

**“Me, my selfie and I”: an exploration of
subjectivity and identity portrayal in the
social media use of 10- and 11-year-olds**

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Abstract

This study explores how children of 10 and 11 years old, so-called 'tweens', experience social media use within digital spaces and how they make sense of their digital identities. Using social media is a widespread phenomenon and plays a significant role in modern life. Notably, there is little research with children of this age and what is known is often viewed through a problematic lens, for example within a discourse of risk and harm. The study implements a social constructionist perspective, that views children as capable social actors and experts in their own lives, allowing situatedness of their experiences reported through their own narrative. In addition, Goffman's (1959) theory of impression management is used to allow consideration of the way social media may provide an additional stage for performances to be acted out and may also offer individuals the opportunity to manipulate and shape their identity. Finally, a poststructuralist lens is employed to recognise the ways in which children's social media use is not free from power and control.

A socio-economically and culturally diverse sample of forty children in their final year of primary school took part in this study. Utilising focus groups with activities related to social media and the creative participatory method of collaging with interviews, allowed for both collective and individual narratives to be heard. Thematic analysis was used with the focus group data and the collages with interviews. Following this, analytical questions were used with the creative participatory data and a visuo-textual type of analysis. This allowed for the richness of the data to be analysed using multiple layers.

Focusing on children's own cultural practices, findings suggest a lack of homogeneity in responses to identity portrayal on social media, emphasising the differing subjectivities children encounter that may not be as distinctive as an online/offline binary in terms of how they portray their identities. Consequently, this may affect some children more than others in terms of their well-being. This was evident with the girls in this research, where identity portrayal was linked to physical appearance and the use of filters and viewing idealised body shapes affected how they felt about themselves. Other pressures within digital spaces, such as seeking validation, and external factors, like celebrity culture and advertisements, also impacted on children's sense of self. E-safety was well understood and enacted by children in the form of privacy settings and awareness of potential predatory behaviours.

This qualitative study contributes to the existing body of research by suggesting that children aged 10 and 11 years old are co-producers of their own identities within digital spaces, albeit with differing degrees of agency, and that social media use enables them to connect to their peers in meaningful ways.

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Copyright declaration

I, **Claire Pescott**, declare that this thesis titled, **“Me, my selfie and I:” An exploration of subjectivity and identity portrayal in the social media use of 10- and 11-year-olds**, and the work presented in it are my own. I confirm that:

- This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University.
- Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated.
- Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed.
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- I have acknowledged all main sources of help.
- Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself.

C.K.Pescott

Signed: _____

Date: _____ 17.06.22 _____

Chapter One - Introduction

1.1 Context of the study

Over the past two decades, the rapid development in technology has transformed the way children and adults communicate and interact within digital spaces (Hogan, 2021; Kaess, 2020; Booker, Kelly and Sacker, 2018). The popularity and availability of smartphones¹ and handheld devices², along with faster broadband and readily available Wi-Fi³ have had a further impact on this advancement (Throuvala *et al.*, 2019). Social networking sites and the subsequent usage of social media are a widespread phenomenon (Buda *et al.*, 2020; Barbovschi, Machackova and Ólafsson, 2015) that now plays a significant role in modern life (Kim, 2017). boyd (2015, p.2) asserts that “over the last decade, social media has gone from being a dream of Silicon Valley technologists to a central part of contemporary digital life around the world.” Research in this field has sought to establish how social media contributes to how we portray and perceive our lives within digital spaces through self-curated digital content of narrative, images, and photographs. For adults and children, social media platforms present new possibilities for communication and interaction (Ditchfield, 2019). Social media has undeniably, therefore, transformed the way people create, share, and consume information (Baccarella *et al.*, 2018) and has created online virtual communities (Buda *et al.*, 2021). Throuvala *et al.* (2019) have coined this as a new social milieu and a major transition within an online environment, one that is ever-evolving as social media applications⁴ progress and possibilities within digital spaces continually expand.

Social media may be defined as an online platform that allows users to create a profile, connect to others, and exchange and share content (boyd and Ellison, 2007).

¹ A smartphone is a mobile phone that performs many of the functions of a computer, typically having a touchscreen interface, Internet access, and an operating system capable of running downloaded apps.

² A piece of computing equipment that can be used in the hand, such as a smartphone or tablet computer.

³ Wi-Fi is a facility allowing computers, smartphones, or other devices to connect to the Internet or communicate with one another wirelessly within a particular area.

⁴ ‘Social media applications’ refer to a range of web applications based on Web 2.0 technologies that enable users to socially interact with one another online

Güntüz (2017) argues that social media enables identity expression and exploration and allows users to connect and interact in a way without time or place limitations. It has revolutionised the way we socialise, changed our digital habits, and the way we present ourselves within digital spaces (boyd, 2015). There are various forms of social media available, including social networking sites such as Facebook (2004), Instagram (2010), Snapchat (2011) and TikTok (2016), instant messaging services for example WhatsApp (2009), blogging sites like Twitter (2006) and online gaming platforms for example, Minecraft (2009) (Ryan *et al.*, 2017). However, social networking sites (SNS) are the most popular forms of social media today and are continually increasing in usage (Ofcom, 2021) and within this thesis are in the main referred to in this capacity when I use the term 'social media'. To also clarify, the term 'digital spaces' is used within this thesis to define the communities that these social media platforms build and how children interact digitally within them.

Ranzini and Hoek (2017, p. 228) discuss the enduring nature and popularity of platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, even with newer competitors in the form of Instagram and Snapchat (which rely more on visual content). They note that all continue "to influence the way in which individual narratives are constructed and broadcast." The way adults and children use social media often differs though, popular social media activities for younger people involve the taking and posting of 'selfies'⁵, likewise 'groupies'⁶, checking into places⁷, using hashtags⁸, and documenting all aspects of daily life (Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo, 2017). Thus, to qualify as 'social media,' there needs to be an element of 'interactivity' that may involve the opportunity to like, share or comment (Poore, 2016). It is undeniable that social media pervades all our lives to some extent, whether directly in our self-curation (Duffy, 2019) or indirectly, through others documentation (Cirucci, 2013) or in a less overt way by scrolling through platforms, without commenting or explicitly engaging (Poore, 2016). Consequently, new possibilities of interaction have

⁵ 'Selfies' photos of oneself on a forward-facing camera.

⁶ 'Groupies' posting photographs of yourself with a group of friends

⁷ 'Checking into places' can have many purposes on social media, for example to find people and friends near your location, to get rewards from brands via your location or to recall where you have been and stores/restaurants you've visited.

⁸ 'Hashtags' a word or phrase preceded by the symbol #, used on social media websites and applications, to identify digital content on a specific topic.

materialised with the use and engagement of social media platforms (Ditchfield, 2019).

Despite the commonality of social media, how we interact and engage within digital spaces and how we choose to represent ourselves and relate to others within it are dependent on factors including age, technological skills, self-monitoring (Ranzini and Hoek, 2017) and a digital divide driven by non-equitable access to the Internet and technology because of socio-economic factors (Donelle *et al.*, 2021). The nature of social media facilitates a permanently 'on' state, and as such, users can be constantly connected to virtual digital spaces, which can perpetuate a continual loop of receiving and checking (boyd, 2014). However, it may also be argued that social media helps set and reinforce social and cultural norms (McCrae, Gettings and Pursell, 2017). Furthermore, digital spaces that social media offer can reflect, complement, and reinforce offline practices, processes, and relationships (Yalda, Ellison and Subrahmanyam, 2017), though the anonymous and asynchronous nature of social media practices may provide digital spaces that differ from real-life interaction (Ryan *et al.*, 2017). In Chapter Two, I offer a more detailed exploration of the theories and explanations related to the contextualisation of social media as a facilitator of interaction and communication.

In the following sections of this introductory chapter, I discuss how children may experience social media within digital spaces. This is particularly important to consider as most people have social media applications and use social media in some capacity, and as Ranzini and Hoek (2017) note is a widely spread, if not universal phenomenon. This makes Mannay's (2016, p.32) notion of 'making the familiar strange' particularly pertinent, with respect to challenging preconceived ideas of what constitutes children's digital spaces. Therefore, my own positionality and rationale for interest in this topic is important to consider, as this stems partly from reflecting on my own personal social media use and presentation of self within digital spaces, which is discussed in section 3.2.5. Later in this chapter, I outline how children's identity may be shaped by using social media and how their experiences of this within digital spaces are amplified before establishing the research context in

which this study took place. The notion of researching children's digital spaces is then contextualised within the parameters of how this study was conducted. Children are not simply adults in the making (James and James, 2012), and consequently how they experience digital spaces may not be the same as adults. Accordingly, the digital spaces that children may occupy are explored within the situatedness of children's own accounts, about social, cultural, and affective conditions (Renold *et al.*, 2017). In the final part of this chapter, I outline my research aim and questions, followed by a synopsis of the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

1.2 The experience of social media within children's digital spaces

According to Goodyear and Armour (2019), social media is embedded in young people's lives, and despite the terms of service for social media platforms being thirteen years of age, children as young as eight may have their own social media accounts (NSPCC, 2018). Ofcom (2021) reported that by eleven years of age the majority (59%) of UK children use social media. This figure may be conservative, however, as children are self-reporting in this data and may be aware of the minimum age set by social media platforms. Even at the start of the last decade, Livingstone and Brake (2010) documented that social media use had been rapidly adopted by children and young people alike, and though most social media networks are intended for teenagers and adults, children are using them at an exponentially increasing rate. Like adults, children's use of social media is constantly evolving, and recent research exemplifies children are messaging, sharing, and liking throughout the day, including during school hours and late in the evening (Ofcom, 2021). The portal that social media generates for communication has expanded and, consequently, the nature and scope of how children interact digitally has changed considerably (Wood, Bukowski and Lis, 2016; McBride, 2011).

As with adults, children's social media use has become embedded in their everyday lives and they are now part of a generation growing up in an era of social media, which is taken for granted as a cultural fabric of socialisation (Clark, 2011).

Childhood has arguably blurred into youth in contemporary society, and as social media offers new affordances this invariably has an impact on their cultural practices (Tsaliki, 2022). Whilst there are risks associated with children using social media, the bias of these warnings from a determinist discourse and magnification of these issues denies that children's agency can shape their behaviour within their digital spaces and that they may have more discernment than they are given credit for (D'Lima and Higgins, 2021; Oswell, 2016). It is also worth noting that children now and in the past ten years have grown up with social media, and many even have a digital footprint before they are born, with ultrasound scan photographs being shared on social media platforms as a popular way to introduce a pregnancy, so called 'sharenting' (Nottingham, 2020; MacBlain, Dunn and Luke, 2017; Leaver, 2016; Lupton, 2013). However, despite apparent homogeneity of children's experiences in this area, reference should be made to a social constructionist perspective and the assertion that there are many children and many childhoods (Arnott, 2017). Consequently, children's subjectivity of digital spaces, through both their parents' documentation and their own social media use, is not the same. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that Lupton and Williamson (2017) highlight the fact that the digital spaces in which children inhabit and the childhood that they experience are increasingly commodified and datafied⁹.

1.3 Identity and children's social media use

Many scholars make the association between identity and social media (Evans, 2014; Davis, 2012; Pea *et al.*, 2012), something which is further explored in Chapter Two. However, less is known about how social media shapes children's identity, which is particularly important for the age group of 10- and 11-years olds in this research who are arguably at a transitional period in their lives, where they are discovering who they are in relation to peers and outside influences beyond the family (Charmaraman *et al.*, 2022; Mascheroni, Vincent and Jimenez, 2015; Cirucci, 2013; Litt, 2012). It is also the period of their lives when they are likely to get their

⁹ The term 'datafied' is utilised by Lupton and Williamson (2017) to describe the way children are becoming the objects of a multitude of monitoring devices that generate detailed data about them.

first mobile phone, which increases the possibility of them joining a social media application (Ofcom, 2021). Peer culture and fitting in are also high on most children's agenda at this age (Pea *et al.*, 2012). Through a social constructionist lens, the concept of identity and subsequent meaning-making in relation to this are linked to the digital spaces which individuals encounter (Baldwin, 2020; Odell, 2019), and for children, this may be even more complex and transformative than it is for adults (Moran, Reily and Brady, 2021). Livingstone and Brake (2010) through their work on children's identity and social media, highlight the importance of viewing their practices through a children's rights agenda and stress that the presentation of self, a wider circle of friends, and management of privacy are some of the benefits. They also advocate that identity cannot be separated from discourse, and in the main, suggest that social media affords a construct of a valued representation of self which can be affirmed by peers.

According to Willoughby (2019) for children and young people, sharing information, photographs and personal data is important for shaping their identity, and there is a lack of research about what children do on social media and how they feel about it. Livingstone and Brake (2010, p.83) highlight this saying, "...there is also much left for researchers to do...research must be kept up to date with young people's social practices online, as their enthusiasm for social networking is undeniable...". The speed at which this has happened in the succeeding decade to this statement, and the proliferation of children using social media in their daily lives (Ofcom, 2021; Livingstone, Mascheroni and Staksrud, 2017), is testament to the need for more research in this area. Social media use and the digital spaces that children occupy impact on cultural practices of their childhood, and it is therefore important to understand from their perspective how it shapes their identity and affects their subjectivity. boyd (2008) encapsulates the transitory nature of social media and suggests that despite this, the digital identity is tangible. However, this cultivation of an online persona (Duffy, 2019) is dependent in part on likes, comments, and validation (Throuvala *et al.*, 2019) whilst also subject to algorithmic feeds and data surveillance (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat, 2020; Buckingham, 2017; Brown, 2014; Trottier, 2012) which makes for a complicated space to navigate.

1.4 The Welsh context

Despite the upsurge in social media use by children (Ofcom, 2021) and the advancements in technology afforded by digital practices (Booker, Kelly and Sacker, 2018), not all children are viewed by parents and educators as responsible digital citizens (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018). Furthermore, digital spaces that children create may not be understood by adults (Nouri and Cameron, 2016; boyd, 2014) and consequently, their attempts to educate them and safeguard their experiences may be ill-advised and somewhat naïve (Phippen and Street, 2022; Moss, 2019; Dooly, 2017; Huk, 2016). Education, is of course, not free from dominant discourses and therefore the outline of what is taught within school curricula is driven by political and government agendas (Moss, 2019). In terms of social media and children's occupancy of digital spaces, what children learn in school through the curriculum needs to be unpacked by the educator and co-constructed with the children (Trevor, Ince and Ang, 2020).

In Wales, in response to technological advancements and the need to embrace digital literacy in a holistic way, The Digital Competence Framework (2018) was developed and implemented in schools (Welsh Government, 2018). This framework is inclusive for all learners aged 3 – 16 years and is a commitment to improving digital competence through a set of skills, knowledge, and attitudes (Welsh Government, 2018). It is envisaged as a way of ensuring that learners are informed and capable but also able to manage the positive and negative aspects of being a digital citizen. The Digital Competence Framework (Welsh Government, 2018) comprises four strands¹⁰, the 'citizenship' element is the first strand, which suggests its importance. Within this strand, there is a reference to "identity, image and reputation, health and well-being, digital rights licensing and ownership, online behaviour and cyberbullying" (Welsh Government, 2018, p.5) which are all applicable to the context of this research. As highlighted in the Welsh context, there is a progressive strategy for ensuring that children are digital citizens and an

¹⁰ The Digital Competence Framework (Welsh Government, 2018) has four strands – Citizenship; Interacting and collaborating; Producing; Data and computational thinking. Information literacy is included under the strand of Data and computational thinking.

acknowledgment that this is an integral part of the wider curriculum (Welsh Government, 2018). Of note, and according to Polizzi (2020), in the rest of the UK and other countries in Europe, there is a lack of a unified framework of how digital literacy and citizenship should be taught. Despite this lack of consistency, The Children's Commissioner for England (2018) also called for online resilience lessons for children towards the end of primary school to discuss the emotional demands of social media not just messages about e-safety. Pyer, Lomax, and Bramble (2019) also emphasise that children need to be more actively involved in developing digital policies. This they argue, would help facilitate well-being when using social media, particularly with the less overt dangers. The focus of my research was not to ascertain an evaluation of policy to practice, and I did not ask the practitioners their perspective of how children were engaging within their digital spaces. However, my research was conducted within the school environment and was therefore not a value-free space (Bland, 2017). It is acknowledged that the children could have been influenced by the power hierarchies and dominant discourses in which the curriculum exists and is in line with poststructuralist thought, that is, not free from the ideology and the production of knowledge (Moss, 2019) which is explored in detail in Chapter Two.

1.5 Researching children's digital spaces

It is hoped that this research contributes to debates regarding children's digital spaces by investigating how social media use shapes their digital identity and subjective experience of interactions with others. In researching with children of 10- and 11-years of age, so-called 'tweens'¹¹, who were in their final year of primary school, a qualitative approach was utilised. This allowed children's stories concerning their own experiences of using social media within digital spaces to be heard, rather than simply perceived by adults. Much research, rhetoric, and moral panics about the dangers and repercussions of using social media are based on adults' perceptions of children's use of social media within digital spaces rather than through the lens of the child (Phippen and Street, 2022; Huk, 2016). Also, much

¹¹ A 'tween' is a child between the ages of 9 and 12. A tween is no longer a little child, but not quite a teenager.

academic attention has been centred around the young adult population (Best, Manktelow and Taylor, 2014). Influenced by social constructionist thoughts about how reality is defined by discourse and everyday 'realities' negotiated through individual interactions (James and James, 2012), this research endeavours to explore the construct of childhood within digital spaces, through the children's interpretations of this concept. My research is situated within a cross-disciplinary approach of education and the sociology of childhood, acknowledging that these are linked through the ontological assumptions that childhood is a social construct that changes through time, space, and culture (Norozi and Moan, 2016). Children within the school environment are now part of an offline as well as a virtual world, through the digital spaces that they encounter. For children themselves then, this has considerable effects on their perception of how they experience their childhood and how they engage with others as well as how they perceive themselves. Despite the terms of service for social media platforms being a minimum of thirteen years of age (NSPCC, 2018), there is increasing pressure for children to engage with these platforms as it has become part of peer culture (Charmaraman *et al.*, 2022; Eichen *et al.*, 2021; Mascheroni, Vincent and Jimenez, 2015).

It is apparent that much of the literature and research on children's social media use, as well as in mainstream media, and through dominant discourses, is often shown through a deterministic lens, with children being portrayed as having little or no agency. Children's usage is often viewed and represented in problematic terms (Duffy and Chan, 2018) or from 'adultist views' (Phippen and Street, 2022, p.43) with grooming, catfishing, and predator behaviour invariably seen as a jeopardy of digital spaces and exploitation as a real possibility (Reeves and Crowther, 2019; Ashurst and McAlinden, 2015). Furthermore, as research with children in this field is limited (Blackwell *et al.*, 2014), issues that apply to young people and adults are often applied to the context of children's digital spaces. Whilst the nature of social media, with its emphasis on sharing photographs, videos, and personal information as well as the ability to send private messages, makes it the ideal forum for cyberbullying to exist (Willoughby, 2019; Ho, Chen and Ng, 2017; Canty *et al.*, 2016), it does not make this an inevitable part of children's experience. Consequently, situating children as social actors, capable of choice and enactment of agency, as well as

being co-constructors of their own experience (Prout, 2011; James and James, 2004; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998) is important when considering how social media impacts children's lives. As Livingstone (2014) points out, the extensive use of social media by children has reconstructed how they communicate, with whom, and the consequences of this interaction. This research seeks to contribute to the growing body of research focused on children's experiences of social media use, specifically, how children portray their identity within digital spaces and the impact this may have on them. Instead of viewing children as passive subjects, recognising their agency and co-constructing capabilities, my work endeavours to explore how children navigate the ever-changing phenomenon of social media and how their engagement within digital spaces impacts on the notion of childhood.

In my research, I worked with an ethnically and socio-economically diverse¹² sample of forty children aged 10 and 11 years old, who were in Year Six of primary school, in four settings in the South Wales area. This age group was chosen as these children were in the final year of primary school before making the move to high school, which may be viewed as a transitional time of their life (Cirucci, 2013). In addition, according to research, many children start using social media at this age, although the terms of service are thirteen years of age (Charmaraman *et al.*, 2022; Ofcom, 2021; McDool *et al.*, 2016). Building on research from my extensive pilot study, I employed a qualitative approach, which consisted of focus groups with visual activities that I designed around social media use, to engage the children in initial discussions about the digital spaces that they encountered and occupied. Then, a creative participatory method of collaging with the child's own narrative was utilised with sixteen of the children, to explore their perceptions of their identity on social media and how they perceived their digital spaces. The task was kept open-ended to make the research more participatory and child led (Eldén, 2013) and to allow for more organic discussion between myself and the participants to develop. A so-called 'intermingling' of methods, which does not separate the collage from the interview/narrative was applied (Grbich, 2012). My research offers a contribution to the methodological literature of working with children in a creative way, to facilitate a

¹² In this research, only gendered differences are explicitly referred to in the findings, as this became more of a focus following the results of the pilot study.

narration of their own lives, through their own lens, which is particularly important as there is a lack of qualitative research with children within this field (Huk, 2016).

The theoretical framework of this thesis is situated within the social constructionist standpoint of how children and childhood are viewed and how these singular as well as collective actions of children with each other may present multiple realities and subjective experiences (Ruck, Peterson-Badali and Freeman, 2017; Norozi and Moen, 2016). It is recognised that the concept of a digital childhood in ever-changing digital spaces is complex and can impact on how individuals construct their social worlds, through language and social processes (Bryman, 2016). The conceptualisation of identity and perceptions of self in digital spaces was influenced by Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management and how individuals guide the impression of how others view themselves and others through appearance, manner, and attitudes, which is arguably amplified within digital spaces. Though limited in terms of research with children's social media use, Goffman's (1959) theory has been applied to much other research into social media use and identity (Ditchfield, 2019; Mishra and Ismail, 2018; Chae, 2017; Dooly, 2017; Kim, 2017; Ranzini and Hoek, 2017; Cingel and Krcmar, 2014; Chou and Edge, 2012). Consequently, in the early stages of my reading, this shaped the way I perceived social media, that is, as a type of virtual stage, with children as social actors who are influenced by an imaginary audience.

The notion of a self-curated lens and the multi-modal dimension that social media affords, incorporating auditory, visual, and narrative possibilities (Zhao, 2005), led my philosophical positioning to be influenced by poststructuralist thought. This linked language (Barthes, 1993) and subjectivity as a way of investigating how children shape their identity. Children's social media use is not free from power and control (Foucault, 1980), and the digital spaces which children encounter may be likened to Deleuze's (1992) 'societies of control', where algorithms, advertisements and data surveillance may affect their digital diet and perception of self (Lyon, 2017). Communication and conversation, which social media allows, may also influence the construction of this subjective reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). Braidotti (2014,

p.168) likens this to a type of 'shared subjectivity', which in my research, makes connections between the shaping of identity and the subjectivity of childhood itself with the influences of digital spaces.

1.6 Children as experts in their own lives

As mentioned, it was of paramount importance in my research that the perceived digital spaces that children occupy and how they experience social media was narrated by themselves and not through an adult's perspective. Children's engagement with social media and within digital spaces, is a nuanced picture, sometimes active and sometimes passive (Goodyear and Armour, 2019). However, the overarching goal of this research, was not to view children's experience in binary terms of positive and negative encounters, but rather look beyond the obvious and explore more closely their everyday interactions and subjectivities in relation to being a child within a digital age. Aligning with post structuralist thought regarding children as competent commentators of their own experience (Moran, Reily and Brady, 2021), this research challenges dominant discourses about children's passivity and the notion of 'becoming' (Quennerstet and Quennerstet, 2013; James and James, 2012). Instead, my work, takes the standpoint that children actively engage in co-constructing their worlds in which they exist, whilst acknowledging that this may be influenced by participation and interaction with social media, which has become part of the fabric of their reality.

Spyrou (2016) highlights a particular focus within childhood research to give children a voice, though enshrined primarily with adult-centric agendas and power hierarchies. Whilst this may not have been eliminated entirely within my research, a genuine attempt to hear and narrate the children's stories of the digital spaces that they encounter is presented in this thesis. It is documenting these 'everyday' experiences of their story which will help understand how children live their lives in a period of rapid social and technological change (Brady and Graham, 2018). As already highlighted, the rhetoric of public discourse, and with much academic literature surrounding children's social media use tending to be centralised around

catfishing, grooming, and cyberbullying, there is a danger of contributing to moral panics about children's digital spaces (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018). My contribution to the field, I hope, is of importance in its use of creative participatory methods with children in an area that is relatively under researched (Dooly, 2017). It is anticipated that this will help develop an understanding of digital spaces that children encounter from their perspective. Livingstone, Mascheroni and Staksrud (2017, p.1122), in their influential work analysing the data from EU Kids Online from 2006 – 2014, stress the importance of examining children's engagement within their digital space in relation to the "...host of increasingly taken-for-granted ways." My research is therefore positioned within digitally mediated spaces that children encounter, which is evidently different from the way adults, parents and educators operate and moreover differs from pre-social media times.

1.7 Children's accounts of their digital spaces

Hearing children's own accounts of their experiences of digital spaces and how they make meaning of these is at the heart of this research. These possible and idealised presentations of an online identity have been seen in the results of this research to not be as negative an experience as other research suggests (Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo, 2017) nor as separate from real-life as first thought. In this research, the shaping of identity in childhood is intrinsically linked to the presentation of self within digital spaces and arguably an important influence on future versions of self (Brandtzaeg and Chaparro- Domínguez, 2020). It is worth reiterating the concept that there is no one trajectory for all children and furthermore a rigid framework to impose their way of being is not necessarily useful (Nouri and Cameron, 2016). In this research, children are viewed as experts in their own lives (James and Prout, 2015), and the rightful co-constructors of any digital strategies that may be aimed at promoting their learning or well-being (Charoensukmongkol, 2018; Chou and Edge, 2012). However, though mindful of the limitations of researching within the school environment, my background as a primary school teacher, ensured a familiarity with the structure, routines, and practices of such settings and with an ease of speaking and engaging with children of this age. Similarly, adopting a qualitative approach and creative participatory methodology, with the child positioned at the heart of the

research, ensured that a window to children's own digital spaces was explored. It was hoped that a collaborative approach and allowing children to respond in a creative way ensured greater sensitivity to their subjectivity and individual experience of digital spaces and reduced power imbalances in the researcher/participant dyad (Scherer, 2016; Leonard and McKnight, 2014). The focus groups with activities were useful in contextualising children's collective experiences of using social media and the peer culture that this perpetuates. The creative participatory method of collaging facilitated a one-to-one experience of researching *with* the child, fostering authentic dialogue and a more nuanced depiction of the way their identity is shaped by social media and their subjectivity within digital spaces. Consequently, this mixed method approach allowed for the 'messiness' of children's voices to be heard (Eldén, 2013) and an embodiment of how they are social actors within their digital spaces to be explored. Inspired by other scholars who have utilised creative participatory methods in their work, notably, Kara (2015), Mannay (2016) and Culshaw (2019), my research draws upon these practices to work with children in relation to their experiences of social media and facilitate an authentic and honest reflection of this (Grant, 2018).

While using collaging with children is not new (Dutton *et al.*, 2019; Rose, 2016; Eldén, 2013), my research utilised this technique in relation to children's social media use and so makes contributions to the scholarly field. This is through enabling a more nuanced picture to be developed, without the apparent deterministic lens other research with children reports (Reeves and Crowther, 2019; Duffy and Chan, 2018). Viewing children as social actors and experts in their own lives (James and Prout, 2015; Prout 2011), and acknowledging that using social media is not a binary experience of light or dark nor good or bad (Kaess, 2020; Baccarella *et al.*, 2018), shines new light on their subjectivity. Likewise, viewing the distinction between offline and digital spaces as more than just a duality of experience for children, and exploring the concept of identity and the sense of self as a complex and nuanced understanding, offers contributions to this field. As mentioned, there is not one definition of 'child' nor one homogeneous depiction of childhood (Arnott, 2017) and this is perhaps even more relevant within a digital childhood. This research, therefore, engages in weaving the stories of different childhood subjectivities within digital spaces and attempts to demonstrate a multi-faceted, multi-modal

understanding of the contributions this may make to childhood in a technological age.

1.8 Research aim and questions

The research aim and questions in this study, are informed by reading about empirical research and literature in the field as well as discussions of philosophy within a Faculty reading group, and the pilot study that took place prior to the main study. They evolved as the study proceeded and were continually evaluated in relation to the development of my knowledge and understanding throughout my PhD journey.

The main aim of this research is as follows:

To explore children's experiences of social media use within digital spaces and how they make meaning of their digital identity and its portrayal.

To realise this aim, the following research questions were devised:

RQ1: In what ways are children's identities shaped by their experiences of social media within digital spaces?

RQ2: What influence does gender have on children when using social media within digital spaces and how does this affect how they feel about themselves?

RQ3: To what extent do children feel the pressure of social media within digital spaces and how do they negotiate these experiences?

RQ4: What knowledge can children share about using social media within digital spaces to support other children's use?

1.9 Summary of chapter and thesis outline

In this introductory chapter, I have situated the context of my research within digital spaces, in a time of rapid technological advancement, with faster Internet access and the advent of smartphones and handheld devices. Correspondingly, this has increased social media use, for both adults and children and afforded changes with communication and interaction, due to increased accessibility. I have detailed the context in which this PhD study emerged and the lens that I adopted, particularly in relation to the digital experience of childhood and how this may differ from the digital spaces that adults contend with. I have also detailed how research tends to view children's social media use through a problematic discourse concentrating on physical risks such as grooming and cyberbullying. In response to this, the importance of viewing children's experiences, through their own interpretations has been emphasised and hearing their voice and reporting their stories makes important contributions to the field. Finally, I outline the design of the study, in relation to its qualitative approach that employed creative participatory methodology informed by social constructionist and poststructuralist theoretical standpoints.

In Chapter Two, I discuss the theoretical and empirical literature in relation to situating the notion of childhood as part of a cultural and historical concept. I explore the multiple realities that children may experience and highlight the premise that childhood is evolving in part due to the advancement in technology and online digital spaces. Children as social actors and co-constructors of their own subjective experience is held as central to the debate, and drawing upon social constructionist theory, I present the wider implications of how children socialise and communicate in digital spaces, arguing that is not a homogenous experience but rather a subjective reality. Detailed exploration of the complexity of defining identity is given consideration and various perspectives such as developmental psychology are drawn upon, before I discuss the questions around discourse, power, and

consumerism with a poststructuralist lens. A focus on identity and the subsequent subjectivity of experience is seen in this chapter as being more complex than a binary experience of an online and offline world. Much of the research in this field, remains dominated by studies with adults, and correspondingly adds to the moral panics about the perceived dangers children encounter within digital spaces. I weave together literature and empirical research to outline the complexities of social media use within digital spaces and highlight the gap in the literature in respect to researching with children in a qualitative way. Finally, I investigate, the notion of social media use being a gendered experience, particularly in relation to body image, and how distorted, filtered realities can affect how girls feel about themselves.

In Chapter Three, I describe my research design and how choices were made in relation to the theoretical underpinnings. The ontological assumptions of social constructionism and multiple realities, along with Goffman's (1959) theory of impression management, combined with poststructuralist ideas of power and discourse attend to the lens that I adopt and present. I explore an interpretivist epistemology in relation to hearing the child's voice and a consideration of their own conceptualisations and interpretations of the digital spaces that they encounter. The ethical considerations are presented, with particular focus on the children being under the age of the recommended use for using social media platforms which had an impact on methodological choices. Later in this chapter, I exemplify the sampling technique of $n = 40$ (20 girls; 20 boys) for the focus groups and $n = 16$ (8 girls; 8 boys) for the collaging. This chapter also provides the rationale and justification of the research methods utilised in this study, namely focus groups with activities and collaging, and how this was developed as the project evolved. Finally, the data analysis, which embraces the 'messiness' of qualitative research of this nature, is outlined. In relation to the focus group data, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was employed, though for the collaging method with interviews, the analysis used a hybrid model developed from Grbich (2012), and Rose's (2016) analytical questions combined with Brown and Collins (2021) analytical visuo-textual framework. The themes from both analyses conceptualise children's experiences of their digital spaces in response to the research aim and questions.

Chapter Four is the first of three chapters, in which I present the findings and discussion. In this chapter, I contextualise the digital spaces that the children in this research encounter and challenge the binary concept of 'being' and 'becoming' in favour of a more nuanced phenomenon, which may encompass elements of both and a wider societal and cultural lens. I also seek to challenge dominant discourses about the universal experience of childhood and how the contours of their experience may in part be shaped by the wider influence that a digital childhood affords. Focusing on children's own situational and cultural practices both collectively and individually, is seen to move beyond a good or bad/light or dark dichotomy of experience. This chapter illustrates that children have both positive and negative experiences of using social media and it is not as detrimental as dominant discourses suggest. Furthermore, children's encounters with digital spaces can give rise to fun and ludic, entertaining purposes that are part of peer culture. I consider how focusing on children's own cultural practices and subjectivity can elicit feelings of belonging and connectedness regarding the digital spaces they encounter and can demonstrate a sense of agency which may affect how they feel about themselves. This chapter addresses research question two and demonstrates how gender may affect the digital space experiences, especially in relation to body comparison for girls. It also focuses on research question three and how navigating digital spaces is not a neutral experience and how peer and other outside pressures may play an influential part.

In Chapter Five, the second of the findings and discussion chapters, the research lens is directed at exploring children's identity and how their sense of self is shaped by their digital spaces. The discursive element of social media, where users curate their own content through photographs, narration, and a documentation of their lives, which in turn is presented to an 'imaginary audience' (Goffman, 1959) is seen to impact on how they feel about themselves. Children's subsequent meaning-making is seen to be further perpetuated by external factors such as advertisements, trends, and celebrity influence. It is evident within this chapter that the way children perceive their digital experiences may be different from how parents and educators view them and go beyond the realms of e-safety that is taught in schools. Viewing idealised physical appearances on social media and the use of filters and

enhancements that these purports, affected girls considerably in this study, and like the previous chapter addresses research questions two and three. However, it also addresses the overall aim of this research in respect to how social media and the digital spaces that children occupy helps to shape their identity. Finally, I argue in relation to research question one, that identity is an active form of meaning-making and a distinct social construct in which social media plays an influential part.

In Chapter Six, the final findings and discussion chapter, I detail the concept of surveillance and how this is incorporated for children within real and imagined parameters. The imaginary audience (Goffman, 1959) is seen within this analysis to incorporate both peers and an omnipresent 'other' that the children in this research found more difficult to quantify. In a more obvious way, the children acknowledge an understanding of how social media is based on peer approval, validation, and governed to a degree by individualised advertisements and suggestions. However, some children document a lack of control, and an uncertainty regarding what Lyon (2017) coins 'surveillance imaginaries', they are not sure of the rules and regulations of digital spaces that they inhabit, and this makes for challenging navigation of this ill-defined community (boyd, 2014). The emotional ramifications of using social media, rather than being based on the fear of grooming, predators, and cyberbullying (Reeves and Crowther, 2019) lies more within peer-to-peer pressures and a desire to fit in. Largely, this chapter addresses the fourth research question, with messages of how children can support their peers within digital spaces, which goes beyond what parents and educators may acknowledge. This research therefore has important contributions to offer for safeguarding and providing children with digital resilience in ever-changing digital spaces.

In the concluding chapter, Chapter Seven, I provide an overview of how I explored 10- and 11-year-olds experiences of social media use within digital spaces and how they make meaning of their digital identity and its portrayal. I reiterate how dominant discourses surrounding children's engagement within these digital spaces has been disrupted by researching from children's own perspectives. An exploration of the main research findings is discussed in relation to the themes presented in the

analysis chapters and how they answer the research questions. I evaluate how utilising a creative participatory approach, with focus groups with activities and collaging with interviews, provided rich nuanced data in relation to the research questions and the contributions this made in terms of the methodology. Key contributions to knowledge are then highlighted in relation to children's social media research and in the context of theoretical implications in the development of social constructionism and poststructuralist perspectives. In the latter sections of Chapter Seven, I discuss the implications for policy and practice considering the research undertaken and the potential areas for future research. The limitations of the study are explained before final conclusions are reached in the closing section.

Chapter Two – Review of Literature

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss empirical and theoretical literature associated with childhood and identity and how children experience these phenomena in relation to social media within digital spaces. Due to the broad focus of my research, the review of literature is not claiming to be exhaustive but does draw upon key concepts and notions that underpin this research. In an initial scoping exercise, I utilised the key search terms – social media, self, identity, childhood, children/young people, social comparison, and impression management and applied them to the University of South Wales web-based library and Google Scholar, a free web-based academic search engine. Alerts were also set in relation to the key research terms, to ensure that recent publications were included. I devised a reading notes proforma, to keep a systematic track of the literature that I engaged with. This consisted of basic information such as the title of the article/research, author (s), year of publication and publisher. Alongside this, the main theme of the article and brief synopsis was documented as well as the sample, method and data analysis employed. Finally, the strengths and limitations of each study was evaluated as well as the applicability to my own research contemplated. This enabled a level of criticality to my reading and subsequently themes emerged that could be synthesised together. Ongoing handwritten notes were also taken from excerpts of literature in book format, as well as relevant websites and policy that fitted the research criteria and snowballed from articles and chapters from literature read. In addition, a reading group was set up by my Director of Study, with other academics within the faculty where philosophical literature to support the theoretical and conceptual framework of my research was discussed. Again, I kept systematic notes of my own and others' contributions in the discussions around these concepts that related to the philosophical underpinnings of my research.

Through an existing body of literature, this chapter seeks to situate the notion of childhood and establish an understanding that it is a period of life that is more than simply a biological, developmental process but rather a subjective realm that is

malleable and changeable (Wyness, 2012). Furthermore, childhood is presented as a concept that is not free from dominant discourses and is therefore different and dependent on the cultural and historical context in which it is situated (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). This concept of childhood as a changing social space that encompasses new and evolving opportunities for communication and socialisation that technology and social media affords is also examined. A consideration is that a digital environment provides multiple spaces with varied opportunities to move across offline and online realities, with greater flexibility to display one's life in a multimodal way, facilitating the performance of multiple identities (Darvin, 2016; Phippen, 2016; Alford, 2012). The complexity of contextualising and defining identity within the parameters of both a wider societal lens and within emerging digital spaces is presented to frame the wider infrastructure and the influence that social media may provide in identity formation. The discussion of identity is important, particularly with reference to how online engagement through social media is causing a substantial shift in how children are perceived as social actors (Dooly, 2017). However, children's subjectivities and how they experience a world that has been fertilised by digital spaces is also considered and held as central to the analysis. Widening the discussion to accommodate subjectivity of experience goes beyond the parameters of identity, though online digital spaces are interlinked with the construction of these identities (Darvin, 2016). Therefore, the identification of children as social agents with feelings and pressures associated with their engagement with social media is held as a central notion to the debate. Exploration of research that investigates the challenges and affordances of social media for children is also drawn upon.

2.2 Situating the academic field

The notion of identity is commonly contested in the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and education, but is now predominantly understood as not being a stable, fixed nor predetermined property of an individual but rather as a set of resources which are drawn upon when presenting ourselves through interaction with others (Lieberman and Schroeder, 2020; Seargeant and Tagg, 2014). Identity

definition is complex because it is not simply something we possess, nor an entity that we project, rather it is a mode of thinking about ourselves which can change in different circumstances and over time. It could be argued that identity is our creation, though caught between a sociological truism that we are born into a world that already exists and is therefore historically and culturally context-specific (Giddens, 1991). Identity is intrinsically shaped by both physical and psychological development; certain physical attributes change over time as a child becomes an adolescent and then matures into an adult. In many ways though, it is our psychological self or identity that defines us, the way we make sense of experiences shaping who we are (Knowles and Lander, 2011). Due to the complexity of the notion of identity, it may be useful for it to be viewed as being on a continuum that acknowledges factors such as personal history as well as character attributes such as age, gender, and ethnicity (Ellison, 2013). Giddens (1991) points out that identity is not a distinctive trait, nor a series of traits, but rather a complexity that is bound by the ability to sustain a narrative that is reflexively understood by the individual in terms of his or her biography. This meaning-making and subjectivity of how identity is lived and portrayed both virtually and offline is important to this debate and will be looked at through the lens of poststructuralism in the discussion. It is hoped that this will highlight the fact that how we think about ourselves, experience phenomena, and portray our identity is not free from dominant discourses nor power structures (Braidotti, 2014; Foucault, 1980).

Furthermore, poststructuralism puts forward the idea that everything in the world is in a state of constant flux and therefore a subject's understandings at any point are associated with their experiences (Hughes, 2010). This further emphasises the link between subjectivity and identity formation and will be explored. Despite the complexity of definition, the child's right to a legal identity is protected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), along with the subsequent legislation (Children Act, 2004; 1989) and demonstrates the importance given to personal and distinct individuality in our society. Establishing a child's legal identity is just the first step in the multi-layered and complex process of identity formation, however, since it is a process that continues to evolve throughout life (Brooker and Woodhead, 2008). There is a changing impetus of viewing children as active

participants in their own lives, capable of decision-making and able to present their reality in an authentic way that has real meaning to them (Dockett, Einarsdóttir and Perry, 2012; Clark, 2011). Nevertheless, Lomax (2012) postulates that young people's desire to document their lives is restricted by the ways in which adult researchers tend to formulate childhood, which in turn is influenced by social, political, and cultural contexts. In the subsequent sections, various theoretical perspectives on identity and subjectivity, both historically and in the milieu of digital spaces, will be explored to situate the context of this study within a framework of existing literature and to highlight where the gaps in knowledge are and how originality to this important debate can be achieved.

2.3 What is childhood?

Developmental psychology dominated the field of childhood studies for most of the twentieth century, constructing childhood as a set of predetermined stages with the endpoint being adulthood (Leonard, 2016). Piagetian theory suggests that children are in different age bands within a temporal journey of a universal and natural developmental process with a cognitively and biological rooted structure (Piaget, 1954). Essentially, children were viewed as objects of this process of natural development towards a fixed, idealised, competent state of maturity (McDonald, 2009). Piaget's work was heavily criticised for justifying adult supremacy and its universal approach to a standardised developmental process (Tisdall and Punch, 2012) that paid little regard to deviations from the norm (Leonard, 2016). Singal and Muthukrishna (2014) further highlight this point and indicate that there is no such thing as a 'typical' child and that conceptualisations of a child as homogenous, decontextualize their lives and are problematic in definition. Notably, the conceptualisation of what is a child and what the notion of childhood means has evolved considerably since the latter part of the twentieth century (Wyness, 2012). In contrast to the natural and cognitive maturation theory derived from developmental psychology, in the 1980s and 1990s, sociologists of childhood emphasised the process of socialisation, which allows children to internalise and adapt social norms (Prout, 2011; James and James, 2004; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). In conjunction with a move towards advocating children's rights, children's place in

society was reconsidered (Qvortrup, Corsaro and Honig, 2009). According to James and Prout (2015) childhood is not a universal nor natural feature of humanity, it is a social construction that typifies a cultural and structural component of many societies and provides an interpretative frame for contextualising the early years of human life. James, Jenks and Prout (1998) largely reject the relationship between biology and culture and suggest that childhood is characterised by a set of cultural values. Furthermore, they argue that childhood cannot be separated from other factors such as class, gender, and ethnicity.

McDonald (2009) furthermore highlights that childhood does not exist as a finite construction, rather perceptions are always situated within a social, political, historical, and moral context and childhood is a social construction dependent on these factors. From a social constructionist perspective then, childhood is based on a historical and cultural premise and subsequently meanings we attach to the idea vary considerably dependent on the context (Jenks, 2005). This Jenks (2005) continues, demonstrates the divergent nature of childhood and how it exists within a political framework that is sustained in language and discourses of the institutions and professions which serve to guard the boundaries established around childhood as a social status. Quennerstet and Quennerstet (2013) highlight that the image of the child has changed considerably in recent decades and that within sociological debate viewed within the 'being' rather than the 'becoming' binary. Likewise, Brady, Lowe and Lauritzen (2015) acknowledge that children should be viewed as 'being', capable of agency rather than an 'adult in the making' and from a poststructuralist critique that this is not fixed within the confines of the maturity of the individual (Renold, 2004). Prout (2011) argues that this is central to the tenet of the paradigm shift of viewing children as 'being', valued in their present state and not striving towards a state of 'maturity' defined as adulthood. Though Uprichard (2008) suggests that looking beyond the future of 'being' should not be ignored as this is an important part of shaping the future of 'becoming' for children. Norozi and Moen (2016) further emphasise that the new notion of children and childhood focuses on the collective actions of children with adults and with each other. Consequently, childhood may be constructed *for* children but is also constructed *by* children and they do not merely replicate the social processes that they are subjected to but

actively make sense of these processes through challenge and continuous negotiation (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2018; Leonard, 2016).

The view that children are active agents and actors is a significant contribution to the new paradigm of childhood, relocating children as individuals in their own rights, with the ability to act in and influence the world around them (James and Prout, 2015). James and James (2004) argue that childhood is a social space within which children negotiate their own and other's identities at both a macro-level (collective, structural, and institutional) and at the micro-level of everyday interactions. Identity formation begins in childhood, with children's first tentative representations, and gains prominence during adolescence. Wyness (2012) highlights that there is growing recognition that the study of childhood can illuminate wider issues in society and challenge current thinking surrounding social theory. At the other end of the spectrum, from a poststructuralist perspective, there is no such thing as 'the child' or 'childhood' as a state to be discovered, rather there are many children and childhoods, each constructed by our understandings of what they are or should be (Moss, 2019). It is therefore fundamental that an understanding of how childhood is viewed by society is established and the continued evolution of this due to the advances in technology is recognised. In addition, how identity formation and subjectivity fit into this meandering entity is a key consideration.

2.3.1 Concept of a digital childhood

Discourse surrounding the nature of childhood is changing due to the ubiquitous access the Internet has afforded and the wider influences of a digital realm and communication via social media that are available to children (Brough, Literat and Ikin, 2020; Guinta and John, 2018; Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018). This transformation of the digital landscape is forcing a change to the way young children socialise (Pea *et al.*, 2012). Public debates about children's digital use are often infused with sweeping claims about social change; they are over-stated or unduly polarised with little attempt to access children's voices and perspectives (Phippen and Street, 2022; Buckingham, 2017). Furthermore, Murray (2019) ascertains that

there is a pluralism in children's voices and not all children have the same view, nor subjective experience of a digital childhood. Hitherto, moral panics about digital childhoods grounded or not, become part of everyday parenting and schooling thus plays an integral part in shaping discourse surrounding technology and social media use (Tsaliki, 2022; Hogan, 2021; Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018; Ashurst and McAlinden, 2015; Livingstone, 2014; Devine and Lloyd, 2012). The contemporary child now possesses different knowledge and skills to previous generations.

Children as young as three for example, are now using Internet-enabled devices, it is therefore an area that has never been more relevant to discussions about childhood (Palaiologou, 2012). Shuler (2007) documented earlier and increased usage of technology for children, whilst Priyanka (2010) highlighted the fact that many parents give their children their smartphones or tablets to distract them as they wait for a meal in a restaurant or a queue.

Accordingly, a dichotomy exists between those who are fearful of the implications of empowerment that technologies advocate and those embracing it (Livingstone and Blum-Ross, 2020). In relation to different approaches that parents may adopt in relation to their children's digital use, Gentile *et al.* (2014) discusses two distinct modes of parenting. Namely at one end of the spectrum, 'restrictive monitoring' is a parenting style which takes the form of checking and censoring what children are allowed to view. At the other end, 'active mediation' involves discussing implications of digital spaces in age-appropriate ways and checking the suitability of apps/social media platforms with the child, which Gentile *et al.* (2014) argue is more effective. It is also worth noting that not all children live with their birth parents, and that children with the state as a corporate parent, via residential care and foster carers, also regulate children's interactions of social media. This mediation is often to a more extensive degree than their non-care experienced peers and consequently focused exclusively on risk (Hammond *et al.*, 2018). Whichever end of the polarity, there is no denying that childhood has changed because of technology and that it will continue to evolve and change as society does (Dredge and Schreurs, 2020; Mertala and Koivula, 2020; Craft, 2012).

Palmer (2006) highlights the 'toxicity' of childhood that technological advances are making and attaches accountability for troubled backgrounds and anti-social behaviours. This is reiterated by Turkle (2011) who blames an overreliance and overdose on technology as the major component of the detrimental effect of stress and a collective noise that is permeating childhood. Blackwell *et al.* (2014) indicate that this collective noise and continual accessibility means that we do not often experience 'solitude' and consequently this has a detrimental effect on young people as they have diminished capacity to form genuine attachments when necessary. They continue that we are never allowed to be bored or suffer from loneliness and rather than this having a positive effect it is not productive for our overloaded and overstimulated minds. In contrast, Wang and Edwards (2016) indicate that learning how to manage relationships across a range of social media platforms provides opportunities for children and young people to gain a better understanding of their self-identities. They can rehearse and test the boundaries of relationships in a relatively safe forum (Ismail, 2020).

Potter and McDougall (2017) highlight the complexity of digital spaces and how they facilitate a type of curatorship. This may be defined as an active form of meaning-making, which social media affords with a type of digital artefact in the form of photographs, videos, and profile statuses for example (Potter, 2012). Similarly, Marsh (2013) highlights the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the digital spaces that children navigate and consequently a digital childhood has no singular containment. Björktomta and Hansen (2018) extend this notion by suggesting that digital spaces need to be contextualised from the child's perspective and that social media needs to be seen as a component of how children experience childhood. The rapid advancement of technology and the digital spaces that children now inhabit need to be understood in relation to the 'everyday' experiences that they negotiate and the subsequent meaning-making they imply (Moran, Reily and Brady, 2021; Vickery, 2018; Megele, 2017). Social media use can also facilitate mutual self-disclosure, which can be viewed as an integral predictor of intimacy and quality in young people's friendships (Uhls, Ellison and Subrahmanyam, 2017; Reich, Subrahmanyam and Espinoza, 2012).

Close friendships can be validated and strengthened through online interaction (Nesi, 2020; Vorderer, Krömer and Schneider, 2016). Seemingly, digital platforms can offer a positive experience, though Leppänen *et al.* (2015) stress that each social media domain has a particular set of rules, dynamics, and etiquette that users must adhere to when ‘posting’¹³. This makes for a complicated journey through interpretive conventions for the participants’ social activity. Ultimately, digital technologies and social media add new dimensions that children must navigate, and social media has irrevocably altered the notions of community, space, identity, and the relationship between them (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018). Furthermore, the rules of engagement are ill defined, unregulated, and unprotected ‘imagined communities’ (boyd, 2014) and the rules may be tacit (Pangrazio, 2019). Though, Ackermann (2011) does indicate that despite the emergence of a digital childhood, children do have a predisposition for adjustment and can cope with the complexities of digital spaces. Hanson (2017) suggests that it is therefore necessary to move beyond the binary depiction of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ in relation to a digital childhood and that children’s own engagement in their lives needs to be considered. To further complicate matters, Willet *et al.* (2013) indicates that there is a blurring of boundaries between childhood and adulthood and the concept of the ‘tween’ typified as a stage between childhood and teenagers is more apparent, particularly in relation to discussions surrounding digital childhoods.

2.3.2 Agency and ethical rights in childhood

The sense of agency and the ethical rights of the child comes into question as children often have involuntary involvement and a ‘digital footprint’ before they are born; parents may share the foetal ultrasound scan photo as a way of announcing pregnancy and document their children’s milestones in a public forum (Nottingham, 2020; Phippen and Bond, 2019; Martin *et al.*, 2018; MacBlain, Dunn and Luke, 2017; Otero, 2017; Oswald, James and Nottingham, 2016; Leaver, 2016; Freeman, 2016; Lupton, 2013). This ‘intimate surveillance’ has become a commonplace practise

¹³ Posting is a message, such as text or photos, published online on a social network or messaging platform by a user.

amongst parents and this datafication of childhood often begins during gestation (Lupton and Williamson, 2017). Some parents even set up accounts for their infants on social media platforms so that their social media profile is established at birth (Holloway, Green and Livingstone, 2013). Simpson (2013) proposes that mobile technology affords children the ability to reconstruct the meaning of childhood and family relationships especially as parents are less capable of supervising their interactions, though they may publicise their children, as previously suggested. He also highlights those online technologies are altering the dynamics of relationships and challenging the notion and discourse of childhood innocence as children are now key players in their identity formation, which consequently challenge the order of childhood.

