated four workshops. They were supported by two youth workers and one researcher, but the young people led all dialogues. Workshops included a mix of large group discussion and break-out groups, using a mixture of flash, picture and colour cards to stimulate reflections. The workshops were audio recorded and fully transcribed by the research team.

The peer researchers worked with the research team to co-analyse the workshop data. This was undertaken in two sessions using a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is an approach to qualitative data analysis that explores and interprets patterned meaning through a process of data familiarisation, data coding, and theme development and revision.[145]

The method enables the building of a complex picture that allows for nuance and layered meaning. This makes it suitable for co-analysis as it allows for discussion and the emergence of multiple interpretations. The peer researchers worked with the research team to identify common themes. These themes were then used as a framework to structure the second stage deep-dive analysis undertaken by the Ada Lovelace Institute.

Creative interviews

Alongside the peer research, we conducted ten creative interviews with older young people (20–24 years old). The rationale for working with older young people was to build a longitudinal perspective into the research to understand how the experiences of this cohort of young

people had changed as technology has developed.

The creative interview process prioritises participant ownership over data and voice through an iterative, collaborative and creative process that results in the co-creation of an audio-visual output in the form of a short film.

The creative interview process began with a semi-structured interview using pre-defined overarching themes to guide discussion. The dialogue was audio recorded and transcribed by the research team. The interviewer and participant then worked collaboratively to identify key themes and edit the audio. The interviewer and participant then worked with a filmmaker to build visuals that represented and deepened themes. Final consent was given when the participant watched the film with the interviewer and confirmed that they were happy with the way their voice had been presented.

Ten young people participated in the creative interview process. All of the short films developed during the creative interviews can be viewed here.

How we analysed the data

The data gathered during the peer research and the creative interviews informed the development of this final report. This includes transcripts from the peer research training sessions, the peer-led workshops, the co-analysis sessions and the creative interview process. The research design did not include young people being involved in the production of this report, therefore the peer researchers did not access or analyse this full dataset.

As noted in the research design, we adopted a 'pockets of participation' framework whereby participants are not expected or required to participate during the entire research process. Instead, our focus was on ensuring learning and ownership at each research stage through an iterative research design with analysis embedded throughout the entire research process.

Analysis and theme development was threaded throughout the peer research process. For example, the research team fully transcribed every peer research training session and then fed back and displayed the peer researchers' own quotes to the group the following week. This supported the peer researchers to reflect on their discussions in a structured way, enabling them to identify themes as they emerged.

They then worked collectively to design the workshops in response to their own iterative process of data analysis. This early theming also provided a structure from which the peer researchers could compare their own views with the themes that emerged during the co-analysis of workshop data.

This iterative approach to theme development decentres the focus on ownership over the research output and instead prioritises participant learning and ownership during the data collection process.

This report was written and produced by the Ada Lovelace Institute. However, the lead researcher at the Ada Lovelace Institute utilised the themes developed by the peer researchers during co-analysis as a framework to guide the overall analysis. To ensure the findings accurately represented the peer researchers' views, the lead researcher presented a

summary of her analysis to the peer researchers prior to writing the report for feedback. The peer researchers agreed with the summary and identified themes.

Alongside this report, the youth workers at HCT worked with the peer researchers to produce their own research output. The peer researchers were able to choose the format for their output, and they chose to produce a zine to represent their peer research experience. The zine is not an analysis of the data but rather a visual snapshot of how the peer researchers experienced the research process. Their zine, aptly titled 'Happy Happy Doom Scroll', can be accessed below:

Read: *Happy Happy Doom Scroll*

Research limitations

The research embedded the core values of relationship-based youth work to ensure that young people's learning and development was a core outcome. While funding and timescales meant that it was not possible to co-produce the final report, the feedback from the peer researchers clearly states that they were active participants in their own learning journeys and identifies how the research enabled them to become more active in their own digital lives.

It is important to acknowledge that while the peer researchers worked with the research team to co-analyse the research data and organise their findings into a thematic framework, they were not actively involved in the development of the key findings. We were clear that this was never the intention, instead working to ensure that the peer researchers were fully embedded in the co-design, facilitation and analysis of workshops.

Situating the research in Dundee, and working with Hot Chocolate Trust, has coalesced a set of distinctive viewpoints which are rarely heard. But this also makes it difficult to talk generally about findings regarding 'young people' in relation to technologies; and perhaps the broadest lesson that can be learned here is about the value of spending time to listen to and understand how different young people feel about the topics that matter to them.

Research evaluation

The research process was independently evaluated by Anna Beckett Consulting. The evaluation concluded that while the research aims were ambitious, they have been largely achieved. This includes new contribution to knowledge through the experiences and views of young people, building a critical perspective on the overarching narratives in society around young people's digital lives, building capacity for the peer researchers to engage further on issues around digital technology, and testing and demonstrating the efficacy of research methods that centre young people's voices.

The evaluation identified the partnership with youth work as a key strength of the research, enabling the research design to embed best practice from across the youth work, peer research and social research.

We must also recognise that, while we worked hard to mitigate the inequalities and disparities of the research process through these methods, the youth work setting may have influenced how the young people engaged with these issues in ways that are not easy for us to see.

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- Anna Beckett, Independent evaluator

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About the Ada Lovelace Institute

The Ada Lovelace Institute was established by the Nuffield Foundation in early 2018, in collaboration with The Alan Turing Institute, the Royal Society, the British Academy, the Royal Statistical Society, the Wellcome Trust, Luminate, techUK and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics.

The mission of the Ada Lovelace Institute is to ensure that data and AI work for people and society. We believe that a world where data and AI work for people and society is a world in which the opportunities, benefits and privileges generated by data and AI are justly and equitably distributed and experienced.

We recognise the power asymmetries that exist in ethical and legal debates around the development of data-driven technologies, and will represent people in those conversations. We focus not on the types of technologies we want to build, but on the types of societies we want to build. Through research, policy and practice, we aim to ensure that the transformative power of data and AI is used and harnessed in ways that maximise social wellbeing and put technology at the service of humanity.

We are funded by the Nuffield Foundation, an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. The Foundation funds research that informs social policy, primarily in education, welfare and justice. In addition to the Ada Lovelace Institute, the Foundation is also the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory.

Find out more

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About the Nuffield Foundation

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social wellbeing. It funds and undertakes rigorous research, encourages innovation and supports the use of sound evidence to inform social and economic policy, and improve people's lives. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory.

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