Gardner and Davis (2013) refer to the current generation of children growing up in a world of digital media as the 'App Generation' and emphasise that this discourse is shaping young people's attitudes and lives. Similarly, Oswald, James and Nottingham (2016) suggest that the term 'Generation Z' is used to categorise young people who have grown up with technology and the Internet. The stereotypical image of a young person continually attached to their smartphone is portrayed perpetually by the mass media and epitomises children and young people in the twenty-first century (Chou and Edge, 2012). At the turn of the new millennium, Prensky (2001) coined the expression 'digital native' to apply to the youth in society, due to today's children and young people being immersed in a digital environment from an early age and consequently, how they think, and process information is fundamentally different from their predecessors. He suggested that this was concurrent with quickfire thinking rather than sequential thinking of previous generations (the 'digital immigrants' as he labelled them).

Plowman and McPake (2013) postulate that whilst there is a clear generational divide it is important not to assume that all children are 'digital natives' and to understand that some can feel overwhelmed when faced with new digital devices and websites. Likewise, this notion is deemed too simplistic by White and LeCornu (2011) who critique Prensky's 'Natives and Immigrants' analogy and argue that this

notion predates social media applications. They highlight that there has been a paradigm shift in computer and Internet use which has influenced attitude and motivation regarding digital technologies and arguably has transformed the nature of relationships, citizenship, and learning. Personification within social media spaces as a projection of aspects of one's personality to an imagined audience and the notion of 'place' as a metaphor of the virtual nature of the web has given a "sense of being present with others" (White and LeCornu, 2011, p.4). They conceptualise the 'visitors and residents' notion which they emphasise should be viewed as a continuum rather than a binary opposition. Most young people fall in the 'residents' category typified by a blurring of online and offline life, belonging to a virtual community and a willingness to share their persona online. It is thus arguable that young people are not always aware of the impact of this social presence and are not always secure in their digital identity, therefore their affordance of being a 'resident' may confuse boundaries in their Internet use. Nevertheless, the changes to childhood and the differences in the way children and young people socialise and communicate are apparent.

There is no denying that social media use is rising, numbers of users of social media have exponentially increased in recent years with children and young people recognised as heavy adopters of this virtual social network (Ranzini and Hoek, 2017)¹⁴. Terms of service for the major social media platforms stipulates that the recommended age for joining social media sites is thirteen years old (Ofcom, 2021; McDool *et al.*, 2016), though, according to recent documentation, social media is central for both tweens (8 – 12 years of age) and teenagers (NSPCC, 2018). Notably, the biggest increase in use is between 10 and 11 years of age¹⁵, where the number of online social media profiles doubles from 21 to 43 per cent (Ofcom, 2021). Furthermore, it is the tween demographic that is growing exponentially (Pangrazio and Gaibisso, 2020). It is evident that online spaces have become increasingly important arenas for the development of social identities and dynamic ways of meaning-making (Megele, 2017). Through digital affordances and various modalities,

¹⁴ Ofcom (2021) suggests that by eleven years of age 59% of children are using social media, this figure rises significantly for children aged twelve to fifteen years of age (91%) and for sixteen to seventeen years of age (97%).

¹⁵ In the UK children aged 10 and 11 years are in their final year of primary school before making the transition to secondary school, which may be an explanatory factor in this notable increase.

the boundaries between online and offline reality have been blurred (Darvin, 2016) and children and young people are certainly at the forefront of this digital revolution.

2.4 Identity as a social construction

As already highlighted, identity is not fixed nor static and therefore can be viewed as co-constructed and negotiated repeatedly through interaction that takes place within a set of constraints that have social, cultural, and individual factors that may differ depending on the set of contextual circumstances that are operating (Seargeant and Tagg, 2014). Identity then could be seen as a construct that is enacted through social interaction with others and our relationships with them that reflects our role in the wider social environment (Luchman, Bergstrom and Krulikowski, 2014; Ellison, 2013). Odell (2019) emphasises that what we experience as our identity or the 'self' is completely bound to others, and thus where 'self' begins, and ends is difficult to quantify. This notion of self as a product of social interaction is central to three theories all of which highlight that the concept of self-identity is reliant on the surrounding social context: Cooley's (1902) 'looking glass self', Mead's (1934) 'shared meanings' and Goffman's (1959) 'dramaturgic analogy of social life'. These theories are highlighted as making important contributions to social constructionist thought and the notion that identity is viewed, not just as something given to individuals in any biological sense, but rather is produced or constructed by interactions and experiences. Over one hundred years ago, Cooley's (1902) 'looking glass self' theory posited the concept that the notion of 'self' and therefore identity is largely built by how an individual views him/herself in relation to others. Utilising the analogy of a mirror and the physical enactment of seeing oneself reflected, checking one's appearance can be likened to how individuals begin to imagine themselves with how they appear to others and anticipate their judgement. This social psychological theory considers the concept of identity as a receptacle that contains a collection of identities, roles, and values that an individual forms through an inner dialogue in response to the way they perceive they are reflected to others (Jones, 2015). Cooley (1902) further advocated that this imagined judgement evokes an emotion of 'self-feeling' which consequently influences subsequent actions. This symbolic interaction then is reflected by both verbal and non-verbal behaviours and

influences the way we think about ourselves, and how we come to see ourselves through the lens of others (Zhao, 2005).

Similarly, Mead (1934) postulated that in the context of social interaction, the self and a sense of identity evolves gradually through childhood. This, like Cooley's (1902) theory, identifies that how an individual perceives themselves is dependent on the interaction with others and in the case of a child, the larger community to which they belong. Therefore, a child may have multiple selves and their identity is shaped by the internalisation of the responses by others (Mead, 1934). Meadian theory further suggests that the concept of a social self, as an agent of interpretation and action, is dependent on the social field in which the individual locates themselves and is subsequently in a continual state of evolution that is subjective to the exterior world (Dunn, 1997). This is coined 'symbolic interaction' by Mead and is a result of selectively interpreting external stimuli in relation to self, attaching meaning which is the basis of social interaction (Strauss, 1964). Through this communal activity or 'social acts' individuals realise their role with others when learning to see themselves from the perspective of their co-actors (Mead, 1934). Identity is therefore not a singular entity, it may be more useful to characterise an individual's experience as a plural notion of 'identities' or at the very least different aspects of a person's identity which may be at play in any given time (Seargeant and Tagg, 2014).

Moving on from this, Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation helps us understand the duplicity of identity cues that we share with others. These can be both intentionally, that is, those that are 'given' through conscious management, and unintentionally, that is, those that are 'given off' less consciously through language choices and direct interaction with others. These can both illustrate how this affects the way we are perceived by others. Goffman (1959) used the metaphor of the stage to illustrate through the concept of dramaturgy the differences between situations in which self-presentation concerns are salient or less pronounced. This theory highlights that when individuals are in public settings, they are endeavouring to inculcate a specific impression among an audience - this is likened to the 'front

stage' like an actor presenting a performance. In contrast, there is the 'backstage,' that is a place where performers can relax and step out of character with people and circumstances that they are very familiar with. This is not as simplistic as it first seems, however, as the roles and stages are not always clearly defined and the role of the audience and the actor is interchangeable and occurs simultaneously (Davis, 2012; Hogan, 2010). This could be viewed in a dichotomous way with both the actor and the audience performing a role for the other to portray a certain personality or ideal self (Goffman, 1959). The ideas about the self being a presentation of a role rather than an innate characteristic have challenged how personal interactions are viewed and move away from more evolutionary theory (Ellison, 2013). On reflection, it is clear from these three theories that any discussions about identity are complex and more recent researchers have conceptualised identity as an ongoing and commitment to possible selves (Manago *et al.*, 2008).

2.4.1 Identity as a developmental process

Unlike the evolution of childhood theories from a developmental psychology perspective which dominated the twentieth century, moving towards a social constructionist paradigm from the 1980s to the present day, the notion of identity formation has seemingly followed a different trajectory. Social constructionist ideas presented previously in this discussion centred on identity as an enactment through social interaction and the perception of self being dependant on the societal environment (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934; Cooley, 1902). Erikson (1959), drawing upon and moving beyond Freud's (1905) controversial psychosexual theories¹⁶, proposed a conceptualised stage of psychosocial development as a predictable trajectory that individuals move through. Utilising this theory, identity is defined as a unique configuration that provides a sense of psychological well-being typified by a feeling of being 'at home' within the embodied experience (Erikson, 1968). At stage five of the process, a developmental period emerges where identity becomes the primary concern of individuals and is a phase when young people aim to foster their

¹⁶ A critique of Freud's psychosexual theory can be found in Chodoff, P. (1966) 'A critique of Freud's theory of infantile sexuality', *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 123(5), pp.507-518.

autonomy via their identity creation (Wood, Bukowski and Lis, 2016; Valkenburg and Peter, 2011). Adolescents and pre-adolescents can experience an 'identity crisis' (Erikson, 1968), that is, temporary instability and confusion as they struggle with ego growth, alternatives, and choices. It is during this crisis, or more specifically the way an individual resolves the crisis that will determine their personal development and future identity (Fletcher and Lawrence, 2018). Though concerned with adolescence, Erikson's theory could also apply to younger people and tweens, particularly as the online digital spaces that children find themselves privy to permeate their lives at a younger age (Darvin, 2016).

Omrod (2014) suggests that in current digital climates, as well as dealing with identity confusion in respect to the dual challenge of developing a unique identity whilst trying to fit in with peers, young people must determine how others perceive them digitally and thus social media adds another layer of complexity. Erikson (1968) does not dismiss the social construction of identity though and acknowledges that identity formation is the process of creating a coherent understanding of self across time and space as well as the socio-cultural milieu. Similarly, despite the stages he advocates, he recognises identity as an ongoing process and that, regardless of the conceptualisation of the body as being the home to this identity development, it is situated socio-culturally. Nelson *et al.* (2018), utilising Erikson's theory, suggest that identity may be viewed as a fit between culture and the individual. Furthermore, in a similar vein, Davis (2012) highlights that this process begins when individuals start to consider contexts beyond their immediate experience and contemplate their role within the broader societal context. In the case of a digitally mediated environment, this is even more apparent as individuals assume an increasing number of social roles and is more multifaceted than ever (Baldwin, 2020; Davis, 2010).

Marcia (1980) developed and refined Erikson's theory though similarly suggested that identity structure is dynamic and not static and proposed a four-stage model. In his theory, adolescence is similarly seen as a particularly important period due to his drawing upon Piagetian stages of development from concrete to formal operations (Piaget, 1954). Though he does acknowledge that identity formation does not just

begin in adolescence, but rather commences with self-object differentiation in infancy. The first stage of his theory, 'identity achievement', recognises that there is a greater variety of styles of dealing with the complexity of the identity issue than Erikson's (1959) dichotomy of identity versus identity confusion. Marcia (1980) highlighted that developing a sense of identity is a striving towards consistency and a sense of harmony between beliefs and values whilst recognising that a sense of future possibilities as well as choices may exist. Whichever paradigm is contextualised, identity development is an important facet of childhood and arguably provides the foundation for the 'rest of your life' (Brandtzaeg and Chaparro-Domínguez, 2020; Omrod, 2014). A person without a strong sense of identity may lack stable values and beliefs, in contrast, those with a strong concept of self-identity can adapt to challenges faced and ensure personal growth and healthy social interactions (Fletcher and Lawrence, 2018). Changing the focus of the lens, identity portrayal is seen as a key component of social media use (Dooly, 2017), but the contrived nature of social media platforms makes identity more of a forced reality compared to real-life interactions. For 'tweens' (8 – 12-year-olds), who are on the cusp of adolescence, the presentation of a 'digital identity' involves first steps in social positioning often across social media platforms and the selection of visual images and words to construct 'of-the-moment' online identities (Bourdieu, 1991).

Viewing identity formation on a developmental trajectory becomes problematic when digital spaces are considered (Evans, 2014). It could be argued that profile pages of social media networks are artefacts that exist to position the creator in relation to the reader/audience (Potter and McDougall, 2017; Potter, 2012). They carry meaning and are representations of the world the author wishes to communicate (Gulatee, Combes and Yoosabi, 2021). It is a deliberate presentation of self, an identity that is presented to the community in which socialisation occurs (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018) and in more recent theorising about identity formation, the impact on the individual of the exponential growth of digital spaces needs to be considered. Such growth takes the form of apps, social media platforms, data surveillance and individualised algorithmic feeds for advertisements, alongside celebrity, blogger, and YouTuber's widespread influence (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat, 2020; Buckingham, 2017; Stevens *et al.*, 2016). Children experimenting with their identities may not

recognise that other peoples' 'highlight reel'¹⁷ depicted via social media is not their real life for example. Possible and idealised selves can be presented online, and this can propagate pressure to continually adopt this fictitious persona (Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo, 2017; Vogel *et al.*, 2014). Allowing others to 'like' and comment on their lives can have implications for self-esteem since social acceptance and approval by peers is essential for the well-being of children and young people (Steinbekk *et al.*, 2021). How children are perceived by others is inextricably linked to how they feel about themselves (Koutamanis, Vossen and Valkenburg, 2015).

2.4.2 Identity and subjectivity through a poststructuralist lens

In contrast to previously mentioned theories of social constructionism and developmental psychology regarding identity, in a globalised, poststructuralist world this concept is seen to be more fluid, diverse in nature, repeatedly shifting and continually reconstructed through language and discourse (Dillet, 2017; Kouhpaenejad and Gholaminejad, 2014). Accordingly, it is important to consider how identity is situated as part of a wider conceptualisation that incorporates subjectivity - our sense of being in the world – as a central philosophical concept that considers feelings, belief, agency, and truth (Bernstein, 2016). In the context of social media, Cover (2014) ascertains that this type of platform enables space for the continued, ongoing construction of subjectivity and a reflexive performance of selfhood rather than just a context for identity play. This also fits with Butler's (1990) theory of identity performativity, which is based on the idea that identity and subjectivity is an ongoing process of 'becoming' (rather than an ontological state of 'being' favoured by social constructionists) and a series of acts retroactively constituted. Comparisons exist between previously mentioned Meadian theory and some of the ideas of poststructuralists. The former suggesting that the concept of a social self as an agent of interpretation and action is dependent on the social field in which the individual situates themselves. Therefore, this 'symbolic interaction' is viewed as a subjective experience to the exterior world (Mead, 1934). Similarly, from

¹⁷ A 'highlight reel' refers to social media users deliberately curating their best moments on their social media feed.

a poststructuralist perspective, Strauss (1964) emphasised these interpretative actions and highlighted this 'symbolic interaction' as construed selectively by the individual. He further suggested that it is through this communal activity or 'social acts' that individuals realise their own role in relation to others, from the perspective of their co-actors, and thus subjectivity can be influenced by this.

Poststructuralists tend to understand subjectivity as being constructed within a context of discursive practices. The conception of culture is therefore changed by indicating ways it is structured by both discourse and power and how human thought and behaviour is understood as a broad practice that is constituted in and through language structures (Dunn, 1997). Therefore, poststructuralism claims the conflict between subjectivity and objectivity is not polarised because the subject is produced outside itself, with views being learnt and what is deemed as objective knowledge is outside the subject and what constitutes subjectivity is not free from influence (Belsey, 2002). Poststructuralists argue that knowledge can never be free from ideology and this production of knowledge has both a political and competitive endeavour (Moss, 2019). This is especially apparent in the case of social media that is driven by advertisements and consumerism, and it could be argued that knowledge about the world, digital or otherwise is contradictory (Stevens *et al.*, 2016; Cover, 2014).

Adopting a Foucauldian lens, these power relations can be viewed as embedded within discourse with emphasis on the idea that social relations are a product of institutionalised practices. In this respect, social media could be perceived as a form of twenty-first century virtual panopticon¹⁸ with power and control now more covertly facilitated by technology and the oscillation of virtual realities affecting identity construction and subjective experience (Foucault, 1980). Deleuze (1992) also discussed the implications of identity being affected by institutions and dominant discourses and therefore subject to the influences of power and control. The construct of digital spaces in the form of different apps, social media platforms and

¹⁸ A panopticon is a circular prison with cells arranged around a central well, from which prisoners could always be observed.

individualised algorithmic feed of advertisements and data surveillance along with celebrity, blogger and YouTuber's influence does not exist separately from the notion of one's own identity. The all-pervading nature of these digital spaces has been described in terms of Deleuze's (1992) 'societies of control' that have captured the subject and taken away the freedom to choose not to express oneself. In this 'postscript' society, communication via social media is constant and resides in a feedback loop comprised of validation, likes and comment threads. It is unclear where the monitoring begins and ends as technological systems of real-time tracking are built into the infrastructure and 'dividuals' are reduced to quantifiable data.

Trottier (2012) argues that surveillance via social media is debatably a 'lived condition' that is a product of mobile technology and digital affordances. Furthermore, Brown (2014) highlights that as well as more overt surveillance for data generation and economic factors, social media reduces the control over information that is disclosed in terms of identity and social preferences. Lyon (2017) argues that within digital spaces, surveillance is becoming part of everyday life and suggests that rather than individuals being complacent, they do play an active role within this culture, through their own efforts to regulate and monitor that of themselves and others. Moving beyond the traditional concept of surveillance referred to by Foucault (1980) that refers primarily to institutional mechanisms enacted by the government, Lyon (2017) alternatively in the context of social media, suggests that individuals perceive the scrutiny that *could* take place. Hitherto, efforts to control the audience within digital spaces is more of a hidden type of surveillance that in effect does reaffirm power relations but in a less overt way. The term 'surveillance imaginaries' coined by Lyon (2017) summarises this concept in relation to the monitoring that may take place from both consumerism and data purposes as well as by others within digital spaces. Similarly, Duffy and Chan (2018) use the phrase 'imagined surveillance' which they emphasise steers individuals as social actors to present themselves and their identity within digital spaces in relation to how others may perceive them. This they liken to a type of 'cultural anxiety' and a fear of judgement, which can consequently encourage social media users to overtly consider how their peers view them in digital spaces and enact a type of impression management (Goffman, 1959). Jaynes (2020) takes this a step further by suggesting a type of

'peer surveillance' that occurs within digital spaces with an enhanced sensitivity of how individuals may be perceived by their peers, particularly in a physical sense, which may lead to a fictitious persona.

According to Anders (2009), identity is not static but is ever evolving and constructed according to the society in which we live. It can be viewed as an iteration that is multiply personified and arguably now digitally contrived with even more layers of complexity. This complexity, moreover, creates an intricate web of connections and a 'meandering path of shared subjectivity' that is more than merely a 'tightrope of identity' (Braidotti, 2014, p.168). This is possibly heightened by the 'surveillance imaginaries' (Lyon, 2017) described above and the fear of judgement (Duffy and Chan, 2018) that this may foster. For children, therefore, online activity signifies not only questions about identity formation but the subjective experience of childhood itself. It is important to highlight though that the decisions we make as adults and the discourses we uphold and portray, can silence children's subjectivity using a rigid framework to dictate their ways of 'being' and experiences (Nouri and Cameron, 2016). Moss (2019) contests the view that taking a position and assuming an identity is without choice or alternative but highlights that important narrative and dominant discourses influence how we make meaning of ourselves and our lives.

2.4.3 Identity and subjectivity in a networked era – the phenomenon of constructing identities on social media

With the advent of smartphones, faster Wi-Fi, easier access to the Internet¹⁹ and the possibility of social media offering a portal for communication and entertainment, individuals can express themselves and show visual expressions widely in a way that was not possible before (Nesi, 2020; Tartari, 2015). Far from being neutral in content though, these self-expressions can have political, legal, and cultural ramifications (Jones, 2015) as well as influence from dominant discourses as discussed in the previous section (Dillet, 2017). It is apparent that identity and the

¹⁹ It needs acknowledging that there is still a digital divide, where some individuals do not have equitable access to the Internet and technological devices due to poverty (Donelle *et al.*, 2021).

wider construct of subjectivity has changed due to the ubiquitous advances that technology and social media have made (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018). Subsequently, researchers have revisited prominent theorists and applied their ideas to more contemporary issues that social media produces. As previously presented, Cooley (1902) coined the term 'looking glass self' to explain that a notion of 'self' is built upon how an individual sees him/herself in relation to others. Zhao (2005) utilises this theory and updates it to demonstrate the implications to digital identity and the changing dimension of an online world, where the presentation of self is through a virtually disembodied experience. Our view of ourselves is reflected by how others react to us and in real life this is through both verbal and non-verbal cues. However, this differs through digital use and this he coins 'tele copresence' to describe interaction from a distance in a disembodied environment without being physically co-present. Consequently, the nuances of communication and discernment that comes from symbolic nonverbal cues to obtain accurate appraisals of others are compromised. In the analogy of the 'looking glass self,' Zhao (2003) therefore determines that this notion becomes 'opaque', and it may be difficult to see a clear reflection of ourselves and what is seen and subjectively experienced may differ considerably in an electronically mediated space as opposed to a corporeal experience.

Jones (2015) also utilises Cooley's (1902) theory and argues that in the case of social media, neither the reflection nor the others' judgement needs to be imagined. This is because digital media itself acts as a mediated mirror and social media engenders a space where the judgement of others is posted in response to photos, status updates, likes and shares, thus media sharing platforms can serve as a digital looking glass lens. Like Zhao (2005) she highlights that in real life interactions may be more ephemeral and reactions more nuanced with gestures, body language and inference through oral communication. This mediated form of capturing oneself is within the context of self-produced media, where the curator quite literally turns the lens on themselves to capture photographs (selfies) or videos (vlogs) this perpetuates a 'me – media' and represents a relatively new phenomenon (Butkowski, Dixon and Weeks, 2020; Jones, 2015). The analogy that Cooley (1902) encapsulates with the 'looking glass self' becomes even more apparent in a more

literal sense and can act as a magnifying glass in the case of social media. In research conducted by Gonzales and Hancock (2011), utilising a sample of sixty-three university students, they explored a more nuanced look at the relationship between Internet use and psychosocial health and gathered evidence to suggest that Facebook provides a self-flattering mirror. Their research randomly assigned participants either to their personal Facebook page, someone else's Facebook page, or a mirror. Results indicated that participants who saw their own Facebook page subsequently had higher self-esteem than participants assigned to other experimental conditions.

Gonzales and Hancock (2011) interpreted their results as evidence of the benefits and positive effects on self-esteem at being able to personally craft one's Facebook image in a digitally mediated environment, but their results could also be attributed to the benefits of exposure to the supportive virtual presence of Facebook friends. Whilst this does posit Cooley's (1902) theory in a digital landscape, this research is relatively dated, since Facebook is no longer the biggest social media site used by younger people, as Snapchat and Instagram have become more popular (Ofcom, 2021). Also, looking at your profile page is only a small part of using social media – this study does not consider the effects of likes/comments that others make on statuses and photos for example (Poore, 2016). Furthermore, self-esteem is difficult to quantify and consequently in a quantitative study such as this, it is difficult to conclusively make comparisons between factors (Punch and Oancea, 2014). Nevertheless, the connections made to self-esteem and subjective experience are important to this debate and how children and young people see their reflection virtually needs to be considered. In contrast to the potentially negative disembodied experience Zhao (2005) and Jones (2015) typified, Uhls, Ellison and Subrahmanyam (2017) propose that as children and young people express themselves on social media platforms, they could learn to read emotions and interpret signs and provide and receive social feedback. In addition, they participate in online conversations with potential new personal sources about what is morally right and wrong and about models to aspire to. Likewise, they receive feedback on their actions and values, and they experience self-validation that could contribute to the development of their own identity. The social competence that is perpetuated by social media is deemed as an

important facet to children and young people and a feeling of acceptance and comradeship is essential to their social and emotional development. Consequently, this disembodied reflection may not be as distorted as previously thought (Jones, 2015; Zhao, 2005).

2.4.4 Identity and the 'imagined audience' of social media

Goffman's (1959) theory of the front and backstage using the dramaturgical analogy, as presented previously, is frequently employed in more contemporary research to explain social media-based self-perception and identity. Alongside this, his theory of impression management where he asserted that individuals strive to control or guide the impression of how others perceive them with how they present their appearance, attitude and manner depending on the audience that they encounter. This 'imaginary audience' is also a useful lens to attempt to understand how users present their identity online and how they interact with each other via social media (Goffman, 1971; 1959). Cirucci's (2013) study conducted a systematic analysis that compared research regarding identity and reality in social media and video games. Just as a gamer creates an avatar before entering the game's world, similarly a profile on social media sites is generated, whereby the user documents aspects of themselves, alongside a profile picture before connecting with 'friends' and adjusting privacy settings. The point that Cirucci (2013) emphasises is that most gamers know that an avatar is only a representation albeit they may 'feel' some of these virtual experiences, whereas for social media users, this hyper-reality may result in individuals not being able to make the distinction between real and simulated reality, and is a danger of social media use, particularly for children. Identity on social media is therefore fluid and an ever-changing process, where the distinction between front and backstage identities may not be as apparent (Goffman, 1959). In Cirucci's research, it is highlighted that teens and young people are an especially important group because they are at a transitional period, where they are discovering who they are and who they want to be, which may leave them more exposed and vulnerable in terms of identity formation.

In a related review of literature, Litt (2012) ascertains that during face-to-face settings people interact with small and explicit audiences relying on what they can see and hear rather than on their imagination. In the case of social media, this is challenged and subsequently alters the size, composition, boundaries, cue accessibility and the perception of this 'imagined audience.' The less an audience is known, the more individuals become dependent on their imagination and individuals must navigate through these challenges and cope with such realities. The lines between these front and backstage personas become blurred and the author acknowledges that measuring an imagined audience is difficult to quantify, as self-reporting is problematic. Both Cirucci's (2013) and Litt's (2012) assertions do not utilise any empirical data, though both do help to contextualise how Goffman's (1959) theory can be applied to the context of social media. Mascheroni, Vincent and Jimenez (2015) in a study spanning three countries (Italy, Spain, and the UK) with a sample of one hundred and fifty-seven 11 – 16 years old, explored teenagers and pre-teenagers' discourses around the process of self-presentation online and how they experienced this. They argue that patterns of online identity are socially constructed, which concur with other literature (Baldwin, 2020; Odell, 2019; Seargeant and Tagg, 2014; Ellison, 2013), though they extend this by highlighting that this is reproduced or resisted in the daily use of mobile Internet technologies. They argue that the notion of identity and the attached meaning-making is better understood as a social and relational construct and that this is firmly embedded within peer culture, as children now have full-time access to their peers in a way that previous generations did not. Again, drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical account of social interaction and its accompanying rituals of impression management, individuals engage in this perpetual selective self-presentation aimed at controlling the impression made on their co-actors. This is integral to young people and Mascheroni, Vincent and Jimenez (2015) argue is far more heightened through social media and that tensions arise out of conflicting pressures. Negotiating what is deemed as appropriate and inappropriate posts to share about oneself, whilst conforming to socially accepted rules (which may be ill-defined) is problematic (Martin *et al.*, 2018; boyd, 2014). The emotional component of using social media is seen as challenging in research by Pyer, Lomax and Bramble (2019). They suggest that children need support in developing agency and discernment in relation to the pressures that they may be facing in digital spaces.

Similarly, Ranzini and Hoek (2017) employing a large sample of two hundred and sixty-eight participants between the ages of 16 and 65, emphasised that social media perpetuates an artificial 'imagined audience' and users of social media may feel that they are constantly under observation, which can have an impact on how they present themselves and can inform their impression management strategies. Social media facilitates and influences the way that individuals construct and narrate their lives in a public forum – audiences are something that users think about when interacting on social media and this has an influence on how they present their daily actions. Ranzini and Hoek's study concentrated on investigating how the perception of being observed impacts the way that Facebook users present themselves on the platform. Self-monitoring (deemed as a personality trait in this research) and individual privacy concerns in conjunction with impression management were investigated, using online surveys with a large sample and a wide demographic in terms of age. From their results, they deduced that impression management is a strong influencer of self-disclosure via social media, though does not generally have a gender nor age bias. Whilst, the research does offer some useful connections with Goffman's (1959) theory, the hierarchical regression analysis used and consequently preconceived hypothesis tested may have influenced the data collected. In addition, the age range of the sample was large and there is no rich analysis of how participants feel or what may drive this impression management. As with other studies, Facebook was used exclusively (Ditchfield, 2019; Huk, 2016; deVries and Kühne, 2015; Barbovschi, Machackova and Ólafsson, 2015; Cingel and Krmar, 2014) and may not represent the nuances of other social platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat, which are more popular with the younger contingent (Ofcom, 2021; Thomas *et al.*, 2020; NSPCC, 2018).

2.4.5 Multi-faceted identities on social media

Mishra and Ismail (2018) like Cirucci (2013) and Litt (2012) do not utilise empirical data, but in their literature review, draw several themes about social media together. They argue that social media affordances enable us to construct multi-faceted online identities and personal brands that we use to engage and interact with audiences which can be defined and ambiguous, intended, and unintended. The way we

present ourselves in a specific context depends to a great extent on the audience we have, this audience's expectation in offline contexts carries over to online settings as well. This finding is unlike other research previously mentioned, which suggest that there is a clearer distinction between online and offline impression management (Ranzini and Hoek, 2017; Mascheroni, Vincent and Jimenez, 2015). Vitak's (2012) and Marwick and boyd's (2010) 'context collapse' facilitates the flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one's social network into a more aligned, singular group of message recipients within the social media context. Drawing upon this, Mishra and Ismail (2018) suggest that this further complicates one's attempt to present an authentic version of oneself to multiple audiences who may evaluate such authenticity using different standards. This serves to highlight the complexity of impression management (Goffman, 1959) within the context of social media use. Like Mascheroni, Vincent and Jimenez, (2015), Kim (2017) emphasises that social media now plays a central role in most individual's lives and, in this research, identity construction is seen to be different from previous anonymous spaces. Kim's (2017) research conducted in Korea, using a sample of forty-six university students, highlighted that users display their self-identity through personal profiles thus they are 'networked selves' in which individual and collective identities are presented and promoted simultaneously. Consequently, online impression management and self-presentation involve conscious effort for creating the desired persona and using Goffman's (1959) term 'performance' can in the case of social media allow this identity presentation to be commented on by other users. Using evidence from questionnaires and in-depth interviews, Kim (2017) suggests that the performance type nature of social media leads to some individuals constantly striving to present an idealised version of themselves. By contrast, they describe some users as 'lurkers' who are reluctant to reveal their identity and personal information on social media and thus lack any overt digital interaction and tend to merely observe the activity.

2.4.6 Identity and digital interaction

Dooly (2017) points out that much of the discourse surrounding children's and young peoples assumed social media use has been vocalised by adults. In this research,

an extensive case study is used and allowed for a deep exploration and close analysis of how performative construction of identity in social media may be constructed. Like the previous research reviewed in this section, Goffman's (1959) theory is used in the theoretical framework, though, in this case, the socio-cultural dimensions are emphasised and the ongoing process and continuous performance that this facilitates. Here, however, Dooly (2017) suggested that in a digital realm this has added complexity due to the newer component of 'digital identity', that is, an intentional and contrived social presence online. In Dooly's research, it is evident that caution must be administered when theorising about online and offline identities as they are not separate (as also suggested by Kim, 2017). In this case study, the 'dramaturgical identity' (Goffman, 1959) is also drawn upon, which requires reflexivity as a sense of identity is reliant on others' perceptions, though reflexivity and audience segregation is sometimes apparent. Despite the interesting ideas put forward, this study was not conducted using actual social media sites for example, Facebook or Snapchat. Instead, a platform was designed for a cohort of students to use and therefore may not be transferable to actual social media platforms. Also, there are some ethical issues apparent since it is not made clear if the participants were aware that screenshots were being taken, and if they were, how this may have affected what they chose to share.

In more recent research, Ditchfield (2019), using screen capture technology, stressed concerns surrounding the quality of digital interaction and conversation and the amount of time spent online which previously Turkle (2011) referred to as 'reductive genres of abbreviation'. Ditchfield's research focuses on what happens pre and post messages sent and that this interactional order has a set of rules and a moral way to act and behave, with the quality of this interaction intrinsically linked with the presentation of self (Goffman, 1959). The pre-post editing allows for a time lag between messaging that real life does not allow and consequently, there is an affordance of editability and the opportunities this provides for identity construction (Jakaza, 2020). Therefore, the pre-post editing that this research concentrates on extends Goffman's (1959) concept of the front and backstage and is coined the 'rehearsal' stage of interaction. This is defined as an experience that is distinctive from the real experience (Goffman, 1971), essentially a space in which social media

users can construct, draft, and redraft the final presentations of self. Whilst this research has important implications for moving Goffman's (1971; 1959) theory forward, a very small sample group of just four participants was used, making generalisations problematic. In addition, the sample group was limited to those who use Facebook on a laptop device, many only use social media on smartphones as indicated by Ofcom (2021). There is also the possibility of researcher bias as participants were recruited from the researcher's social network and as with Dooley's (2017) research may be viewed as ethically problematic due to screenshots being taken of people's private conversations. The research that employs Goffman (1971; 1959), albeit in various guises highlights that these social interactions with others as an audience is an integral component of the building blocks of our identity formation and how our beliefs, values and behaviours are shaped. However, this distinction in identity may not be as definitive and impression management may not be as straightforward to manipulate on social media as it is in real life. Furthermore, Goffman (1959) stressed how audiences, both real and imagined, influence the self-presentation of individuals in daily interactions but the extent of one's audience is not always possible to quantify. For teens and tweens online, social networking has become an integral part of managing ones' identity and social relations and how they subjectively experience this has changed considerably due to the complexities that digital spaces have forced.

2.5 The affordances of online identity formation and subjectivity

As well as research that draws upon more traditional theory of identity as a social construction as discussed in the previous sections (Goffman, 1959; Cooley, 1902), there is also various research that highlights the different, implicit ways in which identity and subjectivity are experienced using social media. For example, reshaping of youthful practices of communication due to the alacrity in which children have taken up social media has considerable impact on identity and relationship management (Patchin and Hinduja, 2010). This can have a positive impact on children's social capital in terms of enhancing friendships and decreasing loneliness (Wood, Bukowski and Lis, 2016; Gonzales and Hancock, 2011). More recently

Livingstone and Pothong (2022) highlight the ample affordances for children's development in terms of socialisation and identity formation. However, Baccarella *et al.* (2018) argue that social media users are not in control of their own identity, thus leading to privacy and safety risks, and that individuals continue to post pictures and content without thinking of the ramifications. They argue that a sense of empathy is lost as users no longer see the impact of their actions. Although relatively dated, research by Dunne, Lawler and Rowley (2010) made an important distinction between social media users who use it for gratification and that a social media profile as the focal point of a virtual existence, where users can aspire to an ideal self even if this differs from their subjective experience. They refer to the sample age group (12 – 14 years of age) as being a particularly connected generation and girls were specifically chosen due to their marketing habits (consumption of fashion, cosmetics, and accessories) their perceived predisposition to gossip and use of an online environment. In the seven focus group discussions, with twenty-four participants, there was a clear link between identity creation and management and the accompanying desire for peer acceptance. From a marketing perspective, Dunne, Lawler and Rowley's (2010) study exemplifies how tweens use sites to share information about lifestyles, interests, tastes, and experiences thus offering valuable insight into their lives, though limitations of purposive sampling may be apparent in the decision to choose females only based on their perceived consumption of goods and patterns of social media use. Nevertheless, rich qualitative data is provided and the quotes from the participants allow a picture to develop, with a sense of their 'voice' coming through. This is particularly important since, as previously noted, it is often adults who comment on children and young people's perceptions of social media use (Dooly, 2017) and research with children and young people is scarce, with little known about their actual social media habits (Phippen and Street, 2022; Huk, 2016; Quinn and Oldmeadow, 2013).

This is also the case in research conducted by Pea *et al.* (2012) which employed a large sample of over three thousand participants between the ages of 8 – 12 years old. Seeking the view of this age demographic is a significant contribution to this field as there is little research in this area. During this time children deal with developmental challenges of growing intimacy with friends, exposure to risky

behaviours by peers and an assumed autonomy in schoolwork and home life as they advance towards puberty (Simpson, 2013). Pea *et al.*, (2012) highlight that these years comprise a pivotal time devoted to identity formation and the subsequent development of social networks with friends who can serve as models and peers for support and allies in navigating the social world. Furthermore, the possibilities of subjective experience have wider influences of outside factors and the immediate environment of the home is seen as not the only reality that exists. Particularly in the case of social media, these broader influences extend further than geographical limits would normally define and therefore it could be argued that society is experiencing an unprecedented shift in media ecology (Ellison, 2013). Children's occupancy of digital spaces is seen as being more reliant on cultural and societal norms, a type of 'third space,' beyond real life and virtual binaries (Bhabha, 1994). This is of concern for parents, teachers, and policymakers as they are unsure of the uncharted digital spaces (Livingstone *et al.*, 2020). Pea *et al.*'s study (2012) examined the relationship between traditional and new media use and face-to-face communication as well as social well-being indices (feelings of success, acceptance, and normality amongst friends). Quantitative data in the form of an online survey was collected, multiple choice questions on a scale with options and numerical values assigned for analysis were employed with some of the questions related to social media use and some to more traditional forms of media such as magazines and television. Results demonstrated that even heavy online users preferred face-to-face interaction over virtually contrived ones and there were negative feelings attributed to online communication and media multitasking which could affect children's perceptions of the digital world. Unfortunately, these negative experiences were not explained further due to the survey method and as it is self-reported data may not accurately represent the true complexity of digital use. However, the researchers argue that the sample is wider and more representative than classroom research which they deem homogenous and geographically limited.

2.5.1 Identity formation in digital spaces

Davis (2012) highlights the tensions of identity formation in digital spaces, where a networked era alters young people's subjective experience. She emphasises that

issues of identity are particularly salient for young people as they conceive new opportunities for self-expression through digital technologies. In this research, in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-four 'digital youth' between the ages of 15 – 25 years of age who were highly engaged in at least one form of digital media activity at the time of the interview. Results indicated a multiplicity and fluidity to identity with individuals assuming an increasing number of social roles across diverse contexts, which also concurs with research by Ditchfield (2019) and Dooly (2017). In addition, Davis (2012) highlighted that adolescents' practices on social media involved them effectively hiding in public, which is due to abbreviations or song lyrics being utilised which are pertinent to groups of friends. Arguably this could demonstrate how online identities are often more consistent and dependent upon offline identities. This is concurrent with research conducted by boyd (2014) who also ascertained this synchronicity of identity. In Davis' research, participants were asked to respond to a hypothetical dilemma involving online identity and therefore the data may not be as authentic as the participants discussing their own online identity. Nevertheless, it does emphasise that identity is a salient part of social media use and that tensions do need to be navigated and investigated more. Offering a clinical psychologist's perspective, Evans' (2014) research aligns with Davis' (2012) study and stresses that the process of socialisation is changing, with social media offering opportunities for teenagers to explore and experiment with their identity in a way that was not possible before. Similarly, it is apparent that this is a fundamental time in teenagers' lives, a time of formation of self and identity and this has implications because a large part of this transformation now occurs in an online capacity– where personal (internal) and social (external) identities exist simultaneously, with online and offline worlds now merging.

As with the previous studies, Cingel and Krcmar (2014) indicate that despite adolescent use of social media being high, there is less research that has examined the interaction between adolescent development and the use of social media, and this research seeks to posit this phenomenon within a developmental construct. Like Pea *et al.*'s (2012) study, in Cingel and Krcmar's research (2014), the new conceptualisation of adolescent egocentrism is theoretically understood as part of the separation that is an individuation process of adolescence, where children seek

to balance their own needs as distinct from their parents. This, they explain is amplified with social media use because the nature of this online formation stresses the importance of social interaction and the creation of one's own identity. In this large survey, with two hundred and sixty participants, and a diverse age sample of young people between 9 – 26 years of age, results demonstrated that social media and, in this case, Facebook may act as a media super-peer. This is described essentially as a construction of normative beliefs within an online community, where adolescents adapt their profiles, engage in comparison, and further adapt their profiles to fit in with the accepted norms. Cingel and Krcmar (2014) also suggest that adolescents go through a process of 'behavioural rehearsal' where they change their behaviour to be more in line with others who they seek to connect with or socialise with online and subsequently their subjectivity may frequently change and evolve. Despite the interesting results, as with other research, for example, Ranzini and Hoek (2017) and Ditchfield (2019), only the social media site Facebook was investigated and therefore may not be representative of other social media platforms. Also, due to the wide age range used in this research, there may be key differences between adolescent and adult use that have not been identified. Nevertheless, this wider target audience that social media affords and the connection to a larger set of people may instigate identity formation at an earlier age and there are certainly implications for future research as social media use continues to gain popularity and the amount of time people spend on it increases (Ofcom, 2021).

2.5.2 Identity formation in relation to societal norms

Vermeulen, Vandebosch and Heirman (2018) highlight that Facebook use amongst young people is waning and other platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat are more popular. Utilising an interpretative approach in the form of in-depth interviews with twenty-two young people between the ages of 14 and 18 years of age, the researchers concluded that social media is often used by teenagers as a means of emotion regulation. Fundamentally, they look at online content to change or enhance their current mood and affect their subjective experience implicitly. They suggest adolescents deal with physical, social, cognitive, and emotional changes, as well as the most important task of establishing an independent identity combined with

spending less time with family and more time with peers. Therefore, they need to learn to regulate their emotions, and this is often enacted through sharing their emotions for the dual purpose of personal expression and to receive feedback, like Cingel and Krcmar's (2014) 'behaviour rehearsal' as indicated above. Vermeulen, Vandebosch and Heirman (2018) emphasise the terms of 'time and place controllability' vary and that adolescents learn from peers' which sites are good. Subsequently, in response to this they adhere to societal and peer norms for example, it was noted in this research that it is not acceptable to share overtly emotional statuses on Facebook. Similarly, it was deemed more appropriate to disclose intimate information in private messages. Therefore, adolescents can be seen to strive to meet the norms because this is a time of heightened self-consciousness and a subjective experience that is concurrent with observations of how others perceive them. Participants in the study also suggested that they enjoyed receiving likes and positive comments and that venting negative emotions helped them regulate how they feel and offered some temporary relief to frustrations. As with Davis' (2012) research, Vermeulen, Vandebosch and Heirman (2018) emphasise that identity online and offline may not be two distinct entities. Notably, then, young people often protect their privacy by using vague language, quotes, or pictures, a so called 'social steganography' (boyd, 2014). Consequently, only those 'in the know' may understand the message and this enables a type of subculture to emerge. There are clear merits of this research, namely that comparing multiple platforms mirrors the complexity of adolescents' daily lives because they must navigate which mode they will use and follow the perceived etiquette of conduct. In addition, allowing adolescents to have a 'voice' can help explain and theorise how they use social media to regulate their feelings. However, adolescents may not always be aware that they are intentionally sharing their emotions and may have been reluctant to disclose more sensitive information in a focus group capacity.

Also using focus groups, Throuvala *et al.* (2019) highlight from their findings that the technological landscape inevitably influences usage, for example, the transient nature of Snapchat appears to provide congruent communication. This platform was deemed as an 'inner circle' amongst the forty participants of 12 – 16 years of age, with the exchange of personal information paramount and implicit uses and rules

such as Snapchat streak maintenance (keeping track of the days in a row people have talked or interacted with each other). Throuvala *et al.*, (2019) that identity development facilitated through the interaction of the self with others on social media platforms, can enable friendship formation and provide social support for the development of behaviour, goals, and attitudes. Yet, adolescents at this stage tend to distance themselves from primary attachment figures and self-regulatory devices are developing and thus they may be more emotionally vulnerable with their increased digital socialisation. In this data, reasons cited for this included the need for constant availability and validation, perceived enjoyment of others, social relationship formation, mood regulation, entertainment, and a need to conform to group norms. Here, engagement with the online environment is seen as dynamic and evolving and Throuvala *et al.* (2019) indicate that further empirical investigation is required that can shed light on fresh perspectives and insights into young people's social media use.

2.5.3 Identity as positive self-representation

Duffy (2019), theorising about the complexities of social media use, suggests that it has become axiomatic that social media is an exercise in self-presentation. He indicates that projecting an online identity is a creative act just as much as choosing what to wear to a party or inventing a fictional character and therefore social media is the perfect space for experimenting with social identity. Just as children tell tall tales in the playground and experiment with possibilities of who they can be, as they rehearse for the future, this is replicated in social media use and allows the curation of self to achieve an image-based goal. Rather than having a fixed or static identity, teens are a 'work-in-progress' on social media, just like they are in the offline world and can create their narrative and craft their own identity as an ongoing construct. The dichotomy presented by Duffy (2019) though is whether an individual represents the influence *of* society, as much as the individual creating an identity *within* society. This complexity of locus, and the consequence of observing separation from or an engagement with societal norms through the landscape of social media, may facilitate a more nuanced understanding of how the negation of self occurs within this realm. The polarity, as discussed in this section, resonates with the social

constructionist notion of identity formation but also the wider construct of subjective experience and how children feel about how they portray themselves. Children and young people may have more reflexivity and agency within this than previously thought (Pyer, Lomax and Bramble, 2019; Oswell, 2016).

2.6 Body image and gendered identity portrayal

Academics and researchers consistently take a problem/solution-based approach which leads to young people's use of social media being seen in problematic terms (Pangrazio and Gaibisso, 2020; Duffy, 2019). Though, Baccarella *et al.* (2018) argues that there is a duality to social media use, and it is not as straightforward as light or dark, good, or bad. Preoccupations with body image and distorted physical self-image is an issue that the mass media and social media perpetuates with idealised body types and depictions of unrealistic images of celebrities and models being posted online (MacLissac, Kelly and Gray, 2018; Tatangelo and Ricciardelli, 2017). This is concurrent with young people being able to post their physical appearance on the Internet and strive for perfection through editing, filtering, and enhancing their features (Burnell, Kurup and Underwood, 2021; Shin *et al.*, 2017; Chae, 2017; Toma and Hancock, 2010). This problem has become part of a wider issue of 'social grooming' and a greater desire and drive for socially accepted body norms (Kim and Chock, 2015). Similarly, Ashurst and McAlinden (2015) coin the expression 'peer-to-peer' grooming and suggest that perceived ways of looking and acting could affect young people's self-esteem.

Tatangelo and Ricciardelli (2017) in their research into body perceptions via media, with sixty-eight children between the ages of 8 and 10 years old, conducted in depth interviews and focus group discussions. They concluded in their analysis that appearance was considered more important to the girls in the sample group and sports and ability related comparisons were more prevalent for boys. Similarly, there was a distinct gender divide with negative connotations relating to media comparison for girls and a more inspiring association for boys. The gendered trends identified in the analysis were concurrent with gender ideologies that are portrayed in Western

society (Steinbekk *et al.*, 2021; Butkowski, Dixon and Weeks, 2020; Oswell, 2016; Leonard, 2016; Renold, 2004). Tatangelo and Ricciardelli (2017) deemed this as an important concept and they concluded that gender identity in childhood is more fixed than in adolescence, which concurs with other research which depicts the fluidity of identity in adolescence (Ditchfield, 2019; Dooly, 2017; Davis, 2012). Subsequent research in this area is important as Tatangelo and Ricciardelli (2017) concluded that this affected the personal expectations of children and research with this age group is infrequent (Huk, 2016). Although in Tatangelo and Ricciardelli's (2017) study rich, nuanced data is provided and an opportunity to hear the child's voice through quotes, the interviews and focus groups may have been affected by their peers and by the female interviewer, particularly as they may have been interpreted from a female perspective of boys' experiences (Wilson, 2017). In addition, the demographic and socio-economic groups of the parents were not collected, and this may have affected the results. Whilst this study discusses 'media' in general it does have strong connotations with the perpetual bombardment of body imagery that is also applicable for children via social media (Chae, 2017). The school context is also important to this comparison, as children are situated within a larger group and a mix of body shapes and opportunity for direct comparison, whereas social media exposes them to a highly idealised body shape and image.

In Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo's (2017) qualitative study also utilising focus groups, with a sample of thirty-eight participants of 12 – 14 years of age, Instagram and Snapchat were reported as the most popular platforms both of which have an image focused content. In this research, selfies were self-reported as not being posted frequently but this was contradictory to the paired sample tests where friends were asked to report on their friend's selfie posting. Social media etiquette was a sub-theme that emerged from the data, and it was claimed that standard behaviour was "interwoven with judgements about what was acceptable and unacceptable" (p. 117). Acceptable behaviours were cited as posting artwork, groupies and posting infrequently whereas posting 'excessive' posts, negative comments and selfies were named as unacceptable. A dominant idea that emerged was that the young people in this sample perceived their social media use as being different from peers outside of the school. This led the researchers to ascertain that the culture of the school and in

particular the resilience to negative body image is addressed frequently in this private school for girls and consequently echoed in their responses. This could be seen as an example of cultural capital and that the socio-economic status of the setting is difficult to disentangle from the social interactions and culture perpetuated by it. Social comparison was cited as another sub-theme and this included both peer and celebrity sub-themes, which is concurrent with other studies (Latif *et al.*, 2021; Butkowski, Dixon and Weeks, 2020; Bianchi *et al.*, 2017; Chae, 2017; Tatangelo and Ricciardelli, 2017; Fardouly *et al.*, 2015; Chou and Edge, 2012) and suggests a strong correlation.

Appearance concerns and general dissatisfaction with their appearance was a dominant theme, with half of the participants mentioning body dissatisfaction, although this figure may have been affected by the sample being all female. The focus group method may have restricted individual responses or may have been dominated by a member of the group and consequently group dynamics could have been affected (Wilson, 2017), as previously suggested with Tatangelo and Ricciardelli's (2017) research. Different facilitators were used to interview the focus groups, some of whom had more experience than others and whilst there was an effort to ensure cross coding by the first and then the second author there may have still been comparability issues. However, Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo (2017) highlight future research needs to consider alternative ways of probing social comparisons qualitatively to warrant more forthcoming responses. Similarly, research by Metcalfe and Llewelyn (2020) emphasise that there are rules of gender that are unwritten in both the physical world of school and the peer culture in which children and young people inhabit as well as within digital spaces. Social media, then, they argue, may reinforce, and perpetuate these gender norms. However, Renold *et al.*, (2017) suggest that the enactment of these complex gendered normative behaviours may be amplified by social media and consequently may reinforce gender struggles, particularly for girls in relation to their physical appearance.

2.6.1 Social comparison

As well as overt body comparison that social media seemingly perpetuates, social comparison is also present in the affordances of portraying oneself online and Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory is utilised as the theoretical underpinning in many research studies into social media (Chae, 2017). Though there are different lenses adopted concerning this theory (Chou and Edge, 2012), it is dominant in terms of conceptualisation and exemplifying a potential reason children and young people act in a particular way that could be identified within the parameters of this notion. Over sixty years ago, Festinger (1954) proposed this social comparison theory, which advocated that people have a fundamental desire to evaluate their abilities and opinions to strive towards a stable and accurate appraisal of themselves. The popularity of this theory is perhaps because it pervades all domains of life and is a basic social phenomenon that continues to permeate today's society despite the elapse of time since its inception and consequently it has had considerable theoretical and empirical attention (Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz, 2016). deVries and Kühne (2015) propose that social networking sites such as Facebook give the impression that others are doing better than we are and that this may lead to negative social comparison. This is also highlighted by Chou and Edge (2012) who suggest that social networking sites are notorious for this misrepresentation of reality and the false power of suggestion that people are living better lives than we are. Using a sample of four hundred and twenty-five undergraduate students, from Utah, USA, they ascertained that participants generally present themselves and their lives positively on social media sites, posting photographs when they look their best and are having a good time with their friends (Dorethy, Fiebert and Warren, 2014). For children who are in a vulnerable position in terms of self-perception and are more inclined to want to fit in with their peers, this is even more of an issue as the pressure to look good and maintain an active social life is realised. Additionally, research has indicated that social media nurtures negative self-comparison and can harm psychological well-being (Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz, 2016; McLean *et al.*, 2015).

Subsequently, most of the time that children spend online on social network sites consists of viewing idealised profiles, pictures, and status updates. Chou and Edge's (2012) study encapsulating the hypothesis that social media sites such as Facebook led to the perception that everyone else is happier, has a profound effect on psychological well-being. This study refers explicitly to Festinger's (1954) theory and the fact that social media may impact how people perceive themselves because self-perceptions are at least partly based on how they are doing compared to others. In this study, the theory is related specifically to the perception of self in passively viewing others' profiles and investigates the potential effects of social media use on self-perception through social comparison. Results demonstrated that many identify themselves as doing less favourably than they perceive others in relation to the idealised profiles and edited photographs that they see online. In turn, these negative self-perceptions can have a detrimental effect on well-being and concurrent with the theory of Festinger (1954) reflect negative self-comparison that will directly influence the area or domain of their life that they are comparing. The conclusions of this study exemplified that social networking sites can impact considerably on self-perceptions and well-being in both positive and negative ways depending on the individual user.

In another study, conducted in the USA, Wang, Yang and Haigh (2016) utilised an extensive survey method, with a sample of two hundred and seventy-five participants with an average age of thirty-three. Findings indicated that frequent selfie viewing behaviour led to decreased life satisfaction, whilst frequent groupie viewing behaviour resulted in increased life satisfaction. Selfie or groupie posting in this study is considered a type of self-disclosure behaviour and can be related to the presentation of self. An issue with utilising social comparison theory in research though, is that most people do not admit that they compare themselves to others and well-being is difficult to quantify, particularly during an online survey. Booker, Kelly and Sacker (2018) emphasise that adolescents are among the highest consumers of social media and rapid changes in technology have given rise to many questions surrounding short- and long-term effects on overall well-being. Whilst social media allows for interaction between people it is still a sedentary activity that can be conducted in a solitary environment. Booker, Kelly and Sacker's (2018) research

conducted in the UK, had a very large sample of nearly one thousand 10 – 15-year-olds and perceived well-being was determined by six questions covering domains of life such as family, friends, appearance, schoolwork, and life as a whole and recorded on a Likert scale. As noted by much other research, adolescents are increasingly engaged in social media and the long-term effects on well-being are not fully known (Ofcom, 2021; NSPCC, 2018). In this study, well-being scores differed by gender and age and findings indicated that increased social media interaction was correlated as a causal link with lower levels of happiness and higher levels of socio-emotional difficulties. The research indicated that there may be a mediating role of upward social comparison (Festinger, 1954) with the relationship between social media interaction and well-being particularly among females as they get older. This consequently highlights that it is important to educate children before they become teenagers as it is essential that they understand the implications increased social media interaction can have on their well-being. Though Booker, Kelly and Sacker's (2018) research have significant connotations, especially for gender differences, it is essential to point out that this research relies on self-reported data which may be misrepresentative (Creswell, 2014).

Charoensukmongkul (2018) also using survey data, though generated in Thailand, and with a slightly older sample (13 – 19 years old) of two hundred and fifty participants, indicated that teenagers' behaviours are shaped by the social context to which they belong, and parents and friends have a strong influence on the behavioural outcomes that teenagers develop from their social media use. This research makes the explicit link between the intensity of social media use and negative consequences of social comparison and envy, which is concurrent with the previous study (Booker, Kelly and Sacker, 2018). Charoensukmongkul (2018) highlights how teenagers deploy social media for self-presentation to impress each other and not all information that is shared on social media tends to reflect the reality of the user who has shared it. Effectively information posted on social media tends to be socially desirable which aims to create an impression to others (Vogel *et al.*, 2014). This is like the claims of Chou and Edge's (2012) study, where they also highlight that not all 'friends' on social media are personally known. Consequently, they tend to rely on availability and posts/pictures that friends have posted to form

impressions of them. The theoretical underpinning of Festinger (1954) is also used in Charoensukmongkul's (2018) research, and individuals are seen to be motivated to compare themselves with others who are like them to gauge their ability and performance. Whilst this does occur in everyday life, this is more intense within the online social media community due to the contrived way people showcase their 'highlight reel'. Accordingly, feeling envious of other people's posts can cause a feeling of inferiority brought on by unfavourable social comparison which is amplified by the passive following of information that friends share on social media (Hanna *et al.*, 2017). This could be proactively examining the profiles of friends and perceiving that they are more attractive than them or live more favourable lives. In Charoensukmongkul's (2018) study, it is emphasised that in making these unrealistic comparisons, teenagers tend to underestimate their friends' negative experiences but overestimate their positive ones and consequently this can cause emotional distress. Research of this nature makes important contributions to viewing how teenagers use social media and how their subjective experience is affected by others use. However, Likert scale type questions could have been leading and the study lacks any rich qualitative comments that may have emerged (Punch and Oancea, 2014). Furthermore, self-reported measures can be susceptible to subjective bias by the respondents (Wilson, 2017) and not every teenager will be affected by social media use at the same level and as a result, this study is not necessarily generalisable.

2.7 Summary of the literature review

It is clear from the literature, that the omnipresence of social media and the changes to socialisation and communication that it subsequently affords, particularly for children and young people, has created a paradigm shift in the development of identities and how subjectivity is experienced through emotional regulation and self-expression (Brandtzaeg and Chaparro-Domínguez, 2020; Luo and Hancock, 2020; Goodyear, 2019). Situating children as social actors, with agency and as co-constructors of their own lives (Prout, 2011; James and James, 2004; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998) is important when considering how social media permeates young people's lives. This is especially important as their ubiquitous use of social media

may not be experienced as the online/offline binary that characterises the lives of older generations (Goodyear and Armour, 2019; Reich, Subrahmanyam and Espinoza, 2012). The notion of a digital childhood has wider implications not only with how children socialise and communicate but how they develop a sense of self, and their identity formation is more publicly navigated (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2018; Renold *et al.*, 2013). The concept of identity is challenging as it can be seen through different perspectives, according to the paradigm within which it is situated, this ranges from social constructionism (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934; Cooley, 1904) to developmental psychology (Marcia, 1980; Erikson, 1968) and more recently with poststructuralism (Deleuze, 1992; Foucault, 1980). It also includes subjective experience and the influences of discourse and power.

Despite the difficulty in defining the term 'identity' and the broad, nebulous, and ambiguous nature it encapsulates, it provides a useful lens through which to view aspects of young people's relations with social media more clearly. It draws attention to critical questions surrounding personal and social relationships and the nature of these social and cultural experiences. Furthermore, it questions social power, consumerism, and inequality as well as societal change. A focus on identity requires close attention to the diverse ways in which social media and technologies are used in everyday life by young people and their consequences for both individuals and social groups. It involves viewing children and young people as significant social actors and an investigation into their experiences of social media in relation to their formation of identities requires an approach that is not characterised by moral panics. Alongside this, the review of literature has reflected on studies of how the affordances of identity formation and subjectivity experienced with social media exist within a changing digital landscape. This can also be perceived as a gendered experience, particularly concerning body image and how girls feel about themselves in relation to filtered photographs and societal norms of how they should look.

2.7.1 Research questions

The gap in the literature has emerged from reviewing the existing literature and demonstrates that children's subjective experience of social media is under-researched. As mentioned, what is known about social media use and interaction tends to be dominated by research with older teenagers and adults (Huk, 2016). To understand children's digital spaces and what their online practices entail it is essential that research takes place with children of this age (Livingstone and Brake, 2010). As it is apparent that despite the terms of service for social media use being thirteen years of age, many tweens are utilising these digital spaces (Charmaraman *et al.*, 2022; Pangrazio and Gaibisso, 2020; NSPCC, 2018) and furthermore that these figures may be conservative. Adult's perceptions of how tweens may be experiencing social media do not adequately safeguard them from less overt online dangers of an emotional nature, nor capitalise on the positive aspects that they may experience. Moreover, identity portrayal and subjective experience tend to be identified and defined by others. Seemingly, what is missing in this field, is the subjective experience of social media use as defined by children themselves in changing digital spaces that they navigate as well as their real-life interactions. Therefore, the subjective experience of social media as defined by children is at the core of this research. The aim was to provide an opportunity for children to share their views and insights into their experience of social media and how they make meaning of their digital identity and its portrayal. This meaning-making is understood as a social and relational construct that is situated within peer culture (Mascheroni, Vincent and Jimenez, 2015). The online/offline binary has blurred particularly for younger generations where the boundaries of the digital affordances may be ill-defined (Darvin, 2016; boyd, 2014). It is also important to consider feelings and how they are incorporated into the meaning-making process.

To explore children's subjectivity of social media and how they present their digital identity online, I posed the following four questions:

RQ1: In what ways are children's identities shaped by their experiences of social media within digital spaces?

RQ2: What influence does gender have on children when using social media within digital spaces and how does this affect how they feel about themselves?

RQ3: To what extent do children feel the pressure of social media within digital spaces and how do they negotiate these experiences?

RQ4: What knowledge can children share about using social media within digital spaces to support other children's use?

In the following chapter, I outline the methodological approach that I adopted to answer the research questions and contextualise the research design.

Chapter Three - Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the research paradigm adopted to frame this study is presented as an important element of the research design concerning the ontological and epistemological assumptions which contextualised the framework. My standpoint and reflexivity as the researcher form an integral part of the research design documented in this chapter. Ethical considerations are also held paramount to the methodology of this study and how this was executed is examined. The evolution of the research questions, in response to a sizable pilot study and extensive reading, are described. The sampling technique of a non-probability, purposive sample that was employed in four primary schools in the South Wales area is detailed and how the participants were selected explored. Data generation methods, in the form of focus groups and the creative participatory method of collaging with interviews are presented, both in terms of the suitability of these methods to the overall aim and research questions, as well as potential limitations. Finally, the analytical framework implemented, which entailed consideration of layers of complexity, is discussed.

3.1.1 Consideration of the research design

Researchers are presented with a variety of research designs, paradigms and approaches which can seem like a 'bewildering labyrinth' (Hammersley, 2012). It is therefore essential that due consideration is given to the research design to ensure that the complexities of this are addressed throughout the process (Punch and Oancea, 2014). Research is framed by a set of related assumptions that can be classified as four key areas; ontology relating to the nature of the social world, epistemology exemplifying how this existence is known, methodology typifying the over-arching paradigm undertaken and methods characterising techniques of data generation selected (Punch, 2014; Arthur *et al.*, 2012). In simplistic terms, the research design could be defined as being the point in which research questions become and turn into a research project, encompassing the issues involved in

planning and executing from the problem through to reporting the results (Punch, 2014).

Basit (2010) emphasises that ontological and epistemological assumptions lead to the methodology considerations. Furthermore, these assumptions affect the researcher's stance and viewpoint and do not appear in a vacuum, they are influenced by gender, social class, ethnicity, political views and so forth (Yin, 2016). This axiological position refers to the values and principles that the researcher holds and therefore it is essential to avoid bringing bias to the research, whilst recognising your stance within it (Basit, 2010). Similarly, Hopkins (2014) highlights the importance of avoiding ethical bias and stresses that despite holding their own truths and assumptions, the researcher should adopt a 'value free' position wherever possible. He does acknowledge, however, that it is impossible to be objective as invariably personal biases cannot be avoided. Central to this study and underpinning the entire research project is the premise illustrated by Robson (2013) that the investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon is explored within its real-life context. This is especially important to consider in this research, as social media is prevalent in modern life (Ranzini and Hoek, 2017; Kim, 2017; Barbovschi, Machackova and Ólafsson, 2015) and this consequently has influenced the methodological position that I have adopted.

3.2 The research paradigm

The dominant paradigms that exist within investigation in the social sciences and education, are characterised as positivist and interpretivist approaches; each providing a theoretical framework that influences the methodology selected by the researcher (Creswell, 2014). Positivist researchers are typified by strict adherence to the rules of scientific methods and generally rely on quantitative data that is objective and uninfluenced by their interests or agenda (Arthur *et al.*, 2012). In contrast, interpretivist researchers identify the complexity of human behaviour through the gathering of qualitative research data (Roberts-Holmes, 2018; Cohen, Manion and

Morrison, 2017). Lather (2006) argues that power has been held by positivist research and it has dominated academic discourse in the past, with social scientists and interpretivism viewed as inferior to scientists. Conversely, Pring (2015) argues that the distinction between the two paradigms is a misleading polarisation, and that research may endorse elements from both models for example, positivism elucidates the what, whereas interpretivism clarifies the why and how and investigates the reason for the phenomena. Basit (2010, p.15) concurs and describes the artificial differentiation between these archetypes, saying that “the positivist and the interpretive paradigms have been criticised for offering partial versions of social phenomena.” Conversely, Mukherji and Albon (2018) note that interpretivism is predominantly utilised in studies with children, particularly as they are usually observed within their environment. With this taken into consideration, an interpretivist lens was adopted for this study as most suited to the methodology chosen and philosophies and principles that underpinned the entire research process (Roberts - Holmes, 2018). Lather (2016, p.129) argues that an interpretivist approach endorses qualitative work and gives “...the incalculable, the messy, and the responsibilities of not knowing”. Likewise, Punch (2014) establishes that the method lies behind the inquiry in a piece of research, whereas Arthur *et al.* (2012) highlights the fact that those methodological assumptions reflect certain ontological and epistemological positions which will now be explored in the following sections.

3.2.1 Ontological assumptions

According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017), ontological assumptions are concerned with the very essence of the social phenomena being investigated, which can also be described as social reality through interpretation (Arthur *et al.*, 2012) or more simplistically, what the reality is like (Punch, 2014). Thomas (2016) characterises this as what you are looking at and the events that exist in the social world to validate this. Furthermore, he ascertains that ontology also assists with the construction of the research and helps develop an awareness of different ways of viewing the world. This has implications for myself in my role as a researcher, as the pervasive nature of social media in everyday life (Kim, 2017) also involves my own experience of using digital spaces. This study investigated the subjective experience

of social media use for children of 10 and 11 years of age. It was their perceptions that were sought and were therefore paramount in ascertaining how they constructed their understandings of that experience (Basit, 2010). I acknowledge that I am presenting a specific version of the participant's social reality (Woods, 2012). Subsequently, the social phenomena and associated meanings are continually being constructed and revised (Bryman, 2016). The fast pace of technological advancements (Booker, Kelly and Sacker, 2018) and the way social media is present in everyday lives (Clark, 2011) influences this social reality. My role as a researcher requires reflexivity and a presentation of a truth rather than *the* truth (Yin, 2016).

Social constructionism is a theoretical perspective that explores how 'reality' is negotiated in everyday life through an individual's interaction and set of discourses (James and James, 2012). In this case, employing a social constructionist standpoint seeks to understand how the notions of children and childhood are constructed and how various conceptions exist among different cultures, societies and at different times in history (Norozi and Moen, 2016). This more contemporary notion of children and childhood focuses on the collective actions of children with each other (Ruck, Peterson - Badali and Freeman, 2017). Reality then is neither objective nor singular, instead, multiple realities are created by individuals (Alford, 2012). Furthermore, Creswell (2014) notes those individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences and these are complex and varied. This complex and wide range of positions that social constructionism refers to highlights the relationship between constructions and reality and how we socially construct these notions (Bøe, 2021). Furthermore, social constructionists argue that we create our worlds and perceptions of this collaboratively, which in the case of social media is discursively produced and offers a lens of inter-connectedness (Alford, 2012). It can therefore be argued that we have multi-identities that are shaped by the environment in which we situate ourselves (Darvin, 2016; Greene and Hogan, 2005) and with the advent of social media essentially how we communicate and interact has changed. The affordances of social media through asynchronous posting of texts, images and statuses reduces the contextual cues of feedback and combined with surveillance assimilates online identities with consumer preferences and iterative algorithmic judgements (Alford, 2012).

The ontological assumptions that underpin my research lie within the premise that digital spaces which now exist heavily incorporate social media and are consequently forcing a change to the way young children socialise (Blackwell *et al.*, 2014; Pea *et al.*, 2012). Arnott (2017) describes how new digital technologies reflect social constructionist theories in a variety of ways. For example, mobile technology affords children the ability to reconstruct the meaning of childhood, challenging the notion of childhood innocence as children are now key players in their identity formation, which consequently challenges the order of childhood. Accordingly, childhood is a social space (James and James, 2004) and children begin to negotiate their own and other individual's identities. As mentioned, it is important to consider that identities are ever-evolving and are not fixed but fluid and constructed according to the society in which we live (Anders, 2009). Children's culture now has a digital layer due to the pervasive nature of social media use and is caught between a dichotomy of agency and social vulnerability (Buckingham, 2017). Children, at the cusp of adolescence, are making their first tentative steps in social positioning and via text, images and online interaction on social media are beginning to construct their identities (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018).

3.2.2 Epistemological assumptions

Epistemological assumptions can be classified as the relationship between the researcher and the reality (Punch, 2014) and how we know about the world that has been defined ontologically (Thomas, 2016). Consideration of these highlights the relationship between the nature and scope of knowledge and how belief is justified (Arthur *et al.*, 2012). Research surrounding children's social media use is limited as highlighted by Blackwell *et al.* (2014) and consequently interpreting their subjective experience of using social media is an important premise for this research.

Children's engagement with social media is often portrayed as problematic and typifies the subsequent public rhetoric surrounding how they supposedly experience these digital spaces (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018). By positioning the child's subjective experiences of social media and how they make meaning of this centrally in this research constitutes an attempt to ascertain the very essence of their interpretations. We often know things associated with certain phenomena because

we experience them, and this empiricism requires questioning and thorough investigation (Basit, 2010). The pervading influence of social media on every day, modern life (Kim, 2017; Clark 2011) emphasises the importance of considering this within my study. Clough (2002) suggests that to 'make the familiar strange' a focus needs to be drawn towards taken for granted occurrences in life. Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont (2003, p.47) explore the notion of 'strangeness' and 'familiarity' and suggest how the researcher needs to consider how "to *make* phenomena strange or familiar", rather than just basing it on our own identity and perception of a culture. Similarly, Clough and Nutbrown (2012) suggest that researchers need to develop the capacity to view their research topic from a different lens, to look beyond their own knowledge. From a more sociological stance, Mannay (2016, p. 32) discussed this notion of 'making the familiar strange' to fight both familiarities and to challenge preconceived ideas of place and space. This concept was particularly important in this research as I have an online identity through three social media platforms, namely Facebook, Instagram and Twitter as well as being a part of multiple groups via WhatsApp. This process of defamiliarization (Mannay, 2016) is considered more extensively within the section on the reflexivity of the researcher in section 3.2.5.

The epistemological assumptions held in this research are based on the premise of there being a distinction between an online and offline identity, a highly managed portrayal of self to an online community and an awareness of audience but this may not be the reality for the younger participants in this study. Leppänen *et al.* (2015) stress that each social media domain has a particular set of rules, dynamics, and etiquette that users need to adhere to when posting, this makes for a complicated journey through interpretative conventions for the participant's social activity. I am aware of these assumptions and manage my social media platforms in a controlled and mediated way according to the perceived audience. However, this may not be the case for the child participants, and consequently, a dichotomy may exist that assumes that either young people are oversharing their lives or hiding behind a screen (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018). In addition, social media use with young children is under-researched (Huk, 2016) and much that is known is from research with older participants and tends to highlight the issues such as cyberbullying (Willoughby, 2019; Ho, Chen and Ng, 2017; Canty *et al.*, 2016),

Facebook depression (McBride, 2011), sexting (Ringrose *et al.*, 2013) and negative body image (McDool *et al.*, 2016). Hearing the child's voice and engaging with this age group is beneficial to contextualise how they perceive their identity online and how this subjective experience is different from those who are not 'digital natives' (White and LeCornu, 2011; Prensky, 2004).

An interpretivist epistemology was therefore adopted in this research with the acknowledgement that direct knowledge is not possible. Rather, accounts and observations of the world provide indirect indications of the phenomena being investigated, and consequently, knowledge is developed through a process of interpretation (Arthur *et al.*, 2012). It was considered that these perspectives are subjective, and the reality is mediated through how the participants construct their social worlds (Bryman, 2016). My view is that individuals are each situated within a personal, societal, and cultural construct and their subjective experience of childhood is changing due to the pervasive nature of social media. Furthermore, presenting an online identity may be dependent on a feedback loop of likes, comments, and validation by others. To challenge this, at the onset of this research, and to ensure defamiliarization with preconceived ideas (Mannay, 2016), a thorough investigation of what the child participants understood by the notion of social media was established. This exploration of how and why they think social media is used provided an overview of their perception of digital spaces that were defined by themselves and not the assumptions made by the researcher. It is worth noting, as Arthur *et al.* (2012) acknowledge, that due to a largely social constructionist ontology, obtaining direct knowledge is not possible but rather it is an account or observation of the world and therefore indirect indications of phenomena and knowledge that is typified through a process of interpretation.

Mannay (2016) advocates that it is essential for researchers to have a sound understanding of their own epistemological beliefs, personal epistemology and epistemic resources and it is necessary to employ a strong theoretical connection rather than just a technique led approach. Furthermore, she argues that research requires an ethnographic base, or what she refers to as a 'waiting field', that can

encourage and facilitate epistemic cognition. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) suggest that an epistemological approach can produce cultural knowledge of a group and analysis of patterns of social interaction and essentially 'insider' accounts; all of which are pertinent in the research of social media. Common rhetoric surrounding social media also fails to explore the reality of how children and youth use and interact with social media. To position the research further, it is important to regard the axiological position and a consideration of the values and principles that the researcher holds, which are presented later in this discussion (Basit, 2010). The purpose of this research and its value and contribution to the field is to develop an understanding of how the phenomenon of constructing identities online via social media platforms may affect children's childhoods.

3.2.3 Theoretical framework

Kiley (2015) emphasises the importance of theory to a doctoral thesis to both link the literature to the empirical data gathered and to make sense of the findings in a 'unified manner'. It is important to consider that empirical data does not sit in a theory-free vacuum but is surrounded by layers of assumption and therefore theory has an important role to play at different stages of the life cycle of a thesis (Adams and Buetow, 2014). Similarly, Leshem and Trafford (2007) stress the importance of providing a theoretical overview that conveys how the abstract phenomena can be described and applied to the research. The theoretical framework underpinning my research is derived from the review of literature and has three elements, consisting of social constructionism, Goffman's (1959) theory of impression management and the philosophical position of poststructuralism. Firstly, the way children are viewed as capable 'social actors' and their position as experts in their own lives and childhood (Yates, 2010; James and James, 2004) is central to this study. Maybin (2013) encapsulates the evolving nature of childhood studies and the ethical way in which the children's voices and opinions can be central to their contextualisation of lived experiences. Therefore, the centrality of positioning the child as a capable decision-maker and a genuine attempt to include them in the production of knowledge in the discourse surrounding their own life is emphasised within my research (Lomax, 2012). Adopting the view that children and childhood are a constructed phenomenon

that is subject to change allows an exploration of how societal discourses of social media are reified within their subjective experience (O'Reilly, Ronzoni and Dogra, 2018).

Secondly, Goffman's (1959) impression management theory has been frequently adopted to explain social media-based self-perception and identity within contemporary research (Hogan, 2010). Adopting this lens takes into consideration the way social media involves significant amounts of time viewing idealised profiles, statuses, and photographs that are continually updated which may affect emotional well-being (Chou and Edge, 2012). Due consideration was given to other theoretical underpinnings such as Erikson's psychosocial theory, but this was rejected as being too deterministic in terms of being age-related and following a progressive trajectory that may not be relatable to children's social media experiences. Postmodern theories were also considered as they highlight the power and control that culminates in dominant discourses, which is important to the debate in terms of how we make meaning of ourselves and our perceived identity (Moss, 2019). Goffman (1959) asserted that individuals strive to guide the impression of how others perceive them through the way they present their appearance, manner and attitudes and his ideas therefore support the notion that individuals have more autonomy than psychosocial and postmodern theories allow. Social media provides an additional platform for performances to be acted out and individuals can manipulate their identity. For teens and tweens, social networking has become an integral part of how they manage their own identity within this digital space. This "imaginary audience" is a useful lens to attempt to understand how users present their identity online and how this may affect their subjective experience and well-being. Profile pages of social media networks are artefacts that exist to position the creator in relation to the reader/audience – this may be carefully curated and needs consideration (Ranzini and Hoek, 2017).

Finally, poststructuralism, as a philosophical underpinning, is held within the theoretical framework of this research. Aligning with the social constructionist thought that children are capable commentators of their own lived experience

(Moran, Reily and Brady, 2021) dominant discourses about children's subjective experiences are challenged (Moss, 2019). Through a poststructuralist lens, identity portrayal is viewed as a negotiation of meaning-making (Braidotti, 2014; Foucault, 1980) and consequently, social media interaction is affected by this process of interpretation. Control and power within digital spaces are also linked to Deleuze's (1992) 'societies of control' and, in the case of social media, driven by consumerism in the form of advertisements and algorithms. Discursive practices of social media, in the way children respond to likes and comments, are also linked to language structures in this study (Dunn, 1997). In addition, subjectivity, and the cultural effects that this perpetuates (Foucault, 1980) points to the ephemeral nature of social media within this research. Whilst an acknowledgement has been made to the significance theory and philosophy play in the research process (Creswell, 2014), it is important to note that a reflexive and iterative approach is required. This, Adams and Buetow (2014) argue requires an ongoing effort to develop the theoretical concepts until the key concepts emerge and light can be shed on the research questions.

3.2.4 Positioning of the researcher

It is important to consider that how we approach research is dependent on the research lens that we adopt and how that impacts our view of the world (Gary and Holmes, 2020; Jacobson and Mustafa, 2019). In a qualitative study, researchers "position themselves" and need to consider how this informs their interpretation of the data and how they construct knowledge (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Positionality involves factors such as our age, gender, ethnicity, demographic location, as well as our motivation, prior interests, and cultural orientation (Yin, 2016). I am a white, female, heterosexual mother. I am in my forties, I am Welsh and British, have no religion and live in a city. I have a background as a primary school teacher which has led me to be interested in how children form their identities and how they interact with each other within a peer culture. My current position as a senior lecturer in Early Years and Education in Higher Education (HE), teaching students who are working with children in a caring and teaching capacity, has further influenced this interest. It is important to consider researcher bias with my social positioning (Punch and Oancea, 2014) though efforts have been made to mitigate this. Assuming a social

constructionist ontology, and an epistemology defined by interpretivism, requires a standpoint based on relativity and meaning-making. These beliefs are also closely linked to my social and personal position as already highlighted which form my axiological standpoint, in which the role of values and how these are acknowledged are applied to this research (Kara *et al.*, 2021). The importance of recognising this and the influence I may have on my research, I hope, has been thoroughly considered along with the fact that engaging with children in research and seeking their perspectives is a complex process (Dockett, Einarsdóttir and Perry, 2012). In the next section, I consider researcher reflexivity in more detail and how this was paramount to my research, particularly as social media is a lived phenomenon that I experience and requires careful consideration when researching with children.

3.2.5 Reflexivity of the researcher

Reflexivity aids the researcher in exploring their positionality as discussed in the previous section but also goes beyond 'reflection' and influences all aspects of the research study (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Gabriel, 2015). According to Olukotun *et al.* (2021) in qualitative work, reflexivity should be viewed as the central tenet. Loughran and Mannay (2018) indicate that most disciplines employ techniques that conceal or contain the researcher within certain boundaries. Furthermore, they suggest how common discourse creates the impression that the researcher is an unfortunate necessity during the production of the research, rather than "its beating heart" (p.2). Lather (2006) discusses how positivist approaches, that dominated the nineteenth century and beyond, continue to perpetuate the discourse that researchers should not acknowledge or explore their own emotions and subjectivity in ways that could potentially enrich their research. This discourse, presenting the research as detached, objective, and free from emotion, fails to acknowledge the researcher's centrality in the research process and how this recognition can lead to authenticity and a reshaping of the parameters of the research (Loughran and Mannay, 2018). From an interpretivist stance, reflexivity locates the researcher within their research, which is essentially the opposite of the positivist view (Kara, 2015). Berger (2013) argues that reflexivity is an active acknowledgement that the researcher's position may affect the research process. It involves recognising one's

situatedness and pondering ways that the researcher may be involved in the co-constructing of meanings to understand the social phenomenon being investigated. This has resonance with my study due to my own experience with social media and how this can affect my subjectivity and shared experience of the area of investigation. I have previously mentioned the term 'making the familiar strange' (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012, p.54; Mannay, 2010, p.94) in section 3.2.2 when discussing the epistemological assumptions of the study. Whilst Mannay (2010) was discussing this notion in terms of her positionality to the participants in her study with mothers and daughters, a revisiting of this concept concerning my own social media use has been integral in my defamiliarization. Notwithstanding the insider/outsider binary that the researcher needs to consider, familiarity may act as a barrier in any field with which we have previous experience (Mannay, 2016). However, I suggest that whilst my own social media use has led to a degree of familiarity, I hope that by addressing and reflecting on my usage I have rendered the familiar strange (Mannay, 2016; 2010) and attempted to view the children's subjective experience as being different from my own. An acknowledgement that familiar territory may potentially overshadow the world of common understanding (Mannay, 2016) an active deliberation considering my own identity and subjective experience of social media has I hope helped to mitigate this and enabled boundaries to be put in place to separate my social media use from that of the children. As previously mentioned, Leppänen *et al.* (2015) stress that each social media platform has a set of rules, dynamics, and etiquette that users need to adhere to when posting.

On reflection of my social media use, I have three distinct identities for the three different platforms that I predominantly interact with. In addition, I deliberately present myself on these social media platforms in different ways and engage with my own self-imposed rules. On Twitter²⁰, I use this platform in a professional capacity, as depicted in Figure 1 of my profile page. I specify my job role, research interests and how opinions are my own. I post pictures of my student's work and useful publications related to the field of education and the sociology of childhood. I follow

²⁰ Twitter is a microblogging and social networking service on which users post and interact with messages known as "tweets"

accounts related to my professional rather than personal interests too. I am careful with how I curate and project my professional self.

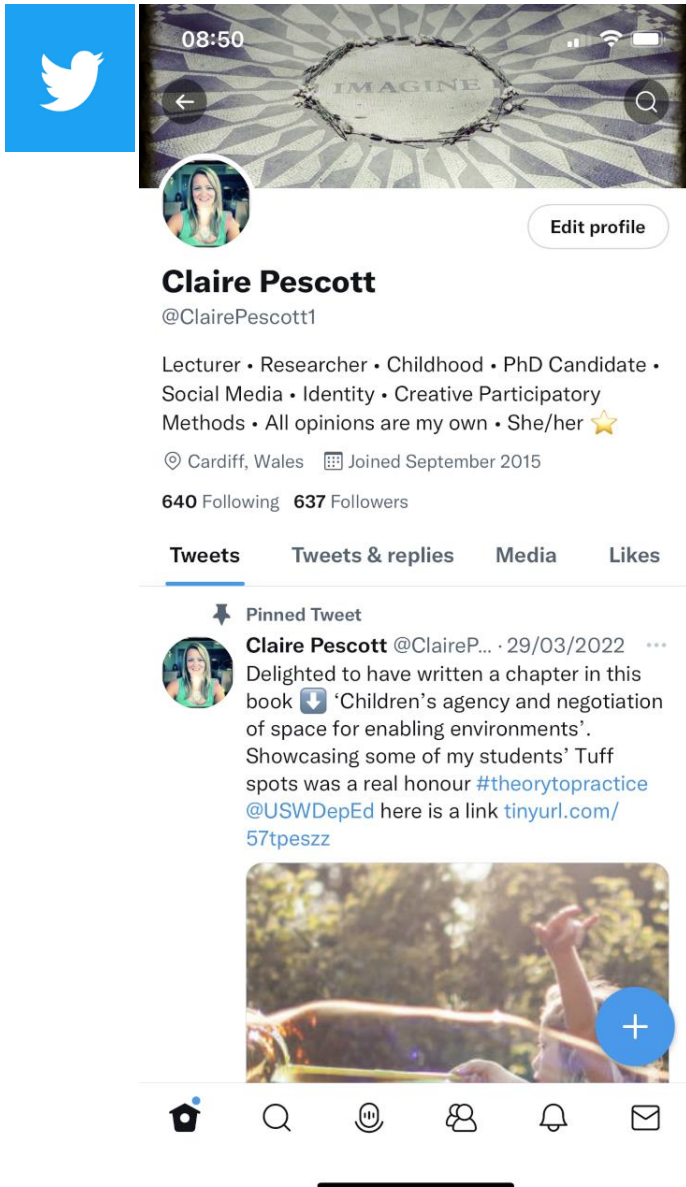


Figure 1: My Twitter Profile

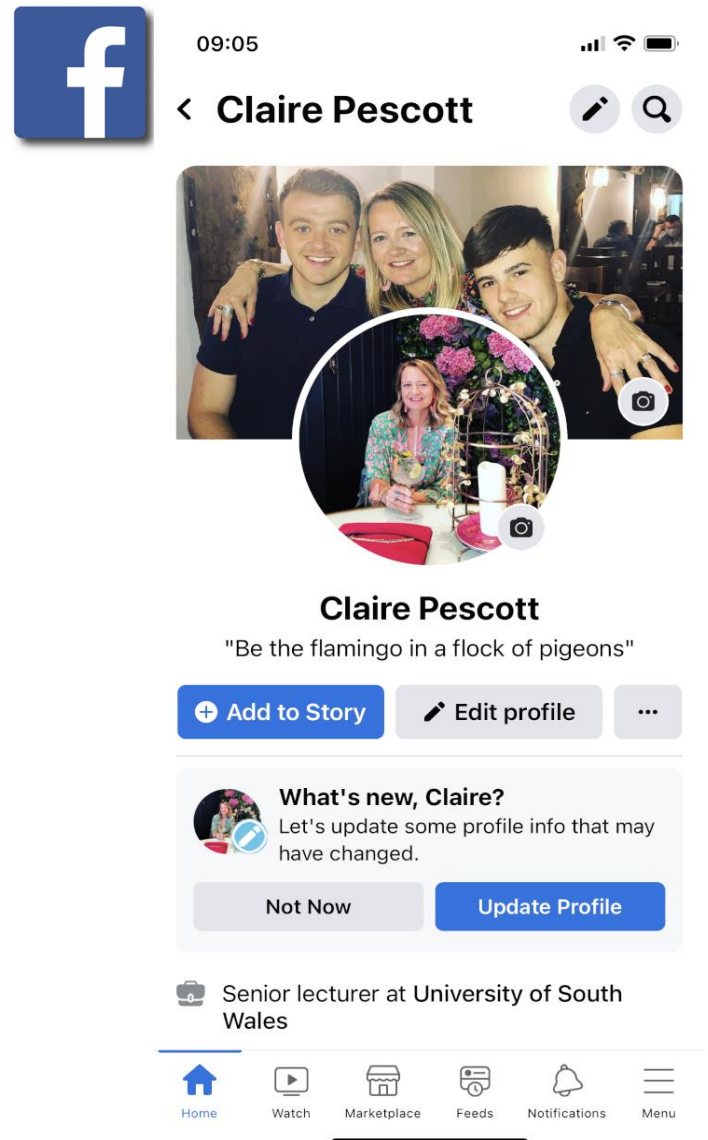


Figure 2: My Facebook profile

On my Facebook²¹ account (Figure 2), my identity is portrayed in relation to my personal self, which I choose to share with friends, some who I see regularly and

²¹ Facebook is a popular social networking website that allows registered users to create profiles, upload photos and video, send messages and keep in touch with friends, family, and colleagues.

some who I have not seen for years from school. I occasionally post photographs and a status update about a milestone event or a holiday. In contrast, my Instagram²² account (Figure 3), is a carefully curated feed, a highlight reel of stylised photographs, a type of first-person paparazzi (Cirucci, 2013) that I am aware demonstrates clear evidence of impression management (Goffman, 1959). I appreciate this ocular centric (Mannay, 2016; Rose, 2016) social media platform is contrived and the accounts that I follow relate to fashion, home interiors and stylised lifestyles.

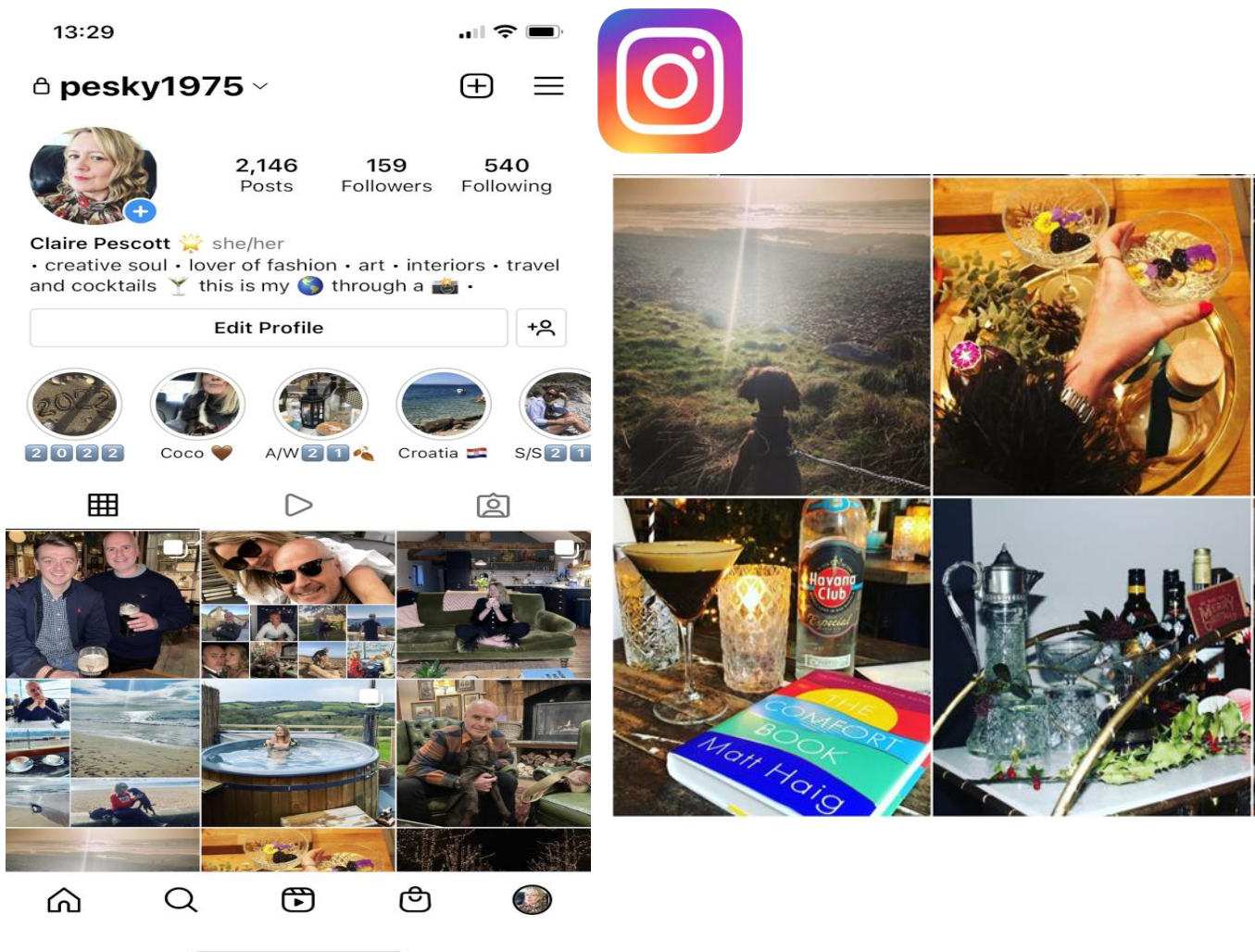


Figure 3: My Instagram profile

²² Instagram is a social networking service built around sharing photos and videos.

Though there is an element of my personal self with my family, as depicted above, other images are staged artistically, with attention paid to the audience in which it will be received. Reflecting on my own social media usage on this platform, I realise I have a clear understanding that my presentation of self is dichotomous in that I locate myself as both a social actor and with the audience that I imagine (Ellison, 2013; Davis, 2012; Hogan, 2010, Goffman, 1959). I am also aware that when I view other Instagram accounts that I follow, that similarly, they are presenting an idealised version of themselves and their lives (Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo, 2017; Kim, 2017; Chou and Edge, 2012). Therefore, my perception of social comparison (Festinger, 1954) is relative, and I can curate what I see by unfollowing accounts that make me feel negative or affect my well-being. Moreover, recognition of these attributes about my identity on social media thus position me as an insider in relation to my own social media subjectivity yet as an outsider potentially to the children's (Gary and Holmes, 2020; Palmer, 2019). The very nature of reflecting on my own identity on social media made me realise that for children this may be a very different experience. The process of 'making the familiar strange' (Mannay, 2016; Clough and Nutbrown, 2012; Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont, 2003; Clough, 2002) has indeed enabled me to engage with the research process with a sense of authenticity, whilst acknowledging that from a child's perspective their social media usage, subjective experience and identity portrayal is different from my own.

As a more ongoing type of reflexivity, research journals were kept during this study, which helped me to connect with the research process both viscerally and emotionally (Brown, 2021). My journaling took varied forms and through different media, for example, note-taking on my iPhone²³ and handwritten notes in many journals²⁴.

²³ An iPhone is a smartphone made by Apple that combines a computer, iPod, digital camera and cellular phone into one device with a touchscreen interface.

²⁴ In the image of the journals (Figure 4) the text is unreadable to ensure anonymity.

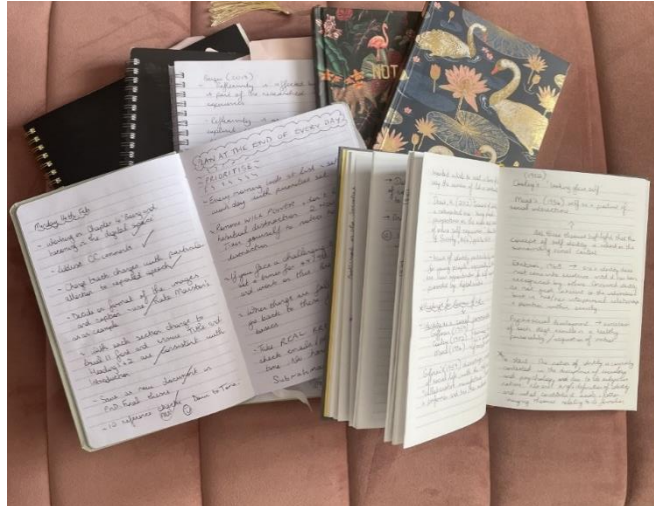


Figure 4: The journals that I kept over my PhD study

Notes were made during the initial stages of the focus groups in the pilot study, which helped aid reflection on the appropriateness as a research method and how improvements could be made in the implementation of the focus groups. During the main study, notes were made for both the focus groups and the collaging with interview methods that were employed. As well as notes in response to processes that took place, I periodically recorded my feelings, observations, and wrote ongoing lists of what I needed to achieve. Taking Brown's (2021, p.11) assertion that "there is no rule", and that as with research, journaling can be "messy, chaotic, untidy, disorderly" (p.10), building a narrative has proved invaluable to my research journey and development as a researcher. Regarding reflexivity, keeping a diary can help the researcher to become aware of any prejudices or subjectivities and ensure that they are aware of these when analysing data and can also assist with making tentative interpretations (Arthur *et al.*, 2012). The reflective journal can also provide a first-hand account of researcher bias and any preconceived ideas that may affect judgements made (Yin, 2016). Thomson, Berriman and Bragg (2018) stress the importance of keeping a research diary or field notes, as they provide 'thick descriptions' combining a moment-by-moment account with reflections on researchers' responses and tentative interpretations. Alongside my more formal writing of chapters, the journals have helped me document the research process in an informal, personal way, which has enabled me to make sense of experiences and support the analytical process (Brown, 2021). Finally, concerning my positionality, I

did record pivotal moments of my research process on social media, which act as a type of visual diary and engagement with a wider audience. Examples of this can be seen, with my engagement with Twitter, which was more formal (Figure 5) and Instagram which was more personal (Figure 6).

 **Claire Pescott** @ClairePe... · 15/10/2019 ...
I just heard that I passed my Transfer Viva...proceed to PhD 🎉🎉🎉 what a relief at the two year stage mark! @PhDStudents @PhDForum



🗨️ 17 🔄 🇬🇧 76 📌 📊

 **Claire Pescott** @ClaireP... · 21/10/2020 ...
Very pleased to have my first solo authored publication in @SocialMedia_Soc documenting my PhD pilot study findings on children's social media use. Please click below if you're interested in reading.



journals.sagepub.com
"I Wish I was Wearing a Filter Right Now": An Exploration of Identity Forma...

🗨️ 12 🔄 17 🇬🇧 67 📌 📊

 **Claire Pescott** @ClaireP... · 07/12/2020 ...
A short article summarising my PhD pilot study has just been published in @ConversationUK please click on the link if you would like to read! #socialmedia #twens



theconversation.com
'I wish I was wearing a filter right now': why tweens need more emotional supp...

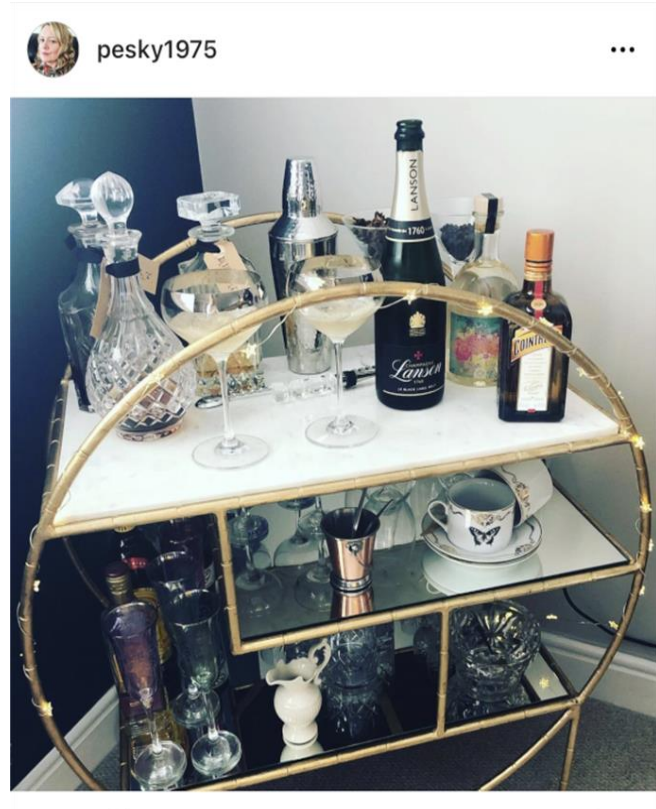
🗨️ 2 🔄 2 🇬🇧 10 📌 📊

Figure 5: Examples of documenting my research journey on Twitter



Liked by loutremayne and 30 others

pesky1975 After six months, four submissions, countless changes, wondering why I'm doing this, lots of swearing, sheer frustration...I have Ethical approval for my PhD pilot study "Me, my selfie and I" 🎉👏 research with children using focus groups and activities about social media! Hoorah! 🎉👏



Liked by loutremayne and 38 others

pesky1975 Celebrating the successful completion of the fourth year of my PhD 🎉👏 and have committed to submitting my thesis 🥰 the end is in sight!

Figure 6: Examples of documenting my research journey on Instagram

It is only on reflection of the research process that I can see how my own social media has played an integral part in documenting my journey. It has reflected both my subjectivity in terms of the research process and how I have shared this with a wider audience. Social media as a lived phenomenon and part of the everyday fabric of modern life (Vickery, 2018) has unintentionally infiltrated my study on a personal level and further made me consider my positionality.

3.3 Ethical considerations

Punch and Oancea (2014) point out that ethical issues are sharply framed in qualitative research on children's subjective experience in natural contexts and this

is certainly the case surrounding social media use. Alderson and Morrow (2011) define this process as complicated and that criticality is key to this, with the notion operating that an imagined endpoint needs to be reached. This particularly resonated with my research and evoked an ethical journey that positioned the child participant as the cornerstone. Dockett, Einarsdóttir and Perry (2012, p.244) highlight that research with children needs to be supported by assurances to the ethical conduct of interactions with children and young people and that "...recognition of their rights as participants in research and consultation and efforts to represent their perspectives in authentic ways." The notion of consent, assent and dissent is imperative to the upholding of this commitment. Central to this is the role of informed consent – based on sufficient and appropriate information, including the right to choose not to participate in the research. In research that involves children, there is the added dimension to consider as they are unable to give consent either legally or of virtue and therefore the concept of assent is evoked (Alderson and Morrow, 2011).

3.3.1 High-risk ethical procedures for the pilot study

University ethical approval for the pilot study was gained in January 2019 (see Appendix A). The research was deemed high risk, and the ethical process was rigorous and consisting of three submissions overall with significant amendments made each time. The ethical contentions in this research were intrinsically linked to the age group with whom I hoped to conduct the research. Social media platforms have a recommended age of 13 years old (Ofcom, 2021; McDool *et al.*, 2016) and consequently, the participants in this research are below the age of suggested use. In informal conversations with headteachers and teachers, it became clear, that children in primary school, sometimes as young as Year 3 (7 – 8 years of age), are utilising these platforms. It is very easy to falsify a different date of birth and essentially there is no regulatory body checking this. This is further complicated by the fact that the child's parents may be complicit in their account formation (Barbovschi, Machackova and Ólafsson, 2015). Consequently, children below the age of recommended use are using social media to communicate with their friends and potentially people they do not know (NSPCC, 2018). Despite the initial

restrictions and the careful consideration of ethics before the main study, I felt that due to the lack of research in this area (Huk, 2016) and the increasing responsibility of schools to educate informed, digital citizens (Welsh Government, 2018), investigating this area with children below the recommended age was worth pursuing.

Initially, I was keen to ask about children's usage of social media and to use creative participatory methods to elicit the emotional response that this evokes for them. The Faculty Ethics Committee at the university were concerned about this and produced a list of reasons why this may be problematic. One of the most significant concerns was that the researcher could be seen to be colluding with the children in their covert social media use, particularly if their parents did not know that they were using these platforms as a means of communication. Also, the assumption and link that was made to identity may not be significant to the group that the research was with. It became apparent that I needed to adopt a reflexive approach and attitude (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008) and include the children in the research in a more open way that investigated their perception and understanding of social media use before asking about their usage. This type of approach is advocated in Christensen and Prout's (2002) notion of 'ethical symmetry' which outlines the relationship between the researcher and the participant, and that the researcher needs to move beyond assumptions of personal judgements. This experience and the many iterations I made to the study design, really changed the way I viewed ethics regarding children. Rather than just viewing ethics as a process of approval, the centrality of this to my research became paramount and was continually reflected upon during the process.

3.3.2 Centrality of ethics to the research process

Considering the ethical experience of the pilot study, introduced in 3.3.1, ethics needs to be at the core of the research, participants in the study should be viewed as part of it rather than simply objects from whom data can be extracted (Thomas, 2016). In this case, the themes from the pilot study were utilised to shape and inform the research questions in the main study and are truly informed by the children's

responses and not preconceived ideas that the researcher holds. While ethical dilemmas in research with children may sometimes be hard to resolve, there is a general framework that applies and the professional bodies of guidelines and codes of conduct for example, BERA (2018) exist so there is a clear protocol for researchers to adhere to. In addition, to the ethical considerations, I followed the safeguarding policy in each of the four settings and was aware that any behaviour by participants that raised a safeguarding concern or disclosures of sensitive or concerning information, the Safeguarding Officer, headteacher and parents were to be informed.

Children and young people are now routinely asked about their views on all aspects of their lives. This is enshrined in the UNCRC and specifically, Article 12 which stipulates children have the right to form and express opinions freely in matters that affect them (UNCRC, 1989). However, research and consultations with and about children raise important ethical questions and addressing these is crucial for the development of appropriate methods and effective outcomes of research (Alderson and Morrow, 2011). Ethics are beyond just being principles of conduct about what is right and wrong, and they are more than just a process to go through. The participants need to be centre stage and integral to the research study (Thomas, 2016). Likewise, Punch (2014) argues that ethics need to be considered at every stage of the study, the planning, the execution, and the reporting and disseminating. Having adopted the rigour of the high-risk ethical considerations as outlined above and the changes made to the research study considering this, my supervisors advised that low-risk ethical approval should be sufficient for the main study of the research. Ethical approval was granted via the School Ethics Committee in June 2020 (see Appendix B).

3.3.3 Implementation of the ethical procedures

As the research was set within the context of the school, for both the pilot study and the main study the consent of the headteachers and teachers as the 'gatekeepers' was initially sought. Following this, parents were given detailed information about the

research and why it was deemed important for this age group (a copy of the Parent Information Sheet is in Appendix C and the Consent Form in Appendix D). In addition, parents were invited to attend a forum if they had any additional concerns or questions, however, none of the parents indicated that they wished to do this. Once parental/carer consent was given, children in Year 6 (aged 10 and 11 years old) were asked to self-nominate their interest and told that unfortunately, not all children would be selected but all would be able to participate in the focus group activities if they wished within class time. Asking for self-nomination was deemed important as power is held by the researcher and children may feel pressured by peers (Bland 2017; Leonard and McKnight 2014). They may also be subjected to a range of influences and expectations as they make decisions about participation, which Gallagher *et al.* (2010, p 479) suggest makes “a messy, compromised position [as] research participants.” The children were provided with age-appropriate information sheets (see Appendix E) and given time to read and digest this. I reiterated the main points and invited questions and concerns to be aired. Assent was indicated by verbally agreeing. However, I did not take this as a guarantee that ethical concerns ceased there; ongoing assent, signs of dissent both verbally, emotionally, and behaviourally were continually observed and monitored. Alderson and Morrow (2011, p.39) highlight that “ethics pervades every step of research”, and this was certainly the case within this study and utilised to shape, inform, and guide each stage.

3.4 Pilot study

Bryman (2016) asserts that a pilot study is a mini version of a full-scale study, or a trial run conducted in preparation of the complete study, with the latter also being called a ‘feasibility’ study. This is reiterated by Denscombe (2014) who emphasises that it is a matter of good practice and an invaluable way to test methods in advance and to check how well they work in practice. Basit (2010) highlights that a pilot study enhances the reliability and validity of the research and the practice of analysing the data gives the researcher a different perspective on the questions asked and enables them to adjust where necessary. Furthermore, considering the findings, the

research questions may require refining and rephrasing to strengthen them, something that should be viewed as a positive step in the research process (Robert-Holmes, 2018). Especially when researching with children, it is essential that the methodology is piloted to expose any practical and theoretical challenges, the researcher then making modifications to ensure that the objectives of the study are met (O'Reilly, Ronzoni and Dogra, 2013). The pilot study for this research took an interpretivist epistemology (as discussed in 3.2.2) to explore participants' experiences and their interpretations of these understandings (Robert-Holmes, 2018; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017; Creswell, 2014), in this instance, an inquiry into children's general understandings of social media, their social reality and cultural interpretation of what it means to engage with digital platforms, leading to a more specific investigation in the main study. This allowed for a reflexive approach with a consideration for how my role shaped the data (Rose, 2016), whilst allowing the participants to have some control and power to direct their lens (Grant, 2018). A qualitative approach was deemed the most suitable way to collect the data and focus groups in four school settings of varying demographics with children in the target age range was employed. It was of importance that the pilot study was conducted to ascertain the participants' understanding of social media and their perceptions of how it is used before investigating their usage in the subsequent part of the study, particularly as the participants were under the age of consent for social media use. Utilising creative participatory methods was high on my agenda to elucidate rich, nuanced data about identity and social media but in consultation with my supervisors, I decided that focus groups using activities was most appropriate at this stage.

3.4.1 Pilot study design

The pilot study aimed to investigate how children present themselves online as a way of gaining a greater understanding of how they manage their engagement with social media.

The aims of the exploratory pilot study were twofold:

1. To explore understandings of social media by children within the target age group (Year 6 pupils aged 10 and 11 years old).
2. To trial guides for questioning children within this age group and methods to support group discussion.

In this pilot study, the sample selected was purposive (Punch, 2014) and the age group (Year 6 pupils aged 10 and 11 years old) specifically chosen as they are seen to be at a pivotal age of embarking with social media accounts for their usage (Ofcom, 2021). Furthermore, they may not have developed the emotional resilience to cope with the implications of this (Children's Commissioner, England, 2018). The sample was comprised of Year 6 self-nominated children (10 from each school in 2 focus groups – 5 in each) in the four sample schools ($n=40$). Data was collected using focus groups and four activities that I devised to stimulate discussion and arouse interest in the topic. These were 'Sorting of Logos', 'Snap chat filters', 'Emojis' and 'Profiles' (as depicted in Figure 7).



Figure 7: Focus group activities used

A semi-structured approach was used with the four activities presented in the same order and similar questions asked, though lines of enquiry that emerged from each group were pursued (Yin, 2016). All discussions were recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. I also kept a reflexive journal of field notes to record group dynamics and patterns of behaviour that could not be audio recorded. This proved to be good practice for the main study and allowed a rehearsal into facilitating the focus groups with participants not known to me, within a school context (Gibbs, 2017). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to explore how participants made sense of social media and a digital landscape within the context of their subjective experience (Smith and Osborn, 2003). Following this analytical process, emerging sub-ordinate themes were developed which developed into overarching super-ordinate themes (Smith, Flower and Larkin, 2009).

3.4.2 Pilot study findings and brief analysis

Findings of the pilot study indicated that children in this age group had an astute understanding of what social media is and why it is used but were not always aware of the subtle nuances and etiquette between different social media apps.

Furthermore, they were not fully aware of the appropriateness of what to share online and, consequently, children of this age may be more vulnerable in terms of identity portrayal, which concurs with research by Pea *et al.* (2012). Despite the recommended age for joining social media sites being 13 years of age, nearly all participants disclosed that they were on social media platforms and therefore estimates for social media use for tweens may be conservative in comparison to this study (Ofcom, 2021; NSPCC, 2018). Only a small number of children suggested that their parents monitored their social media use, though they did demonstrate a sense of agency and may be more aware of social parameters than research suggests (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018). This enactment of agency took the form of adjusting privacy settings and being astute about who their friends were on different platforms. However, it was noted that allowing people to like, validate and comment on posts could elicit negative responses and potentially affect self-esteem (deVries and Kühne, 2015). Furthermore, perceived surveillance was commented on by several participants which took the form of friends and 'others' that were not specified, a seemingly collective undefined presence which links to data in Jaynes (2019) study.

Children in the pilot study had some idea of what 'identity' was and how this could be presented through social media platforms through profile pictures, photographs of social interaction, selfies and interactions with likes and comments. This distinction between 'real' and 'virtual' may not be as clear as in real-life interaction and resonated with Goffman's (1971) dramaturgical analogy of front stage and backstage identities. Some children did demonstrate more discernment regarding what they post but this is an area that requires more research. The use of Snapchat filters (digital overlays on photographs) in this study was commented on explicitly and had a clear gender divide. Most of the boys saw these filters as a source of fun and

entertainment and favoured those with dog ears and exaggerated features, whereas most girls typified them as enhancing their appearance and making them look prettier. This corresponded with other studies such as Chae (2017) and Ranzini and Hoek (2017) and highlights the emotional ramifications of using social media and overt social comparison (Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo, 2017). Continuing with Goffman's (1971) analogy these filters could be viewed as props or costumes that are used virtually and may not be harmless fun. Possible and idealised selves may pressurise children to continually adopt a fictitious persona and a polished, physical appearance, though they may have some autonomy over this fakeness (Jaynes, 2019).

From this research, it was clear that lessons around e-safety tend to concentrate on physical rather than emotional risk. It seemed that parents and teachers had reinforced this information which was relayed to a perceived authority figure. The children commented extensively on potential overt physical dangers such as catfishing, paedophiles, and stalkers. This highlights the dichotomy between the perceived threats and risks adults envisage and the more subtle and nuanced emotional risks that social media use may engender for this age group. More research needs to be conducted with children to ascertain their views on emotional risk and their potential vulnerability online. Further exploration of how children feel when images are liked, not liked, or commented on and how their identity is produced and perceived online will help them navigate the more nuanced risks of social comparison and impression management. It was clear from the pilot study that tweens are heavily influenced by adult concerns particularly about what is 'risky' and 'fake', which may signify the important role parents and teachers play in shaping discourse for this age group (Barbovschi, Machackova and Ólafsson, 2015). There is certainly more room for critical reflection on how children are using these definitions and ways of labelling different forms of social media use for example, what constitutes 'risky' behaviour and what is real and what is fake. Furthermore, the pilot study paints a picture of children being heavily concerned with surveillance by both peers and parents which is also exemplified by other research (Jaynes, 2019; Duffy and Chan, 2018; Lyon, 2017). The findings from this initial process were published in the journal *Social Media + Society* (Pescott, 2020) and a more detailed account of

the study can be found there (see Appendix L for the link). The information that was gathered in response to these questions supported the development of the research design for the main study which sought to explore issues concerning children's identity portrayal and the impact of this on their subjective experience of using social media.

3.5 Research questions and rationale

As indicated by Robert-Holmes (2018) the implementation and results from the pilot study instigated new ideas and a different perspective which led to a slight shift of focus. Consequently, this critical reflection and amendment strengthened the overall research questions for the main study. As well as the pilot study, in preparation for the research questions for this project, a comprehensive review of the literature in the field of childhood studies, identity formation and children's subjective experiences of using social media was conducted. This review highlighted the lack of literature on this topic for children, emphasising the need for further research in this area (as outlined in Chapter 2). The research questions are framed by an overarching aim, which is presented below:

Aim: To explore children's experiences of social media use within digital spaces and how they make meaning of their digital identity and its portrayal.

To realise this aim, the following research questions were devised and are described in the following sections with a rationale of how they were developed.

3.5.1 RQ1: In what ways are children's identities shaped by their experiences of social media within digital spaces?

Preadolescents' may experience an 'identity crisis' (Erikson, 1968) as they learn to negotiate their ego and develop a sense of who they are, whilst experiencing relationships and choices outside the realms of the family. Notably, 10 and 11 years

of age is a pivotal time for identity formation (Pea *et al.*, 2012) and is essentially a transitional period²⁵ (Cirucci, 2013). It is also the time when peer acceptance becomes important and friendship groups are formed based on mutual interest, similarity in age and gender as well as popularity (Abeyrathne *et al.*, 2011). Identity can be viewed as a social binary between self and others with a constant negotiating of this and may be dependent on how childhood is socially constructed (James and Prout, 2015). Social media adds another layer to identity formation, from the tentative steps of creating a profile picture, to engaging and responding to others online. This may have implications whilst negotiating identities at both a macro (collective, institutional, and structural) and micro (every day) level (James and James, 2004) both of which can be typified with social media use. In the pilot study, children did indicate that they were aware of how they showed their identity online with profile pictures and statuses and how others responded could influence how they feel. Exploring identity formation and portrayal online could lead to a richer understanding of whether this is the same or different as their offline identity for children of this age. Likewise, it could determine whether subjective experiences of viewing idealised profiles and a curated, highlight-reel affected how they presented their own identity (Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo, 2017).

3.5.2 RQ2: What influence does gender have on children when using social media within digital spaces and how does this affect how they feel about themselves?

In the pilot study, there was a tentative exploration of how children perceive social media use through the activities employed. As already discussed, in the ‘Snapchat filters’ activity, there were two distinct reasons for using these digital overlays that emerged, which had a clear gender divide; the boys discussed using animal filters, adding moveable ears, exaggerating features, and making themselves look silly for entertainment purposes. Whereas most girls explained they used them to alter and enhance their appearance. Girls in this study discussed that comparing themselves with filtered photographs changed how they felt about themselves and manipulated

²⁵ In the UK children of 10 and 11 years old are in the final year of primary school before they begin Secondary School.

their moods. In more generic media research, Tatangelo and Ricciardelli (2017) correspond with these findings and highlight a similar gender divide, with many girls in their sample being concerned with physical appearance, whereas boys were interested more in sports and ability. These findings are also concurrent with research on older teenage girls where some appearance concerns were endorsed and physical comparisons evident (Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo, 2017). Further exploration of how gender may affect the motivation of what children post online, was seen to be apparent after the pilot study. Furthermore, an exploration of how children react to others' posts and the feedback loop that this perpetuates may be useful to allow a deeper understanding of actual positives and negatives that are subjectively experienced.

3.5.3 RQ3: To what extent do children feel the pressure of social media within digital spaces and how do they negotiate these experiences?

The findings from the pilot study indicated that social media use is much more prevalent for this age group than other studies report (Ofcom, 2021) and consequently their experiences of it may differ from older teenagers' use (Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo, 2017). Social media sites offer young people a portal for communication and entertainment in a way never experienced by older generations (Tartari, 2015). Moreover, each social media domain has a particular set of rules (Leppänen *et al.*, 2015) which makes for a complicated digitally mediated space. Pressures of physical comparison have been highlighted in the justification for RQ2 and body image seems to be an area where girls feel pressured to look a certain way (Tatangelo and Ricciardelli, 2017). These pressures of physical comparison from influencers and bloggers may be more overt, yet the pressure of peers, peer mediation and approval may also be sought and is of great importance for this age group (Barbovschi, Machackova and Ólafsson, 2015; Best, Manktelow and Taylor, 2014). Dooly (2017) warns that it cannot be assumed that all young people access and use technology equally or even in the same way – they still interact in the 'real' world and both online and offline activities have an impact on their construction of self-identity. Research with children of this age group is scarce (Huk, 2016) and hearing their voices about how they navigate and negotiate these spaces is

important, particularly for parents and teachers who may not use social media in the same capacity (White and LeCornu, 2011).

3.5.4 RQ4: What knowledge can children share about using social media within digital spaces to support other children's use?

In the pilot study, the participants indicated that they were well versed in e-safety and aware of how to protect themselves against perceived risks such as catfishing but also demonstrated a social vulnerability in terms of emotional risk in response to the negative comments they may receive. Baccarella *et al.* (2018) comment that individuals continue to post pictures and content without thinking of the ramifications and a sense of empathy is being lost as they no longer see the impact of their actions. As already highlighted, digitally mediated spaces have rules of communication and posting etiquette amongst young people (Leppänen *et al.*, 2015) which influence how individuals construct their narrative and how this is broadcasted (Ranzini and Hoek, 2017). Social media, arguably, is a portal that is 'always on', and as such many children are permanently connected to their virtual social network, receiving, or checking their feed and verifying the popularity of their posts (boyd, 2014). Consequently, they need educating on how to manage this domain and not feel consumed or overwhelmed by it. Electronic media has a growing role in children's lives which has been recognised by the UNCRC (2013) and calls for measures to empower and inform children to enable them to act safely online and become confident citizens in a digital environment. However, Binford (2015) believes that there are no specific strategies to protect the 'digital child' and that this is essential to prepare them for the demands of adult life. Similarly, there is largely an absence of 'authentic' voices in public discourses about childhood (Aldridge, 2012). With all this in mind, a more in-depth investigation of how children subjectively experience social media will allow an exploration of risk versus agency and a rich, nuanced response that demonstrates the implications of this use and how best parents and practitioners can support them.

The four research questions can be seen to build on the empirical data gathered from the pilot study and the subsequent analysis provided a clear path for the researcher to follow. Commencing with the notion of how identity is shaped by social media experiences (RQ1), exploring gender tendencies (RQ2) assuming pressures negated in these spaces (RQ3) and finally what kind of advice can be offered to other children navigating social media (RQ4). In the following sections, how the sample was selected for the main study is presented.

3.6 Sample – school selection

Sampling in qualitative research invariably revolves around non-probability sampling (Bryman, 2016) and within this research purposive sampling was selected as a way of accessing participants in a strategic way that fitted the research design and their relevance to the research questions (Bell and Waters, 2018; Mukherji and Albon, 2018; Wilson, 2017). It is acknowledged that purposive sampling is not necessarily a representative sample, though it does offer a variation of views within the sources and does nevertheless yield rich and plentiful data (Yin, 2016). The study took place in four primary schools in the South Wales area, one in Cardiff and three in Newport, which were selected to provide a diverse socio-economic range. The ratio of pupils accessing free school meals was used to determine this status which was reflected in recent Estyn (Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales) documentation as detailed in Table 1:

Table 1: Data from Estyn documentation and Cardiff/Newport County Council (2020)

School code	Setting	Number of pupils on roll	Form entry	Free School Meal % (Wales average 19%)	English as an Additional Language
School A	South Wales Valleys town	400 - 450 pupils	13 single-age classes, 3 mixed-	20.1%	Most pupils are of White British ethnicity

			age classes and 1 class for pupils with ALN		
School B	Outskirts of a city	400 – 450 pupils	11 single-age classes, 2 mixed-age classes and 2 mixed-age learning support classes	41.4%	A few pupils speak English as an additional language
School C	A suburb of a city	450 - 500 pupils	13 single-age classes, 2 part-time nursery classes	12.2%	Approximately 16% speak English as an additional language
School D	Faith school (Roman Catholic)	350 - 400 pupils	14 single-age classes	11%	Approximately 34% speak English as an additional language

3.6.1 School A

School A is a community school situated in the South Wales Valleys. It is part of a federation with another school in the area, with both schools sharing the same executive headteacher and governing body. There are currently between 400 and 450 on roll, including approximately 80 nursery pupils who attend school part-time, there are 13 single-age classes and 3 mixed-age classes and one class for pupils with additional needs (Cardiff Council, 2020). 20.1% of the children are eligible for free school meals, which is slightly above the Wales average of 19.9% (Welsh Government, 2020). Most pupils in this school are of white British ethnicity and very

few pupils have English as an additional language. Very few pupils speak Welsh at home (Estyn, 2018)²⁶.

3.6.2 School B

School B is situated on the outskirts of a city, in a designated Communities First area, where the site is shared with local authority support and Flying Start nursery provision (Estyn, 2016a). There are currently between 400 and 450 pupils, with two part-time nursery classes, 11 single-age, 2 mixed-age classes and 2 mixed-aged learning support classes (Newport County Council, 2020). There are 41.4% of pupils who are eligible for free school meals, which is nearly double the average in Wales of 19.9% (Welsh Government, 2020). Compared to the other schools there is a much higher incidence of fixed-term exclusions (Estyn, 2016a). English is the predominant language for nearly all pupils, with only a few pupils learning English as an additional language and no pupils speaking Welsh at home (Estyn, 2016a). In terms of ethnicity, this school is like School A.

3.6.3 School C

School C is in an outer suburb of a city. There are currently between 450 – 500 pupils on roll, there are two part-time nursery classes, and the rest of the pupils are in single-age classes (Cardiff Council, 2020). According to the most recent figures, there are 12.2% of pupils eligible for free school meals, which is below the average in Wales of 19.9% (Welsh Government, 2020). The school has identified around 19% of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds and about 16% speak English as an additional language (Estyn, 2016b). Very few pupils speak Welsh as their first language.

²⁶ Please note the full information from this and the subsequent Estyn reports are withheld in the reference list to protect the identity of the participating schools.

3.6.4 School D

School D is situated on the outskirts of a city and mainly serves the Roman Catholic community of the west of the city, it is a Voluntary Aided School. There are between 350 and 400 full-time pupils, taught in 14 classes. Around 11% are eligible for free school meals, which is well below the average for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020) and therefore this school is comparable to School C. There is a considerable number of pupils with English as an additional language, 34% (Estyn, 2014). This is the highest percentage of the four schools and is subsequently the most diverse in terms of ethnicity.

3.6.5 Participant sampling for focus groups

Children of a specific age (10 and 11 years old) were chosen as they were identified as embarking with social media accounts for their usage and because this age is under-researched (Huk, 2016). In the pilot study, with this age group, this proved to be the case, with 38 out of the 40 children indicating that they had social media accounts (Pescott, 2020), a figure that is higher than research in this area indicates (Ofcom, 2021; NSPCC, 2018). After an initial consultation with schools, it was affirmed that data generation within Year 6 was appropriate particularly as children were in their penultimate year of primary school before making the transition to secondary school and many children start using social media at this time. In consultation with the headteacher (Schools A and D), the deputy headteacher (School B) and the research lead (School C), senior management were asked to select one class from this age range for participation in the study. Following this, the teachers responsible for these classes were asked if they were willing to take part in the process of data collection. Liaison from this point remained with the headteacher for Schools A and D but was via the class teachers in School C and D. A purposive sample with some predetermined criterion (Yin, 2016) was chosen from each class from self-nominated children (who did not have to have social media accounts). The class teacher was asked to help facilitate this and invite a selection of both genders and mixed ability pupils. In total forty participants took part in the focus groups, ten from each school. To avoid disappointment from other self-nominated pupils, a copy

of the focus group activities was left at each setting so that children had the opportunity to discuss their views at another time.

Table 2: Information on the initial data sample

School	Number of pupils in class	Number of males who took part in the study	Number of females who took part in the study	Total number of pupils who took part in the focus groups
School A	30	5	5	10
School B	29	5	5	10
School C	26	5	5	10
School D	30	5	5	10
Total	N/A	20	20	40

The participants were also asked to populate a 'participant profile' to elicit basic personal information, such as gender²⁷, age, how many siblings they had, which social media platforms they used and their preferred social media platform. An example of this can be seen in Figure 8.

²⁷ The gender of the children as either male or female was a demographic question designed by the researcher, without any input from the children or teachers.

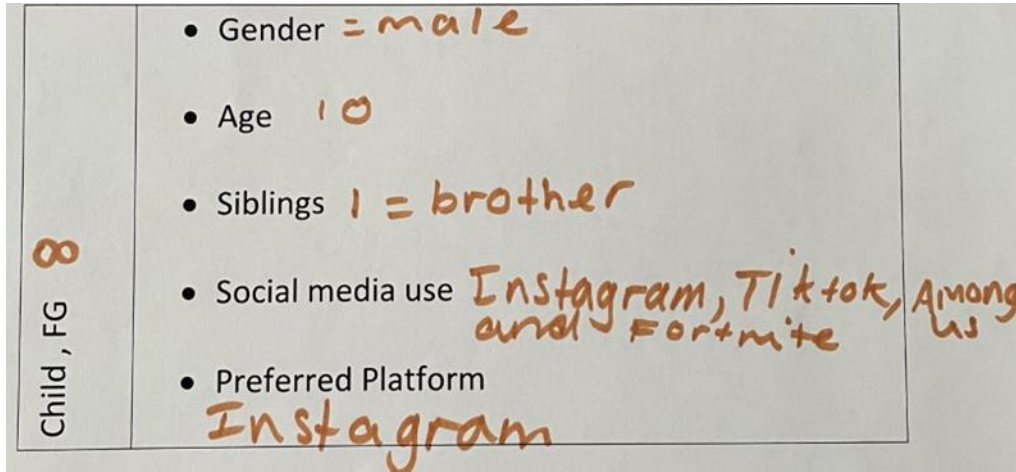


Figure 8: Example of 'participant profile'

3.6.6 Participant sampling for collaging with interviews

After conducting the focus groups and identifying children who were particularly vocal or reticent (Yin, 2016) I consulted with the class teacher to ascertain the suitability of participants for the one-to-one collaging session. This purposive sample of $n = 16$ was spread across the four school settings and an equal number of males and females were selected (8 of each). As with the previous purposive sample for the focus groups, the participants were self-nominated, and the task was explained before asking them if they wished to take part. The participant's profiles can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Information on collage participants

School	Pseudonym	Focus group	Participant	Gender	Age
School A	Isabel	FG2	Child F	Female	10 years
School A	Sophie	FG1	Child E	Female	10 years
School A	Lloyd	FG1	Child A	Male	10 years
School A	David	FG2	Child I	Male	11 years
School B	Oscar	FG3	Child K	Male	10 years
School B	Millie	FG3	Child L	Female	10 years
School B	Abigail	FG4	Child Q	Female	11 years

School B	Emily	FG3	Child O	Female	11 years
School C	Simon	FG5	Child X	Male	10 years
School C	Gabby	FG5	Child Y	Female	11 years
School C	Karen	FG6	Child AD	Female	11 years
School C	Ian	FG6	Child AC	Male	11 years
School D	James	FG7	Child AI	Male	10 years
School D	Ross	FG7	Child AH	Male	10 years
School D	Izzy	FG8	Child AJ	Female	10 years
School D	Henry	FG8	Child AM	Male	10 years

3.7 Methods of data generation

As previously discussed, this research took an interpretivist paradigm as a way of exploring in-depth participants' experiences (Punch, 2014). Adopting this perspective, and a social constructionist ontology, has led to a qualitative exploration that can attend to the contextual richness of this research area and support a study that investigates children's social media use in their everyday lives (Roberts-Holmes, 2018; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). Methodologies that support qualitative research are concerned with meaning and significance and seek to explore feelings and personal responses to a particular phenomenon (Atkins and Wallace, 2012) and differ in this respect from quantitative research, which adopts a largely positivist approach and an objective methodology that can be tested to prove or disprove (Greig, Taylor and MacKay, 2013). It should be noted, however, that such distinct mappings are difficult and there is an issue with illustrating 'tidy binaries' between quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Lather, 2006). Recently, there has been a resurgence of positivism and a quantitative approach as the 'gold standard' in research methods, but Lather (2006) points out that there are aporias of complicity and a refusal to situate qualitative as the 'good' to the bad of 'quantitative'. Furthermore, whilst this is not so much a reconciliation of a mixed-method approach but more of a type of knowledge, a producing practice that values and wants to participate in making better research. In establishing children's views about their subjective experience of social media use and how they form their

identity online, this study sought to investigate the part social media plays in their everyday lives. In this case, a qualitative methodology, seeking to uncover feelings and experiences, was deemed as more appropriate than a positivist approach and quantitative methods.

3.7.1 Researching with children

Researching with children about their childhood, with an active commitment to hearing the 'child's voice', was situated at the heart of this research. Graham, Powell and Taylor (2013) emphasise that it is imperative for the 'child's voice' to be respected to avoid the detrimental practice of imposing adult-centred research agendas. Viewing children as competent social actors has changed considerably in contemporary study in the social sciences (James and Prout, 2015). An adult's perception of the child can invariably affect the research design, though the philosophy of researching with children affords exploration of children's standpoints (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018). Punch (2009) describes three main ways that the child can be situated within research and this philosophy affects the methodology. Viewing children as essentially the same as adults, or as being different or recognising that children are like adults but have different qualities. In this research the latter assumption was adopted which also reflects the notion of researching 'with' rather than 'on' children (O'Reilly, Ronzoni and Dogra, 2013; Pauwells, 2011). Buckingham (2017) advocates that even within contemporary research, there is little attempt to access children's voices and perspectives. Likewise, Alderson and Morrow (2011) highlight how children are among the groups most excluded from research. Considering this presumption, the choice of research methods reflected the notion that children are competent participants within the research process and an attempt to respect children's abilities to freely express their perceptions of their lived experiences without imposing my views was advocated (McTavish, Streelasky and Coles, 2012).

Previous experiences as a primary school teacher have also shaped my awareness of how children make meaning and express these experiences orally and more

creatively. Methodological boundaries are expanding across all social science disciplines and researchers do not always use traditional methods to seek effective ways to research complex research questions (Kara, 2015). Therefore, two methods were selected for the data generation in this research: focus groups with activities and collaging with a narrative which took the form of an unstructured interview. Whilst a participatory approach was partially implemented, and the children did have a choice in the materials selected in their creative approach, it does need noting that as the participants were not involved in the research design it is not truly participatory. Mannay (2016) discusses that rather than viewing participatory research as an all or nothing scenario, it should be seen as more of a continuum in which a relationship is established between the researcher and the participant, and they are involved at every level. Most research though remains partial to their commitment to participatory practice. Facilitating a multi-method or multi-modal approach acknowledges the idea that triangulation is important, which can increase the credibility of the research findings (Creswell, 2014) as well as an important reminder that nothing is ever just visual, so the narrative is also important (Rose, 2016).

3.7.2 Focus groups

The use of focus groups as a means of gaining a broad overview of children's perceptions of social media at the preliminary stage seemed a useful platform to further refine the research questions that were directed by the participants and not the researcher (Newby, 2014). This was utilised in the pilot study, as already explained in section 3.4.1. Due to the rich discussion and data that was yielded from this research method, focus groups were also utilised in the main study of this research. Yin (2016) defines a focus group as a form of data collection, whereby the researcher convenes a group of participants with similar attributes and the researcher 'focuses' the group in a non-directive manner. In this case, the participants were a specific age (10 or 11 years old) and the discussion focused on their understanding and meaning-making of social media. This, Crano, Brewer and Lac (2014) deem an essential feature of a focus group and define this as a homogenous aspect i.e., the focus group is drawn from groups sharing a critical

feature, in this case, age. A starting question about an issue that leads to a discussion is introduced and developed by the focus group coordinator (Newby, 2014).

Wilson (2017) highlights that focus groups are useful for revealing attitudes, collective experiences, beliefs, and feelings of participants. Whereas Gibbs (2017) ascertains that focus groups can co-construct new knowledge by gauging opinion and interpreting culture. Likewise, O'Reilly, Ronzoni and Dogra (2013) argue that it can reveal consensus views and can generate richer data, it yields a collective rather than individual response (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). In addition, Punch (2014) suggests that focus groups afford rich data and produce cumulative responses that can be recall aiding. Robert-Holmes (2018) advocates how children tend to enjoy social situations and therefore focus groups with other children appeal to this sociability. Newby (2014) advocates that focus groups can be used in the early stages of the investigation to obtain insights before the main investigation. Similarly, Crano, Brewer and Lac (2014) establish that focus groups are used in pilot studies or the formative stages in research and help to obtain preliminary evidence to gain an understanding of the understudied topic. The focus groups in my research, both in the pilot study and in the initial stage of the main study were a very useful way of obtaining children's opinions about social media use and how they viewed it within their everyday lived experience.

Particularly when working with children, focus groups are a useful way of obtaining data because the nature of the group facilitation can replicate a natural and familiar form of communication in which children talk together with their peers and one to one discussion with adults may be unfamiliar and restrictive (Gibson, 2012). They can be used as a method on their own or to complement other methods (Gibbs, 2017), which was the case in my study. The use of stimulus in focus groups (in the form of pictures, videos, and activities) can help participants move past simply answering questions (Newby, 2014). Furthermore, using child-centred structured activities helps to avoid adults dominating the discussion (Robert-Holmes, 2018). This principle was adopted for this research and the seven activities (located in section 3.7.5) were

utilised to help generate a more in-depth discussion. Likewise, by the researcher establishing themselves as an 'inexpert', it can help the participants take ownership and feel more confident expressing their views (Robert-Holmes, 2018). Wilson (2017) highlights that small focus groups may increase the comfort levels of participants and consequently the groups in this research were made up of five participants. Finally, O'Reilly, Ronzoni and Dogra (2013) assert that focus groups provide a holistic picture of children's culture and language, this is particularly useful as what is known about social media tends to be dominated by research conducted with older participants (Blackwell *et al.*, 2014).

3.7.3 The role of the researcher in focus groups

In a focus group situation, Wilson (2017) argues that the role of the researcher changes, they become more of a moderator or a facilitator and less like an interviewer, and consequently the process is not one of alternate question and answer as in a traditional interview. There is more of an open dialogue going back and forth between the researcher and the opportunity for gaining an understanding of thoughts, experiences, and feelings (Gibson, 2012). The focus group activities that are presented later in this chapter, made the focus groups more spontaneous and facilitated this type of organic discussion. Utilising this technique, a demonstration of how the moderator or group facilitator played a critical role in determining the outcomes and experiences of the group was established. Gibbs (2017) suggests that good interpersonal skills and the ability to handle conflict as well as nurture contributions whilst remaining reflexive and non-judgemental is paramount to this method. Intragroup disagreements may occur and require careful management and negotiating skills. Having experienced facilitating focus groups within the pilot study, gave me confidence in my role and enabled surface aspects of a situation to be drawn out, that may not otherwise be exposed (Punch, 2014). When facilitating a focus group, the researcher needs to be aware of group dynamics and strive to achieve a balance, which can be challenging, particularly as the discussion may be directed in areas not anticipated by the researcher (Gibbs, 2017). My experiences of being a primary school teacher helped with this aspect, and I was confident being the facilitator of these discussions.

In any focus group, one or two participants may control and dominate the group and the researcher may need to assert a firm style that requires some control over the most talkative participants and stimulate the more reticent ones, whilst striving not to influence or bias the group's discussion (Yin, 2016). Consequently, strong diplomatic skills are required (Crano, Brewer and Lac, 2014). The researcher needs to be mindful that as some participants may dominate the group, their behaviour may lead to a false sense of consensus (Wilson, 2017) or joint production of meaning (Bryman, 2016) and the possibility of a group effect of conformity (O'Reilly, Ronzoni and Dogra, 2013). Bell and Waters (2018) ascertain that this can be overcome if the researcher periodically checks if the group have a consensus view and asks questions such as 'is this what everyone thinks?' Within each focus group, there was certainly one or more children that tended to dominate the discussions, but the activities helped dissipate this and I was able to actively ensure that the more reticent members were included. Children's relationships are complex though and there may be conflict and issues outside of the group that the researcher is not aware of that may affect the discussion and the way the children participate in the focus group (O'Reilly, Ronzoni and Dogra, 2013). It is part of the researcher's role to carefully observe the group dynamic and interactions within the group context to ensure that conflict is resolved, a consensus is achieved and power divides between participants is exposed (Wilson, 2017). This was accomplished in my study by being responsive to the children's needs and by keeping a research journal and reflecting on the dynamics within the groups.

The researcher needs to be mindful that focus groups take place within an unnatural, contrived manner and bring together participants who have been carefully chosen (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). I was particularly conscious of this due to the school environment that the focus groups took place and the way the children were selected by their class teacher. Bryman (2016) highlights that the researcher has less control over the proceedings than with an individual interview, but this can be viewed as a positive as it does give the participants some 'ownership' of the research process. This resonates with James and Prout's (2015) view that the sociology of childhood has shifted, and it is increasingly acknowledged that children should be advocates of their own experience and that they should be viewed as

competent creators and interpreters of their own lives. Furthermore, children have moved from the margins or the periphery of research and are now viewed as partners within the process. Gibson (2012) asserts that the researcher needs to think carefully about their role within focus groups and adopt the 'least adult role' in which they do not exert authority but rather assume a friendly manner. A balance needs to be struck between adult authority with a reassurance that the participants have equal status and that their perceptions are important and of value to the researcher (Crano, Brewer and Lac, 2014). It needs noting that the child participants may have a desire to please the interviewer or because of their perceived authority say what they think the interviewer wants to hear, it is thus important that trust is established at the outset (Denscombe, 2014; Gibson, 2012). However, alternatively, group interviews are desirable when it might be suspected that participants might more readily express themselves as part of a group rather than a solo interview and especially so with children or young people (Yin, 2016). This group dynamic then should spur on responses that would not have been obtained if social interaction was absent (Crano, Brewer and Lac, 2014) and may make them feel empowered (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). If facilitated well, participants should feel confident to broach sensitive topics and may gain strength from the group position gaining a collective voice (Gibbs, 2017). Researchers need to be flexible, reflexive, and creative in adapting the discussions to meet the needs of individual children, whilst guiding a group situation (Gibson, 2012). Considering this, I cannot claim that my role as researcher did not influence the children's responses, however, I did strive to elicit discussions from the children that were authentic and representative of their own opinions.

3.7.4 Limitations of focus groups

As well as the potential problems of group dynamics (Bryman, 2016; Yin, 2016; Newby, 2014) and the possibility of researcher bias (Wilson, 2017) as already highlighted, there are numerous other disadvantages of utilising a focus group. The data that is generated may be generalised and consequently, it may be difficult for the researcher to distinguish between individuals and the group (Wilson, 2017). Issues of ethics need to be reviewed throughout the process and taking stock of this

is the researcher's responsibility particularly when topics become sensitive and discussions must not be allowed to get distressing (Gibbs, 2017; Newby, 2014). This point was particularly salient in all the focus groups that I facilitated and my experience as a primary school teacher aided the centrality of ethical practice throughout the study. Furthermore, I am used to facilitating discussions with children, and I was aware of when children may feel uncomfortable, or a topic too sensitive and was able to redirect accordingly. When it comes to analysing the data, it may be difficult to generalise if the group size is small or not representative of the wider population (Gibson, 2012). Notably, though, I am not suggesting a generalisability nor a homogeneity within children's experience, however, the focus groups did yield rich qualitative data that represented the everyday experiences of the participant.

Particularly disadvantageous is that recordings are more time-consuming to transcribe because of the multi-party interaction and the difficulty in discerning different voices, particularly if the participants were talking over each other (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). O'Reilly, Ronzoni and Dogra (2013) discuss the complexity of interviewing groups of children and that they can be difficult to set up. I was not known to the participants and therefore they may not have responded as fully or as honestly as they may have if they were familiar with them (Robert - Holmes, 2018). Confidentiality can be an issue in focus groups as the researcher can only guarantee that they will maintain this, and not the other participants (Jensen, 2017) which could lead to participants not giving a full or honest account. As with the issue of researcher bias that was raised earlier, the researcher's views must never become obvious (Davies and Hughes, 2014). Additionally, it is essential that the views of the participants are not commented on critically and the flow of ideas emerging from the group must not be constrained by the perspective of the researcher (Denscombe, 2014). In groups, due to the strong pressure towards conformity, a mutual influence can raise the question of reliability, as group dynamics ebb and flow (Gomm, 2008). Despite all the discussions and caveats of what can go wrong, most focus groups work well and yield rich, useful data, (Newby, 2014) which was the case in my research.

3.7.5 Facilitation of focus group activities

Due to the positive responses to the focus group activities in the pilot study (which are discussed in section 3.4.2), I decided to use this approach in the main study. Newby (2014) asserts that utilising stimulus in focus groups can help move beyond just answering questions. Whilst rich discussions were generated from the four activities in the pilot study, I further enhanced this opportunity by developing three additional activities. These activities were presented in each focus group in the same order and the same questions were asked, though lines of enquiry were pursued as and when presented by the research participants (Gibson, 2012).

Activity 1 – ‘Sorting of logos’ (warm-up activity)

Participants were given a set of cards with different logos on them and asked to sort them into two piles, social media logos and not social media logos. They were encouraged to discuss their choices and asked:



How did you know which were the social media logos?

What do you know about social media?

What is social media used for?

Figure 9: Focus group activity 1 - 'Sorting of logos'

Activity 2 – ‘Emojis’ (warm-up activity)

Participants were given a set of cards with different emojis on them, and they were asked to sort them into four piles (happy feelings, unhappy feelings, places, and activities). They were asked the following questions:

How are these emojis used?

Are emojis helpful? How?

Do you always know how people are feeling when they use these emojis?

How?

Why do people use emojis?

How do people use emojis on social media?



Figure 10: Focus group activity 2 - 'Emojis'

Activity 3 – ‘Snapchat filters’

Participants were given a set of photographs of people with Snapchat filters. They were asked to discuss them in response to the following questions:



Figure 11: Focus group activity 3 - 'Snapchat filters'

What are these filters used for?

How do they make people look?

How are these different from how they look in real life?

Why do people use these filters?

What problems might happen? Why?

Activity 4 – ‘Social media images’

Participants were shown some posts from Instagram (which were obtained online) and asked the following questions:

What motivates people to post on social media?

What types of images have they chosen to post?

Why?

How do you think people feel about likes and comments on their posts?

How do these posts show their identity?

What issues do you think happen when posting on social media?



Figure 12: Focus group activity 4 - 'Social media images'

Activity 5 – ‘Advertisements’

Participants were shown a variety of advertisements that may appear on social media, and they were asked the following questions:



Figure 13: Focus group activity 5 - 'Advertisements'

Do you notice advertisements when using social media?

What kind of advertisements are you aware of?

Why do you think you are targeted?

How does it affect your identity?

Does it influence you in any way?

Activity 6 – ‘Profiles’

Participants were shown screenshots of 3 profiles from Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook. They were asked the following questions:

What are these showing?

Do you think these people are real? How do you know?

What do you know about these people?

How can we show our identity on social media?



Figure 14: Focus group activity 6 - 'Profiles'

Activity 7 – ‘Your messages about social media’

Unlike the previous activities (which were interactive and designed to elicit a group response) this activity was an individual activity that was designed as an opportunity to reflect on the discussions in a more individualised way. The reasons for this were twofold: firstly, to ensure that more reticent members of the group had an opportunity to give their opinion (Gibson, 2012) and secondly to take the pressure off an immediate response and the chance to slow down and think about what they might say (Gibbs, 2017). The participants were given a prepopulated piece of paper that had a happy emoji and a sad emoji on it. They were invited to advise other children about using social media and asked to comment on how issues could be improved.



Advice about using social media

How issues could be improved


Figure 15: Focus group activity 7 - 'Your messages about social media'

Due to the interactive nature of the activities and the visual stimulus that they provided (Newby, 2014), rich discussions took place in the focus groups. The time spent with each focus group varied considerably: the longest was 40 minutes and 4 seconds and the shortest was 22 minutes and 59 seconds, with the average length being 34 minutes and 9 seconds. The difference in these session lengths was led by the children, and although I used the same activities, some children were invariably more responsive than others. Despite the disparity of session lengths, all the focus groups were receptive to the activities, and they were certainly ‘tin openers’ for talk (Roberts and Woods, 2018). The focus groups were facilitated before the creative participatory method and not all children who participated in the focus group took part in the subsequent collaging activity, as explained in 3.6.5.

3.7.6 Creative participatory methods

Utilising creative methods is a burgeoning area within social science research and is closely associated with the prioritisation of children and young people having a more active presence in research about their lives as a way of providing researchers with a rigorous approach to exploring social phenomena (McLaughlin and Coleman - Fountain, 2019). Mackworth-Young *et al.* (2020) highlight that, as well as gathering rich data that invites real insight into their lives, creative methods also empower children and young people by giving them an avenue to express themselves in a less directed way and facilitates independent reflection and self-presentation. Children are also repositioned as subjects rather than objects in research which helps to legitimise their view (Kaplun, 2019). In essence, creative methods are used to engage research participants and can encompass drawings, collaging, photographs, and videos for example (Roberts and Woods, 2018). Incorporating these methods can be individual or project-based. They allow participants to pause, ponder and examine assumptions and allow for a more nuanced depiction of ‘lived realities’ (Literat, 2013). Leonard and McKnight (2014) argue that if employed sensitively and reflexively, they can encourage a more collaborative type of research with reduced power in balance in the researcher/researched dyad. They can also allow the researcher to locate themselves more firmly and easily into the space of the

participant (Mannay, 2016). Rose (2016) emphasises the researcher's stance, especially in interpreting the data and she implores the researcher to pay close attention to the visual representations. Furthermore, this can be deemed as a critical paradigm as it relates to the constructed representations of society. As mentioned earlier, Mannay (2010, p.94) uses the term 'making the familiar strange' and highlights that this type of creative research allows the researcher to investigate territory without the data being distorted by the self-contained and enclosed world of common understanding. This in turn has ethnographic implications if the concept of 'familiarity' is to be challenged. Also, within a social constructionist paradigm new practice of meaning-making can act as a touchstone to illuminate participants' experiences (Gerstenblatt, 2013).

Mannay (2016) proposes that we live in an 'ocular centric' culture with a perceptual and epistemological bias ranking over other senses and that images form a vital part of our everyday worlds. Rose (2016) also discusses the term 'ocular centrism' to describe the centrality of the visual to the contemporary Western world. This preoccupation with a 'visual culture' has been realised through the increased dominance of the visual being used as a precursor to the modern world. Likewise, this resonates with Berger's (1977, p.7) comment that "seeing comes before words...and establishes our place in the surrounding world", which addresses the crucial connection between human existence and visualisation. The emphasis on the ocular centric can lead to a discussion on the perception of vision versus visibility and the juxtaposition of how we interpret our vision is different from what we see (Rose, 2016). Despite researchers using creative methods to overcome 'persuasive textual bias's', caution does need to be administered and the data collected needs to be "embedded in the narratives of its inception, reception, interpretation, and impact" (Mannay, 2016, p. 2). Images and artefacts produced by participants are subject to interpretation and reinterpretation to ensure a rigorous methodology. Rose (2016) notes that utilising creative methodologies is a small but increasingly popular research paradigm and is increasingly being used by social and educational researchers. Correspondingly, she emphasises that any representation of creativity that takes place within a specific social context is particular to the social context that mediates its impact. The real strength of creative methodologies is the fact that they

allow the researcher to enter a dialogue and enables the “insiders with knowledgeable insight and expertise and they provide avenues to spatiality and delve into issues often left unspoken” (Karlsson, 2012 cited in Arthur *et al.*, 2012, p.99).

I chose a creative research method for this research as a means of exploring themes that emerged from the focus group data (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017) allowing a much more personal and rich response (Bland, 2017). It also allowed the opportunity to work with some children on a one-to-one basis, particularly if they were more reticent to speak during the focus groups (O’ Reilly, Ronzoni and Dogra, 2013). Also, as some of the issues discussed and disclosed by children would be difficult to articulate orally, particularly when discussing complex notions such as ‘identity’ and ‘self-presentation’, this was deemed the most effective route. Photo elicitation was considered as a method of data generation for this research and employing screenshots of the children’s social media profile, along with an accompanying interview/narrative/dialogue to explain it. Utilising this approach could have potentially captured a rich account of their world (Rose, 2016). However, this proved to be too ethically challenging, as the children in the study were under the recommended age for using social media (Ofcom, 2021) and this could potentially be viewed as collusion in respect of the researcher’s role.

Collaging can be another window into how people make sense of the world. It can allow respondents to show their perceptions and make representations of their situation in a way that a verbal description may not allow (Arthur *et al.*, 2012). I decided to give children the opportunity to respond visually by collaging, still allowing for a co-constructed method that did not rely on linguistic proficiency (Literat, 2013). This enabled an acknowledgement that not all children are comfortable with their perceived artistic ability and therefore sought to be inclusive (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015). Unlike focus groups where a spontaneous response is expected, the research participant is given the time and the space to reflect on their responses which encourage active conceptualisation (Bland, 2017). This empowering notion is also held by a poststructuralist critique of the indignity of

speaking for others. Deleuze (in Foucault, 1977) suggested that in creative production the power differential is gradually passing to the 'subjects'. Groundwater - Smith, Dockett and Bottrell (2015) highlight creative methods as less confronting than, for example, a standalone interview as the participant does not have to engage in eye contact which can help the researcher establish rapport through a more relaxed interaction, whilst also giving the participant more control.

3.7.7 Collaging

In this creative method, participants are invited to create a visual representation, utilising images collected from magazines, as well as collage-making materials such as coloured beads, ribbons, sequins, balloons, tissue paper and feathers for example (Roberts and Woods, 2018). Dutton *et al.* (2019) highlight that collage creation can take many forms but, at its most basic, it involves the act of cutting and sticking objects onto a surface. Mackworth-Young *et al.* (2020) suggest that collage can achieve the balance of being fun and simultaneously being accessible, which is particularly important for those daunted by drawing. The collection of images requires a lot of thought over an extended period and allows the participant to slow down and connect with their own life (Mannay, 2010). Using this method, authenticity is high as it can facilitate an honest and accurate reflection (Grant, 2018). Culshaw (2019) suggests that collaging is gaining in popularity as it enables stimulation of the visual rather than linguistic thinking and the opportunity to offer an expression of holistic experience as a non-linear metaphor, as well as having revelatory potential. This type of research design allows for a deep engagement with participants' experiences and for the collection of rich, highly qualitative data (Basit, 2010). Collaging is situated within the ontological assumption of constructionism (Culshaw, 2019; Gerstenblatt, 2013) and it was therefore seen as a useful tool within this research.

This type of method allows for the meaning of social phenomena and the associated meanings assigned by participants to be explored but it needs to be considered as a specific subjective experience presented by the participant rather than a definitive one (Woods, 2012). Roberts and Woods (2018) indicate that collage can act to help

conceptualise ideas and that this alternative way, can represent subtleties of experiences and profound feelings and understandings and can act as ‘tin openers’ for talk. Participants are encouraged to explain the analogies and visual metaphors using their own subjectively contingent schemas (Mannay, Staples and Edwards, 2017). These metaphors can reveal how participants construct their reality, in the case of this research, this was of great importance as social media is an intricate and complex phenomenon and the collage-making process allowed for visual metaphors to emerge. Collage therefore can act as a reflective process and facilitates the slowing down of meaning-making, allowing participants to choose materials to represent something and time to consider where it should be placed and why (Roberts and Woods, 2018). This production of images requires thought and encourages participants to actively access their sense of self, place, and space (Mannay, 2016). Gerstenblatt (2013) claims collaging allows for an opportunity to fragment space and repurpose objects to contextualise multiple realities, which serves to highlight postmodernist thought challenging a single reality. Dutton *et al.*, (2019) similarly suggest the connection with poststructuralist perspectives which underscore that reality is partial, subjective, and socially constructed and is, therefore, another strong rationale for utilising this method.

3.7.8 Combining methods – the visual and the verbal

As mentioned, it is useful not to separate the visual from the surrounding narrative and dialogue that is generated from the participant and researcher (Rose, 2016). Grbich (2012) uses the term ‘intermingling’ to depict this mix of the collage and the interview. The collage and the interview cannot be easily separated and the collage acts to help conceptualise and articulate ideas (Roberts and Woods, 2018). Given the opportunity to explain and rationalise visual metaphors that develop can help participants articulate subjectively contingent schemas (Mannay, Staples and Edwards, 2017). Eldén (2013, p. 76) emphasises this and suggests that artistic creations are “part of the whole picture and cannot be separated from the talk.” Mannay (2010) also highlights how visual techniques can engender in-depth interviews which can help explain and contextualise participants’ lived experiences.

Gerstenblatt (2013) stresses that collage can open dialogue and gives the researcher the opportunity of being the observer or being actively involved, which can differ for each participant. Though, Dutton *et al.* (2019) highlight that collage does not require verbal language and can act as a vehicle of expression. However, Banks (2001) indicates that the study of images alone would be a 'mistaken method'. Rose (2016) emphasises that two sets of data (visual and verbal) should not be kept separate as they are intrinsically linked. Correspondingly, Eldén (2013) emphasises that creative productions are part of a whole picture and cannot, therefore, be separated from the dialogue that the participant has provided. In summary, a combination of the visual and the verbal can enable participants to actively engage in a reflective process that adds richness to both the meaning-making process and the telling of their story in a less directed way (Mackworth - Young *et al.*, 2020). This interweaving of the two methods worked well in my research, and children were able to express their responses both visually and verbally.

3.7.9 Limitations of creative participatory methods

It is worth noting that some children may be reluctant to create art because of a perception that they are not very good at it (Dutton *et al.*, 2019; Groundwater - Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015) and some participants may feel intimidated by this perceived artistic ability (Culshaw, 2019). This was certainly the case for David and Emily during the collaging, who both demonstrated reticence in their approach to the activity. Both participants, asked for clarification several times and were hesitant in commencing the collaging. The researcher/participant dyad was also more pronounced with these two children, as they clearly viewed me as an authority figure and the task as having perceived outcomes (Canosa, Graham and Wilson, 2018). This is reflected on further in the conclusion chapter in section 7.3.2. The significance of the research taking place in school time should not be underestimated, as schools are environments where work is appraised and assessed and needs to be 'completed', so whilst children in my research did have a choice over what materials they use, creating art is not a value-free skill or activity (Scherer, 2016). Encounters between adult researchers and children are often highly managed and this needs to be considered before researching with children (Holland

et al., 2010; Tisdall, Davis and Gallagher, 2009). Likewise, Bland (2017) highlights that although creative activities may reduce power differentials that exist between children and adults, the contrived school environment can affect this even with creative participatory methods. Gauntlett (2007) expresses concern over the highly personal nature of this type of research and the fact that samples tend to be small which can affect generalisability. In addition, he points out that it is also very interpretative due to the visual rather than textual narrative and thus validity is difficult to prove. Mitchell (2011) maintains that the power of art can exceed our ability to interpret them, thus presenting the researcher with a challenge of how to approach the interpretive process of such creations. Children may approach creative methods differently and consequently, the researcher needs to be flexible and adaptable as well as allow for plenty of time as this method can be extremely time-consuming (Dutton *et al.*, 2019).

3.7.10 Facilitation of the collaging with interviews

Participants were presented with a variety of art and craft materials to use to make their collage. These included scrabble letters, gold/silver foil letters, pens, pompoms, buttons, beads, sequins, fake gems, star shapes, hearts, flower shapes, ribbon, pegs, labels, leaves, wool, lollipop sticks, tissue paper, textured animal print paper, fabric, pipe cleaners, googly eyes, emojis, scissors, glue, and pens²⁸. The participants were invited to select a colour A3 piece of paper to make their collage and were able to choose if they used this landscape or portrait. The participants were invited to represent their collage in any way they chose and told that they could use any of the craft materials. The participants were asked to reflect on the questions:

How do you see yourself on social media?

How do others see you on social media?

²⁸ The use of magazines, newspapers and catalogues were considered as collaging materials but due to ongoing Covid 19 safety concerns with hygiene and children touching them, it was considered safer for them to use new materials. Also, due to the participants being children, finding suitable material was considered challenging due to potential inappropriate content.

Are you the same on social media as you are in real life?

An unstructured, informal interview took place in conjunction with this, which was to allow for reflexivity as much as possible and to allow me the opportunity to adopt behaviours and demeanours that made the participant feel as comfortable and responsive as possible (Yin, 2016). Figure 16 depicts the collage materials that were used in conjunction with the broad questioning noted above.



Figure 16: Collage materials presented to the participants in the research

Excerpts of the children's collages are presented²⁹ in Chapter Four, Five and Six, however, the children's actual collages can be seen in Appendix K. The time children spent creating their collages and narrating differed considerably, the longest was Sophie (53 minutes and 37 seconds) and the shortest was Lloyd (14 minutes and 44 seconds), with the average length being 32 minutes and 23 seconds. Notably, though, I did not view the time spent as a direct indicator of engagement, nor a

²⁹ Excerpts of the children's collages were specifically presented in the thesis, to centralise and emphasise the importance of the image to the reader. The full collages can be seen in Appendix K.

reflection of the children's understanding, rather it demonstrated that the process was led by the child and an individual response (Bland, 2017).

3.8 Data analysis

Yin (2016) highlights that, unfortunately, there is no definitive instructional manual that can directly give answers to how to analyse your data set. Similarly, Kara (2015) suggests that data analysis is a difficult process that at times seems impenetrable. It is often referred to as the 'dark art' of research, yet it should be the 'beating heart' of researchers' work (Kara *et al.*, 2021, p. 83). Basit (2010) also suggests that data analysis is the most challenging part of qualitative research and needs to be dynamic and intuitive to inform inductive reasoning and theorising. In respect of analysing qualitative research, there is no one universally accepted or adopted method for analysis (Johnson and Christensen, 2016). Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge unwanted biases imposed by your values when analysing data. The author's position requires clear identification as having some effect on the identifying and selecting of narratives (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This was explored in section 3.2.4 with the positioning of the researcher and 3.2.5 referring to the reflexivity of the researcher. Despite using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in the pilot study, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach was adopted in the main study for the focus groups and for identifying initial themes within the collages with interviews. Although exploration of how participants were making-meaning of their personal and social worlds through social media was still held paramount, IPA is more suitable for a smaller sample (Smith, Flower and Larkin, 2009). In the following sections, I explain how an interweaving of different methods of data analysis was employed to unpick the layers of interpretation that the rich data set offered and how I made sense of the representations of the lived reality of social media that the children in this research alluded to.

3.8.1 Thematic analysis used with the focus groups and collaging with interviews

Thematic analysis is a well-established common approach to qualitative data analysis where recurrent codes are utilised as the basis for generating themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013; 2006). Creswell (2014) advocates that to successfully analyse the data, it is essential to become familiar with it. Transcribing the focus groups and interview recordings as well as reading through the transcripts several times helped to gain this familiarity. Prior to making formal codes and themes, I analysed the focus group data manually in three broad topics to try and make sense of what the children were saying. These 'noticings' were derived from the following questions:

1. What is social media used for? (Playing, having fun, making money, being famous, curating your life, showing who you are)
2. What do people do on there? (Communicate, interact, show off, find someone, copy, seek attention, feelings, enactment, producing, performing, playing with identity)
3. What do you need to consider or think about when using social media? (Privacy, discernment, safety, issues)

An example of this initial analysis can be seen in Appendix F and was used for all the focus groups. This enabled me to start "...meticulous preparation and coding of data..." (Kara *et al.*, 2021, p. 84). Braun and Clarke (2006) advocate a six-phrase approach to thematic analysis which was adopted and allowed for a structured approach to the focus group and later the interview data. In the social sciences, this is arguably the most influential approach, possibly because it offers such a clear and usable framework for conducting thematic analysis (Macquire and Delahunt, 2017). After the initial 'noticings' a second trawl of the data was conducted, utilising NVivo software³⁰ to establish and cross-reference the sub-themes (these are documented

³⁰ NVivo is a qualitative data analysis computer software package that helps qualitative researchers to organise, analyse and find insights in unstructured or qualitative data.

in red in Appendix F). To gain further familiarisation with the focus group data, I also tracked four children - two male and two female - to establish broad themes and to ensure that my research findings were firmly rooted in the data (Kara, 2015). I analysed the times that the child spoke within the group and keywords/terms were highlighted. These were again cross-referenced in the second trawl by specific quotes and how they related to the subthemes (an example of this can be found in Appendix G) whilst trying to retain a sense of where the data sat within the whole transcript (Silverman, 2014).

After establishing these broad themes and getting a sense of the responses from both above strategies, I used NVivo to facilitate coding and to check the frequency of themes as well as the quality of data relating to those themes. In the initial analysis of the collages with interviews, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic model was also employed, similarly to the focus groups, though at this stage more emphasis was placed on the interview and the narrative provided by the child rather than the collage. Three master themes were identified with several sub-themes within each master theme. In the data analysis chapters, these are explored and presented with excerpts of the children's voices documented during the focus group activities and collages with interviews combined with analysis of this data in response to the research questions and other research literature. A mixed-methods analysis was also employed for the collages with interviews, and different analytic techniques were used with the same dataset, as this can enrich the data (Kara *et al.*, 2021). This is explained in the following section.

3.8.2 Analysis used with the collaging with interviews

As mentioned, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach were also utilised in the first instance with the collages with interviews but later the same data set was interrogated using analytic questions derived from Rose (2016) and Grbich (2012). This was followed by Brown and Collins' (2021) analytical visuo-textual framework (which is discussed in detail in the following section 3.8.3). Sorin, Brooks and Haring (2012) highlight that there is no consensus about the best way to analyse visual data

and therefore researchers need to develop their approach. Analysing the collages and children's narratives/interviews were based on several approaches that embraced the 'messiness' (Lather, 2014) of this qualitative research. Arthur *et al.* (2012) suggests that in some cases creative participatory data can be analysed and interpreted in similar ways to other qualitative approaches by utilising themes with the visual used to support as extra evidence. However, this overlooks the more nuanced depictions and empowering concepts encapsulated in children's art (Literat, 2013). At the other end of the spectrum, the study of images alone would be a 'mistaken method' (Banks, 2001). Similarly, Mitchell (2011) maintains that the power of the image and our ability to interpret them presents the researcher with a challenge as to how to approach the interpretative process. Both Rose (2016) and Mannay (2016) argue that to gain an understanding of the internal narrative of the image, it is imperative to acknowledge the image-maker and pay attention to what they intended to show. Furthermore, the two sets of data, the visual and the verbal, should not be kept separate as they are intrinsically linked (Rose, 2016). An auteur approach that emphasises the need to explore why participants produce the images rather than the researcher imposing their interpretation was employed (McLaughlin and Coleman-Fountain, 2019).

3.8.3 Establishing an analytical framework for combining the visual and the verbal

As well as adopting the above strategies in the interpretation and analysis of the visual data and accompanying narrative, I endeavoured to approach the visual with a set of analytical questions that drew on suggestions from Rose (2016) and Grbich (2012), an example that can be found in Appendix H. These were initially basic:

- What is being shown?
- How are the components arranged?
- What use is made of colour?

Before becoming more analytic:

- What social signifiers or signs are linked or embedded in the image?
- How does the image reflect or depart from dominant cultural values?

- What relationships are established between the components of the image visually?

To synthesise this analytical process further and ensure a semiotic approach between the image and narrative, Brown and Collins' (2021) visuo-textual framework were employed. They highlight that the material representation is more than just a powerful tool to instigate conversation but also a compelling expression in and of itself. Similarly, Pink (2013) highlights the complexity of visual data and that examining the text combined with the image provides interdependent strands that bring out the complexity of qualitative research. Furthermore, Brown and Collins (2021) emphasise this duality and suggest that none of the modes of communication is superior to another. They use the analogy of weaving to illustrate how the three elements and two levels are intertwined, the two levels - noticing and describing, followed by conceptualising are combined with the three elements in turn, visual only, then transcript only before finally combining the two in a visuo-textual way. This structured way of approaching the qualitative data enabled meticulous preparation and appropriate use of interpretation (Kara *et al.*, 2021). The following figure is an example of the analytic process that was adopted, this was repeated for all aspects of the collage and narrative and enabled a picture of the participant's portrayal of self via social media to be established. A more detailed version can be found in Appendix I.

	Element 1 Visual only	Element 2 Transcript only	Element 3 Visuo- textual combined
Level 1 Noticing and describing	Central figure depicting self.	“I’m going to make myself out of a peg”. Self.	Perception of self
Level 2 Conceptualising	Binary depiction of self – on social media and in real life (labels and headings).	Social media as being a 'judgement' of self.	Strong sense of self and understands that social media is a way of portraying a certain image of yourself to an imagined audience through self- expression in the form of comments and engagement on social media.

Figure 17: Example of Brown and Collins' (2021) analytical framework

Yates (2010) further advocates that analysis needs to be discursive and not viewed through a single lens. To add to this complexity, Leitch (2009) emphasises that there is no right or wrong way to interpret data, nor a single approach as depicted above, though a thorough explanation does need to be provided to give credibility to the research. Within the analysis sections of this thesis, the three master themes have been separated into chapters and the sub themes have been renamed using excerpts of the children's quotes to encapsulate the richness of their voices.

3.8.4 Validity

Creswell (2014) notes that validity does not carry the same connotations in qualitative research as it does in quantitative studies. However, he does point out that validity can be ensured whether the results are accurate from the perspective of the researcher and the participant. Lincoln and Guba (1985) eschew the term validity altogether in qualitative research as they argue that it is too heavily tainted by a positivist standpoint, but they also suggest that it may be captured more by transferability and authenticity. Punch and Oancea (2014) suggest that validity is a complex term that can involve the research design (internal validity) and the

relationship between the sample and the population it was drawn from (external validity), in other words, validity is about inference in terms of what the researcher observes. In this research, the research design was robust in that it was based on a solid grounding of the review of literature as well as research questions and methods informed from the pilot study. Whilst external validity and generalisability are not being suggested, careful consideration was given to the sample population and four different types of schools were selected based on Free School Meals, location, and ethnicity. Arthur *et al.* (2012) similarly advocates that validity should include an explicitly justified methodology and data analysis which can be found in this chapter. Triangulation, in this case utilising two different research methods to build up a coherent justification of themes and rich description, was used to convey the findings as a detailed discussion of shared experiences (Punch, 2009). Hayashi, Abib and Hoppen (2019) emphasise that there is real diversity in qualitative research and consequently there are no universally accepted criteria and validity should be considered a processual approach at each stage of the research.

Denzin and Lincoln (2017) discuss validity in qualitative research more in terms of credibility, trustworthiness, and authenticity. In this research, 'member checking' was utilised to ensure that the research reflected the children's viewpoint. Birt, Scott and Cavers (2016) suggest that this is a useful way to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences. Though Lincoln and Guba (1985) highlight that this is not a simple procedure as member checking might be compounded by methodological challenges, in this case, the dilemma of assimilating voices with focus groups and the ethical decisions that this involves. However, they maintain that member checking can enhance the rigour of qualitative research. Kara *et al.* (2021) indicate that it may not always be possible to involve participants fully in the analytic process but that reengaging with them can play an integral role that allows for reflection. To facilitate this, I summarised the findings from the collages and the messages from the focus groups to provide a collage to show the children and discuss if this represented what they wished to say, this can be seen in Appendix J. Due to ongoing COVID - 19 restrictions, member checking was conducted online through Microsoft Teams. Unfortunately, this was a rather stilted way of interacting with the participants as I had only met them once during the data generation which took place

between October and December 2020. The participants in School B engaged the least and were monosyllabic in their responses. In School C the class teacher remained present, and this may have affected what the participants said. However, overall, the member checking did highlight themes that I had deduced from the data, particularly in respect to girls aspiring to beauty standards and feeling the pressure of looking a certain way.

3.8.5 Reliability

Arthur *et al.* (2012) suggest that reliability reflects the accuracy of the study at demonstrating the participant's meaning. Achieving this reliability in qualitative research does not necessarily mean that the study could be exactly replicated as in quantitative research. Nevertheless, they suggest that it does relate to the transparency of the study at providing a clear overview of the participant selection (3.6.5 for the focus groups and 3.6.6 for the collaging with interviews) and the methods advocated (see 3.7) and data analysis procedures (see 3.8) with a clear rationale for each stage. Similarly, Punch (2014) defines reliability in terms of consistency and qualitative data refers also to the dependability of the data. In my research, this was exemplified by using the same focus group activities and question agenda (see 3.7.5) and by using the same collaging materials and instructions (see 3.7.10). Yin (2016) also advocates checking transcripts for accuracy, which I employed for both the focus groups and the collage interviews/narratives. Rose and Johnson (2020) also suggest that the overall trustworthiness of qualitative research can be aligned directly with the larger issues of ontological (see 3.2.1) and epistemological (see 3.2.2) affiliation. Along with the theoretical orientation, methodological practices, and analytical techniques, all of which have been presented in this chapter.

3.9 Summary of the chapter

In this chapter the research design was described and a critical reflection of why choices were made articulated. The ontological assumption of social constructionism

was presented in relation to multiple realities that are created by individuals and how children and childhood are situated within this and in relation to their engagement within the digital space. An interpretivist epistemology acknowledging that direct knowledge about the lived phenomenon is not possible but rather as a process of interpretation was discussed. Furthermore, the notion of hearing the child's voice about these conceptualisations was seen to be held paramount in this research. All aspects of the research process were considered including ethics, sampling, and methods of data generation and analyses. The evaluation of the methodology has reflected on issues of sampling, ethical dilemmas, and limitations across the process. The data was collected across four different schools and therefore each setting was individual in terms of the ethos and environment. The effect of the researcher and the attempts to minimise researcher bias were reflected upon. Data analysis techniques employed across the two data sets were explored, which demonstrated the layers of complexity that this entailed. In the subsequent chapters, the results and discussion are presented in line with the theoretical framework adopted, the research questions and other research explored in the review of literature.

Chapter Four - 'Being' and 'becoming' in the digital space

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the first of three empirical chapters documenting the results and findings, I explore how social media is shaping children's childhoods within digital spaces and their subjective experience of this. The chapter title, denotes the first main theme, 'being' and 'becoming' in the digital space. Within this chapter, and the subsequent chapters, mixed method analysis is woven through "to generate a richer perspective of the phenomena under study" (Kara *et al.*, 2021, p. 97) and as a way of capturing the nuance that the data generated. When the participants are referred to as Child (capital letter denotation), followed by (FG, number), data from the focus groups is being referred to for example, Child A (FG1). Whereas when there is a name (pseudonym) followed by CI (number) the reference is from the collage with interview, for example, Isabel (CI1). The results and findings in this chapter are divided into subthemes, which have a title that has a quotation from the data, followed by a colon and an explanation. Within these subthemes excerpts of the children's voices and images captured during the focus group activities and collages with interviews are presented. This is combined with analysis of this data in relation to the research questions and other research literature. Focusing on children's own cultural practices in relation to their social media use situates their experience as a hybrid of online practices and peer culture, as well as establishing the influence of gender and language within their identity formation. This 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994) in which children construct these cultural practices is conceptual rather than geographical and enables them to engage in multiple ways.

In respect of digital technologies and the advanced communication that this has afforded, arguably this digital space is more complex than ever before and facilitates a type of curatorship (Potter and McDougall, 2017). Potter (2012) emphasises that this curatorship is an active version of meaning-making and digital artefacts, in the case of social media, profiles, statuses, photographs and videos help to create a space that is self-representational and elicits a response from an audience. For the children in this study, the way they negotiate their digital spaces is explored and

analysed in relation to their 'everyday' experiences which is significant for understanding how they make meaning of their lives in a period of rapid technological change (Moran, Reily and Brady, 2021). As Marsh (2013) acknowledges 'childhood' has no singular containment and therefore children live in multi-faceted, complex worlds, which again, has been further complicated by digital spaces. It is also worth acknowledging that there is pluralism in children's voices and the assumption that not all children have the same view (Murray, 2019). So, whilst collective views are portrayed within this analysis, especially in relation to the focus groups, individual views are also interpreted within the creative participatory method data.

The notion of 'being' and 'becoming' helps to contextualise digital spaces from the child's perspective and to ascertain how they communicate via social media as a component of their experience of childhood (Björktomta and Hansen, 2018). The sociology of childhood and how children are viewed as capable social agents (James and James, 2004) are important concepts for this chapter and it is through this communication and interaction, that their world and how they socialise online was demonstrated. This took the form of both positive and negative experiences and demonstrated how they viewed their interactions on social media with this subjective meaning-making as integral to their 'being' within this space (Prout, 2011). Also 'becoming' was seen as an ongoing process of identity formation (Bernstein, 2016) rather than a temporary state before reaching adulthood and maturity. Uprichard (2008) highlights that looking forward to what a child 'becomes' is arguably an important part of 'being' a child and that looking to the future must not be ignored, as this prevents exploring the ways in which this may shape experiences of being children. In a digital space, children have a 'digital footprint' in a way that was not apparent before the prevalence of social media (Lupton, 2013). This can incorporate both a 'sharenting' aspect, where their parents document their lives (MacBlain, Dunn and Luke, 2017) and a record of their childhood through their own self curatorship, which has a type of permanence through photographs and status' that was previously not possible (Butkowski, Dixon and Weeks, 2020).

Furthermore, how we construct the notion of 'child' is not to be confused with being a child and therefore it is important to view children's participation with research not as homogenous and undifferentiated but rather as an acknowledgement that they shape and organise their own world and their own experience of childhood (Lomax, 2012). From a poststructuralist perspective, the culture that we live in shapes both who we are becoming and how we are becoming (Foucault, 1969). In more recent times, there has been an emergence of a digital childhood, with technological advancements and communication practices through social media and this arguably has implications to this 'becoming' experience due to the complexities it engenders (Ackermann, 2011). In addition, the boundaries between phases of childhood and adulthood are more unstable and less defined, and the concept of the 'tween' intervening between early childhood and teenagers is becoming more apparent, particularly in relation to social media use, which is popular with the tween contingent (Willet *et al.*, 2013) and why this specific age range was chosen for this study. Moving beyond a binary depiction of 'being' and 'becoming', produces a wider conceptual lens for viewing children's engagement in their own lives and the social world around them and how these impact on their childhood experience both individually and collectively (Hanson, 2017). Adopting this lens, tentative connections with identity portrayal are demonstrated through an exploration of how social media can facilitate subcultures and can affect mood and behaviour when children are trying to fit in. Relationships and how these were enacted on social media were also evident within this theme and how this sometimes replicated or strengthened real life interactions. Finally, far from being just a dangerous digital playground with exposure to inappropriate content and dangers, fun experiences were often reported and a sense of ludic in how they formulated their communications were documented.

4.1.1 Background information about participants' use of social media

To contextualise the viewpoints of the children, data was gathered on their incidence of social media use and their preferred platforms. This was ascertained at the outset of each focus group session as part of their participant profile. Two participants indicated that they did not have social media accounts but still indicated a preference in relation to ones they have seen/used on their parents' accounts. The incidence of

social media use in this research for 10 - and 11-year-olds is 95%, which is significantly higher than research indicates. For example, Ofcom (2021) documents that 44% of children have a social media profile on at least one platform (though their sample group is 8 - 11 years old which makes comparison problematic). Of greater relevance, research by the Children's Commissioner (2018) indicates 75% of 10 - 12-year-olds having their own accounts (however this sample age range is different and includes Year 7 of high school). In this research, there was a gender divide in social media preference with females favouring TikTok (60%) and males preferring YouTube (60%). Overall, the most popular social media platform was TikTok (37.5%). The results demonstrated that Instagram and Snapchat were not very popular with this sample (though it may have been their second or subsequent choice) as indicated in other research (Ofcom, 2021; Children's Commissioner, 2018). It was clear from this research that Facebook is not a popular social media choice for tweens as no children indicated this as their preference and Child B (FG1) specified that this lack of popularity was related to age, making the comment, "Facebook, old people use that." Tween culture in this research seemingly favoured TikTok, one child noting, "because of the dancing mainly" (Child R, FG4) with YouTube and WhatsApp next in order of preference. Though children in the research did discuss the use of Instagram and Snapchat in subsequent discussions.

4.1.2 Initial exploration of children's social media understandings

To further contextualise the findings of this research and to establish the nature of digital spaces for child participants, in the focus groups children were asked to sort the logos provided into those that were social media and those that were not. This initial activity was to enable understandings to be discussed but also allowed an establishment of group rules and a collaborate approach where open dialogue was encouraged (Newby, 2014). This discussion generated their ideas about what social media was used for, it allowed children to question each other and establish trust. For example, one child thought that Dell and Firefox were social media logos and another child questioned this, saying, "that is a company and not social media" (Child E, FG1). This confusion was also reiterated in relation to another child who thought

that Google was a social media platform with Child F (FG2) correcting them by saying that this may have been “because you can still go on the Internet.” Most children in the focus groups were clear about what social media was and how to define it. Child E (FG1) indicated that you “put like pictures of yourself online maybe”, similarly Child F (FG2) summarised it succinctly in this way, “Texting. Communicating. And posting stuff.” The social element of social media was commented on by Child M (FG3) “on social media you can chat in groups, and you can scroll through pictures.” This was also mentioned by Child V (FG5) “you can virtually socialise with them and share things like videos and photos...” It was also linked to gaming “you can make contact with other people who are playing a game” (Child AH, FG7). Furthermore, one child commented that there is a reciprocal element to social media where “other people can comment on your posts and photos.” Social media is not always confined to people you know and that this can sometimes be far reaching as defined by Child C (FG1) “if you’re on social media, you can contact other people in the world.” It was clear from the findings that most children were aware of what social media was and how it was used and combined with the incidence of their social media use as defined in the previous section highlights the digital space that children of this age are inhabiting.

4.2 Presentation of the sub themes within this chapter

As described in the methodology, the analysis of the data was complex and had many layers. In summary, thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) model was employed for the focus groups, followed by the collages with interviews, using NVivo software. Mixed method analysis was then employed with the collages with interview data using analytical questions derived from Rose (2016) and Grbich (2012), which allowed for a deeper understanding. This was followed by Brown and Collins (2021) analytical visuo-textual framework, which combined and contextualised the data further and allowed both the visual and linguistic elements. This discursive approach (Yates, 2010) allowed the data to be viewed through more than one lens. Despite the ‘messiness’ (Lather, 2014) of the data, a systematic and meticulous approach was adopted to interpret the data (Kara *et al.*, 2021). Following this extensive data analysis, three master themes were established and have been

separated into three chapters within this thesis. Within each master theme, sub themes were established to articulate the analysis of the data. These sub themes are presented below.

4.2.1 'A quicker way to get your feelings known': social media as a communicative space

Children's use of social media is often portrayed in terms of a moral panic by adults, with children described as having little agency and a passivity in relation to how they communicate within this digital landscape (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018). However, in this research, participants highlighted some positive experiences of communication. For example, the sharing element of social media, which could affect feelings in a positive way, was emphasised by the following dialogue from Focus Group 3:

Child K: And sharing their happy days.

Child O: To share like their happy moments with other people when they feel something good, they share with other people.

Nesi (2020) similarly suggests that social media offers a portal for communication and individuals can express themselves verbally and through imagery in a way that was not possible prior to the advent of such platforms. The positive communication discussion in this research was largely generated in relation to the 'Emojis' activity that was described in Chapter 3.7.5. Participants explained that "sometimes if you are talking to someone you can express feelings without using words" (Child Y, FG 5). This can demonstrate how you are feeling without seeing other people "when you say laugh, laugh, laugh you can send those emojis. It just shows your mood" (Child X, FG5). Children expressed the fact that this can help if you find it difficult to articulate your emotions, with one child commenting, "if you can't really say it or explain it in words" (Child AE, FG6) and another that, "it's a quicker way to get your feelings known" (Child D, FG1). Using emojis was also seen as positive in relation to an international language that could be accessed whatever your mother tongue as explained by Child E (FG1) "...because if people don't speak the same language, they can still communicate. You can understand more because it is like a facial

expression, and you can tell how they feel from this.” This symbolic interaction, which in this case is reflected in non-verbal behaviours can be influential in terms of communication (Zhao, 2005). Emojis were also prevalent in many of the collages and utilised to demonstrate how participants communicated via social media. In Figure 18 below, Millie (C16) included six smiley face emojis which were placed on the right-hand side of her collage. She accompanied her image with the narrative “these emojis show that most people are happy on social media, my favourite one [emoji] is the monkey covering his eyes.”



Figure 18: Excerpt from Millie's collage showing emojis

The prevalence of emojis and the space that it occupies on Millie's collage could perhaps demonstrate the importance of communication on social media and how it is a facet of self-expression for children (Brandtzaeg and Chaparro-Domínguez, 2020). Similarly on Izzy's collage (C115), in Figure 19 below, she chose to use emojis around all her other images, demonstrating the centrality of the purpose of communication and the way that it is weaved through her social media experience. Unlike Millie's example, Izzy's chosen emojis are not all the same, though in her accompanying narrative, she explained that “I'm just going to dot emojis around, social media can be fun and entertaining.” Izzy's collage and narrative further

highlights the universal language and insider communication that emojis facilitate and a tool for self-expression which is not reliant on written narrative (Zhao, 2005).



Figure 19: Izzy's collage, in which emojis are dotted around

In contrast, Ian (CI12) in his collage, Figure 20, utilises three emojis in a horizontal row, closely stuck together to represent his friends and how communication is facilitated on social media. His accompanying narrative “I’m going to do a smiley face for friends because they make me happy...” also demonstrates the close friendships that social media can engender (Nesi, 2020) and how pertinent emojis can be used between groups of friends (Davis, 2012) which can help formulate a type of peer culture (Mascheroni, Vincent and Jimenez, 2015).



Figure 20: Excerpt from Ian's collage, in which three emojis are placed together

It is evident from the data that posting online can be seen as a positive form of communication and a way of being in touch with other people's lives, "because people put pictures of themselves. They post stuff they are doing and people they see" (Child D, FG1). Though this was caveated by a cautionary piece of advice by the same child, who said, "...sometimes it is boring like what they had for tea." There are seemingly unwritten rules for posting on social media platforms, which was also evident in Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo's (2017) study where social etiquette was exemplified and posting artwork and groupies was deemed more acceptable than posting selfies. The types of communication via social media can be diverse and can include pictures, videos, and clips of "themselves...or animals, games, stuff like that" (Child M, FG3). You can use additional features like GIFs³¹ too as explained by Child V (FG5) who commented, "someone's birthday you send moving presents and like confetti emojis and that, it might make them feel excited." However, Brough, Literat and Ikin, (2020) argue that it may be restricted by the constraint of the platform design and rather than offering more communication through virtual outputs may constrict what individuals wish to communicate.

Lloyd (C13) emphasised that communication on social media can be affirming, particularly when discussing how he follows other football fans and celebrities. He said, "their anthem and the people, it makes you feel part of something, you can share comments with other fans." This was also depicted by the following excerpt from his collage (Figure 21), where he has made a goal post out of lollipop sticks and used a pompom to depict a football.



Figure 21: Excerpt from Lloyd's collage showing his goal post and football

³¹ A GIF (Graphical Interchange Format) is an image format which is animated.

His narrative and the accompanying image demonstrate that intimacy and the sharing of interests (for example, football) can improve the quality of online relationships (Uhls, Ellison and Subrahmanyam, 2017). Likewise, Oscar (C15) also highlighted how important football is to him and this is shown by the circle of beads he used to represent this (see Figure 22).



Figure 22: Excerpt from Oscar's collage, showing his football made of beads

Like Lloyd, Oscar also likes following famous footballers on social media who inspire him and enables him to acquire new football skills. His narrative demonstrates this “when I look at football on social media, I learn more stuff...They [famous footballers] post all their video clips and all their good moments. Like really good shots. I want to be like them.” Similarly, whilst Ross (C14) did not specify a particular hobby or interest, he did articulate both visually and orally that positive communication was an aspect of social media that he found beneficial “we talk about other things too, like what we have been doing and other stuff. They are like little characters. I’m going to make myself texting someone out of this doily and googly eyes.”



Figure 23: Excerpt from Ross' collage, showing himself communicating via his phone

Ross also said that “I use social media, so I can talk to my friends when I am not in school.” It is clear from the examples, that he views his communication on social media as an extension of his real life and existing relationships can be strengthened with chatting online (Nesi, 2020). These positive affirmations were more apparent with the males in the research which supports Tatangelo and Ricciardelli’s (2017) study, with boys depicting a more inspiring and connective experience on social media than girls. As well as feelings of belonging, social media can have an educational focus which is highlighted by Oscar (CI5), who said, “Yeah. You learn from it. That is what I use social media for. To learn from other people and to make friends with people who are into the same stuff as me.” Both aspects, described by Lloyd, Oscar, and Ross, are also apparent in Gonzales and Hancock’s (2011) study where they concluded that Facebook exposure attributed to the virtual presence of friends who could be supportive. Although, in my research they do not allude to a particular social media platform, they were referring to this sense of belonging to a wider community and may be seen to enhance friendship.

4.2.2 'Some types of emojis might be like swearing or rude': negative aspects of social media as communication

Communication on social media is not always a positive experience though and many participants in the focus groups indicated how it could be negative. Children's engagement in a digital community can necessitate new ways to communicate, and this can be complicated in the way that it is ill defined and unregulated (boyd, 2014). One of the most prevalent comments about this in this research concerned the way in which emojis can be utilised to conceal how you are feeling. The motives for this were not always made explicit but could be to protect the recipient's feeling as indicated by Child E (FG1), who noted:

Sometimes, I have seen people like on social media and stuff and like saying, ha-ha, crying with laughter face, but they are not actually laughing out loud, they are just sat there, this will make other people happy because I am laughing.

This was also indicated by Child O (FG4) who discussed how they can be misinterpreted, saying, "people can sometimes think that when you are using an emoji that you are feeling something else. Like if you used the crying emoji, they may think that you are using it for laughing." Without other cues such as facial expressions, tone of voice and body language, this way of communicating can be conflicted. Child V (FG5) suggested this in the following quote:

Because if you said something like, the emoji like this or another one, when you look angry, but it is more like a joke, but some people could take it the wrong way and think you are really upset with them but really you're not. It is really just a joke.

Emojis can also look similar, which can be confusing "...they may mix it up with the crying with laughter one. When you are really happy sometimes you can cry" (Child W, FG5). Similarly, this was emphasised by Child AJ (FG8) who said, "and sometimes you don't know what the emojis mean and you don't know if they are good things or bad things really." Zhao (2005) emphasises that there is an opaqueness to online interaction, which is disembodied in emphasis due to the lack of nonverbal cues evident and this can be problematic in terms of a subjectively

experienced digital space. As demonstrated in these cases, children may get confused by the lack of transparency in these types of communications.

The most negative aspect of using emojis, which was mentioned numerous times was the way they could be used in a rude way to represent sexual or phallic symbols. One child said, "...sometimes people use rude emojis and this can be inappropriate" (Child AJ, FG8). The following discussion from Focus Group 3 highlights this:

Child L: And the one like the egg plant, people think that is rude.

Interviewer: So, the aubergine?

Child L: Yes, they use it as a rude symbol.

Child M: And the peach.

Interviewer: They have taken on different meanings?

Child M and Child L: Yes.

This was echoed by dialogue in Focus Group 8:

Child AK: The banana and the cherries can be rude.

Child AL: Yes, and the aubergine.

Child AJ: They can make you feel uncomfortable.

Davis' (2012) research also highlighted how young people's (15 – 25 years of age) engagement with a digitally mediated space can facilitate modes of communication that are pertinent to groups of friends. In this research, the use of song lyrics and abbreviations could be seen as affirming and essentially helping to support a group consensus. Similarly, Throuvala *et al.*, (2019) coins the expression 'congruent conversation' in relation to Snapchat where an 'inner circle' of communication can be a bonding exercise. This use of this 'in the know' communication is described by boyd (2014) as a 'social steganography' and is linked to privacy within groups and the emergence of subcultures. It is clear from this research data, that unlike Davis' (2012), boyd's (2014) and Throuvala *et al.*'s (2019) examples, emojis for younger participants may not always be a harmless way of communicating as they appear on

the surface and can be misconstrued, misinterpreted, and used to convey illicit messages that may not always be appropriate for the age or maturity of the child using them.

Another negative aspect of communication discussed within the focus groups was how much information should be posted on social media when the 'unwritten' rules are not very clear (boyd, 2014). Child AJ (FG8) highlighted that perhaps how we are feeling should not be information that everyone is privy too, saying, "if you were on Instagram and you didn't know the emojis you put, loads of people can see how you are feeling, and this is perhaps something you shouldn't make public...". She later reiterated that you could be "sharing too much about yourself and revealing too much", which renders you exposed in a vulnerable way. As previously mentioned, as was the case with Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo's (2017) study, certain types of posts were deemed as more socially acceptable within the group. Similarly, boyd's (2014) definition of types of engagement on social media platforms as lacking defined rules may be problematic particularly for this age group.

Finally, communication on social media can also be negative through comments and particularly in a group context, where members do not necessarily consider how their conversation can affect other people as discussed by Child AB (FG6) "...sometimes in the group chat, it gets really silly, people say mean things and people get upset. It doesn't happen much now though." This was also highlighted by Emily (CI8) who documented how other people's comments on social media could negatively affect her mood, though she did point out that in real life this is even more upsetting:

Sometimes I feel upset by other people as they try to hurt me or make me feel upset with mean comments or ignoring my post. It normally hurts more in real life though as you know on social media it is through a screen and you may not know them personally. If it is someone you don't know, it makes you feel upset but after a while you remember that it is through a screen and that they can't really do much to you as they don't really know you. Or they don't know what you are actually like. In real life they can say it to your face, which can hurt more.

Omrod (2014) suggests that the kind of experiences documented above, can be confusing particularly in digital climates, where younger people are trying to fit in with their peers. Likewise, more recently Steinbekk *et al.*, (2021) made the connections

between social acceptance and approval by peers and how it is essential for the well-being of children and young people to feel like they fit in.

4.2.3 'You can virtually socialise': interaction on social media and navigating digital communities

Closely linked with the afore mentioned sub themes, is the sub theme of interaction on social media and navigating digital communities, which further highlights how children negotiate digital spaces and how they make sense of these interactions in terms of their own subjective experience. Rather than simply replicating interaction in real life, as already highlighted in 4.2.2, a lack of social cues can cause misinterpretation and responses that were not the person's intention (Zhao, 2005). This can make for a complicated journey in understanding and responding to other people (boyd, 2014; Davis, 2012). Interaction via social media can be welcome by some children though, as described by Child V (FG 5), "you can virtually socialise with them and you can share things like videos, photos and on Minecraft you can share something you have made." Though this is disputed by Child V (FG5) who said, "there is not much actual social activity." Child Y (FG5) also suggested that interaction online is not a substitute for interaction in real life, saying, "...you can't really socialise or communicate with people properly. But it is virtual." Interaction in real life may be more ephemeral as suggested by Zhao (2005) and interaction via social media may be more of a forced reality due to its contrived nature (Dooly, 2017).

There is a discursive and reciprocal nature to social media interaction that may or may not render a positive experience and this is in the way that "other people can comment on your posts and photos" (Child AK, FG8). But Child R (FG4) emphasised the positive way that this type of interaction can help individuals feel more connected with their comment "...like making people feel less alone." Wood, Bukowski and Lis, (2016) similarly mention this and discuss the positive impact this social media engagement can have in terms of social capital and enhancing friendships and decreasing feelings of loneliness. This reciprocity and interaction as a two-way

process is emphasised on social media and was also indicated in a mostly positive way by Child V (FG5):

...I know some people get not very nice comments and that but most of the time if they are nice people, they can get like mostly nice comments. If I post this, they may think they expect nice comments, I know they may expect some negative comments but most of them are nice. So, they expect everyone to say they look pretty and so I'll post it and then everyone will know where I have been.

Though it can encourage negative responses, particularly from people who you “don't really know” (Child AJ, FG8) and may not have to ever see you in real life, interaction via social media may also have a judgemental element as depicted from the following turn:

Interviewer: Do you think it is just you judging yourself?

Child A: It is other people as well because you have posted online.

This relates to Jones' (2015) social media updated use of Cooley's (1902) 'looking glass self' theory, indicating that judgment is clear in the way that others respond to posts, statuses, and photographs, which can serve as a digital looking glass, where the judgment is not as imagined as in real life and may serve as an influence of how the self is presented online. There is a permanence to posts on social media and even with Snapchat which is designed to delete 'stories' after twenty-four hours, screenshots can be taken. This type of interaction takes on a different dimension and can also be experienced as contrived in nature. Interestingly, Abigail (C17), in Figure 24, described in detail how different people interact on social media and she categorised these as three different types: lurkers, prolific post users and sharers:

The beads, it kind of like represents three different things a bit, kind of like silver is like bland and is plain and is usually just people who just look at accounts but do not engage much, green, is much brighter for those who post on social media and share stuff and blue is kind of a paler colour and is for those who repost and comment on other people's posts but don't post their own material.



Figure 24: Excerpt from Abigail's collage, documenting three types of social media users

Abigail's assertions, align with Kim's (2017) research where in-depth interviews were used to determine individual's social media engagement. At one end of the spectrum individuals strived to be an idealised version of themselves. At the other end, there were 'lurkers' who did not reveal their identity or personal information on social media and their lack of digital interaction took more of a voyeuristic pathway. Emily (CI8) discussed interaction on social media as being different and distinct from real life. This she explained was due to the way people portrayed themselves on social media platforms and could make you sad, as seen in Figure 25 below.

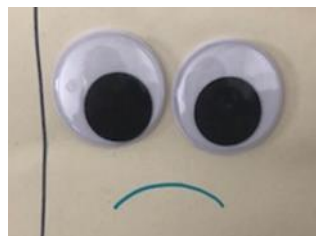


Figure 25: Excerpt from Emily's collage showing her sad face

It is evident from her comment that children need to be discerning in who they consider to be their friends:

Yes, because they might be thinking she is really cool, and I want to be her friend. But just because you are friends on social media does not make you friends in real life. They may not be the person you thought they were. And they are like different and it can put you in lots of trouble because you may think you're being friends with the person who they are pretending to be. But they are really not them. They are like a character.

This online characterisation of identity and pretence that it can emanate may be an issue for children in respect to their interaction in a digital space. Though Kim (2017) indicates that caution must be administered when theorising about online and offline identities as they are not separate.

4.2.4 'I only use this one as my sister has it': relationships in the digital space

It was clear from the data that children were often influenced by their family's views and usage of social media, and it was often a space that children shared with their parents. This occurred when children accessed their parent's social media accounts and used them together, for instance Child E (FG1) said "...that is Pinterest and my Mum has that, she lets me go on her phone to look stuff up for my bedroom." The virtual space merges with the real-life relationship in this example and the child and parent can enhance their existing relationship in a way that is led by the child's interest. Likewise with Child A (FG1) who explained that "...my Mum has it on her phone and she allows me to go on it, like have a look at my football team because my football team has like a group for fans and they have an Instagram account, so I go on there to look at that." It was not clear whether he discussed this with his Mum though in this case, though he later explained that "...if my Mum has seen something cool that she wants me to see, she shows me. But if she is on it, sometimes she turns her phone away from me. Just in case there are inappropriate things on it." Though utilising an older sample of 13 – 19-year-olds, Charoensukmongkol (2018) indicates that young people's behaviours are shaped by the social context in which they inhabit which can be influenced strongly by parents. Many children spoke about how their parents would post pictures and videos of them on their own social media accounts. This 'sharenting' was sometimes presented in a positive way and seemed to act as a way of highlighting shared interests and a close relationship, as commented on by Gabby (CI10):

I properly love golf because my Dad usually puts on his Facebook and obviously I don't because I am not the right age to have Facebook because you have to be 13, so my Dad usually puts on Facebook with my little golf buddy because he calls me his little golf buddy when I play with him.

Izzy (CI15) also echoed the same sentiment when talking about her Mum's sharenting. She said, "she makes a picture collage for my birthday, like her and me together." As demonstrated, the child's 'digital footprint', where parents document their child's life publicly, is cited in much research (MacBlain, Dunn and Luke, 2017, Otero, 2017; Freeman, 2016; Lupton, 2013) and this 'intimate surveillance' is well documented (Lupton and Williamson, 2017). It is interesting in this research that the two children who commented on this type of parental sharenting were not allowed social media accounts of their own. Simpson (2013) explains this in the way that parents may be less capable of supervising their interactions, though they may publicise their own children on social media sites. This relationship between parent and child as demonstrated in the afore example is not limited to sharenting though and the type of posts some children described at this age were also about "their family" (Child O, FG3) and consequently may emphasise these close relationships that they have in real life. In Henry's collage he highlighted the importance of not only parental relationships but that of family too. This can be seen in the image below (Figure 26) and is reflected in his accompanying narrative in which he said, "I'm going to write like @ it goes to a certain account...family. They are important to me. I like to see them in real life too. I was going to do a world. They are my world." His sentiment and image capture these close relationships and how they can be further strengthened via the digital space (Vorderer, Krömer and Schneider, 2016).



Figure 26: Excerpt from Henry's collage, showing the importance of family relationships

Similarly, relationships with siblings can also be developed in this positive way using social media as suggested by Child D (FG1) "I only use this one as my sister has it. And she is like 17. They like take funny pictures and send them to me." Abigail (CI7), Figure 27, emphasised her relationship with her brother and how this is demonstrated via social media:

Okay [pause: 0:21]. I also have a brother who is on TikTok and he follows me as well and we sometimes do duets and he does the dances. I think it is really funny because he always does the moves wrong.

Interviewer: So, it makes it even funnier.

Yes, and he concentrates so much, and he gets it all wrong. He is a year younger than me. But sometimes he does do dances on his own. But he hasn't got many followers.

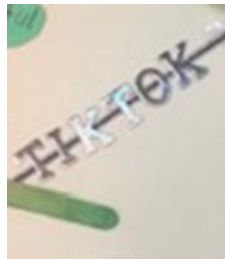


Figure 27: Excerpt from Abigail's collage, showing her preference for TikTok

In both examples, siblings can be seen as positive role models when using social media and could be an effective way to ensure a positive step in using social media independently. This is reiterated in research by Pea *et al.*, (2012) who also used similar age children in their study (8-12-years-old) and highlighted that having role models who use social media could positively impact on perceived exposure to risky behaviours with those who are younger and less experienced. This is particularly important as children approach adolescence and could provide necessary support for them navigating digital spaces. Ross' (C114) collage emphasised the importance of relationships that were instrumental to the positive experience of social media that he portrayed. In Figure 28, he depicts this with two pompom faces each with two button eyes and pipe cleaner arms connecting them together.



Figure 28: Excerpt from Ross' collage, showing online relationships

His associated narrative further emphasises this, “I might do some arms on this or something – so it shows the connections again. This is me and another person, like playing on social media, on social media and real life.” He reiterates this concept again in Figure 29 below.



Figure 29: Excerpt from Ross' collage, showing the importance of relationships on social media

Ross depicts his 'social life' as being symbiotic with his social media and the relationships that he experiences instrumental to this, as seen by the characters he depicts and the proximity he has positioned them to each other. However, he also points out that although relationships are enhanced online, they are not a substitute for real-life interaction:

Also, if you prefer or don't really use social media then being together in real life is the better option but if you have a friend in a different country maybe, a place that you cannot really visit them, then you would use social media with them.

Simpson (2013) also suggests that the dynamics of relationships may be enhanced by social media and that this may influence how children experience and negotiate childhood relations. As previously mentioned, relationships can be strengthened using social media and the opportunity for children to gain a better understanding of their interaction with others (Wang and Edwards, 2016).

4.2.5 'Because it is funny': entertainment in the digital space

As already suggested in section 4.2.1, 4.2.3 and 4.2.4, social media experiences are not always perceived by children as negative. Social media can be used as a source

of entertainment, a distraction from everyday life and this can make children feel happy. There was a clear gender divide illustrated when documenting fun experiences though, with the males in the group using this terminology far more often and frequently in their engagement with Snapchat filters. This is illustrated by Child B (FG1) who said, “this is my favourite filter [animal ears] it is fun and entertains people”, which was reiterated by Child A (FG1) when describing using these digital overlays, “because it is funny, for a laugh” and Child M (FG3) “I use the funny ones.” Similarly, Child Z (FG6) echoed this by saying “there is this funny filter on Instagram, it can turn you into animal faces and it is so funny, like a warthog.” In the following conversation a female in Focus Group 1 (Child A) highlighted that using Snapchat filters is favoured by boys but she does not specify why:

Child B: To make people laugh, I do that.

Child E: You can pull all kinds of faces.

Child A: For fun. Boys do it more.

A further example of this was evidenced in David’s (C14) collage, where he also suggested that using filters was a fun experience. In his collage and accompanying narrative, he explained how he deliberately altered his appearance for other people’s entertainment, which was seen as different from his real-life self that he documented on the left-hand side of the image. In an excerpt from his collage in Figure 30, he depicts himself on the right of his collage on social media with an exaggerated mouth and drawn on eyes.

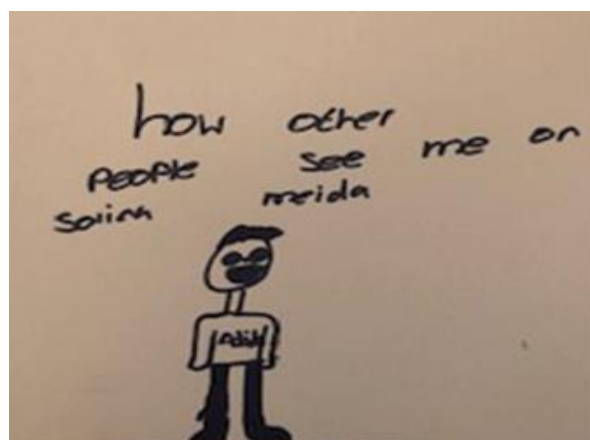


Figure 30: Excerpt from David's collage demonstrating how he uses filters for fun on social media

His narrative also emphasised how he used filters “this is a filter from Snapchat...do you know the one with like the eyes, like the funny one. I like to make people laugh.” This gendered trend concurs with research by Tatangelo and Ricciardelli (2017) who conducted focus groups and interviews with 8–10-year-olds and similarly noted that negative connotations relating to social media comparison was overt with girls and a more inspiring and entertainment association for boys. More recently, Steinbekk *et al.*, (2021) interviewed children at 10, 12 and 14 years of age in a longitudinal study, and emphasised this gender divide, suggesting that boys are less likely to use filters for enhancing their physical appearance.

The word ‘fun’ was also used in relation to posts made on social media and how aspects of your life could be shown, this was commented on by Child P (FG4) who said “...updates on them and sometimes fun things that they have been doing...” This can also be through photo updates, which is demonstrated in the following dialogue from Focus Group 4:

Child Q: Outfits. Their kids or their dog.

Child R: Outfits. Food. Fun.

TikTok was also conveyed as a fun experience by many children, though they were mostly female, as demonstrated by Child S (FG4) who said, “because of the dancing videos and it attracts young people.” Emily (CI8) also highlighted this by saying “it can be fun because I can talk to my friends, and I like making videos on TikTok and sharing dance moves.” She reiterated this with the word ‘Fun’ made from scrabble letters that can be seen in the excerpt of her collage below (Figure 31), though it does need noting that this word was placed near the image of the sad face that was previously shared in 4.2.3. This could suggest that children have conflicted emotions when using social media and how their feelings of fitting in and belonging to the peer culture that they desire can be a challenging experience (Omrod, 2014).

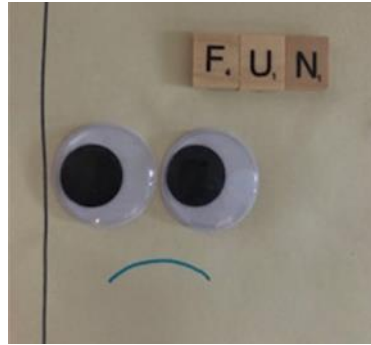


Figure 31: Excerpt from Emily's collage showing the duplicity of feelings on social media

The fun element was also suggested by Abigail (C17), who said “I wanted to try and spell ‘fun’ because that is how people see me online because I am like funny, some people say I am funny on social media with certain dances”. Her written affirmation also spelt using scrabble letters can be seen in the excerpt from her collage (Figure 32).



Figure 32: Excerpt from Abigail's collage with the word 'funny' to describe herself

These comments serve to demonstrate a part of youth culture that is specific to this social media platform. Children also described actively using social media to boost their mood and make them laugh, this was commented on by Ian (C112) who said:

I liked to watch famous YouTubers who did Science experiments on there, like they would make things explode, not like fire but like something pop, like slime. I like watching that because it is funny, I find, and they do it for people to watch.

Throuvala *et al.*, (2019) also highlighted that interaction with others on social media could be an uplifting experience that would consolidate friendships, encourage mood regulation, and facilitate entertainment. Vermeulen, Vandesbosch and Heirman, (2018) through their in-depth interviews also indicate that young people often use social media to enhance their current mood which affects their subjective experience explicitly. Finally, some children were particularly attracted to the games element in certain social media, though again, this seemingly had a gender divide with the males in the group mentioning this as demonstrated by Ross (CI14) who noted, “Yes. I sometimes play Fortnite with my friends because it is fun, and I can talk on my mic and with the chat box...” Cirucci (2012) highlights this and explains that gamers can have a positive experience when socialising online due to the connections with friends that this type of interaction encourages.

4.3 ‘Being’ and ‘becoming’ in the digital space: children’s subjective experience and identity portrayal

In the subthemes presented in this chapter, it is evident that social media is influencing how children experience childhood. This is exhibited through both the frequency that they are using social media and the way this is impacting on the way they communicate and interact via digital spaces. The way the child is viewed is an important notion to this research and is exemplified within this theme. Children are no longer seen as simply an ‘adult in the making’ (Brady, Lowe and Lauritzen, 2015) or in a state of ‘becoming’ (James and James, 2004) or striving towards a maturity of adulthood (Prout, 2011). From a social constructionist point of view, through which the ontological assumptions of this research are based, childhood is not a finite construction (McDonald, 2009) but based on a cultural context where meanings attached are dependent on the context (Jenks, 2005). In respect to this research, how children experience the world and make meaning of their subjectivity is particularly important when considering the changes to childhood that digital spaces implicate. Quennerstet and Quennerstet (2013) warn about oversimplifying the ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ binary, though it is important in the study of childhood there is acknowledgement of children as individuals and that their opinions can effect social change (Wyness, 2012).

Identity formation begins in childhood and within a social space, children begin to negotiate their own and other's identities (James and James, 2004). This takes on new meaning within the micro-level of social media, which facilitates everyday actions through likes, comments and social interactions depicting photographs, posts, and statuses. 'Being' and 'becoming' in the context of this research is referring to the past and present notions of self, situated within social media. This 'self' may be viewed as an evolving social artefact (Gulatee, Combes and Yoosabai, 2021) that through active communication and interaction shape's identity and meaning-making in the social world. This theme also demonstrated how children experience digital spaces as forcing a change to how they socialise and this enactment of 'becoming' rather than being a passive label could refer to the temporal and situated nature of social media. Arguably this allows for their first tentative steps into identity portrayal online and a means of rehearsing the presentation of 'self' through virtual socialisation with others (Ditchfield, 2019). It is apparent from the children in this research that communication via social media platforms is far more prevalent than other research demonstrates (Ofcom, 2021) and is therefore an element of childhood that is very worthy of research. Children are not passive in their use of social media though and positive and negative experiences were noted. Social media affords a portal for virtual communication that previous generations have not experienced (Tartari, 2015) and each social media platform has a particular set of rules, some more overt than others that children must navigate (boyd, 2014).

4.3.1 'Being' and 'becoming' in the digital space in relation to the research questions

The theme of 'being' and 'becoming' in the digital space provides responses to two of the research questions, which will be further answered in subsequent chapters. From the data collected and analysed, a nuanced depiction of children's everyday experiences has been drawn upon to contextualise the digital spaces that they inhabit, the influence that this has on their experience of childhood and how this potentially affects how they feel about themselves. Utilising creative participatory methods both in the form of the activities in the focus groups as well as the collages with interviews has provided both narrative and visual imagery to capture some of

their thoughts and understandings of using social media. Whilst not claiming homogeneity, this data has enabled the complexity of participants experiences to be recognised and valued (Roberts and Woods, 2018). It also makes an important contribution to the field, due to the lack of research in this area (Huk, 2016). Listening to the children's voices both visually and orally and having regard for children as active agents within the cultural and social settings that they inhabit (Dockett, Einarsdóttir and Perry, 2012) can enable adults to learn about their digital spaces.

4.3.2 Findings in relation to RQ 2: What influence does gender have on children when using social media and how does this affect how they feel about themselves?

It is clear from the data presented that there are subtle influences of gender that are permeating children's social media experience. Boys in the study were documenting a more positive and uplifting interaction with social media. They discussed and provided imagery to support the notion that they felt connected online, and that social media often reinforced and strengthened existing relationships (Nesi, 2020). Whereas, the girls often portrayed a more mixed or negative experience, where they were seemingly more affected by other people's responses and a judgemental element that social media facilitates (Jones, 2015). It was evident that most boys, view using Snapchat filters for fun and entertainment purposes and not for appearance concerns (which is documented in the next chapter by the girls in the study). This concurs with research by Tatangelo and Ricciardelli (2017) who also acknowledged this distinct difference in gender in response to filters. Seemingly, these gender stereotypes are perpetuated by the peer culture in which the children inhabit and arguably their willingness to fit into these societal norms for social acceptance (Steinbekk *et al.*, 2021). In contrast, the children's experience of positive role models in the form of siblings and family through observation and interaction was seen to be a shared experience regardless of gender. The final difference in gendered experience of social media use was documented by the boys in the research who often discussed how they followed like-minded individuals (both known and unknown) particularly related to hobbies such as football. This facilitated a sense of belonging and extended and strengthened existing relationships as well as making

them feel part of a community (Uhls, Ellison and Subrahmanyam, 2017). They could improve their skills by watching other footballers for example and then share these experiences with their friends. Girls documented a more disparate experience, though some did cite the fun element that dancing on TikTok and duetting with others could endorse. In the following chapter, these gender reinforcements are more explicit in relation to impression management and are explored in relation to this more thoroughly.

4.3.3 Findings in relation to RQ3: To what extent do children feel the pressure of social media within digital spaces and how do they negotiate these experiences?

From the data, it is apparent that using social media and navigating digital spaces is not a neutral experience. However, the children in this research do demonstrate that they are competent social actors (Prout, 2011) and that they do exhibit some degrees of agency in their negotiations of social media. There is seemingly a peer pressure to be on social media in the first place, this is apparent from the high number of children engaging with social media platforms, prior to being officially allowed to (Ofcom, 2021; NSPCC, 2018). Fitting in with peers and feeling part of a group is evidenced in relation to the children's responses and can cause concerns of how others perceive them (Omrod, 2014). Peer culture is not a new phenomenon, there have always been latest trends and fads to follow but the added layer of social media, arguably adds to this complexity (Mascheroni, Vincent and Jimenez, 2015) and there are certain ways that children are expected to behave. This is apparent in response to the negative communication that sometimes occurs on social media, particularly in the use of emojis which can be misinterpreted. Also, how people portray themselves online may be different from real life and this may be confusing if they are known in both contexts, especially when the rules of social media are ill defined (boyd, 2014).

4.4 Summary of the chapter

This chapter, the first of three empirical chapters, has helped to contextualise digital spaces from a child's perspective. As little is known of tween's experiences using social media (Huk, 2016) it helps to situate their experience as a type of 'third space' that is reliant on cultural and societal norms rather than geographical boundaries (Bhabha, 1994). The binary concept of 'being' and 'becoming' has been disputed and children's experience situated as more of a nuanced depiction that encompasses elements of both, which facilitates a wider societal lens. This perspective also challenges the discourse about a universal experience of childhood and instead suggests that children are actively engaged in their understanding of the world which can be influenced by interaction and participation (Moran, Reily and Brady, 2021). The contours of childhood are seemingly structured by wider influences, which is especially apparent due to the increase of digital technology and social media use within this age group (Wyness, 2018). Focusing on children's own cultural practices in relation to their social media use has enabled a contribution of knowledge in this field. Furthermore, utilising creative participatory methods has provided depth and nuance to the data (Kara *et al.*, 2021) whilst also giving children a collective and individual voice (Eldén, 2013). Children's encounters of social media in this chapter document both positive and negative communication experiences, feelings of belonging as well as the possibilities of interaction. Also, the impact of relationships has been explored and how these can affect their subjective experience of digital spaces. Finally, the sense of ludic and fun that social media can engender is also highlighted with reference to the entertainment purposes it can facilitate. Far from being the detrimental experience permeating childhood documented by Turkle (2011), with children passively occupying the digital space, their experiences may help to strengthen existing relationships (Ismail, 2020) and help to develop their sense of self. The importance of this self-presentation and how they navigate their own identity within the digital space will be presented in the next chapter.

Chapter Five – Presentation of self in the digital space

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, findings in relation to how children experience social media and feel about these ‘everyday’ encounters was presented. It is hoped that this chapter will help contextualise the social media use of children in this study and explore how they make meaning in relation to these encounters and their experience of childhood. In this chapter, the lens is directed towards children’s sense of self and their identity portrayal within digital spaces. As with the previous chapter, mixed method analysis is shown to demonstrate the nuanced and multi-layered interpretive stages that took place (Kara *et al.*, 2021). As was noted in the previous chapter, the results and findings are presented with excerpts of the children’s voices from both methods and imagery captured during the collages with interviews. The analysis of this data, in respect to other literature and the research questions is also incorporated. This overarching theme, denoted in the title of the chapter, ‘presentation of self in the digital space’ highlights how children portray their identity online and how, due to social media use, this may be in a more contrived way to navigate than their social world in real life (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018). This sense of self via social media could be their first tentative steps in exploring their social positioning, their gender and outside interests beyond their family and known peers (James and James, 2004).

Social media can take the form of self-expression where users can choose how they will interact using comments, posts, and pictures, which may be in an overt way or with greater influence from outside factors (Davis, 2012). In this chapter, drawing heavily upon Goffman’s (1959) impression management theory and the notion of how individuals guide the impression of how others perceive them, in respect to appearance, attitude, and manner, which in turn, influences their behaviour. This could be emphasised by social media use, where identity is seen to be more of a contrived production than in real life and the imagined audience is more challenging to define (Cirucci, 2012; Litt, 2012). The reciprocal and discursive element of social media encourages users to gain self-validation through likes and comments and can

influence what they share online (Jones, 2015). Finally, the impact of viewing material via social media can be driven by influencers and celebrities and popular trends can be perpetuated through advertisements and brand endorsements, which can lead to an element of fakery and the monetarisation of an online identity (Tatangelo and Ricciardelli, 2017).

5.2 Presentation of the subthemes within this chapter

As was explained in the previous chapter and in the methodology, the analysis of the data was multi-layered and complex in implementation. After the initial 'noticings', and general categorising and making sense of the data, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was utilised for the focus groups, followed by the collages with interviews, using NVivo software. After this, a mixed method analysis was employed with the collages with interviews, to really try and embrace the visual and oral nature of the data. Analytical questions developed from Rose (2016) and Grbich (2012), were used with the data, which allowed for a deeper understanding. To further synthesise the relationship between the visual and oral, Brown and Collins (2021) visuo- textual framework was employed to emphasise the duality of the means of communications and the symbiotic relationship between them. This meticulous preparation and thorough approach to the data analysis, allowed the themes and subthemes to emerge between the data sets. As mentioned in the previous chapter, after the extensive data analysis, three master themes were established and are separated into three chapters within this thesis. In this chapter, the master theme, is divided into sub themes that all relate to the presentation of self, which are presented below.

5.2.1 'You only need to show the bits about yourself that you want': impression management on social media

Impression management was by far the most significant sub theme across all the master themes in terms of references to this and the various guises that it took. Referring to NVivo alone, there were 76 separate references. Much of the collage imagery also referred to impression management and a binary depiction of self, with

two distinct sides of the collage often portraying the social media self and the real-life self. Many of the discussions were generated by females in the focus groups and in the collages with interviews in terms of using filters to enhance physical appearances and how viewing these idealised photographs and imagery can negatively affect their self-esteem. In contrast, as commented on in section 4.2.5 on entertainment in the digital space, many boys mentioned using Snapchat filters as a source of entertainment and for fun. The gender divide was commented on numerous times in discussions and the following dialogue demonstrates this:

Child AE: Some people do it to make themselves look better.

Child AF: Lots of the girl ones look cute but the boy ones can look silly.

Child AI: The girls want to look cute and the boys to mess around.

Child AF: Like this girl, took this photo to look good on Instagram.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, this gender divide was also apparent in research by Tatangelo and Ricciardelli (2017) who conducted focus groups with a similar age group and, though this research was more generic in terms of media use in general, they also documented negative connotations for girls and a more positive experience for boys in relation to their use. Appearance was considered more important to the girls in the sample group and sports and ability related comparisons were more prevalent for boys. In this study, the use of these Snapchat filters for the female participants was twofold, firstly to create a contrived and idealised image that conformed to perceived beauty ideals and secondly for validation to boost how they feel about themselves physically.

There were numerous comments related to enhancing physical appearance, for example Child E (FG1) said, “and a lot of people use them for their profile pictures, they go on Snapchat, then use a filter and the photo on other social media. It makes them look perfect and flawless.” This had a more personal emphasis for Child D (FG1) who said, “I like putting filters on because it doesn’t show my birth mark at all. It takes the blemishes off my face.” Child Y (FG5) also commented on this, describing females as sometimes using them “to make them look flawless, as people do randomly get spots on their faces. They can use filters and post them somewhere

just to make them look like they are perfect”, adding, “it like changes them and hides their flaws.” (Child AF, FG7). Child AG (FG7) also highlighted this and explicitly linked using filters to feelings, saying, “when you put a filter on, it makes your skin tone better and it covers up any spots or like any bruises and stuff that you feel insecure about in yourself.” In addition, this was also described to alter physical aspects of your face, as shown by Child AE (FG7) who commented, “they can also hide facial features and contour to make their nose look thinner and their lips bigger.” Snapchat was not the only app that was mentioned in relation to enhancing your physical appearance though as commented on by Child V (FG5) who said:

You can do ones, not exactly filters, not ones with like the flowers on your head but you can on something like Pixar you can take a photo and go on something called ‘Beautify’ and then make your teeth look whiter and your skin look smoother and your hair a different colour and you like have a tan. You can make loads of differences.

This data reflects existing research that makes links with Goffman’s (1959) impression management theory, in terms of how individuals strive to control or guide the impression of how other people perceive them particularly in this case with the way they present their appearance (Mascheroni, Vincent and Jimenez, 2015; Cirucci, 2012; Litt, 2012). Steinbekk *et al.*, (2021) emphasised that increasingly young people rely on social media photographs as a core means of self-presentation and consequently the importance of physical appearance may be further heightened. They go on to suggest that girls internalise media promoted body ideals to a greater extent which is perpetuated by social media and this environment may create appearance norms that are difficult to attain. These observations are clearly linked to this research and many females mentioned that viewing these manipulated photographs and idealised imagery could affect self-esteem and how they perceived themselves as depicted in the following conversation in Focus Group 1:

Interviewer: Why do you think people want to look different online then?

Child E: Because they don’t like the way they look, there is a lot of pressure to look a certain way.

Child C: You want to look like someone else that you have seen on social media.

This also corresponds with research by Metcalfe and Llewelyn (2020) who argue that there are unwritten rules of gender that young people adhere to and are consistent between both the physical world of school and peer culture and the digital world that they inhabit. So essentially then, social media may reinforce these notions of gender normative behaviour rather than create them. Though, Renold *et al.* (2017) emphasises that these tensions of gender struggles and complex relations that young people face can be amplified and perpetuated by social media. In this research, this was certainly the case, as the pressure to look a certain way appeared to be part of the female culture and was commented on many times. The focus of these discussions was implicitly linked to being 'perfect' and facilitated a comparative element, as highlighted by Child G (FG2) "people don't look like how they really look on Snapchat and that can make people compare themselves." This constant comparison can make females overtly concerned about the way they look. As Child H (FG2) put it:

People can like hide their real face, so say that one there [points to Snapchat filter] she can make that her profile picture, she can like edit it and even though you can see her real face she is flawless and sometimes contoured. Like this person [points to another Snapchat filter] is worried about their appearance.

In a similar vein, Child Y (FG5) discussed how aspirations to this beauty ideal were unachievable, commenting, "because people don't really look like that. They are trying to be someone they can't be...if maybe I got that Snapchat app maybe I can look like that, but I don't look like that. People have had that done to them and it has probably just ruined their confidence." Child F (FG2) said that this went beyond feelings about oneself though and was also about how this was perceived by others "people are like comparing themselves to other people and trying to be the most popular." These comments align with Kim and Chock's (2015) research which demonstrated a desire to strive towards socially accepted body norms, they coined this 'social grooming' and this certainly seems to be part of the female culture with the participants in this research. This idealised way of perceiving oneself in relation to physical appearance and a perceived 'perfection' is also seen in more recent research by Burnell, Kurup and Underwood (2021). In their research they used college students and were specifically utilising the social media platform Snapchat,

however their conclusions about self-objectification and body surveillance playing a part in media-imposed cultural standards of beauty appear to be relevant to this research. For example, Karen (CI11) discussed this at length and how social media can be an augmented reality and can perpetuate feelings of self-consciousness.

She would be like a normal person, she might not really like herself, so she takes photos and stages it. It is not true what you see on social media, so you might be taking a picture with your car but then it might not actually be your car. Other people can get very jealous and think look at their life, it is so nice when they might not actually be having those things. You can see them, and they don't have all those things. This girl might be like that, she is faking who she really is.

She also used drawn characters on her collage to emphasise her opinions, which documented a 'real life' self that had no filter, which 'makes her sad' and a 'filter self' which used make up and filters to enhance her appearance. These can be seen in Figure 33 below.



Figure 33: Karen's collage, depicting the real self and the filter self

Karen did point out that the characters were not herself, but it was apparent that at least some of her depiction was based on her own experience. Further in the discussion, she continued to emphasise the feelings of negative self-esteem that viewing these idealised feeds could endorse:

People try and make themselves look beautiful and at the end it may really disappoint them. People see on the Internet and their phones, and they see

people with nice clothes, and they might like how other people's style is and try and be like that. Not really expressing themselves but copying other people...some people hide their real selves.

In research conducted by Butkowski, Dixon and Weeks (2020) they concluded from their content analysis of selfie-taking how young women tend to replicate normative female cues popularised through social media platforms. They also suggested that these exaggerated gender displays also receive more feedback in relation to likes and comments and therefore reinforce these visual cues of femininity. Like Karen, Millie (CI6) used a character to illustrate her point and highlighted how girls were affected by the reciprocal nature of social media, which was also linked to popularity:

Because I feel like they are like embarrassed and don't like the way they look or feel insecure really and say people write comments about what they look like it can make people change their whole appearance. It is worse on social media because it is very much about how you look, and it is easy to change that with filters. Like you can download apps as well to change your appearance. People can try and be all cool, so may post things to get the attention from the group that they wish to hang out with. They want to be popular, but you don't really need to be.

Her 'goofy' character Bob was designed to show girls that taking themselves less seriously on social media combined with managing their physical appearance less would be beneficial to them. The image of this is depicted below in Figure 34.

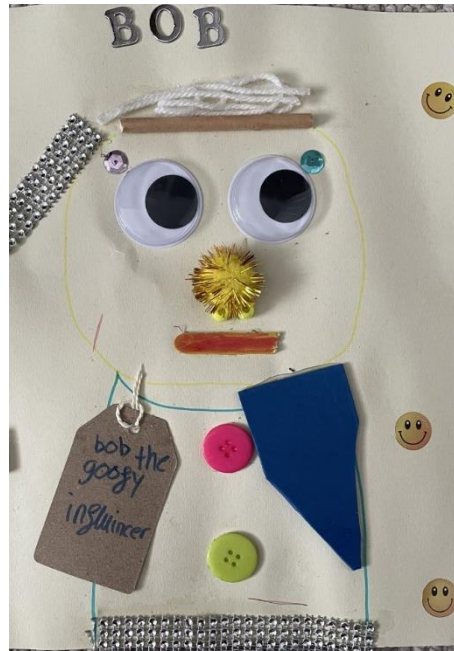


Figure 34: Excerpt from Millie's collage, depicting Bob, the goosy influencer

She further explained this with the following narrative:

He is going to be a goosy emoji because people like to be goosy, but some people get embarrassed by their friends, well my friends do and they put photos and selfies of them looking their best as they are scared to put themselves out there as they really are.

Like Millie, Izzy (CI15) had a clear message for girls using social media and how they may feel when viewing idealised photographs of other females on social media.

She said:

I feel like I want to put something on here to show that it is not all about the filters. Maybe some jewels, I have a good idea. I'm going to put it by here and do a circle of jewels around it...because I am personally not a big fan of filters a lot of time. Sometimes, I will put them on and sometimes I won't. Depends. Then I kind of want to write in pen 'beauty isn't everything.'

Her accompanying image shown below in Figure 35, also highlights this.



Figure 35: Excerpt from Izzy's collage, depicting the notion 'beauty isn't everything'

In her collage and narrative, Isabel (C11) also conveyed a message that she thought others needed to hear in relation to their beauty impression management on social media. In an excerpt of her collage (Figure 36) she has stuck four stars in a wavy line configuration that she narrated "...these stars are to show how people should shine on social media and be themselves..." Along with her written message 'Be your own person. Stop comparing yourself to others.'



Figure 36: Excerpt from Isabel's collage warning against beauty comparison

The above examples also concur with Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo's (2017) research, which was conducted in an all-girls school. Appearance concerns and body dissatisfaction were also reported by over 50% of the participants. In these focus groups, the girls were older (aged between 12 and 14 years old) though they did also endorse strategies to combat these feelings of dissatisfaction in relation to developing a resilience which included lessons that they had received in school and being discerning over their social media etiquette in terms of what they post and view online. Similar to Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo's (2017) study, some girls in the focus groups were aware of this comparison and were keen to point out that beauty and appearance were not the only facet of oneself that you should be concerned with. Child V (FG5) describes it in this way, "...it makes your skin look really smooth and no spots and like really glowey. It doesn't matter how you look; personality matters more but it can affect how other people might feel about themselves."

This was further reiterated in the dialogue between two females in Focus Group 1:

Child B: They are trying to make them feel better about themselves.

Child C: Like making them look more beautiful than they are.

Related to this, Emily (C18) emphasised that some girls change their appearance so much it is difficult to recognise them "sometimes when I go to their account, I have to check it is actually them or not because I don't know whether to accept it or not." As exemplified there does seem to be a clear gender divide in terms of identity portrayal online, with females in the group being preoccupied with perceived beauty ideals that fit with gendered stereotypes, which is also the case for the participants in this research (Burnell, Kurup and Underwood, 2021; Butkowski, Dixon and Weeks, 2020; Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo, 2017; Kim and Chock, 2015). The above examples illustrating the girls' preoccupation with beauty standards and idealised notions of body and face image, draws on Goffman's impression management, more significantly in these incidences with selective self -presentation aimed at controlling the impression made on their co-actors. Taking this analogy another step further, filters and altering appearances technologically could be viewed as props or costumes that are used virtually (Goffman, 1971). However, this may be harmless fun, as was seen previously with the boys in this research, or in the case of the

females, a pressure to continually adopt a physical fictitious persona and a polished, physical appearance which may have emotional repercussions (Jaynes, 2019).

In contrast Gabby (C110), whilst acknowledging beauty concerns and false imagery that girls experience on social media by manipulating images, and the subsequent concern that this overt impression management could cause, demonstrated good self-esteem in relation to her appearance. She emphasised this by saying:

I personally think that you don't need to look perfect, you are born the way you are meant to be born. People doing all that with the filters and the glowing and the tan...you shouldn't put your confidence down because of that one photo or a couple of photos that have been posted online.

Interestingly Gabby was one of only two participants in the study who did not have their own social media accounts and whose parents were restrictive in allowing her to do so. She spoke at length about how her confidence in her own appearance was boosted by her parents and other relatives rather than reliant on endorsements from social media:

And my Dad just wants me to not be self-conscious over myself because there is no need, they do it for likes and followers. You don't need followers to make people say you are beautiful. You just need to believe that you are beautiful yourself.

Also, the way she positioned herself centrally in her collage and spent a great amount of time on her portrayal of self – using a doily for her face, wool for her hair, with an intricate beaded braid on the right-hand side and a poncho made from four separate pieces of material – could be symbiotic with her high self-esteem. In an excerpt of her collage below in Figure 37, this is exemplified.



Figure 37: Excerpt from Gabby's collage, depicting her true identity and confidence in her appearance

Her portrayal of personality above appearance was also seen to contrast with some of the other female participants in the group for example, Sophie, Isabel, Millie, and Karen. This may be attributed to the fact that she does not have her own social media account and is consequently not privy to continually viewing idealised images.

Lloyd (C13) was one of the only males within the research that commented on filters in relation to appearance, which he also depicted with his abstract self, made from googly eyes, a pompom and leaf (Figure 38). In his accompanying narrative, he said, "and then I can do some random googly eyes and I could make a face, it is different on social media because I use a lot of filters."



Figure 38: Excerpt from Lloyd's collage, depicting his representation of self

He did not explain if this was to enhance his appearance, though he also discussed how impression management could be used on social media to conceal feelings. He commented, “sometimes they can, sometimes they won’t because they could be like really sad in the real world and then like really happy on the Internet.” This deliberate act of portraying a happy persona he explained was to “to make people feel better about themselves and then they won’t have to worry about them.” Sophie (C12) also explained that people on social media can also manage their personality or interests and not just their appearance, which seemed to be linked to how they want other people to perceive them and to fit in with gendered ideals:

...some people that I know they are really sporty, and they show that they are not sporty on social media and all that. Like they are sporty, but on social media they are doing their nails and all that and girlie type of stuff and they don't actually. They post what they think others want to see and what will get the most likes.

Both examples, link explicitly to Goffman’s (1971; 1959) notion of the ‘imaginary audience’ and how the children in this research perceive how they think other people will view them which affects their social media interactions. Furthering this analogy, this can be seen in relation to creating a desired persona and a conscious effort of identity presentation. Both Kim (2017) and Mascheroni, Vincent and Jimenez, (2015) highlight this in their research and emphasise that identity construction via social media is different from real life interactions and serves to facilitate a self-presentation

that is a selective process that serves to control the impression others form of the self.

Simon (C19) like others in the research used the example of other people to demonstrate how impression management was used on social media (rather than himself), he emphasised the way clothes and photographs could portray a certain image, the following comment illustrates this point:

So, I am going to do other people and not just me. Maybe then I could show fancy clothes or something because people can show off and be like look at me, look what I have [pause: 1:37]. People like eat foods that they don't even like, show photos of food set ups and fancy restaurants. They want people to think they are rich or something. Look at me. I am fancy. I'm going to make some exotic noodles. People can dress fancy on social media and make them look more cool and hip. These have turned out like rock star trousers with the stars.

In the following excerpt (Figure 39) this can also be seen:



*Figure 39: Excerpt from
Simon's collage,
illustrating 'fancy clothes'*

Similarly, to the other examples above, Simon's response fits with this theory of contrived impression management (Goffman 1971; 1959) and enables individuals to construct their own narrative and curation of their self-identity. Though in the case of social media, this is perpetuated as an artificial 'imagined audience' which is under constant observation which can lead to exaggerations and influence on daily actions (Ranzini and Hoek, 2017). James (C113) talked about the way impression management could be used in a more positive way, which gives social media users

more control “you only need to show the bits about yourself that you want.” But Simon (C19) discussed this from the audience perspective of social media “...people can do loads of stuff on social media that they don’t actually do in real life, and it can be hard to tell if they do actually do stuff or if they don’t do it.” He continues that this can be confusing in terms of perception “yeah, some people can show off their jewellery and just, I’m not being mean, but they flex on people, like I have this. It is okay to say what you have but saying it in like a mean way is kind of not very nice and people could take it differently from how you could.” Evidently how you portray yourself, especially in terms of materialism can be received in different ways by the people viewing your feed, which fits with other research that highlights impression management (Ditchfield, 2019).

5.2.2 ‘It kind of shows who I am’: self-expression through digital curation

Identity portrayal was seen as a key component of self-expression, which is concurrent with research in this field (Dooly, 2017). The following dialogue from Focus Group 3 demonstrates what kind of factors make up this identity portrayal:

Child N: It shows your age.

Child K: Age and what you look like.

This was similarly expressed by Child P (FG4) “by posting your face, what you like, your real name, all the stuff about you that makes you” and Child S (FG4) “by posting pictures of yourself, with your friends and your interests. Your name, your dog’s name. Everything about yourself.” This self-expression was also seen to relate to how and what you choose to show on social media as defined by Child X (FG5) “well they show their identity by taking and sharing photos of stuff they like and videos of themselves and posting them for other people to see.” Child AD (FG6) highlighted that this did have an element of control, with some autonomy evident “your account and where you are. What you choose to share about yourself with other people.” Likewise, Child Q (FG4) said “photographs and the backgrounds, how you choose to show yourself. You can edit stuff.” Gulatee, Combes and Yoosabi (2021) argue that the profile pages and status’ individuals share via social media is a

representation of the world the author wishes to communicate and is positioned by this creator in relation to the audience. This can be viewed as deliberate presentation of self, an identity that is developed to the community where they wish to socialise (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018).

Furthermore Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo (2017) highlight that there may be a pressure to adopt this fictitious persona or this public version of self. This is demonstrated through there being no consensus on whether this identity portrayal should include a censored version of self-expression or not though. Sophie (CI2) highlighted that this needed to be authentic on social media “identity means showing your true self off and not like not just like saying this is me and when it is not actually, hiding how you really are.” This serves to demonstrate the potentially challenging complexity of impression management (Goffman, 1959) particularly if this self-expression and identity portrayal is via more than one social media platform. As Kim (2017) emphasises this self-expression may be seen as different and less ephemeral than previous anonymous spaces. Likewise, Litt (2012) emphasises that face to face interaction with a small and explicit audience is less reliant on imagination and perceived audience than social media self-expression is.

Oscar (CI5) though, emphasised a one-dimensional aspect of his self-expression that he shows via social media, which is arguably less complicated to navigate (Mishra and Ismail, 2018). “No, I only show one side of myself, my skills from games. How good I play and other games in real life too, like football. It is more about what I do rather than what I look like.” Several males in the research, also linked their ideas about self-expression to their gaming persona. Oscar (CI5) said “games, games they are really important, and this is how I like to show what I do on social media.” Similarly, James (CI13) demonstrated this in his collage (which is shown in Figure 40) and his narrative:

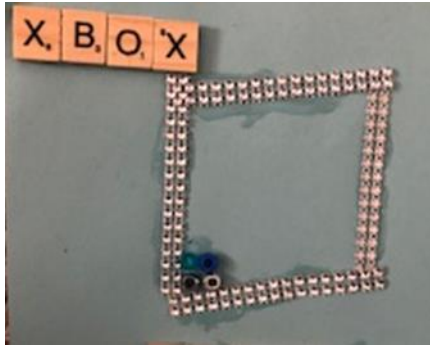


Figure 40: Excerpt from James' collage, showing his gaming interest

It kind of shows a part of who I am, I play an online video game Fortnite Royale, my identity is quite in gaming because I speak to people on there and we have things in common. I have an online character, I quite like to use the word 'shadow' in it, my own online character and I use my own money that I can spend on gaming.

Cirucci (2012) likens a gamer's avatar or online character to a social media profile but explains in the case of gaming, the player may be more attuned to the fact that the representation of this self may not be real, and the experiences are virtual, this is arguably less congruent on social media platforms. Abigail (C17) linked her self-expression to her online persona but not in the context of gaming:

I feel like I am a lot more joyful on social media more than in real life. Because most of the time in real life I am just playing with my friends who know me, I joke around a lot. On social media I feel like I am more joyful because it is fun, and I do happy dances and stuff like that. I only show what I want to on there.

She chose to write the word 'joyful' on foam to further illustrate this point which can be seen in Figure 41.



Figure 41: Excerpt from Abigail's collage, showing her 'joyful' self-representation

Karen offered a more cautionary approach and emphasised how social media use was becoming an overused way of young people expressing themselves. “They post like where they are, what they are doing”, she commented, continuing, “it is like part of their daily lives, TikTok is, and they can’t stop thinking how they would show that on the app.” This again serves to emphasise that self-expression is a deliberate act, where children are seen as social actors (Dooly, 2017) though this can be a compelling experience with a sense of adding collective noise to childhood (Turkle, 2011). Baldwin (2020) emphasises that this notion of identity and the subsequent meaning-making that social media engenders should be viewed as a social and therefore relational construct that is clearly demonstrated within peer culture. It also draws upon Goffman’s (1959) impression management where individuals deliberately express themselves in a way that is deemed appropriate by themselves and the audience they wish to engage with. Sophie (C12) highlighted this and implied that self-expression was the main function of social media. She said, “social media is a way that you can express yourself and who you are. If you don’t there is not really much point on being on there because that is the main thing about it, social media, and stuff because you are meant to express yourself.” She exemplified this by showing various versions of herself, and how a person could show this on social media, which she metaphorically represented with different animal prints on her collage (see Figure 42), saying, “... the way I have put them, so you don’t have to be perfect. It shows like a symbol of having different sides and being unique, we’re all different, people see us differently though.”



Figure 42: Excerpt from Sophie's collage, showing her 'multiple identities'

The strong metaphor that she provides, and the accompanying image encapsulates how social media, and the digital landscape can encourage a more multimodal approach to the depiction of self, facilitating the performance of multiple identities with a flexibility to show your life within multiple spaces (Darvin, 2016). In the way she has split her drawn image in half (Figure 43), Sophie's collage and narrative show a strong binary depiction of self and further highlights the duplicity of her self-expression in real life and how other people perceive her on social media.



Figure 43: Sophie's collage of her binary depiction of self

It is evident that Sophie is aware that there is an audience for her online identity and how she is perceived by others is different from how she perceives herself (Goffman, 1959). Her looks and appearance are very apparent in her imagery. On the social media side, Sophie left her hair uncoloured deliberately, saying that people judge you by the way you look. She commented, "I'm going to leave my hair blank here, because some people, a couple of people see me as like a plain person." She also said that people see her as sporty on social media because she sometimes posts videos of activities, but this is exaggerated as she is not like this in real life. The football and the leaves represent this and show that an image can be manipulated to portray what you wish. Whereas on the left of the image, the beads and dots reflect the colours that she likes and that she is arty. Sophie demonstrates how identity is a social construct enacted through social interaction with others and reliant on one's own portrayal of self as well as others' perceptions (Ellison, 2013). Furthermore, in respect to her social media self, she is an actor with an audience

performing a role (Goffman, 1959). Like the other females in the study, she highlights that there is an expectation for your image/identity portrayal to be a certain way which can put pressure on people, though she notes that “nothing is perfect.” For the girls in this research, there was a sense that self-expression was strongly linked to appearance, with a pressure to adhere to certain perceived ideals in this respect (Tatangelo and Ricciardelli, 2017).

5.2.3 ‘Likes, views and more clout’: using social media for self-validation

Many children commented on self-validation in relation to social media use and this, like impression management (5.2.1), appears to be a key subtheme. In relation to Focus Group activity 4, where influencer’s Instagram posts were discussed as explained in Chapter 3.6.4, many children highlighted the pretentious boasting and bragging that social media facilitates. The following dialogue from Focus Group 1 demonstrates this:

Child A: She is trying to show off.

Child C: She is showing off her clothes and her designer bag.

There were also comments that this level of popularity and self-validation was linked to being famous, one child remarking, “to get followers and likes and to become famous probably” (Child X, FG5). Similarly, Child A (FG1) said, “this one? That is Kim Kardashian. She’s like showing off, look at me and look at what I have got.” This was also linked to popularity and the reciprocal nature of social media, that emphasises the use of likes and comments. The following extract from Focus Group 2 demonstrates this:

Child F: She wants to be popular. She is showing off. Her clothes. Where she is.

Child J: She is trying to be very popular. And she is looking to get a lot of followers. And a lot of likes and comments.

This was reiterated many times, “And for likes and views and for more clout” (Child M, FG3), Child Q: (FG 4) “Yes. You are looking for likes and comments. Looking for

attention” and “most people try and get lots of likes so they can feel popular” (Child S, FG4). The level of attention posts received was deemed important and there was an expectation to this as exemplified by Child Y (FG5):

Maybe I would say like, for example Kim Kardashian, with her niece, she has a lot of likes, over four million likes on just that one personal photo because she is famous and I think maybe that she is expecting lots of likes because of who she is, she is a Kardashian, and she is expecting loads and loads and millions of likes.

These examples align with research by Steinbekk *et al.*, (2021) who demonstrate that allowing others to like and comment on their lives can have implications for self-esteem since much social acceptance is validated by peer approval. Though in this research, some children cited celebrities and kept their comments generic rather than regarding their own personal experience. Similarly, Huk (2016) ascertains that when children are using social network sites, they begin to ascribe value to the number of likes and comments on their posts and the number of online ‘friends’ that they have, which is linked to perceived popularity. But rather than this kind of adulation and popularity bringing happiness and contentment, it can lead to seeking further validation as discussed in Focus Group 5:

Child W: She wants even more.

Child Y: Get a better picture. More attention. Improve how many likes she has. Get to ten million, it is a dangerous game.

Child AB (FG6) also highlighted this “...I think she wants more. When you are famous you get money from it. I don’t think she is actually that happy because even though they are famous because you keep wanting more.” Yet this is not just applicable to famous people as explained by Child AN (FG8) “Yes, I think at first but then maybe not, because when people are really popular, they crave more and more likes.” Isabel (FG1) also demonstrated this through her collage with a heart (which is the way to show a like on Instagram) and explained that “this heart is going to go by here, to show the likes, people want likes if they post stuff. It makes them feel good about themselves, well, they think it makes them feel good, but it doesn’t, well not in my opinion at least. As they just want more and more.” This is seen in Figure 44 below:



Figure 44: Excerpt from Isabel's collage, depicting the heart that people crave in response to a post

Henry (CI16) also demonstrated this in his collage and with his narrative “I’m not saying that I do this, but I am going to put ‘Follow’ and a love heart next to it, people want likes and loads of attention.” His image (Figure 45) demonstrates this and is a powerful reminder of the validation aspect of social media use.



Figure 45: Excerpt from Henry's collage demonstrating the validation aspect of social media

The reasons for this were not just about being famous and popular though as instigated by Child AD (FG6) who said that people were looking for self-validation, “for confidence” and to lift their mood. One child commented, “maybe if they are having a bad day, it may make them feel good about themselves” (Child X, FG5). In a similar vein, Isabel (CI1) said “I think there are some people in the world that think, they feel unloved, and they want people to like them a bit more, to have followers and interact with people. That is just what I am saying.” The above examples seem to contradict research by Uhls, Ellison and Subrahmanyam (2017) who exemplify self-validation in more positive terms. They suggest that young people via social media can engage in this social feedback on their own interactions and can practice interpreting signs and others’ emotions. In this research, self-validation is portrayed in a more negative way and more of a disembodied, shallow reflection (Jones, 2015). Actively seeking validation through likes and comments may have implications for

how children feel, and this virtual reflection may be dependent on the likes and comments of others (Poore, 2016).

5.2.4 'They flex their Lamborghinis': celebrity influence on social media

The influence that celebrity culture has on social media use was highlighted by many of the children. This was seen as partly since "loads of people on here are famous" (Child K, FG3) and often linked to the number of followers they have and not always recognised talent as depicted by Child Z (FG6) who said, "she has two million followers." This was reiterated by Abigail (CI7) in her comment about perceived fame "yes, there is this one person I think called Charli D'Amelio that I told you about earlier and she has 92 million followers, and she is only 16 or 17 years old." This was sometimes viewed as a kind of social media endorsement as they are "...verified, she is famous" (Child A, FG1). A few children commented that for some, there was an aspiration for this fame, Child AB (FG6) said "some people just want to be famous." Child AB (FG6) followed this with the great lengths they would go to "people do lots of crazy stuff. So, they can get famous." There was a materialistic element to this fame often portrayed as demonstrated by the following dialogue from Focus Group 6:

Child AB: They just wear really posh outfits and if you are rich but if you are not that rich you may not be wearing posh outfits.

Child Z: They flex their lambos [Lamborghinis].

This was viewed as problematic by Child AJ (FG8) who said, "the problem is with celebrities, that they are showing us their life and their things and their luxury, some people are impressed by that and want to be like them." This can cause unrealistic aspirations and feelings of poor self-worth (Maclsaac, Kelly and Gray, 2018). Some children were more discerning with their viewing of celebrities though as seen by Simon (CI9) who seemed to recognise that for celebrities they were deliberately manipulating their celebrity status "yes, some people do. I think some people do. Probably not famous people like Kim Kardashian, she probably does have hobbies but doesn't post it. She just promotes herself, her beauty." The material element was

also portrayed as being paid to promote and endorse products, which may be more subtle than overt advertisements, as suggested in the following conversation:

Child AN: I suppose you can notice things, like some products.

Child AM: Some things go viral, and everyone wants it.

Interestingly Karen (C111) mentioned a shift in celebrity culture that social media affords due to the persuasive and far-reaching nature of its use rather than teen media previous generations had “people used to see it on magazines, but it is now more on TikTok and Instagram and Facebook.” This is a very indicative comment on how this element of social media is now infiltrating daily life. Maclsaac, Kelly and Gray (2018) emphasises that social media use is connected to a type of ‘celebrification’ which is a term they use to illustrate the desire to strive for celebrity status among peers, which is an emulation of celebrity interactions and a constant gaze by others. Izzy (C115) also exemplified this in her collage with her image of a doily with stars on which she explained was to show how people want popularity on social media and that celebrities are stars that want constant attention. In Figure 46 below this is depicted:



Figure 46: Excerpt from Izzy's collage, showing celebrities craving popularity

Her commentary reiterated this point:

I'm going to use this doily and the stars can be about popularity. I'm going to put a star in the middle, like the celebrities they are popular, and they are

stars, like movie stars and singers and I am trying to show it with a star. I may do lots of stars, to show popularity. I'm going to do three stars going up and then loads around it.

This digital space for children and young people not only has different social media platforms but also the voyeuristic opportunity to view celebrity lifestyle in a way that other types of media do not purport (Latif *et al.*, 2021). The level of envy that this potentially perpetuates is termed a 'double-edged sword' by Latif *et al.*, (2021) and social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) can be even more heightened with these goals and ideals being difficult if not impossible to reach.

Again, there was a gender divide within this sub themes, as many boys in the group commented on this celebrity influence in a positive way, particularly regarding sport. Ian (C112) discussed this "I do follow some football players on Instagram, and I look at my favourite team, Man City, I like to see the clips that they have posted about stuff that they have posted from when they were younger. It is quite enjoyable." As did Henry (C116) "I am a big football fan, so I follow football players." This can also be seen to encourage aspirations but arguably in a more positive way as depicted by Oscar (C15) "they post all their video clips and all their good moments. Like really good shots. I want to be like them [pause: 1: 26]." In research by Tatangelo and Ricciardelli (2017) this is also the case, where boys cited sports and ability related comparison.

5.2.5 'Things on social media are not always as they seem': feigning and fakeness on social media

Alongside celebrity culture and influence that has already been presented in the above section, the fakeness that social media often engenders was discussed by the children. This took various guises including the influence for girls to aspire to beauty ideals as previously highlighted in 5.2.1 and in how it can encourage people to fake how they feel. Going beyond filters, Child E (FG1) mentioned that "...so things are not as they seem" because of photoshopping and a deliberate fakeness being portrayed of the environment "like they take a photo in front of a building like that and

then they like photoshop the background, so it looks really cool. But that does look quite fake actually.” This self-produced media and a deliberate curatorship of one’s life is indicative of a so called ‘me’ media (Butkowski, Dixon and Weeks, 2020). In this example Cooley’s (1902) analogy of the ‘looking glass self’ becomes more apparent in a more literal sense as the magnifying glass and the deliberate portrayal of the environment is represented to be self-flattering and to showcase their life in a way that is potentially aspiring to others. The intentional curatorship on social media, Potter (2012) highlights is a showcasing of their lives and experiences such as holidaying, eating in restaurants or participating in an activity which was once reserved for personal insight, but is now carefully crafted for a status update and elicits a response from an audience. Karen (CI11) reiterates this in her explanation of how some people portray their life on social media which can also affect how other people feel “Yes. Some people fake how they live their life, they are trying to make other people feel jealous. And other people might not like it and do bad stuff to themselves.” Dooly (2017) also emphasises the contrived nature of social media and how socio-cultural dimensions are emphasised via social media with an ongoing performance that facilitates this.

As mentioned, this fakeness can present in a manipulation of feelings, Child AD (FG6) illustrated this “some people for example sent me a video. I sent so many like laughing emojis and I actually was just like watching it with no expression, so bored. Like I’m going to die, it’s so funny, but actually I’m just sat there.” The misconception of reality is a deliberate attempt to protect the feelings of the person making the post and an intentional fakeness for the audience who receives it, a contrived meaning-making experience (Darvin, 2016). Children do not always passively view these feeds though and can be more discerning as exemplified by Child C (FG1) “it can be fake though. Look at me. Look at my clothes.” This exaggerated portrayal of life to deliberately deceive other people is demonstrated by Simon (CI9) who said:

Basically, like all the food stuff is the same but they make out they’re fancier. And like a person that they are not actually are [pause: 1:53]. It is quite fake on social media. Not everything but 95% of social media is fake and the other 5 is like just real and people just expressing themselves with real stuff.

Simon emphasises this point in the message that he portrayed on his collage, which is exemplified in Figure 47 below.

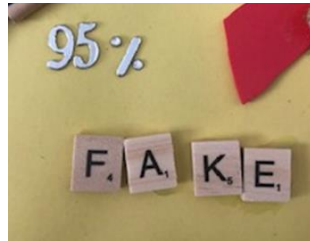


Figure 47: Excerpt from Simon's collage with his message about 'fakeness'

Not all children may be aware of the fakeness on social media though and viewing these idealised feeds may affect how they feel about themselves (Dooly, 2017).

5.2.6 'Companies pay influencers to advertise them': monetarisation of identity

The fakeness and celebrity influence can also be seen to be perpetuated through the monetarisation aspect of social media and the way it is used to endorse products and brands and by the way advertisements are often personalised by algorithms that function on previous likes and interests of the user (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat, 2020). Children are also aware that some individuals are making money through their social media profiles as shown in the following dialogue from Focus Group 1:

Child E: There is this girl called Charli D' Amelio [TikTok star] and she...

Child A: ...is 15.

Child E: And she got like loads of money from TikTok.

Child A: She's like really rich.

Child C: And famous from TikTok.

This can also take the form of other monetary deals, for example, "and sometimes people get sponsored." (Child AH, FG7) and "companies pay influencers to advertise them" (Child AF, FG7). Cover (2014) emphasises the ideology that this type of digital

environment perpetuates which is driven by consumerism which can make for an oscillated reality. The way this presents can also transcend platforms, to further influence users, as also commented on by Child B (FG1) who said, “on YouTube, there are loads of adverts about TikTok, because the app [YouTube] is paying famous people, YouTubers to obviously advertise on there.” Individualised algorithmic feeds and advertisements, alongside celebrity influences can make for a contrived environment similarly captured by Deleuze’s (1992) ‘postscript’ society, where the subtle forms of control can strongly influence how individuals behave and dominant discourse can be subtly utilised to influence subjective experience. Adverts then, can be seen as a way of influencing youth culture by encouraging popularity of certain products, for example, “and they always, when you are on like a game with people, they always like advertise the newest thing” (Child E, FG1).

Celebrity/influencer endorsement can be a powerful factor of social media and can lead to imitation as described by Child E (FG1) “Yes, with brands because some brands have famous people in it, so, they use it and they are famous, so let’s copy them.” Though, children can again be seen as sometimes discerning as they realise that celebrities are advertising certain products for money, rather than preferring them, or even using them. Child E (FG1) highlighted this by saying “there is an advert, and you can definitely tell it is fake, like a lady and she is saying, oh buy Colgate toothpaste as it is like the best but then in her fridge, she has got like 10,000 peppers and she takes a bite out of a pepper just randomly. You’re not actually going to do that in real life.” Dunne, Lawlor and Rowley (2010) in their research highlight the marketing perspective that social media endorses and how teenagers through their consumption habits share their lifestyle on social media in the way they use products. Peer culture is therefore influenced by these factors and the ecology of the individual is expanded since the immediate environment that they have exposure to in real life may be far wider on social media (Pea *et al.*, 2012).

Izzy (C115) emphasises in her comment and collage (Figure 48) that this exposure to a consumer lifestyle can involve dangers of advertisements on social media:

I’m going to do a brand on a label, I’m trying to think which one. Maybe because it is a tag, I could do Amazon as people see this a lot on the adverts. Their logo has like a smile. And I am sticking this bit, so that it can move.

Some companies sell things but can be scams, brands are big on social media [pause: 1:15].

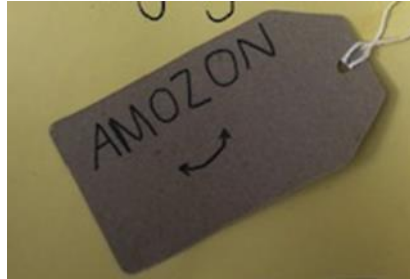


Figure 48: Excerpt from Izzy's collage showing the power of the brand Amazon in advertising

This form of competitive endeavour is perpetuating youth cultures and is not free from dominant discourse (Moss, 2019). Analysing Izzy's image in a more metaphorical way could indicate a more subtle expression of meaning in terms of the company 'Amazon' also being on a tag representing the notion that everything comes with a price in a consumer world. It could be argued that social media is driven by advertisements and consumerism and consequently children's views of the world may be altered (Cover, 2014). Finally, the reciprocation and the monetary element of social media are highlighted by Child C (FG1) who discusses how certain accounts can be used to generate income and merchandise "there are like dog photos too. My Mum set up my dog an Instagram, his own account, so she could post cute pictures. Because if you get enough followers, you can have free stuff." Far from a neutral digital landscape then, social media is used beyond a mode of communication and can be seen as a medium to advertise, endorse brands and influence users (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat, 2020).

5.3 Self-presentation related to subjective experience and identity portrayal

In this theme, self-presentation is exemplified as an important facet of social media use which may be more contrived than real life (Dooly, 2017). The very nature of social media which engenders the use of photographs, status updates and a curated

narrative of one's life is a form of self-expression, but it is arguably more reliant on responses from others, which makes it discursive and reciprocal (Throuvala *et al.*, 2019). Children who participated in this research demonstrate the different ways that they express themselves via social media and how in many incidences they deliberately employ impression management techniques to influence how others perceive them in relation to the 'imaginary audience' that they are engaging with (Goffman, 1959). This can affect their subjective experience as their perceived reality or consciousness related to their social media use and their engagement with the perceived audience can influence how they view themselves. The gender divide is very apparent in this research, particularly in relation to the use of filters, with the girls relaying using them to adhere to beauty ideals. Overt physical impression management can be seen as an example of Goffman's (1971) 'front stage' persona and these exaggerated, contoured physical features with flawless skin which is heavily manipulated exemplifies this. Continuing with Goffman's (1971) analogy these filters may be viewed as types of props that are used virtually, much the same way as make up and clothes are used in real life. However, it is apparent from analysing this data that using these filters and the pressure of being 'perfect' is causing emotional repercussions and an idealised persona that is difficult to sustain (Burnette, Kwitoski and Mazzeo, 2017).

The online culture that children are also experiencing is heavily influenced by celebrity and brands, though it is sometimes apparent from this analysis that the children understand their cultivated identities and experiences on social media platforms as occurring in distinct digital neighbourhoods which are also shaped in terms of socio-economic factors such as advertisements (Stevens *et al.*, 2016). The notion of a 'super peer' may also be seen to be applicable, as social media has the power to influence behaviour, shift attitudes and alter society norms (Stevens *et al.*, 2016). This in turn, can be seen to affect the subjective experience of childhood itself, which is arguably more congruent with branding than ever before. The links to Deleuze's (1992) 'societies of control' are also apparent in this research in respect of both gender portrayal and the pervasive influence of celebrity, blogger and Youtuber's influence.

5.3.1 The presentation of self in the digital space in relation to research questions

It is apparent from this theme, presented in this chapter, that children do enact a type of curatorship on social media which enables them to portray a sense of self through photographs, statuses, and comments and consequently an active form of meaning-making (Potter, 2012). This space that they occupy no longer has clear and distinct boundaries and the divide between school and home is more of a semi malleable membrane rather than a solid barrier (Potter and McDougall, 2017). The implications of this permeate their experience of childhood and how they develop their sense of self is affected by peer culture and wider societal influences (Ellison, 2013). The data and subsequent discussions presented in this chapter answer to a degree all four of the research questions. As with the previous chapter, listening to the children's voice both visually and orally has enabled a rich picture of their everyday experiences of social media to be captured. Moving beyond traditional methods which may limit meaning in a reductive way, creative methods may more accurately reflect the multiplicity of social reality that exists (Kara, 2015). This has made contributions to understandings of how social media influences children's identity formation of this age group and recognises that they are experts in their own lives. From a social constructionist view, the individual is not just a separate entity but a collection of multiple identities that are constantly evolving (Alford, 2012). Especially within this theme, the research questions are seen to be interlinked and provide different facets to the overall aim of the study: To explore children's subjective experiences of social media use within digital spaces and how they make meaning of their digital identity and its portrayal.

5.3.2 Findings in relation to RQ1: In what ways are children's identities shaped by their experiences of social media within digital spaces?

The collages with the interviews answered this explicitly due to the nature of the questions asked about identity formation on social media and in real life to the participants. It is evident from the data that social media is not a vacuum, nor a value free zone and consequently children's identities are being shaped by the pervasive influence that these digital platforms have on their lives. Identity was seen as an

active form of meaning making, in both the way that children portrayed their own identity and how they perceived other people's identities, which aligns with Goffman's theory (1971; 1959) of both the presentation of self and the imagined audience. Though in relation to social media, identity was seen as a distinct social construct, which included social interaction, sometimes in a more contrived way through likes and comments, which affected relationships and reflected the wider role children had with family and peers (Ellison, 2013). Their depiction of self then, was more multimodal and was evidently affected by communication on social media, which was sometimes an extension of their real life and sometimes not and consequently this online and offline portrayal of identity was not fixed (Darvin, 2016). The discursive nature of social media as mentioned, with the opportunity to like and comment on other people's lives as well as them commenting on yours, can affect identity formation as it is a more contrived way of seeking social acceptance from peers and can facilitate approval seeking that is more obvious than in real life contexts (Steinbekk *et al.*, 2021). So, whilst there is some autonomy in the representation of themselves and the world they inhabit, this is influenced by others to various degrees (Gulatee, Combes and Yoosabi, 2021). This is even more prevalent on social media, due to the exposure that children have to celebrity and peer culture in a less restricted or censored way than ever before (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat, 2020).

Children in this study talked about influencers and celebrities showing off designer clothes and a certain lifestyle and even peers only showing their best version of self. The impact of this may be especially influential when children and young people are experimenting with who they are and how they wish to portray their identity publicly. Invariably then, this can render them vulnerable in terms of how they compare themselves to others, especially as they may not realise that they are continually looking at other people's idealised feeds (Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo, 2017). Identity then, is linked to a type of self-curatorship (Potter, 2012) which resonates strongly with impression management (Goffman, 1959) and is demonstrated in this research through the enactments of self that the children portray. Especially in collages showing binary depictions (such as Sophie (CI1), Isabel (CI2), David (CI4), Simon (CI9) and Karen's (CI11) collages). For others then, there was a struggle of

authenticity that social media perpetuated, where Sophie (CI1), Isabel (CI2), Gabby (CI10) and Izzy (CI15) all recommended that you should show your 'true self' on social media. Others, such as Lloyd (CI3), suggested the contrary and demonstrated that your identity should not be shown on social media and should be concealed wherever possible and instead a specific online identity curated. There was no homogeneity in their responses to this and it is therefore evident that the online/offline binary is subjective and the degree to which children may be affected by others may be different.

5.3.3 Findings in relation to RQ2: What influence does gender have on children when using social media within digital spaces and how does this affect how they feel about themselves?

The subthemes that have been discussed above do display certain gender stereotypes. Identity portrayal for the girls in the study was intrinsically linked to physical appearance, whereas the boys identified themselves in less overtly physical ways which tended to be through gaming or connecting with others who inspire them for example, football stars or for entertainment. The most distinct gender divide, which was highlighted in both the focus groups and collages with interviews, was the use of Snapchat type filters. Both genders emphasised that this was seen as an issue that affects girls with a continual pressure to look 'perfect' and to enhance their physical features, in a way that was perpetuated both by other peers and celebrities. Viewing these idealised photographs, where filters had been used to make skin look 'glowey', with no blemishes and exaggerated eyes and lips was seen as the norm by the girls in this research. Many girls, like Millie (CI6), Isabel (CI2), Karen (CI11) and Izzy (CI15) amongst others, did make overt reference to the fact that girls should be less pressured to conform and should feel more confident in how they looked in real life, though suggested that this was a real issue for girls.

It can be seen then that gender ideals are being perpetuated on social media and rather than in previous generations where magazines and television programmes were emphasising this, another layer has been added which arguably permeates young people's lives more as it is ever present because of smartphones (Davis,

2012). This production or enactment of gender is emphasised with social media as it provides a unique platform to actualise these gender norms (Metcalf and Llewelyn, 2020). Even as is the case for these girls who are aware of these overt examples of image manipulation, this undoubtedly has an impact on their well-being to some degree. These unwritten rules of gender, perpetuated by peer and celebrity culture can affect self-esteem (Metcalf and Llewelyn, 2020). Reference to this was overtly made by Karen (CI11) in respect to how she felt when she viewed these idealised images and to other girls who did not specifically refer to themselves demonstrated how it may affect others. Moreover, this type of 'social grooming' can be seen to strengthen the drive of wanting to fit into these socially accepted face and body norms (Kim and Chock, 2015).

5.3.4 Findings in relation to RQ 3: To what extent do children feel the pressure of social media within digital spaces and how do they negotiate these experiences?

As depicted with the above discussions in relation to RQ1 and 2, children do feel pressures when using social media within digital spaces. In addition, the fakeness that is often portrayed on social media, which children are required to sift through in a somewhat disembodied way, without the normal social cues (Zhao, 2005) can add more pressure. There is pressure from a materialistic world, sometimes beyond their reach in terms of celebrity lifestyle, that is publicised in a more overt way than previous generations were exposed to (Latif *et al.*, 2021). Likewise, advertisements and endorsed products via algorithmic feeds also feed this materialism (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat, 2020). Children must make decisions about what is real, what is exaggerated and which elements they wish to influence their sense of self. This can make for a complicated minefield and can come with an intense pressure to behave in certain ways. There are also more subtle pressures that children face, which may involve them liking and commenting favourably on posts, so that they do not hurt the feelings of others. It can also give the impression that everyone is happier, and leading better lives than themselves (Chou and Edge, 2012). The influence of this subtle control and surveillance that social media endorses will be explored more thoroughly in the next chapter.

5.3.5 Findings in relation to RQ 4: What knowledge can children share about using social media within digital spaces to support other children

There were many overt ideas that were given by the children in the discussions in the focus groups and more explicitly in the final focus group activity 'Your messages about social media', which was designed to elicit a more individual, reflective answer rather than a group response. Though these tended to be around the more obvious forms of dangers regarding social media such as catfishing³². Messages also strongly resonated with agency promotion through how to ensure your safety with privacy settings being enacted and being careful where you were photographed, which will be explored more thoroughly in the succeeding chapter. However, during the collages with interviews, the messages and knowledge imparted took a more emotional trajectory than the physical dangers and e-safety discussed in the focus groups. For example, Millie (C16) devised a character, 'Bob, the goofy influencer' as an antithesis to the role models girls currently have and highlighted the fact that girls should be less influenced by the way they look and should be free to have fun with their peers. Similarly, Izzy (C15) wrote on her collage 'beauty isn't everything' and encouraged girls to think about their personality and hobbies on social media and not just the way they look. Sophie's message also emphasised this pressure to look a certain way and wrote 'nobody is perfect' even though that this is often the way it can appear on social media. Isabel's (C12) message 'stop comparing yourself to others' also highlighted this pressure that the digital space engenders, where idealised versions of self are being continually looked at and can affect self-esteem.

From the data collected, it was very apparent that messages of e-safety had been successfully ingrained into children and they had a full repertoire of practices that they could call upon to keep them safe from the more overt dangers of social media, which also concurs with other research (Children's Commissioner, 2018). It is the emotional repercussions of social media, the way it taps at the tween psyche in a less apparent way, particularly in relation to appearance that is the type of knowledge that children need to explore more actively. It would be useful if these experiences highlighted above and other real-life examples, generated by children

³² The term 'catfishing' means to lure (someone) into a relationship by means of a fictional online persona.

themselves were utilised to discuss Internet safety and digital literacy in schools and at home. Children need to be recognised as experts in their own lives and the challenges they encounter online need to be addressed by practitioners and parents, not those that they think are an issue. As Pyer, Lomax and Bramble (2019) suggest children need to be co-architects and co-producers of any digital strategy aimed at increasing their digital literacy and to enhance their well-being. There is a growing recognition amongst international policy makers of this importance of children to engage safely in the digital space (Children's Commissioner, 2018) and evidently this needs to address the more subtle forms of emotional safety that this research has highlighted.

5.4 Summary of the chapter

In this chapter, the second of three empirical chapters, the lens was directed at analysing children's sense of self and identity portrayal within digital spaces. The considerable impact that social media has on identity formation has been highlighted, especially in relation to the theoretical lens of Goffman's (1971;1959) theory in relation to impression management and the imagined audience. The amplification of this is apparent due to the nature of social media and the discursive element which allows users to curate their own portrayal of self in relation to the likes and comments that they may receive (Potter, 2012). The affordances of how filters can be used as props to alter images (Ditchfield, 2019) and perpetuate social and gender stereotypes has been evaluated and has been seen to be a much more prevalent issue for girls. Childhood and how children make meaning of their experiences has certainly evolved in terms of the influence that outside agencies such as celebrity culture and advertisements have on their sense of self. The notion of a digital childhood with more overt awareness of other people's lives infiltrates the way children socialise and communicate within these spaces and discernment needs to be administered to protect themselves both physically and emotionally. The digital space and the way children navigate this is ever evolving due to the latest trends, such as the recent popularity of TikTok and Snapchat social media platforms (Ofcom, 2021), which may distance parents and practitioners in terms of understanding and experience. It is therefore essential that children's voices are

heard in respect to the positives and negatives that they encounter and how a more nuanced understanding of this can help them to confidently navigate this digital space and positively portray their digital self. The impact of surveillances both real and imagined will be explored in the next chapter, with a more detailed analysis of children's perceptions of dangers online and the more subtle forms of control that social media engenders.

Chapter Six – ‘Surveillance imaginaries’ in the digital space

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, findings, and analysis of how children’s sense of self is portrayed on social media within digital spaces was examined. The emphasis of impression management (Goffman, 1959) was seen to affect children’s identity formation and the notion of an ‘imaginary audience’ (Goffman, 1971) was apparent due to the discursive nature of social media. In this chapter, the final of the empirical chapters documenting the results and findings with accompanying analysis and discussion, I explore the concept of surveillance in relation to social media and how this can incorporate both perceived and imagined parameters. Within the title of this chapter, and the third of the main themes I adopt the term ‘surveillance imaginaries’ coined by Lyon (2017) to help understand how individuals are socialised by hidden forms of surveillance. This phrase really encapsulates the way surveillance operates in digital spaces, that children especially may not be aware of. Monitoring activities, by parents and practitioners, as well as for data and consumer purposes, provide a basis for individuals exposure to this type of surveillance (Duffy and Chan, 2018). Furthermore, the phenomenon of ‘surveillance imaginaries’ within a culture of digital practice “forms part of everyday reflections on how things are and of the repertoire of everyday practices” (Lyon, 2017, p.285). This continual scrutiny and perceived observations of digital spaces also resonate with the interplay of the imagined audiences (Litt, 2012) that was presented in the previous chapter.

As with the previous two chapters mixed method analysis is presented thematically with quotes and excerpts interwoven from both the focus groups and collages with interviews. This is an attempt to draw together the complex elements of qualitative research and to exemplify the nuance that the rich data provided (Kara, 2015). The overarching theme of this chapter positions social media as a way of providing surveillance for various reasons. For example, this could exist in the form of ‘intimate surveillance’ as demonstrated with sharenting patterns of behaviour (Charoensukmongkul, 2018), as depicted in 4.2.4. It can also be described in terms of personalised algorithmic feeds and the influence of celebrity culture and

monetisation of famous users/influencers (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat, 2020) that was discussed in 5.2.4 and 5.2.6. However, within this master theme the notion of control is linked explicitly to surveillance, and within this data, outside factors were seen to be perpetuated by social media. Similarly, the existence of an 'omnipresent' other that is imagined by the users was also seen to ensure compliance and an element of more subtle control (Deleuze, 1992). Less subtlety, the way dangers are perceived by parents and the children themselves can take the form of overt physical risk such as grooming and catfishing (Reeves and Crowther, 2019). Far from being deterministic, children are sometimes seen as having agency and discernment in their use of social media and have plenty of strategies for keeping themselves safe online (D'Lima and Higgins, 2021; Oswell, 2016). This may be attributed to overt physical risk rather than emotional factors though as is exemplified within this chapter.

6.2 Presentation of the subthemes within this chapter

In this chapter, like the previous two, the subthemes are presented with excerpts of the children's voices from both the focus groups and collages with interviews, as well as imagery from their visual depictions. These subthemes resulted from complex analysis, initially utilising Braun and Clarke's (2006) model, which involved a six-stage process, using NVivo software. To allow for a deeper understanding, particularly in relation to the collages with interviews, a mixed method analysis was devised using analytical questions based on those suggested by Rose (2016) and Grbich (2012). This allowed for a connection with the data on a less superficial level and in conjunction with Brown and Collins (2021) visuo-textual framework, combined both the visual and linguistic elements. The importance of this is highlighted by other scholars who utilise creative, participatory methods, for example Eldén (2013) who suggests that a mixed analysis framework is a useful way to capture children's voices. In this chapter, due to the abstract notion of surveillance, this mixed method analysis is perhaps even more important for children to legitimise their view (Kaplun, 2019). In this final chapter documenting the findings and analysis, the master theme

of 'surveillance imaginaries' in the digital space, is divided into subthemes to highlight the aspects that this encapsulated and are presented below.

6.2.1 'You cannot control the information that you put on about you': perceived scrutiny and feeling controlled

Children in this research were aware of how social media could sometimes render them with little power, especially in relation to who could see their posts, even if they had privacy settings activated (Baccarella *et al.*, 2018). This was noted as a concern by Child L (FG2):

It is weird though because you cannot control the information that you put on about you, if you post a photo of say yourself, you don't know who is going to end up seeing it. You can't really control it and they don't actually know you.

This lack of power is also highlighted above by the fact that you may not be known to the person in real life, and they are consequently making a judgement about you based on superficial postings (Chou and Edge, 2012). Similarly, Child AG (FG7) emphasised the control element of social media and the permanence of digital spaces and the concept of surveillance with the feeling of being subtly controlled "yes, people can see everything and no matter if you delete it, it will still be on the web and probably like a thousand people have seen it." Child AG (FG7) also indicated this and insinuated that social media is not the ephemeral experience that some envisage, by commenting "yeah and someone may save the video and upload it somewhere else. Even if you delete it, it is still somewhere. Maybe on their phone." This goes beyond just deleting posts though as indicated by Child AF (FG7) who said, "even if you delete the app, it is not gone." In addition, Child A (FG1) implied that other people can manipulate social media users by saying "because people can take a screenshot and they can repost it and they have it in their camera roll until they delete it." These examples demonstrate the phenomena that Lyon (2017) terms 'surveillance imaginaries', which comprises the way that individuals conceive the scrutiny that could take place across social media ecologies because of the way that posts, and statuses are a type of permanent written interaction. Being judged on

social media was also a concern of Isabel's (CI1), she depicted this with the large googly eyes that she placed centrally at the top of her collage as seen in Figure 49.



Figure 49: Excerpt from Isabel's collage, showing eyes that are always watching

Her narration further emphasised this “I’m putting these eyes right in the middle, looking, people are always judging you on social media.” Similarly, Henry also depicted an image of eyes, to metaphorically reflect this watching and judging element of social media as seen in Figure 50 below.



Figure 50: Excerpt from Henry's collage, showing the 'watching' element of social media

He also commented, “other people can see your stuff on social media, they can see your life online...” which highlights the voyeuristic element of social media. Duffy and Chan (2018) discuss cultural anxiety about potential online surveillance and the subsequent implications of social media use. Though they utilise an older sample in their research (18-24 years) their qualitative data suggests similar results to this data. Millie in her collage and interview, emphasised the popularity of social media and how it could have covert control due to the popularity of certain apps and the

ways that this pervades people's lives. Her image in Figure 51, shows her visualisation of how a phone can appear.



Figure 51: Excerpt from Millie's collage showing social media apps on a smartphone

Whilst her narrative further emphasises this point:

On the phone, I'm going to make it out of this, and the scrabble letters are going to show the apps and the button is going to be made out of this [bead]. On the apps I am going to draw the logos on there, TikTok and Snapchat... all the important apps, that underage children should not have.

The control in this example comes from peer pressure and a desire to fit in with their peers (Darvin, 2016). The high percentage of children (95%) who documented that they had at least one social media account in this research also reflected this despite the terms of service stipulating that they are for children thirteen years and over (Ofcom, 2021). The control element was sometimes linked to the addictive nature of using social media, for example Child AI (FG7) said "like phones are kind of like hypnotising, there is a little blue light in there and it draws your attention and then you get sucked into the screen for hours and hours." Likewise, Karen (CI11) commented on how it could affect socialisation in real life "some people are so glued to their phone, and they don't enjoy actual life." Similarly, they echo Turkle's (2011) depiction of the way increased reliance on technology is negatively affecting childhood.

Parental monitoring was similarly seen to be a way of being controlled in both children's access to social media and which platforms they were allowed to go on (Gentile *et al.*, 2014). This was particularly apparent in the two girls who disclosed at the outset that they did not have social media accounts. Both girls related this censorship to being driven by their parents wanting them to retain an element of childhood innocence and not be exposed to perceived online dangers that social media engender, essentially the antithesis to Turkle (2011) rhetoric. Though, in both instances, the girls commented that they often felt excluded from their friends and arguably were not involved in some integral parts of youth culture. Gabby (CI10) illustrated this in her comment when she said:

No. I think my Mum and Dad really want me to stay young as much as possible, but I feel a bit, like most of the people in my class do have and do share and I do feel a bit left out that I can't really message my friends... I feel a bit left out that I can't message my friends.

Similarly, this was described by Izzy (CI15) who said, "sometimes but I do know that my parents are trying to protect me, and I would rather be left out and be safe, rather than not left out in danger. Even if I did have a private account, I would think what if people could hack into it." Both seemed to understand and accept the restrictions that their parents had placed and related this to their own safety.

Parental monitoring by Lloyd (CI3) was depicted in less binary terms than the two female non-social media users and he discussed their supervising in terms of them approving of apps suitability if they were not age appropriate before he was allowed to use them. He suggested that "if, it is like under my age, so say it was like Minecraft, that is about 3 [years of age] they would just let me download that but if it is over my age, they'll have to have a look at it first to see if I can get it." The 'restrictive monitoring' that the two female participants described, where screen time is prohibited or strictly monitored is seen in other research as less effective than the 'active mediation' that Lloyd indicated. Active mediation, which could include the checking of suitable apps/social media platforms and discussions with parents about advertising and the potential implications of socialising in this way could have better outcomes (Gentile *et al.*, 2014). Child D (FG1) in contrast explained that adults were

often the role models and using social media was an aspiration of growing up “because they see like grown-ups doing it and they think it is really cool, so they want to do it themselves.” The digital space then, is not a value free phenomenon, there is an element of control and being controlled that is not always as overt as through advertisements. Considering this, control by parents, may not be about the values of social media but rather concerns about safeguarding (Baccarella *et al.*, 2018) which do not consider consumerism (Cover, 2014) nor the more subtle emotional risks (Throuvala *et al.*, 2019). Children’s understandings of this control are not always as straightforward or obvious either and perhaps far more nuanced as the following sub theme illustrates.

6.2.2 ‘You don’t want random people following you’: self-censorship for social media use

Within this subtheme, children in the research were often seen as demonstrating agency and discernment in the way they responded to social media. Some children were able to self-regulate, instigate their own censorship parameters, and express themselves within a public forum in a positive way. This proactive approach could be linked to the ontological assumptions of this research and suggests that for some children at least childhood is being actively constructed by them and for them as Leonard (2016) suggests. Similarly, this acknowledgement that children are active agents could suggest a shift in childhood and rather than a deterministic outlook, children have influence on the world around them (James and Prout, 2015). Social media was described by Child T (FG4) as having a political aspect, a space for activism, which could be viewed as encouraging and nurturing a social conscience:

Child T: There is lots of racism too. But there is an activist side of TikTok too which is good.

Interviewer: What kind of activist side does this show?

Child P: Like Black Lives Matter and stuff with like Donald Trump.

This awareness of wider issues particularly those affecting children can also be a part of social media culture, as commented on by Child R (FG4) who said, “I have also seen a lot of things with like mental health issues and making people aware of

it.” Again, this resonates with children being proactive in the digital spaces that they engender and a sense of collective actions (Norozi and Moen, 2016). Agency also took the form of not believing everything that was seen on social media, particularly when viewing adverts, as they may be as Child AD (FG5) said “false advertising”. Child AF (FG7) also reiterated this by saying, “normally when you have ads on social media, they are normally not true. You get something completely different.” Consequently, as demonstrated by both examples, children may be more discerning than research suggests (Oswell, 2016). This also took the form of online safety concerns that will be discussed in a subsequent subtheme, which was summarised by Child AE (FG7) who said, “you can have private accounts. On Instagram and Snapchat, you can make it private, and people can’t follow you, you can only follow them. You can accept them. But you don’t want random people following you.” More overt self-censorship was demonstrated by Lloyd (CI3), where he commented, “so, if I do it like this, I can pretend I am hiding my name” and continued “yes, so I have camouflaged the letters, to show you need to hide who you really are on social media.” His accompanying image depicted how he concealed his identity and ‘real self’ on social media, this is shown in Figure 52, where his name is partially obscured and even though the tops of the gold letters are apparent, the rest of the name has been covered with a piece of animal print paper³³.



Figure 52: Excerpt from Lloyd's collage, showing the concealment of his name on social media to protect his identity

³³ Please note the real name of the participant has been changed in this image to the pseudonym assigned, to ensure anonymity.

Oscar (C15) also reiterated the strategy used by Lloyd and suggested that he distorts and camouflages his face on social media to protect his identity, he commented “so I might use these [pompoms]. If I can try and make my face out of that and then I can change it...because you shouldn’t show what you really look like on social media. I don’t [pause: 2:12].” In Figure 53 below his representation of this is depicted with the pompoms he has used to show his distorted face:



Figure 53: Excerpt from Oscar's collage showing his distorted face on social media

Emily (C18) also shared a similar strategy for concealing her identity online, in the form of a nickname, but her rationale was linked more to keeping safe than Lloyd’s reason. She explained this by saying, “...it is my nickname [pause: 0:56]. On social media I don’t use my information, I use different information because my Mum says that it is safer and because it is easier to find more about you and they can find out on the Internet if you use things about you.”

All of these examples, emphasise that children, rather than being passive social agents, possibly have strategies that they can employ to choose what they reveal about themselves on social media and are aware of how this can be potentially perceived by other people (Wood, Bukowski and Lis, 2016). In a more subtle way, social media was seen as a space that could affect how someone feels about themselves in a negative way and Sophie (C12) advised of how to actively protect yourself emotionally:

I think it is really important to not doubt yourself if you have social media but at the same time if you already doubt yourself, I don't think that you should have social media as this just makes it worse because people can make mean comments and stuff like that. And it does affect a lot of people, like how they think they look and stuff like that [pause: 0:58].

This is an area that is under researched with children (Huk, 2016) and often researched through an adult's agenda of how children perceive their social media use (Dooly, 2017). Consequently, the child's voice commenting on negative emotional responses to social media use is an important area to explore and is emphasised again in the succeeding sub theme of dangers (6.2.3). As depicted, children are not always passive in their engagement with social media and may have developed skills to discern overt attempts to manipulate and influence, though more subtle elements may be more difficult to recognise, particularly in relation to their feelings of self-worth.

6.2.3 'You can get hate, that can be hard to deal with': dangers of perceived predators and 'peer to peer' grooming.

From this research, the dangers that the children commented on were physical in the main and took the form of online grooming, catfishing, and predators such as paedophiles, which were termed "paedos" by Child A (FG1). This online danger was often perceived as a deliberate attempt to harm children, with Child K (FG3) saying that these individuals could "hurt you or do something to you." The way in which this could be easily achieved by a perceived perpetrator if they were able to locate you was further commented on by Child O (FG3) who said that they could "track you or find information about you." This concern was shared by Child AF (FG7) who warned about some people on social media and described them by saying that they could be "creepy" and that you "need to be careful." Ian (C12) similarly said "because people, like weird people, might ask you where you live, what's your name, what do you look like and something like that. You need to be careful." Isabel (C11) gave an acute warning of the dangers of having a social media identity:

I know it sounds a bit extreme but kidnapping because there are kids out there who have social media, but all their identity is on there and you can't really trust anyone, so there are people who will ask for other people's

identity, you know like, not take them away but there are people who will eventually do it.

The term 'catfishing' was well understood in all the focus group discussions and was presented as a potential risk of using social media as exemplified in the following dialogue from Focus Group 1:

Child D: They could end up catfishing you.

Interviewer: Do you know what catfishing is?

Child A: Yeah, when people pretend they are like a teenager, to like chat to a 15-year-old girl and they like take photos off the Internet, like a 15/16-year-old boy and you tell them like that you want to be their friend and meet up.

These kinds of comments were reiterated many times by the children in the focus groups and 'catfishing' was well understood as a form of deception. This was described by Child I (FG2) who said, "say like you are on social media, then they could get like a picture from Safari and set up a profile and pretend that is actually what they look like and when they meet up, that is not them. It is called catfishing." Being exposed to predator behaviour is a risk from using social media and one that adults seem preoccupied with in terms of the dangers for children (Ashurst and McAlinden, 2015), as their comments reflect in this research. The anonymity that social media allows makes the grounds for deceit a possible jeopardy that they can encounter (Reeves and Crowther, 2019). Though catfishing was also described as a more subtle form of deception by Child L (FG3) by saying, "no, it could be like a girl pretending she is pretty, makes her look pretty or takes photos offline." Suggesting that identities could be portrayed visually in a deceptive manner not just by individuals viewed as predators in the traditional sense. This deception was often described in terms of imagery to manipulate your age as described in Focus Group 1:

Child E: People might think you are older.

Child A: Or younger.

Child C: So, like with that one [points to filter] you can't tell how old someone is.

Ashurst and McAlinden (2015) coined this 'peer-to-peer' grooming and suggested that it was a significant issue that young people face in terms of perceived ways of looking and acting and could affect their self-esteem. The dangers online by some children were seen in terms of an adult culture and therefore were not safe for children of their age to inhabit, as described in the following conversation in Focus Group 1:

Child D: Because it is dangerous.

Child E: It is for grown-ups.

Child H (FG2) also emphasised the age restrictions on social media apps (despite using them himself), by saying, "there shouldn't be like young children on Instagram because like children are not really allowed on Instagram or Facebook or WhatsApp." This breaching of age restrictions could cause a susceptibility in terms of digital spaces that are largely inhabited by adults. Child C (FG1) emphasised this and said, "because like adults and stuff might like message the little kids that they are ugly and stuff and say like really mean things and comments to them." Sophie (CI2) also discussed the unsuitability of social media for children in her comment, where she said, "because it is too grown up, and there is like swearing and stuff..." Despite the terms of service being thirteen years of age for social media platforms, many tweens are using these digital spaces (Ofcom, 2021; NSPCC, 2018) and the incidence may be far higher than other research indicates (Pescott, 2020). Combined with the lack of research with tweens (Huk, 2016) the research lens often adopted may be unnecessarily biased to adult's perceptions of online issues, rather than what children experience themselves (Darvin, 2016). Similarly, as children know that they are not supposed to be on social media, it may cause covert use (Ofcom, 2021).

The reciprocal element of social media (which were explored in the subthemes 5.2.1 and 5.2.3) was also portrayed in problematic terms in relation to emotional dangers and affecting self-esteem as described by Karen (CI11):

People can say stuff that is not true and make other people really scared and not knowing what to do. There are people who get really worried and

frightened about using social media. When other people do these things that might not actually mean it, they just say but not really mean it because they may never see that person.

This can become more extreme than just making derogatory comments as she later explained by saying "...some people send hate to each other and the thing that happened in our class, that was from TikTok." This is perhaps different from making mean or unfavourable comments in real life, as there is a permanence to social media posts and other people can view them in a way that real life communication does not allow (Guinta and John, 2018). Focus Group 7 also highlighted this in their conversation and how this can impact on feelings:

Child AG: It can attract hate and negative comments.

Child AI: You can get hate in the comments, that can be hard to deal with.

James (CI13) stressed that as you are posting about yourself on social media that there "is still probably a danger if I haven't met them in real life." He further explained that children should be more careful about who they allowed to see their profile by saying, "people who don't actually know you shouldn't really see stuff about you." This type of interaction can be seen as a negative risk as suggested in research by Baccarella *et al.*, (2018) if the ramifications of who is seeing the posts is not thought about. Within children's own social circles cyberbullying was described as a potential danger, though all children who mentioned this, did so from a hypothetical perspective rather than from first-hand experience. For example, Izzy (CI15) said "cyberbullying, where people say mean things to you over the Internet and like they hurt your feelings and I have never been cyberbullied and I don't really know anyone who has. I know that it is not a good thing, and we always learn about it in Bullying week."

In addition, Oscar (CI5) discussed the way in which social media may encourage people to say things via a keyboard that they may not say in real life "sometimes bullying. And normally people just use their laptop or phone, so it is always there. They don't say it in real life. They don't say it to your face." Both comments attest

that this type of behaviour can have an impact on young people and the way words and images have a more permanent existence on social media can transcend physical boundaries of space (Reeves and Crowther, 2019). Many children commented on other dangers when using social media, which were related to deliberate attempts to deceive, this was commented on by Henry (C116) by saying, “I think social media can have scams, like we said, and people can think it looks so good, but when they get it is not that good and then they want the next thing anyway.” His comment also signifies the way social media perpetuates the material side of youth culture in relation to trends and popularity of products and brands (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat, 2020).

Emotional dangers were mentioned, more so by the girls and this was explored in relation to Snapchat filters and perceived beauty ideals in 5.2.1, but this did also emerge in this subtheme. For example, Karen (C111) made the connection with social media apps encouraging social comparison and affecting how she felt about herself, by saying, “...and I was comparing myself to all my friends who looked so pretty, and I started to think, why can’t I be like that. But then I stopped myself because I was not eating that much, and it is not healthy for me.” She later explained that being on social media encouraged this as “there are things on the Internet that make other people want to be other people.” Surprisingly for children of this age the link to idealised body image was also commented on by several children. For example, Child Q (FG4) said “it can have body shaming too.” This was also termed in hypothetical situations or relating to other people’s experiences though as mentioned by Millie (C16):

Because before there was this girl on Instagram that I saw on my cousin’s account, on her page and she was saying that no one likes her because she was too fat and stuff like that, but she wasn’t really fat that was the thing. You know how people say like you are too fat but saying skinny is still offensive too. It doesn’t really matter about the shape of your body but on social media everyone wants to look thin.

The above comments resonate with research conducted by Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo (2017) who suggested that body image concerns were of a real worry for young girls, with over half the participants mentioning this in relation to their social

media use. Similarly, Chou and Edge's (2012) study also encapsulates the altered sense of reality that viewing idealised feeds can have and the profound effect on well-being. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) is well documented in research of this nature and highlights the vulnerable position individuals can face in terms of self- perception, which can be even more heightened for tweens who may want to fit in with their peers. Despite the dangers as mentioned above, children were not always seen as passive agents susceptible to risk without any discernment, they employed plenty of strategies to keep themselves safe online when using social media which will be explored in the following subtheme. Like Booker, Kelly and Sacker's (2018) study, it is apparent from this data that children's social media use can have a negative impact on their well-being. Parents and practitioners, need to ensure that digital strategies and discussions, explore these emotional risks and help children to develop resilience in relation to these concerns.

6.2.4 'Like stay safe on the internet': managing safety and security risks

From this research, it appeared that parents and schools have successfully communicated messages to children about the more overt physical dangers of social media that are documented above such as catfishing, paedophiles, grooming and communicating with strangers. In addition, the safety concerns documented by the children, also took the form of recognising that digital spaces could include inappropriate content and cyberbullying could be a potential problem. This is concurrent with the Children's Commissioner (2018) report, where this strong sense of staying safe online and strict privacy rules is seen as a reflection of parental and teacher messages. It also resonates with research by Pyer, Lomax and Bramble (2019) in their CyGen project which also documents current approaches to digital literacy as having a narrow focus of e- safety and consequently parents and practitioners struggle to keep up with development in digital technologies. This McBride (2011) attributes to a 'participation gap' and suggests that adults need to familiarise themselves with the implications of social media use for younger generations. Children in this research employed various strategies to keep safe in digital spaces, one of which was to ensure that they did not reveal any personal information that could identify where they live or go to school. This was advised by

Child AA (FG6) who said, “don’t share personal information.” David (CI4) was more specific in his advice, commenting, “Um, not in my school uniform, as people could find out where I go to school. So, I have stopped posting on social media.” This was apparent in his accompanying image depicted in Figure 54 below, where he has drawn himself in his Nike sweatshirt so that no one can identify him from his school uniform:



Figure 54: Excerpt from David's collage showing him not wearing his school uniform on social media

Many other children also had advice about this too, with Child X (FG5) suggesting that “you should keep your name anonymous too.” Likewise, Child P (FG4) advised being cautious, by saying, “may be just showing your face and that is it. No name, or age. You shouldn’t be posting anything with your school.” Other children reported specifically about hiding their location like Child AB (FG6) who said, “that one is on Snapchat but you can turn it off location mode so people can’t see where you are. I went on before on accident and mine was on and everyone can see where you are.” There was also a lot of discussion about keeping your account private and being selective with who you allowed to view your social media profiles as explained by Child N (FG3) who said, “do not be friends with people online who you do not know” and by Child X (FG4) who recommended, “if you are on social media, keep your account private.” A cautionary approach was also advised by Child A (FG1) by

saying, “use them sensibly. And if you can make your account private and only let people you know, be your friends on social media, or only let them follow you, if you know them.” Lloyd (CI3) accompanied his advice “like stay safe on the Internet, like only let people you know follow you” with his collage message depicted below made from gold letters in Figure 55.



Figure 55: Excerpt from Lloyd's collage with his message 'stay safe'

It seemed that some of these safety messages tended to be learnt as ‘rules’ rather than general principles that could be applied to different or new contexts. The following dialogue in Focus Group 3 highlights this in the way that the children are quick to state these said ‘rules’ in quick succession:

Child M: Make sure your password is secure.

Child K: Make a good username.

Child L: Don't show your password.

This potentially underestimates the levels of children’s understandings of digital spaces, and in only teaching them the ‘rules’ that adults think necessary, resonates with the moral panics about social media use that are perpetuated by current discourse (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018; Buckingham, 2017). Although Oscar, did allude to the more subtle repercussions of using social media in relation to the ill-defined rules of the digital space (boyd, 2014). He said, “Yes, I have made this handle here out of straw, people get carried away on social media and share too

much about themselves. They need to keep a handle and not reveal too much. You need to be careful what you show..." His accompanying metaphor of a handle seen below in Figure 56 emphasised this.



Figure 56: Excerpt from Oscar's collage, showing his metaphorical handle for keeping things in perspective on social media

This subtle and mature observation by Oscar, demonstrates the symbolic thought that children of this age are capable of and that collaging as a research method allows for more revolutionary potential and metaphorical representation (Culshaw, 2019). Furthermore, this could be viewed as a subjectively contingent schema using visual metaphors (Mannay, Staples and Edwards, 2017) which demonstrates an understanding way beyond the boundaries of e- safety.

Despite the above example, highlighting the complex and nuanced understanding of digital spaces, Isabel (C11) emphasised that e -safety had been drummed into them. She commented, "we have done millions of like Internet stuff, so we have a little thing, the SMART thing, so 'S' is for safety, so whenever we are in the media suite we are always reminded if you are worried about anything, tell a teacher." Abigail (C17) had perhaps a more pragmatic approach to her social media use and talked about using another function, namely 'blocking' people to stay safe online:

I have had a couple of older people following me, but I always end up blocking them and every account that I think looks a bit sketchy I always look at their account to see whether it is looks like a person, if they don't show their face or they look quite young or old, I block them.

She was able to explain how to do this in detail, by saying, “you go on to your account and there are three dots in the right corner and can usually report, block and there is another one, but I can’t remember what it is.” As illustrated above, children were very confident to talk about how to stay safe online from a physical perspective but there was very little discussion about what to do when things affected them on a more emotional level, which could as Child AI (FG7) commented could be “hard to deal with.” There was little evidence that children had strategies to cope with emotional safety when using social media and Sophie (CI2) highlighted that there should be more opportunities to explore these emotional ramifications within school as she explained below:

Sophie: Be true to yourself. Be you [pause: 4:32] [colouring hair]. I think it is important to do these kinds of lessons and I think there should be more lessons in school because it could inspire a lot of people.

Interviewer: In what way?

Sophie: For people who doubt themselves and stuff like that. To not like think that other people are better.

In this research, children were less aware of the more subtle dangers of using social media, which took the form of emotional risks and effects on mood. This resonates with findings in the Children’s Commissioner’s (2018) report, where similar emotional ramifications were documented. Seemingly children need help to develop resilience in relation to this and digital literacy promoted in schools needs to move beyond e-safety. It was apparent that if children did encounter negative emotions when using social media, their response was often to remove themselves from the danger as advised by Karen (CI11) who said, “I got off the app because it was too bad and other people would make fun of other people and that made me very disappointed, so I got off the app.” Ian (CI12) also used this strategy in relation to difficulties he had encountered “I did, but there was a big issue on there, and I stopped going on it. I came off it and now I just don’t go on there.” As did Lloyd (CI3) who said, “that was on TikTok but I deleted it because I had mean comments off one of, what I thought to be one of my friends.” Also, only being on specific social media apps, deemed a safe space by the user was another strategy for protecting your emotions as Child C (FG1) who explained “but I have WhatsApp but that is safer because it says when

you first get WhatsApp, that WhatsApp cannot see your messages only the person you are sending it to. And there have not been as many problems on there.”

These examples, highlight that removal from the situation, does not eliminate the problem in the first place, nor address the complexities of the interactions in digital spaces. Opting out of apps, by deleting them, is perhaps only a temporary solution that the children in this research exemplify and therefore is not addressing the emotional issues of using social media, nor developing children’s emotional resilience. It is clear, that when using social media, children should be given the opportunity to develop robust and long-term strategies that help address the emotional effects and that this should form part of e-safety lessons in a more explicit way. This was also suggested by Pyer, Lomax and Bramble (2019) who highlighted that children’s voices and experiences are often missing from the design and delivery of e-safety strategies employed in schools. In their research, they suggested using role play, group exercises and small group discussions in PSE lessons. Relating to my research, the focus group activities, and the opportunity for children to express their experiences visually through collage, facilitated this type of open dialogue and an exploration of their lived perceptions of social media use. Concurrently, there is a growing recognition amongst international policy makers of the importance of supporting children to engage safely and effectively in digital spaces (Children’s Commissioner, 2018). Channels between home and school also need to be kept open and positive engagement modelled without the sole focus being on ‘problem’ discourse of negative online behaviours needs to be encouraged (Moran, Reily and Brady, 2021).

6.2.5 ‘They are watching you do everything online’: the ‘omnipresent’ other

The final subtheme within the overarching master theme of surveillance, is the children’s perceptions of the more subtle control that social media perpetuates by their comments related to an omnipresent ‘other’, a wider force that is not specifically referred to but takes the form of a George Orwell type ‘big brother’³⁴. The pronoun

³⁴ ‘Big brother’ is a term used in George Orwell’s book ‘1984’ and is used commonly to describe a person or organisation that gains controls over people’s lives.

'they' was often referred to in this context, which sometimes had a monetary/economic slant and sometimes a more sinister one. In relation to advertisements, the 'they' took the form of an outside force to make money as illustrated by the following dialogue:

Child P: So, they can get more money off you.

Child Q: They pay people to advertise their stuff, so they get more money.

This was commented on in a similar capacity by Child Z (FG4) who said, "because they trick you out of spending money." Other children were aware of the algorithmic feed that social media utilises and how the data they generate no longer belongs to them as Child AE (FG7) commented:

Child AE: It also advertises things that you are interested in. Like based on videos that you watch.

Interviewer: On TikTok.

Child AE: Yes, they steal your data too.

The above examples reflect with Duffy and Chan's (2018) research, where there are clear links to what they term 'persuasive cultural anxiety' in relation to online surveillance and the potential implications it has for social media use. The 'big brother' type of surveillance was also alluded to "they are watching you do everything online" (Child M, FG3). Which also took a sinister turn when discussed by Child J (FG2) "because they are like trying to lure a lot of people into using their app. So, they can like lure people into getting this. It may be like a trap." Rather than being ephemeral in nature, as apps like Snapchat necessitate, Child AI (FG6) explained the permanence of social media with their following comment:

The Internet has a big cloud, and it holds everything that has been posted ever in that one cloud and everyone can see it and it may be posted onto all the other platforms that you might not even know about and never heard of, but others have, and it is all saved to one Internet cloud.

Social media does not appear in a digital vacuum, it can have political, social, and cultural agendas and its infrastructure is not neutral in terms of economic and monetary intentions. Surveillance on social media, is arguably an increasingly lived

condition, a distinct product of mobile technology (Trottier, 2012). Essentially social media surveillance reduces individual's control over the information they disclose about their different social contexts and their identity as well as the more overt surveillance for data generation and political and economic factors (Brown, 2014). Though surveillance occurs in some fashion in every social system, through the awareness individuals have of other people's appearances and behaviours, this is amplified on social media as the premise behind it is to communicate, share photos and create profiles (Duffy, 2019). In this research, as the participants are young, they may be less aware of this surveillance and less able to make decisions about what they wish to publicise.

6.3 'Surveillance imaginaries' related to subjective experience and identity portrayal

In this theme, surveillance is demonstrated as more of a lived experience, a product of mobile technology, which is more complex than just a public/private binary (Trottier, 2012). Children in this research demonstrated self-censorship and discernment for perceived physical dangers, utilising privacy features and other online safety features such as ghost mode and being friends with people they know. However, what has emerged from the analysis is a complex, nuanced picture of children's engagement with social media, which can be active and passive, though having the overarching goal of maintaining a feeling of safety regarding their sense of self. Parental monitoring appeared to be ad hoc and more prevalent for the two participants that did not have social media, which took the form of 'restrictive monitoring' (Gentile *et al.*, 2014). Imagined surveillance was evident within the data and seemingly more of an issue for the girls who used these platforms to cultivate their online persona which is heavily linked to their outward appearance, often enhanced by filters (Duffy and Chan, 2018). The concept of surveillance often took the form of a more traditional institutional mechanism enacted through advertisements and branding and whilst children are aware of this, the constant bombardment particularly with platforms such as TikTok may be influencing their everyday life (Lyon, 2017). Whilst surveillance does occur in every social system with individuals being aware of their environment and conscious of other people's

appearance and behaviour, this is amplified on social media through the very premise of sharing photos and creating profiles (Brown, 2014). Young social media users may be less aware of how to curate their own identities (Trottier, 2012) and children may require more overt teachings to have a shrewder control of their self-presentation especially as their impression management now has to translate to digital contexts (Litt, 2012).

6.3.1 'Surveillance imaginaries' in the digital space in relation to research questions

The theme of 'surveillance imaginaries' provides responses to two of the four research questions. The complexities of this notion have been demonstrated in the examples presented in this chapter in relation to how surveillance can be linked to control. As with the previous two empirical chapters, the mixed method analysis has been interwoven with excerpts of the children's voices as well as extracts from their collages to demonstrate points and to highlight the nuances of their lived experiences of social media. Utilising a creative participatory method within a mixed method framework has been challenging in respect to analysing the 'messiness' that this type of qualitative research facilitates (Eldén, 2013). However, the subsequent meaning-making has helped to contextualise the child's voice and to illustrate participants experiences (Gerstenblatt, 2013). It is apparent that children have important messages about the type of surveillance that they experience, and whilst they are aware of how to assert some agency in terms of keeping themselves safe in digital spaces, a lack of control is often reported.

6.3.2 Findings in relation to RQ3: To what extent do children feel the pressure of social media within digital spaces and how do they negotiate these experiences?

It is apparent from the data, that some children do feel a lack of control due to the way that social media has a far-reaching effect, which despite their efforts to contain, through being friends with people they know for example can sometimes reach a wider audience (Baccarella *et al.*, 2018). In agreement with Lyon's (2017) notion of 'surveillance imaginaries', children perceive the scrutiny they may receive as more

definitive that it may be. Arguably, real life interaction is easier to navigate than interaction within digital spaces, possibly due to the more overt social cues that can be called upon such as body language, tone of voice and social cues (Zhao, 2005). Furthermore, scrutiny based on affirmation from likes and written responses, can be re-read and re-imagined in a way that real life encounters cannot (Nesi, 2020) and can lead to pressures to act or behave in a certain way. Likewise, feelings of judgement are more overt, perpetuated by the validation previously mentioned and by the way posts and engagement are potentially viewed by a large audience, some of which are unknown to the users in real life. Jones (2015) coined this notion, the 'mediated mirror' and the way social media can serve as a type of digital looking glass where the lens is directed inwards but reflected outwards. This type of 'me-media' (Butkowski, Dixon and Weeks, 2020) can put a pressure to act and look a certain way, which does seem evident in this research.

Peer pressure was demonstrated in both the frequency and popularity of social media apps with the children in this study, which was significantly higher than research suggests (Ofcom, 2021). Furthermore, it was exemplified in the desire to fit in and to conform to peer and social norms and cues (Darvin, 2016). The two female participants (Gabby, C110 and Izzy, C115) who disclosed that they did not have any social media apps both discussed feelings of being excluded and missing out on peer-to-peer activity through not being on social media. Though, they were both mature in their responses, acknowledging that their parents' rationales for these restrictions were for keeping them safe and not to deliberately segregate them from their peers. This form of 'restrictive' parenting is arguably not as effective as 'active mediation' which gives the child more autonomy to self-censor in an age-appropriate way (Gentile *et al.*, 2014). Particularly as what parents think the children are experiencing on social media might be completely different to their actual experience and what they are protecting them from may not synthesise with this (Children's Commissioner, 2018). More support in developing agency and discernment in the form of how to protect themselves online in an emotional capacity, would help to ease some of the pressures that children may be experiencing (Pyers, Lomax, and Brambles, 2019).

6.3.3 Findings in relation to RQ 4: What knowledge can children share about using social media within digital spaces to support other children

In this research, children demonstrated plenty of messages to convey that they were capable social actors who can display aspects of agency within their social media use (James and Prout, 2015). Some children in this research felt that it was particularly important to hide their identity on social media to remain anonymous and seemingly 'safer'. This was exemplified by Lloyd (C13) who camouflaged his name as a metaphor for concealing his identity and Emily (C18) who used a nickname. Other children were less restrictive regarding remaining anonymous on social media though. However, in all the focus groups, the children were very keen to discuss the physical dangers of social media such as catfishing and being approached by paedophiles, which is prevalent in other research (Reeves and Crowther, 2019). Likewise, they were very proficient discussing ways to keep themselves safe online with knowledge that they were keen to impart. This took the form of using privacy settings, turning location settings off, only being friends with people they know and not being photographed in their school uniform or where they background could be placed. Evidently their knowledge of e-safety has come from successful messages from parents and practitioners, which was also the case in Pyer, Lomax and Bramble's (2019) research.

This negative portrayal of using social media and the overt reference to physical danger concurs with McBride's (2011) so called 'participation gap' whereby adults may not be aware of the more subtle emotional dangers that children face particularly in their exposure to such overt peer pressure and the wider societal influence perpetuated by celebrity culture (Buckingham, 2017). Two participants in their collage interviews (Karen, C111 and Ian, C112) specifically mentioned removing themselves from certain social media apps when they encountered issues. Though this is an immediate response and arguably not a remedy to such problems, as it only takes the form of a temporary fix and at some time, they will re-engage with social media use. Perhaps this is not a wise message to share with other children as it is evident that they need to develop a less binary way to engage with social media and develop a resilience to issues they may face. Both the Children's Commissioner

(2018) and Pyers, Lomax, and Bramble (2019) highlight the need for children to be more actively involved in developing digital policies which would help facilitate their ongoing well-being when using social media, particularly with the less obvious dangers. This is certainly echoed in this research and was very apparent in the children's responses and knowledge of physical dangers and their more reticent discussions about emotional risks and possible strategies to improve their experiences. Finally, perhaps more attention and discussion should be directed around who or what children perceive to be this omnipresent 'other' and how this affects their perspectives about using social media. Using Lyon's (2017) term 'surveillance imaginaries', or Duffy and Chan's (2018) phrase 'imagined surveillance' may be the most apt way to describe how children perceive this phenomenon and that fear of judgment from peers may be the most significant aspect of this. Jaynes (2020) used the description 'peer surveillance' to explain how young people may experience heightened sensitivity to how they think they are seen and subsequently perceived by their peers, which can affect their behaviour.

6.4 Summary of the chapter

In this chapter, the final of three empirical chapters documenting the analysis from the research study, the experiences of children's perceived surveillance have been explored. Evidently technology is firmly embedded in young people's lives (Vickery, 2018) and rather than the being passive subjects, they are competent social actors (James and Prout, 2015). Moral panics, and a deterministic discourse that is often portrayed in the media (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018), may be unfounded as within this research children were seen to have plenty of strategies in place to keep themselves physically safe within the digital space. The limitations of their control when posting online was recognised and subsequent feelings of potential scrutiny and feeling controlled by this was documented. Children described how surveillance took the form of their own self-censorship in response to perceived dangers (Norozi and Moen, 2016) and sometimes their parents and other adults. Peer grooming was potentially seen as the most challenging aspect to negotiate, in respect of peer pressure, the desire to fit in and navigating peer hierarchies that exist in a covert way (Kim and Chock, 2015). The emotional ramifications of using social media were also

highlighted and that removing themselves from apps when issues occur does not promote resilience. Experiences of the digital space are part of how individuals mediate their identity and sense of self (Ringrose *et al.*, 2013) and with the popularity of using social media amongst tweens being high (Pescott, 2020) it is essential that children's voices are heard in relation to the issues that they face. Surveillance, in the many forms and guises that is experienced by children as documented in this chapter, needs to be part of a wider approach to digital strategies implemented in schools to ensure that they have the emotional tools and resilience to deal with control both real and imagined. Evidently, there is a problem of knowing the 'rules' in relation to using social media but still being at risk from both these perceived dangers and the more subtle intricacies surrounding power, control, and surveillance. From the evidence presented in all three empirical chapters, it is apparent that childhood is changing due to the affordances of digital technology and the way children navigate these digital spaces. It is essential that the child's voice is heard in relation to this and the nuanced way that they experience social media becomes part of a wider understood phenomena. In the next chapter, the conclusion, the overall summary of the thesis will be presented, along with the contributions to knowledge, future research, implications for policy and practice, as well as the limitations encountered.

Chapter Seven – Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

Within this thesis I explored how children of 10 and 11 years of age experience social media use within digital spaces and how they make meaning of their digital identity and its portrayal. This age group was specifically chosen, as they were in the final year of primary school, and arguably when they are becoming influenced by peer culture (Steinbekk *et al.* 2021; Omrod, 2014, Pea *et al.*, 2012) and making tentative steps around shaping their own identity that is separate from their family and immediate influences of the home environment (Buckingham, 2017; James and Prout, 2015; Wyness, 2012). Moreover, it is also the age group that is most likely to experience having their own mobile phone for the first time (Pangrazio and Gaibisso, 2020; Children’s Commissioner, 2018; NSPCC, 2018) and subsequently where social media usage increases sharply (Ofcom, 2021). This research was underpinned by the notion that childhood is a social construct (Norozzi and Moan, 2016; James and Prout, 2015; James and James, 2012) and due to advances in technology and the ease and pace that social media is accessed, it affects how children subjectively experience the digital spaces which they occupy (Throuvala *et al.*, 2019; Booker, Kelly and Sacker, 2018). The influences of technology and social media use of children and young people are often viewed by scholars and the mass media in problematic terms, with moral panics fuelling fears of them being groomed or catfished (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018) or cyberbullied (Reeves and Crowther, 2019). Furthermore, there is little research with children of this age group (Blackwell *et al.*, 2014; Huk, 2016) and scholars such as Livingstone and Brake (2010) have implored that researching children’s digital spaces and their online practices is essential to understand how they experience them. This research sought to respond to this need by researching with children, in a participatory way, to understand their engagement within digital spaces from their own perspective and viewed through a less problematic lens.

In this study, to disrupt dominant discourses surrounding children's social media use (Moss, 2019; Dillet, 2017; Jones, 2015), an exploratory approach was employed to research with children using creative, participatory methodology. This allowed for a more nuanced and rich depiction of their subjective experience of using social media and the digital spaces that they inhabit as being complex and not a binary experience of good or bad (Baccarella *et al.*, 2018). My methods consisted of two complementary approaches to allow for both a group view of peer culture surrounding social media use and digital spaces encountered, followed by an individual interpretation with more emphasis on how identity is shaped within these contexts. Firstly, focus groups with activities that I devised using social media icons, emoji symbols and faux profiles for example, were employed through a semi-structured approach to invite rich discussion with forty participants (five in each focus group, two focus groups within each school setting). This was followed by a collaging method with sixteen participants, in response to two general questions:

How do you see yourself on social media?

How do others see you on social media?

The collaging method was far less structured than the focus groups, and developed in an organic way with each child, allowing for an individualised response and an opportunity to explore through the medium of art, using self-selected materials, their own perspective. The dialogue that ensued, and the child's narrative has been viewed as intrinsically linked to their collage depiction within this research, as it has been acknowledged that the two sets of data cannot be separated (Roberts and Woods, 2018; Rose, 2016; Eldén, 2013; Banks, 2001). Underpinning my empirical research, I drew on social constructionism, viewing children as competent social actors (Prout, 2011; James and James, 2004; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998), capable of agency (Dillet, 2017; Kouhpaenejad and Gholaminejad, 2014), and proficient commentators of their own subjective reality (Dockett, Einarsdóttir and Perry 2012; Clark, 2011). The theoretical framework of Goffman (1959) and his notion of 'impression management' has also been utilised to interpret children's depictions of how they position themselves and others within these digital spaces, in relation to an 'imaginary audience' (Goffman, 1971). Post structuralist ideas regarding dominant discourses and power have also influenced the lens that I have

adopted in this research, particularly in relation to the notion of surveillance in Chapter Six.

In this chapter, I present an overview of the main research findings and apply these to both the research aim and the following questions that this research has been guided by:

RQ1: In what ways are children's identities shaped by their experiences of social media within digital spaces?

RQ2: What influence does gender have on children when using social media within digital spaces and how does this affect how they feel about themselves?

RQ3: To what extent do children feel the pressures of social media within digital spaces and how do they negotiate these experiences?

RQ4: What knowledge can children share about using social media within digital spaces to support other children's use?

I also consider how employing a creative participatory methodology and hearing the voice of the child has made rich, nuanced contributions to what is known about this relatively under researched phenomenon. Contemplating these findings, suggestions for future research are considered and implications for policy and practice presented. Finally, the limitations of the study are examined before I provide a conclusion of the whole thesis and closing remarks.

7.2 Overview of the main research findings

The research aim, to explore children's experiences of social media within digital spaces and how they make meaning of their digital identity and its portrayal, was achieved through the creative, participatory methods, that captured the children's views and contextualised their encounters. It is evident from the data, that children's identities are shaped by their experiences of social media but rather than being a passive expression of self, children actively make meaning, in both their own identity portrayal and how they are perceived. The online/offline binary is not fixed, but rather a distinct social construct that can be influenced by outside validation in the form of likes and comments. This in turn leads to a sense of self-censorship (Potter, 2012) and aligns with Goffman's (1959) notion of impression management. Gender is seen to have an influence on how children experience social media, with boys reporting a more positive experience, typified through increased communication and interaction. Whereas girls, experience a form of 'social grooming' (Kim and Chock, 2015) that can affect their self-esteem due to the influence of viewing idealised photographs with filters that portray a fixed notion of beauty perpetuated by peer and celebrity culture. The pressures of social media then, take the form of a disembodied experience (Zhao, 2005) that may not have the social cues of real life. In addition, the materialistic world, of advertisements, consumerism and the subtle control of a perceived surveillance can affect how children negotiate their experiences. Far from the deterministic view other scholars portray though, children do have a sense of agency, and need to be viewed as experts in their own lives (Pyer, Lomax and Bramble, 2019). Furthermore, their discernment moves beyond e-safety messages, with complex understandings of how they interact within digital spaces. Correspondingly, children need to be co-producers of future digital strategies, to allow for relevant support for supporting and developing their emotional resilience.

The research findings and subsequent discussion in this research, were reached after a complex analysis consisting of many layers. Namely, the initial general questions, the 'noticings' that I applied to the data to try and make meaning of what the children said and visually depicted. Following this, once an overall 'feel' for the

data was established, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis were employed in relation to both the focus groups and the collages with accompanying narrative using NVivo software. With the collage data, the analysis was deepened by utilising more analytical questions based on Rose (2016) and Grbich's (2012) suggestions, in conjunction with Brown and Collins' (2021) visuo-textual framework. This allowed the richness of the data to be captured and the depth of the responses to be documented in a meaningful way. This is explained in detail in section 3.8, but it is important to reemphasise here how the 'messiness' (Lather, 2014) of a qualitative study of this nature was embraced and the challenge of making sense of many layers was established. The research findings and discussion are separated into three chapters within this thesis, which correspond to the three main themes that were established through the analytical framework employed. Namely Chapter Four, 'Being' and 'becoming' in the digital space', Chapter Five, 'The presentation of self in the digital space' and finally, Chapter Six, 'Surveillance imaginaries' in the digital space. Within each chapter further classification is given to correspond with the sub themes. Overt reference is made within each analysis chapter of how the research questions were answered. However, to summarise these in relation to the research aim and the four research questions it is essential to draw the elements of the research together and recontextualise in relation to what I set out to explore. In the following sub sections, the three main themes are summarised in relation to the research questions and to establish the overall context of how these fit within the research aim.

7.2.1 In what ways are children 'being' and 'becoming' within digital spaces?

Situating children as competent social actors (James and James, 2004) and recognising the way children are positioned within society in relation to 'being' and 'becoming' within digital spaces was a key part of the first theme presented in Chapter Four of this thesis. This initial conceptualisation helped to position digital spaces from the children's own perspectives. Thinking of the digital space as a type of 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994) beyond real life and virtual binaries, acknowledges that the cultural and societal norms go beyond geographical boundaries. Similarly, recognising a blurring between the binary concept of 'being' and 'becoming' allows a

wider societal lens to be adopted and a more nuanced interpretation that encompasses elements of both. The concept of a universal, homogenous childhood is challenged and the complexities of how childhood is experienced highlighted in this research. Gender was a factor within this study and boys documented a more positive experience, with discussions about feeling connected online and how their existing relationships were strengthened (Nesi, 2020). Often boys in the study referred to how they followed famous footballers or gaming gurus that helped them feel part of a community and improved their own skills. For the girls, there was a more judgemental element to their social media experiences and a stronger emphasis on fitting in with societal norms of female beauty, using filters and an adhering to a type of augmented reality (Steinbekk *et al.*, 2021). It is apparent from this research, that how children experience digital spaces is forcing a change to the way they socialise and is an active part of a wider peer culture that is a perpetuated through the presentation of a digital self (Ditchfield, 2019).

Children are not merely passive in this though, they do have some autonomy and agency of how they engage within digital spaces but fitting in with peers is still deemed to be important. Peer culture is not new though and there have always been trends and fads that children have followed, though this is emphasised by social media (Mascheroni, Vincent and Jimenez, 2015). Continually viewing other people's lives, both peers and celebrities, does have an influence on how children perceive themselves and can arguably facilitate a continued sense of 'becoming', a strive to move towards the next level or improved version of self. Wider influences are shaping childhood, in a way not seen before, due to the level of interaction and comparison that social media facilitates. However, in this research through both the collective voice of the focus groups and the more individualised narrative of the collaging, children's encounters within digital spaces are both positive and negative. For example, reference to feelings of belonging and greater possibility of interactions, as well as concerns around self-validation and fitting in with normative beauty ideals. Therefore, viewing childhood as a more intertwined experience of both a state of 'being' and 'becoming', in less of a binary way, is perhaps a better way of understanding children's experiences of digital spaces. The moral panics and fears fuelled by media and public rhetoric (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018; Turkle,

2011) do not accommodate the complexity of children's digital spaces. In this research, acknowledging that children will continue to use these digital spaces, despite the age restrictions and parental/carer and practitioner concerns, allows for a more measured way of engaging with their experiences from a first-person narrative. The image of the child, valued in their current state, is essential for understanding how childhood is constructed *by children for children* (Leonard, 2016). The influences of social media that pervade children's lives through the digital spaces that they experience are complex and multi layered and in this research have been documented through their own interpretations.

7.2.2 In what ways is the presentation of 'self' perceived within digital spaces?

In this research, it is evident that social media has a considerable effect on children's presentation of 'self' within digital spaces. The discursive nature of social media which allows users to curate their own portrayal of self in relation to others approval via validation of likes and comments therefore is an active form of meaning-making (Potter, 2012). Viewed through a social constructionist lens, the child can be seen as having multiple identities, rather than one distinct identity, which is constantly evolving (Alford, 2012). These identities, then, are seen as being shaped by the influences that social media affords, which aligns with Goffman's (1959; 1971) theory both in respect to the presentation of self, through impression management and in relation to an imaginary audience. For many children, a binary depiction of identity on social media and real life was described, but for others a need to be a more authentic version of self was endorsed. The lack of homogeneity in responses to identity portrayal on social media, emphasises the subjective experiences that children encounter and the varying degree that an online/offline binary are perceived. The effects of celebrity culture, with influencers documenting their lifestyles and endorsing products, brands, and designer clothes, impacts especially on girls, and can render them vulnerable in how they view and compare themselves to others, which resonates with research by Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo (2017). For the girls in this research, identity portrayal was closely linked to physical appearance, with filters, continually commented on in relation to enhancing features and perfecting blemishes on skin. Many girls did refer to the pressures of this and how

they should feel more confident with their own looks and own appearance, though it is apparent that social media is continuing to actualise gender norms (Metcalf and Llewelyn, 2020).

Navigating 'fakeness' and the pressures of a materialistic world, with advertisements and algorithms guiding social media feeds, were seen as problematic by some children in this research. Whilst the children were by no means passive, it evidently influenced their sense of self, and this unregulated community (boyd, 2014) was viewed as a complicated phenomenon, with pressures to act a certain way. The girls in the research had many messages to give to others in relation to how their sense of self should move beyond physical comparison. This took the form of encouraging others to stop comparing themselves and to think about their personalities and hobbies as an extension of self rather than just physicality. Viewing idealised images can affect self-esteem and it is these manifestations of how their sense of self is perceived that girls in particular need support with to help their emotional resilience. Children need to be recognised as experts in their own lives (Dockett, Einarsdóttir and Perry, 2012; Clark, 2011) and the challenges that they experience in relation to their identity portrayal, needs to be addressed by parents/carers and practitioners. The emotional repercussions that filters can have for example, perpetuate social and gender stereotypes (Ditchfield, 2019) and girls in particular need the opportunity to discuss the feelings that viewing this idealised imagery has on their emotional well-being.

For all children, it is evident that overt awareness of other people's lives, influences the way they socialise and communicate within digital spaces. The children's sense of self and the way they present their identity on social media, is affected by many factors including the influences of each other and the subsequent peer culture that this generates, as well as how they may be perceived by others, and the wider influences of consumerism and celebrity culture. It is apparent from my research, that the presentation of self on social media within digital spaces, is an important notion that children experience and construct and re-construct, in a state of perpetual involvement. It is not static, nor formulaic in presentation, rather, it is a changing

manifestation of inner thoughts, feelings, and subjectivities. In turn, these are felt internally but portrayed in an external way which goes beyond fixed ideas about what identity is in terms of age, ethnicity, and gender for example. In terms of social media use for children, it may be more useful to think of the presentation of 'self' as on a continuum and reliant on meaning-making and outside validation through likes and comments.

7.2.3 In what ways are 'surveillance imaginaries' experienced by children in digital spaces?

'Surveillance Imaginaries' the term coined by Lyon (2017) and adopted in my research, describes the perception of the scrutiny that individuals experience within digital spaces as being more definitive than it may be. In a simplistic way, this was evidenced by the pressure to be on social media apps in the first place, as demonstrated by the high percentage of children who disclosed that they had social media accounts in this research (95%). This arguably demonstrates that children strongly feel the pressure to conform with peer and social norms (Darvin, 2016). A type of peer grooming that covertly occurs, where children are required to navigate peer hierarchies (Kim and Chock, 2015) and the challenge of the desire to fit in with latest fads, trends, and conformist ways of behaving. Children may also feel the scrutiny of individuals publicly commenting on their social media posts and the pressure of self-validation through 'likes' in digital spaces, which may be felt more significantly than real life encounters (Nesi, 2020). In turn, this perceived audience, both real and imagined (Goffman, 1971) may lead to a sense of 'me-media' (Butkowski, Dixon and Weeks, 2020) and a type of self-surveillance that necessitates a pressure to act or behave in a certain way.

Self-censorship may be a positive though, and children in this research demonstrated a discernment of utilising privacy settings and being aware of physical dangers that social media affords, and therefore less reliant on parent's active mediation. Though it is apparent that the 'omnipresent' other, that was continually referred to by the children in this research, a perceived body of surveillance that is

difficult to quantify, was felt through the fear of judgement (Duffy and Chan, 2018). The term 'they' was used continually by the children in this research, and resounded with a wider, unspecified force, a type of surveillance that took the form of an economic slant, with the pressures of advertisements and algorithms. Evidently, social media is a type of lived condition that goes beyond the apps themselves and part of a political, social, and cultural agenda which is a product of mobile technology (Trottier, 2012). In this research, although the children were aware of some type of outside presence, that they recognised as being bigger than their control, they need the opportunity to discuss the repercussions of this surveillance and how it may affect their decision-making. Surveillance, in the guises that it may take, needs to form a stronger part of digital strategies that parents, and practitioners implement. This will help to equip children with the emotional resilience to deal with these complicated and digital spaces that are not digital vacuums but rather part of a wider political and social environment.

7.3 How do creative, participatory methods contribute to research about children's social media use?

In this research contributions have been made to methodological debates by utilising a creative participatory approach, underpinned by social constructionist and poststructuralist theories. Furthermore, a consideration of how this approach may facilitate ideas surrounding how children feel and interpret their subjective experience of using social media within digital spaces has been explored. Methodological boundaries are expanding across all social science disciplines and researchers are now not always bound by using traditional methods such as interviews to seek effective ways to research complex research questions (Kara, 2015). In addition, Lomax (2015) ascertains that in the past decade, there has been a rapid development of using creative participatory methods with children, recognising their informed perspectives of their world. Though, Kaplun (2019) explains that children's views have often been supplementary to those of adults in research on children's lives. However, employing creative participatory approaches with children are not new, and there is a growing body of scholars who are advocates for such methodology (Kara *et al.*, 2021; Kaplun, 2019; Mannay, 2016;

Literat, 2013; Eldén, 2013). Along with increasing awareness of children's rights (UNCRC, 1989) particularly in respect of Article 12, with the right to give their opinion, children are being valued more as experts in their own lives (Yates, 2010; James and James, 2004). Although, Holland *et al.*, (2010) do suggest that often creative participatory methods are often highly managed encounters between adult researchers and children which are reliant on institutionalised educational practices. Nevertheless, despite the afore mentioned limitations, my research has contributed to methodological debates by allowing children the opportunity to engage in a creative way, to narrate and illustrate their own stories in relation to their social media use and how they show their identity on these platforms. This has made important contributions in counterbalancing the discourse of social media use being viewed in problematic terms, from a perspective of risk and harm (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018; Dooly, 2017; Livingstone, 2014). In addition, recognising the pluralism in children's voices and playing close attention to their beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and preferences, offers valuable contributions (Murray, 2019) which can help to shape decision-making around their lives.

7.3.1 The importance of viewing the visual with the verbal

The visual in this research worked alongside the verbal, adding depth to the children's responses which often took a metaphorical turn. This layer of complexity and the richness in the depth of response, that this method allowed, fitted with the poststructuralist notion of 'symbolic interaction' (Strauss, 1964) where the individual demonstrates interpretative actions and attempts to make sense of these subjectivities through the language and symbols that they portray. There are many examples of this documented in the findings, for example Isabel's (CI1) heart that she placed on her collage, surrounded by gold jewels, which she commented was to "*be true to your heart*". Though the most notable figurative depictions were created by Oscar (CI5) and Izzy (CI15), who both demonstrated the complexity of their collage, the depth of the layers, and how the visual and the narration could not be separated. In Oscar's collage, he made a handle out of a straw, which had a symbolic resonance which he explained as:

Yes, I have made a handle here, out of this straw, people get carried away on social media and share too much about themselves. They need to keep a handle and not reveal too much. You need to be careful about what you show.

Izzy (CI15) wrote Amazon on a label, which she stuck on her collage. In her accompanying narrative she explained that this was to show that some companies can sell things that can be scams. She said, "I'm going to do a brand on a label, I'm trying to think which one. Maybe because it is a tag, I could do Amazon as people see this a lot on the adverts. Their logo has like a smile..." Her understanding of commercialism and consumer behaviour is also represented within her metaphor and her complex understandings of how digital spaces are occupied. All these examples, demonstrate the complexity of the layers that children experience when using social media, which go beyond them using and accessing the platforms. This notion of 'voice' then, through the medium of creative participatory methodology, enacted in this research, highlights what Maybin (2013, p. 383) defines as "identity, agency and empowerment".

Combining the visual with the verbal in the collaging with children in this research, offered a rich portal into their engagement with social media and how this may have an influence on the way their identity was shaped. This organic way of working with children, enabled them to connect on a visceral level with their feelings and perspectives, allowed the creation of an artefact that was not bound by learning outcomes, nor a set agenda (Kara 2015). Adult-child power relations have been discussed in both the Methodology and within this chapter, and adopting this way of researching with children, did offset some of this power differential (Bland 2017; Leonard and McKnight 2014), particularly as I was not known to the participants. There was clear enjoyment and absorption in the collaging activity by many participants and several expressed contentment that they were able to spend time creating, which the busy school day does not often afford. Gabby (CI10) spent 42 minutes creating and discussing her collage, painstakingly cutting, and sticking fabric, to make a poncho that she felt demonstrated the essence of her uniqueness for example. Similarly, Isabel (CI2) spent 53 minutes on her creation, thoroughly absorbed in cutting triangles out of camouflage printed paper, as a representation of

how we are all different and unique and to illustrate how social media showed lots of different sides of yourself. Karen (C111) adopted a similar time frame of 41 minutes, again spending time on cutting and sticking fabric clothes, and perfectly proportioned boots, to dress the characters that she created to demonstrate how social media and real life may differ.

Though the male participants, generally did not spend as long creating their collages, there were examples of engagement and commitment to the creation of their artefact. Perhaps most significantly, Simon (C19) who expressed enjoyment with the task and spent time selecting scrabble letters and fabrics and materials that he could use as clothes and representations of food. All these examples highlight that the creative participatory methodology employed within my research, enabled a child-centred approach, that elicited meaningful responses from the children. The tactile materials that I provided, combined with the space and time allowed, arguably helped to disrupt established thought patterns that children may have had in relation to how adults usually ask them about their social media experiences. Notably though, not all the participants were enamoured using creative, arts-based methods, which was especially the case for David (C14) and Emily (C18). Whilst I was mindful of their ongoing assent (Docket, Einarsdóttir and Perry, 2012; Alderson and Morrow, 2011), it was apparent that they did not especially like making their collage.

David (C14) took a very long time to get started, he asked the parameters of the task several times and though I assured him that there was not a specific outcome, nor was I judging him on his artistic ability, he was reticent. He also called me 'Miss' on several occasions, and it was therefore apparent that he was viewing me as a teacher, rather than a researcher and this may have affected his response because of the perceived power imbalance (Canosa, Graham and Wilson, 2018). He chose not to use the collaging materials offered (apart from two pre-cut stars that he placed at the top of the collage) and instead decided to write and draw two images of himself with a black pen. His collage and narrative were noticeably short (16 minutes) compared to most of the other sessions (on average 35 minutes) and when I invited him to expand on the image, he created he responded with "No, I have

finished now". Emily also demonstrated reticence during her collage session, and though hers was roughly the same time as the average session, her collage was sparse, and she took a long time to start and commit herself to the paper. Like David, she checked several times about what my expectations were and asked me to reiterate the premise of what she was to do. This was an interesting scenario, and evidently linked to her perceived artistic ability as she was very vocal during the focus group session.

7.3.2 Creative methods as a means of active engagement

Despite two of the children showing reluctance with the medium of collaging, most children in this research were engaged and animated making their collages and produced visual artefacts that along with their narrative, gave a rich depiction of how they subjectively experience digital spaces. Due to the nature of their visual and oral depictions, and the depth of their responses, a different means of conceptualising ideas, nuances of feelings (Roberts and Woods, 2018) and subtle representations of context were afforded. This demonstrated a wider perspective of the digital spaces that they occupy, that may move beyond what adults perceive this to be.

Furthermore, these metaphorical interpretations, alongside explanations of analogies, can reveal how participants construct their reality (Mannay, Staples and Edwards, 2017). In this case, children's occupancy of digital spaces is seen to be more reliant on societal and cultural norms (Bhabha, 1994), notions of adult beautification (Masheroni, Vincent and Jimenez, 2015; Cirucci, 2013; Litt, 2012) and peer pressure (NSPCC, 2018), than previous research in this field has suggested.

Bringing the data together, from both the focus groups and the collages and embracing the complexity that this brought, allowed for a more creative and open-ended understanding of how children experience digital spaces and the effects this may have on a digital childhood. Consequently, the contours of childhood that are being experienced by children themselves through the medium of social media platforms are illustrated through the cultural practices that this data embodies. In terms of research in this field, most notably through an adult lens with a deterministic

agenda, has arguably inadvertently silenced children's voices. Using a creative participatory method, has invited the children in this research to slow down, connect more organically with their feelings and experiences (Mannay, 2016) and allow them through a creative vehicle to represent the digital spaces that they occupy.

7.3.3 Creative methods as a depiction of a child's inner world

There are many examples of this rich depiction of the children's inner world, many of which were positive, for example connection and friendship in Ross' (CI14) pompom people, with button eyes and pipe cleaner hands that were touching. Similarly, Henry's (CI16) message of '@Family + world' that highlighted how social media made him feel more connected to his wider family. The discerning understanding of the complexities of this ill-defined community (boyd, 2014) was seen to be astute and mature in some cases. For example, Abigail (CI4) with her symbolic three beads, that she explained was how she categorised social media users in terms of those that view without commenting, those who engage and are proactive, and those that just repost without committing to self-curation. The distinction between a real self and a social media self was seen to be very well understood and depicted in many collages, notably Isabel (CI1), Sophie (CI2), David (CI4), Emily (CI8), Simon (CI9), and Karen (CI11). This demonstrates an understanding that social media is a curated reality, and some children of this age are aware that there is a deliberate portrayal within digital spaces of a depiction of self that may or not be the same as how they depict themselves in real life.

Utilising a creative participatory approach, with both the open-ended activities within the focus groups and the collaging with interview technique, provided more than just 'tin opener's' for talk (Roberts and Wood, 2018). The visual combined with the narrative, elicited rich, nuanced data, that facilitated a portal into the digital spaces that the children in this research occupy. Furthermore, using a hands-on activity, with the opportunity for expression in a multi-modal way through art and craft materials, provided a juxtaposition to the digital spaces of social media, where digital skills are required, and a virtual world adopted. There were valuable opportunities for the

children to make representations of their occupancy within digital spaces. This was in terms of identity portrayal, which for example, in Millie's case (C16) was through a fictitious character 'Bob, the Goofy Influencer' (C16) who represented the pressures of having to look a certain way. Yet also, through how their relationships and interactions in digital spaces were experienced, which was positive at times. For instance, in Ross' (C114) case, whereby he demonstrated that his social media use, added another layer to his social life and helped him stay connected to friends. The complex and meandering way that this data was brought together, has invited an open-ended and less deterministic way to understand how children subjectively experience digital spaces. The experience of using collaging with the children in this research, has allowed for a co-constructed response that does not just rely on linguistic ability (Literat, 2013) to explain the complex phenomenon of using social media within digital spaces.

7.4 Key contributions to knowledge

As well as the contributions to methodology, with the creative participatory approach as described above, this thesis from a qualitative standpoint, adds to this field which is largely quantitative in nature. The analytical framework that I employed and the multi-layered approach to this, contributes to the growing body of research that has documented data analysis more explicitly. As Kara (2015) acknowledges data analysis is a difficult and challenging process and often in qualitative research, the techniques employed are not well documented and the process remains mysterious (Sorin, Brooks and Haring, 2012). Employing a mixed methods analysis, with many layers to the process, allowed for the nuances of the data to emerge and to capture concepts that both the visual and the narrative intended to show. The 'messiness' (Lather, 2014) of this research and the meandering path that the analysis took, enabled many layers of evaluation, that helped to situate children's experience of digital spaces from their perspective. My research is positioned within a cross disciplinary field of education, the sociology of childhood and a poststructuralist perspective and considers how children experience digital spaces. For children, the real and virtual world, through the digital spaces they encounter are intertwined in a

complex way through engagement with others and how they perceive themselves in relation to this. The centrality of the child's voice in this research is significant to the contributions to the field, particularly as this is often supplementary to those of adult's research on children's lives (Kaplun, 2019).

7.4.1 Contribution to children's social media research

Other scholars in the field such as Livingstone and Brake (2010) have highlighted that there is the need for more research around children's experiences of social media. Yet despite this inference being over a decade ago, there is still little research in this field (Pangrazio and Gaibisso, 2020; Blackwell *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, much research that exists surrounding social media use, is with teenagers and young adults and furthermore is vocalised by adults' perspectives (Dooly, 2017; Huk, 2016). Despite the terms of service being thirteen years of age for social media platforms (NSPCC, 2018), evidently children are engaging with social media platforms, and it is therefore important to research with tweens. In my research, the popularity of using social media for children of this age, is far higher than other research in this area documents (Ofcom, 2021; NSPCC, 2018) and consequently it is significant to ensure that positives and negatives from the child's perspective are discussed and their subjective perspective exemplified. This research has therefore made a key contribution in addressing the gap by researching with children in this tween category of 10 and 11 years old, in their final year of primary school. This builds upon work by organisations such as NSPCC (2018) and Ofcom (2021) and the CyGen project (Pyer, Lomax and Bramble, 2019). However, the afore mentioned research is with a variety of ages and are not just specified to social media use but rather online and Internet practices in general. In my research, utilising a creative participatory approach, has allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how children experience these digital spaces. Using activities in focus groups, allowed for rich discussion and enabled children to explore their own experiences of digital spaces, in a collective way. This safe space, though still recognised as being within the school environment, enabled children to describe their subjective experience, that moved beyond their digital literacy or technological skills and moreover, free from the dominant discourse of e-safety. Through collaging, a more individualised

way of how identity portrayal is shaped through digital spaces was realised. Children did not report a homogenous experience, but rather a complex subjectivity that demonstrated how others could influence their mediated sense of self.

Children's digital spaces, far from being just a replication of real-life encounters, are experienced and imagined in many ways. For some this is a largely positive experience, with the opportunity to interact, communicate and further foster and develop relationships. However, for other children, particularly girls in this study, an objectified self, which encourages judging oneself based on how one is perceived by others, particularly in relation to beauty ideals is amplified in the peer culture that social media perpetuates. This study observed how ideas about relationships between consumerism in the form of advertisements influence peer culture and could affect children's identity portrayal. It is therefore apparent, that the notions of a digital childhood are addressed further by scholars, and that parents and practitioners recognise that children's experiences of social media are far deeper than the recognisable issues that school curricula tend to concentrate on, namely catfishing, grooming and cyberbullying (Willoughby, 2019; Ho, Chen and Ng, 2017; Canty *et al.*, 2016). In the adoption of a less problematic discourse, my research offers a significant contribution to the field, viewing children as competent social actors (Dooly, 2017) and experts in their own lives.

Digital spaces that children occupy, facilitated partly through the social media interaction they imbibe, has influence on how they perceive their own identity portrayal. It is therefore of paramount importance that emotional resilience is developed in relation to the complicated, ill defined (boyd, 2014) digital spaces that children occupy. The notion of being a child, in digital spaces, goes beyond the binary depictions of good/bad (Baccarella *et al.*, 2018), being/becoming (Quennerstet and Quennerstet, 2013) or online/offline (Goodyear and Armour, 2019). Rather, it is a dynamic, ever changing, ephemeral subjective experience for children and as social media is becoming a more prominent feature of everyday modern life (Kim, 2017; Barbovschi, Machackova and Ólafsson, 2015) it is important that the complexities of such experiences are voiced by children themselves. Moving beyond

the notion of children being rendered vulnerable in terms of potential predatory behaviour by adults, instead, as this research demonstrates, children's capacity to develop their identities may be shaped by social media and allow a degree of agency, whilst connecting with peers. By adopting a recognition of the pluralism of children's voices and valuing their thoughts, feelings and beliefs, a contribution has been made to this field and opened potential areas of future inquiry.

7.4.2 Theoretical implications of the research

As well as contributing to the field of children's social media research, as documented above, this research has also contributed to alternative narratives in childhood discourse, in relation to social constructionism and poststructuralism. My research sought to situate children as experts in their own narration of the digital spaces they occupy and that they should therefore play an instrumental part in how adults view these experiences. Childhood as a social construct was held as an ontological assumption of this thesis, and the notion that this period of life allows children to adopt social and cultural norms (Prout, 2011; James and James, 2004). The divergent nature of a digital childhood, that this research demonstrates highlights how social media is forcing an evolution in the way children socialise (Blackwell *et al.*, 2014, Pea *et al.*, 2012). This in turn, has an impact on identity portrayal, and the relationship between perceived reality and reconstructed experiences that children encounter (James and James, 2012). In my research, the presentation of children's subjective experiences, builds upon social constructionist theory, in the way that children encounter these digital spaces and multiple realities are created. This perceived 'reality' is negotiated and re-negotiated through their interaction with others, that moves beyond the limits of real-life encounters. The multi-modal nature of social media with its reliance on images, posts, and video content, allows children through their online interaction, to further construct their identity. Identities are seen to be evolving and a fluid construction that represent the society in which we live (Anders, 2009) which is heavily influenced by social media and consumerism (Cover, 2014). Consequently, this research builds on other theories of identity and presentation of self through a social constructionist lens (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934; Cooley, 1904).

Relating to subjectivity, poststructuralist theory is also built upon in my research, in the way that identity portrayal is seen to be negotiated through meaning-making. The virtual component of social media interaction and the influence of dominant discourses and power (Braidotti, 2014; Foucault, 1980) is continually demonstrated by the digital spaces that the children document. The influence of peer culture, as well as advertisements, perceived surveillance, and celebrity influence, all factor into children's subjective experience of using social media and build upon Deleuze's (1992) notion of 'societies of control'. In this research, children's meaning-making is attached to the ever-present communication tool of social media, with the pressures felt to look and act a certain way which is perpetuated by self-validation and the likes and comments sought. Though, that is not to say that children are without agency, nor are passive agents, however the social acts that social media perpetuate are seen in this research as communal activity (Strauss, 1964) and part of discursive practices, that are related to language structures (Dunn, 1997). In terms of Foucault's (1980) analysis of culture effects, this research links the new technologies to the ephemeral nature of social media and the virtual reality that perpetuates how individuals view themselves and each other. This visual imagery that social media affords, can therefore be seen to unconsciously influence practices that impact our sense of identity (Barthes, 1993).

7.5 Implications for policy and practice

Due to the widespread phenomenon of using social media (Barbovschi, Machackova and Ólafsson, 2015) and the substantial role digital spaces play in contemporary life (Kim, 2017) it is essential that adults interrupt the discourses surrounding how they *think* children may experience this. Fighting familiarisation and disrupting cultural milieu (Mannay, 2010) in relation to perceived children's digital spaces, is of paramount importance if schools are to provide adequate education surrounding children's social media use. Policy-making and pedagogy needs to move beyond a protectionism agenda framed by risk and instead engage with the affordances of children's social media practices within digital spaces as identified by themselves (Tsaliki, 2022; Pangrazio and Gaibisso, 2020). Parents/carers and practitioners need

to be more than just gatekeepers of children's social media use, and actively develop children's social literacies, so they can act more like guides (Pangrazio, 2019). Children in their final year of primary school, as this research has highlighted, may experience considerable social pressures, body image concerns, as well as the challenges of always being connected within their digital spaces. As the Children's Commissioner (2018) also exemplified children of this age may be at the 'cliff edge' of vulnerability and in danger of emotional freefall in terms of the increased complexity of social interactions, the pressure of maintaining relationships, and the subsequent emotional repercussions of this. Whilst it is important to note that children's experiences are not binary (Goodyear and Armour, 2019) and there are many positives such as social capital affordances of enhancing friendships, decreasing loneliness, as well as trying out different identities (Wood, Bukowski and Lis, 2016; Gonzales and Hancock, 2011), it is important that children are able to discuss and make meaning of their experiences in a non – judgemental, supportive capacity.

It is vital for children's well-being that they have support to lead healthy digital lives and that practitioners attend to the emotional demands of this and not just skills of a technological nature, nor perceived safeguarding issues. In Wales, the Digital Competence Framework (Welsh Government, 2018) does endeavour to improve digital expertise as well as to develop informed and capable digital citizens. As previously mentioned, the 'citizenship' strand does make direct reference to "identity, image and reputation, health and well-being, digital rights licensing and ownership, online behaviour and cyberbullying" (Welsh Government, 2018, p.5). However, if practitioners are not fully aware of the complexities of the digital spaces that children occupy then there is a significant gap between policy and practice. As commented upon, practitioners working with children, like parents, hold their own ideas of using social media and how they envisage this is enacted. In this research, children continually alluded to the notion of e-safety, in terms of predator type safety concerns and a seemingly learnt rhetoric. Continual reference made by children regarding privacy settings, not being photographed with their school uniform and to be vigilant of catfishing and grooming, attests to the type of lessons that they are receiving in school.

Comparisons can be made to the 'Stranger Danger' messages of the 1970s and 1980s, with government videos and materials, designed to keep children safe, by essentially frightening them into not going into cars with strangers, nor being tempted by offers of sweets or stroking puppies (Moran *et al.*, 1997). The complexity of child abuse and how this is experienced, perhaps lays less in the hands of so called 'strangers' though, as most victims of such abuse are known to the perpetrator (Wodda, 2018). Furthermore, the chance of a child being taken from the streets are slim, despite high profile cases at that time, such as the Moors murders (Best, 1987). Media attention, and extensive coverage of Esther Rantzen's '*Childwatch*' for example, also added to the dramatization of "a constant (but often shadowy) figure" that lurked in the background: the figure of 'the paedophile'" (Kitzinger, 2002, p. 146). Parallels can be drawn, in terms of the continued reference by children in this study to 'paedos' and catfishing and how in terms of e-safety this was continually mentioned both in the focus groups and within the collaging with interview. Evidently, the way these dangers are portrayed by both parents and practitioners fuel moral panics and add to the phenomenon of children using social media through this problematic lens. It is important to debunk these myths (Wodda, 2018) and create a shift from fear-based approaches to adequately equipping children with the emotional resilience that they require to thrive in digital spaces. Much like the 'Stranger Danger' campaigns that fuelled a climate of fear and suspicion in the 1970s and 1980s (Moran *et al.*, 1997), e-safety and messages about online predators being portrayed in primary schools, do not adequately equip children with the more nuanced experiences they may have, when often the dangers are more subtle in terms of body comparison (Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo, 2017) or continually viewing idealised feeds (Tatangelo and Ricciardelli, 2017). Using a similar analogy, Phippen (2016) likens the way children are taught about e-safety, in terms of how 'road safety' is taught. For example, children are taught that the road environment is predictable and static (with traffic, roads, pedestrians etc.) and therefore there are clear rules (cars drive in a particular direction and must stop at designated signals). The road environment is unlikely to change drastically in coming years and consequently children have the necessary safety measures to adequately equip them to use this physical environment. He stresses, that e-safety is often taught in a similar fashion, regarding using privacy settings and using age-appropriate applications. However, the online environment is continually evolving

and changing and therefore even if children and young people follow the rules and practices that are advocated, this may not address the wider social issues that they are part of, nor address issues from their perspective.

Even current campaigns available online such as on the NSPCC Learning, *E-safety for schools* (2021) website, have a protection and safeguarding agenda, though mention is given to the encouragement of ongoing conversations with children about the benefits and dangers of the internet. There is an emphasis on the risks within the social media section though, which are cited as cyberbullying, online grooming, emotional abuse, and online abuse. Unfortunately, this one-sided, problematic way of viewing children's social media use, is continuing to add to practitioner's and parent's fears and continues to feed moral panics (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018). Instead, as Goodyear and Armour (2019) also attest, practitioners need to co-construct shared understandings of social media and explore the impacts this may have with the children themselves. In addition, practitioners need to be continuous learners, so any enactment of policy, is driven by the children's agenda and not by the perceived dangers or threats that are fuelled by media propaganda, or a one size fits all educational guidelines. Employing activities, like those utilised in my research in the focus groups, can help to instigate discussion and explore challenges and tensions as well as discovering positive experiences. This could really help with the co - construction of a shared meaning- making with practitioners and children. Likewise, allowing children to discuss their experiences through art-based medium, could allow for a more nuanced understanding of how digital spaces are perceived and how best to provide emotional support.

During my PhD journey, there has been much interest in my research, which has enabled an engagement with the wider community of both practitioners and parents as well as the public in general. This attests to the importance of researching with children surrounding their social media use, as it is a phenomenon that has fast become a permanent facet of the childhood they are experiencing and an area that needs addressing in terms of how emotional resilience needs to be developed. My work has already begun to make an impact within the field, as the following

examples demonstrate. After conducting my extensive pilot study, I wrote a piece for *The Conversation*, documenting the need for tweens to have more emotional support to deal with social media. This led to a range of opportunities, including an interview with *MIT Technology Review*, which discussed beauty filters and the augmented reality of social media and an interview with *River Radio* for a parenting hour, which I gave advice to parents. I was also interviewed for *BBC Wales X-Ray*, for a programme about how younger people could feel when using social media and the issues with constant comparisons, particularly for girls using filtered photographs. I was invited to present at a virtual event for *Robert Gordon University (Seminar Series)* on my research and the contributions to childhood discourse, this was a primarily lay audience with some academics. After the presentation, there were many questions and discussion around children's engagement with social media and the importance of researching from their perspective. There has also been international interest which resulted in an interview with a journalist from the Netherlands for a project on the dangers of social media and wisdom lessons for schools. Also, an interview with an Italian journalist for a report "Terre des hommes" dedicated to the conditions of girls in the world, with a chapter dedicated to the theme of self-presentation and the role of social media. In Appendix L, links to these works are documented, as well as other research outputs. I anticipate that future research outputs will make contributions to this field and help shape policy and practice for children.

7.6 Future research

In terms of future research exploring children's subjective experiences of using social media and how this shapes their identity, there is a need for more qualitative approaches to really understand their nuanced and diverse perspectives. There are many children and many childhoods, thus there is no one homogenous experience (Moss, 2019) and in terms of a digital childhood, this may be even more pronounced. The way in which adults view children in their digital spaces and their perceptions of this complicated occupancy are not free from dominant discourse, nor social, historical, political, and moral constructs (McDonald, 2009). Bearing this in mind, it is

important to further research the implications of a digital childhood, as experienced by the child. Inherent to this is a consideration of the changing nature of children's interactions with technology due to the rapid advances being made which adults may or may not be fully aware of (Brady and Graham, 2018). It is also imperative to further address the disparity of what adults *think* children are experiencing within their digital spaces and what children *are* experiencing, from a first-hand narrative directed in a participatory way through the child's own lens. This will help to alleviate moral panics that are being perpetuated by mainstream media and causing a problematic rhetoric of children's social media use (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018).

As mentioned in Chapter Three of this thesis, creative participatory methods are a useful way to explore the meaning of the social phenomenon of social media as a subjective experience by the participant, rather than a definitive one (Woods, 2012). The opportunity to slow down (Mannay, 2010) and engage in a sensory way can facilitate a rich and authentic reflection (Grant, 2018) in a non-linear way (Culshaw, 2019). The successes of using collaging with children in this research, has been seen to produce rich, nuanced data with first-hand accounts presented both verbally and pictorially. Capitalising on this, for future research, using a more open-ended medium approach (as outlined in section, 7.3) children could be given the opportunity in a multi-modal way to illustrate the ways they are experiencing their digital space and how this shapes their digital identity. Working with parents and their children in a similar fashion, within the home rather than a school setting, would help contextualise the dichotomy between adult and children's experience. Consideration for future research, could entail recruiting participants through community groups rather than in a school setting, which may alleviate some of the complexities around adult-child power relations (Canosa, Graham and Wilson, 2018). This would enable parents to engender active mediation techniques rather than restricting children's use of social media as a means of trying to safeguard them.

Evidently, children are part of a peer culture both inside and outside the boundaries of school settings (Mascheroni, Vincent and Jimenez, 2015; Cirucci, 2013; Litt,

2012). However, a considerable amount of time is spent within the school environment and therefore equipping children to be digital citizens and installing ethical practices in the way they interact with technology is high on the political agenda (Welsh Government, 2018). Social media use engenders a large proportion of this, due to the prevalence of smartphones and handheld devices and the ease at which this type of interaction is available (Throuvala *et al.*, 2019). Teachers and practitioners, like parents and carers, hold concerns about the digital spaces that children are encountering and how this is affecting their behaviour both within the school setting and beyond. As already discussed, this is often viewed in problematic terms and from a risk of harm agenda (Tsaliki, 2022; Duffy, 2019). Awareness raising campaigns and educational initiatives often focus on simplistic skills, such as how to use privacy settings (Livingstone, 2014). E-safety is held central to the linear progression of skills that children are taught, though children need to learn more about digital resilience and social media literacies (Pangrazio and Gaibisso, 2020; Pescott, 2020; Children's Commissioner, 2018). Disrupting this rhetoric and developing tasks and activities for teachers to use within their classes would be a very useful way to instigate discussions that go beyond e - safety. For example, the activities that I designed for the focus groups that are documented in Chapter 3.7.5 would be a useful starting point for such discussions, permitting a less linear skills progression (Livingstone, 2014).

Allowing for a more child-centred approach, in future research, and an organic way of exploring their social media use, would be a useful way of addressing issues that may be concerning children, whilst also focussing on the positive interactions that they may be experiencing. Using practical activities, can act as a useful platform for really engaging with children, and allowing them to direct the discussion in the path they wish to follow. Expanding on Activity 7 'Your messages about social media' (also documented in 3.7.5) could be made more practical, by using jars for example, to write messages for other children, like in Renold *et al.*'s (2017) work on gender identity. Capitalising on creative participatory methods, especially collaging as utilised in this research, would allow children to explore their identity in relation to social media, within a safe space and represent their feelings in a responsive and reflexive way, moving beyond the oral. Considering my research, I am enthusiastic to

work with both parents/carers and teachers to develop wider strategies and supportive mediations that move beyond restricting children's access to social media. As children's perceptions of their social media use are at odds with adults, and despite the call for further research in this area, it is still under researched. Benevolently respecting children's voices, to conceptualise their participation from their own perspective, avoids the dangerous practice of imposing adult-centred research agendas (Graham, Powell and Taylor, 2013).

7.7 Limitations of the study

Despite the robust and rigorous approach to my research design, invariability there have been limitations in my study of children's social media use and identity portrayal within a digital space. Undoubtedly the COVID - 19 global pandemic, which has affected the world since 2020, has impacted on research that was in progress during this time (Weiner *et al.*, 2020). High levels of uncertainty, health concerns, social isolation, and the pivotal shift to working and communicating online has challenged researchers (Townsend *et al.*, 2020). In respect to my study, following suitable risk assessment and following University guidelines, I was still able to conduct research in person with the children within their primary school settings. Though, the headteacher (Schools A and D), the deputy headteacher (School B) and the research lead (School C) were all keen to express that they would prefer me to work within one class, rather than the year group that I had suggested. Furthermore, they all specified that they were not keen on multiple visits that I had planned for as an opportunity to get to know the children in an informal capacity prior to starting the research.

The main limitation in respect to these parameters was therefore that I was unknown to the children prior to conducting the research. The power held by the researcher as an adult and the potential subordinate position of the child consequently cannot be ignored (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Greene and Hogan, 2005). In the planning stages, I was keen to dissipate this power differential as much as possible, through

developing a relationship with the children involved in my study before conducting the research (Bland, 2017). Despite this limitation, a participatory approach was utilised, and the children were continually viewed and treated as active and informed agents (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015). Furthermore, my extensive experience as a primary teacher, ensured that I was comfortable and adept at talking to children of this age group and rapport was quickly established. Acknowledging adult-child differences and a concerted effort at assuming the 'least adult role' with a friendly manner over an authoritarian manner was adopted (Crano, Brewer and Lac, 2014; Gibson, 2012). In addition, the type of activities for both the focus groups and collaging, assured child interest and an active engagement during the facilitation of these. The final limitation in respect of the COVID-19 pandemic, was that member checking, due to tighter restrictions, occurred online via Microsoft Teams (documented in more detail in Chapter 3.8.4). Children were given the opportunity, through this online platform, to discuss their contributions to the research and how I interpreted their perspectives. Nevertheless, this was a somewhat more stilted experience, particularly in relation to the rich discussions that had previously been experienced in person during the focus groups and collaging within the school settings. Also, in School C, the teacher remained present and consequently this could have altered the power differential further (Holland *et al.*, 2010).

As already highlighted, the importance of making the research as participatory as possible was held central to this research. The children did have agency and choice over the way they participated with the focus group activities, and more so in their responses with the collage, where they were allowed to select materials and place as they wished in an open-ended way. Some children, during the collaging activity, showed reticence with the nature of the task (especially notable were David, C14 and Emily, C18) and did not spend as much time as the other participants due to their expressions of perceived poor artistic ability (Culshaw, 2019; Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2015). In future research, it may be helpful for the researcher to complete a collage at the same time as the participants, this may give reluctant children more confidence approaching the activity. Furthermore, offering more choice to participants with how they could respond through poetry, drama, dance, drawing or painting for example may have been more liberating for the participants

and offered a more authentically participatory response (Kara *et al.*, 2021; Kara 2015; Greene and Hogan, 2005). Notwithstanding this limitation, it is important as Mannay (2016) discusses that participatory research is viewed on a continuum and not as an all or nothing scenario. Accordingly in this research, offering a choice of materials and an open-ended response did have benefits for facilitating rich discussions and a window to children's subjective experience of their digital spaces and how this shapes their identity. As research with children's social media use is scant (Huk, 2016) I anticipate that utilising creative participatory approaches to investigate their digital space and a playful, exploratory way of viewing their world will grow in popularity. Multi-modal approaches are conducive to the multiple spaces and online realities that exist for children (Darvin, 2016).

7.8 Final conclusions

The research journey that I have experienced, and the resulting study have allowed me to explore children's social media use and their subjective experience of their digital spaces from their first-hand accounts. This was of paramount importance to my research, particularly as much research in this field is situated within a problematic discourse and from an adult lens. Subsequently, hearing the voice of the child, and really listening to their viewpoints regarding the complexities of how they experience digital spaces, was held in high regard throughout the process. The narratives and artefacts that they produced, really showcase through a child's lens, the rich and nuanced intricacies of this subject area and through their own depictions through the medium of collage, a window to their inner world. The importance of this, both to myself and the wider community are evident, due to the lack of qualitative research in this area. Producing rich, multi-modal imagery, allowed for depictions of their social media experiences, that moved beyond the linguistic and oratory and facilitated a more visceral connection to their feelings and thoughts. Having worked both as a primary teacher and as a HE lecturer on courses about childhood and education, it is apparent that children's cultures are evolving, through the advances of technological developments and it is therefore vital that digital childhoods are explored.

My research has mapped out how children's experiences of social media use within digital spaces enables them to make meaning of their digital identity and its portrayal. It has made original contributions to knowledge with the creative participatory methodology employed as well as children's social media research and social constructionist and poststructuralist theory. When reflecting on the whole research process, it is apparent, that changes to how parents/carers and practitioners respond to children's experiences of digital spaces is required. Supportive discussions and explorations of complex feelings, in safe, non-judgemental environments will help to develop children's emotional resilience and equip them with skills to navigate the complex phenomena of social media, that is evidently embedded within their childhood experience. The images that the children produced, serve as a visual artefact, that depict the complex subjective experience of social media use. "Me, my selfie and I", the title of this thesis, encapsulates the complicated sense of self, that being part of an ocular social media culture propagates, which adds to the complexity of how childhood is experienced by the 10- and 11-years olds in this study.

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Appendices

Appendix A: High risk ethical approval for pilot study



Professor Julie E Lydon OBE, Vice-Chancellor
Yr Athro Julie E Lydon OBE, Is-Ganghellor

Wednesday 13th February 2019

Ms Claire Pescott
C/o Faculty of Life
Sciences and
Education University
of South Wales

Dear Claire,

Faculty Ethics Subgroup Feedback – ‘Me, My Selfie and I: An exploration of children’s understanding of how and why social media is used– a pilot study’ [18CP0901HR]

I am writing to confirm that on the 13th February 2019, the Faculty of Life Sciences and Education Ethics Subgroup approved your submission for ethical approval.

Please note:

- i. Approval is valid for 2 years from the date of issue, you will be notified when approval has expired but you are expected to be mindful of this expiration. Upon the expiration of this ethics approval, you may apply for an extension.
- ii. The approved documents are attached. If you intend on deviating from the approved protocol, research team, or documentation you will need to seek approval for any changes.
- iii. This approval does not confirm that indemnity or insurance are in place for this project.
- iv. Please confirm when your research project has closed (a one-page closure report highlighting any recruitment issues, adverse events, publications etc. should be appended).

If you have any queries about the committee’s decision, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Peter M'Carthy
Chair of Faculty Ethics Committee

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Appendix B: Low risk ethical approval for the main study

Alison Murphy

Thu 09/07/2020 09:28

Dear Claire,

Following the Low-Risk Ethics Committee meeting, the reviewers have accepted the revised forms and therefore your study: “‘Me, my selfie and I’’: An investigation of children’s experiences of social media and how they understand their digital identities’ has been accepted and you now have ethical approval.

Best wishes

Alison

Dr. Alison Murphy

Rheolwr Academaidd ar gyfer y Blynyddoedd Cynnar a Gwaith Cymdeithasol /Academic Manager for Early Years and Social Work

Ysgol Addysg, Blynyddoedd Cynnar a Gwaith Cymdeithasol/School of Education, Early Years and Social Work

Cyfadrn y Gwyddorau Bywyd ac Addysg/Faculty of Life Sciences and Education

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Appendix C: Parent Information Sheet

PARENT/GUARDIAN INFORMATION SHEET



University of
South Wales
Prifysgol
De Cymru

Project: “Me, my selfie and I”: An investigation of children’s experiences of social media and how they understand their digital identities.

Researcher: Claire Pescott

I would like to invite your child to take part in a doctoral research project about their perception, understanding and experience of social media. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being conducted and what it would involve for your child. Please take time to read the following information. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Your child’s participation in the research is voluntary so please carefully consider whether you are happy for them to take part.

What is the purpose of the study?

The primary aim of this research study is to investigate children’s experiences of social media and how they understand their online identities.

Why has my child been invited?

Your child’s school has been approached because it is currently implementing the Digital Competence Framework as part of the curriculum and teaching children to become responsible digital citizens. Your child has been invited to participate in the study because they are in the age category and year group chosen for this research. This study will involve children from four primary schools.

Does my child have to take part?

Your child’s participation is completely voluntary, and it is up to them to decide whether to take part with your consent. The study will be described within this information sheet. If you decide to allow your child to take part, you will be required to sign a consent form to show you agreed to do this. If you have any additional questions, you will be given the opportunity to ask further questions via telephone or a meeting with myself. If you do not require more information, written consent is enough. However, you are free to withdraw your child at any time. I have also prepared a simplified information sheet for your child and will explain the research to them if and when you give your consent for their participation.

What will my child have to do?

It is anticipated that the research will take place over a session taking approximately one hour within the classroom environment. Your child will be invited to participate in a focus group of four to five children. A focus group is a method used to concentrate discussion, gather ideas and opinions about a topic and explore a group response. They will have the opportunity to participate in activities related to how social media is used. The focus group activities and discussions will be recorded, an anonymised transcription made (at this point the audio recording will be destroyed) and analysed. This is to understand more about

children's perceptions of social media and how schools can ensure that children are equipped to be responsible digital users. Some children will then take part in a one-to-one collaging/drawing session of approximately one hour, where they will be invited to make a visual response to how they portray themselves on social media and how others may perceive them. They will be encouraged to talk about their picture/collage, and this will again be recorded in the way described above.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Participation in the research project for your child will mean that they may disclose information of a sensitive nature. If it is the case that your child raises an issue that is of concern, the school's safeguarding policy will be followed and the safeguarding officer, the head teacher and you will be informed. I will take steps to ensure that your child feels comfortable discussing topics about social media within a group environment and will also ensure minimal disruption to your child's learning. The data generation will take place in the school day and will take approximately one hour per session.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

It is hoped that by giving children the opportunity to discuss their perceptions about social media, information can be gained about how schools can support their development as digital users and teach them how to remain safe online. In addition, I will ensure that participation in the project will be a constructive, positive and productive experience for your child and that they will feel valued.

Will my child's taking part in the research project be kept confidential?

The information that will be gathered for the research project will be kept securely according to the rules of the General Data Protection Regulation (2018). The information will be used for research purposes only. In accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (2018), data will be stored for the duration of the research study and will be destroyed thereafter once analysis and writing up is completed. Transcripts taken from focus group discussions and visual narratives will be anonymised: that is, I will assign an identifying code and remove all names of children and places from the transcript. The code list will be kept separately in a locked cabinet.

What will happen if my child does not want to carry on with the study?

It is up to you to decide whether your child can participate in the research project, and you are free to withdraw them at any time. Likewise, your child is free to decide to withdraw from the project. If this is the case, all the information and data collected about your child will be destroyed and their names removed from all the study files. Neither you or your child need to give a reason for withdrawing and the researcher will ensure that there are no adverse consequences as a result for your child within the school setting.

Who is organising or sponsoring the research?

This research forms part of a PhD study part funded by the University of South Wales.

What will happen to the results of the research?

Findings from the study will form a PhD thesis. Published papers may be produced from the study and the findings may be presented at a conference. If this is the case, the documents will be available upon request.

Further information and contact details:

The researcher, Claire Pescott, is from the School of Education, Early Years and Social Work at the University of South Wales and her contact details are as follows:

☎ 01633 432188 ✉ claire.pescott@southwales.ac.uk

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you can ask to speak to the researcher who will do her best to answer your questions or resolve a problem. Alternatively, you can contact the research supervisors:

Dr Carmel Conn

Dr Susan Haywood

✉ carmel.conn@southwales.ac.uk

✉ susan.haywood@southwales.ac.uk

In the event of a more formal complaint please contact the Research Governance Officer at the University of South Wales, Jonathan Sinfield on ☎ 01443 484518.

Appendix D: Consent Form

STUDY CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: "Me, my selfie and I": An investigation of children's experiences of social media and how they understand their digital identities



Name of Researcher: Claire Pescott

Please initial all boxes

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 22 May 2020 (version 1) for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my child's participation is voluntary, and s/he is free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without any consequence.
3. I agree to my child's anonymised data being used in academic articles and book chapters.
4. I agree to my child's contribution in focus group/drawing discussions being audiotaped.
5. I agree to my child taking part in the above study.

Name of Participant Date Signature

Name of person - Date Signature
taking consent.

Appendix E: Child Information sheet



My name is Claire Pescott, and I am a researcher at the University of South Wales.

- I would like to find out what you know about social media and how you think it is used.
- You will take part in a session with a small group of children from your class for approximately one hour. Some of you will be asked to take part in another session which will be one to one, where you will be asked to collage about your social media experiences and speak about it.
- It is important to hear your views so that teachers and your parents understand how to keep you safe online and that you can discuss the positives and negatives of using social media in a safe environment.
- I would like to audio record what you say.
- I would like to write about what I find out; I will not use your name and people will not know that it is you.
- You can say 'yes' you would like to take part in this research project – Or you can say 'no' you don't want to take part – it is okay to say this.
- If you say yes now and decide later that you don't want to take part – it is okay to say this too.



Thank you for talking to me.

Appendix F: Example of data analysis for focus groups using ‘noticings’ in response to questions with cross referencing to emerging sub themes

Focus Group 1 – 5 participants (2M, 3F)

Initial data analysis:

1. What is social media used for? (playing, having fun, making money, being famous etc.)	2. What do people do on there? (communicate, interact, show off, find someone, copy, seek attention, feelings, enactment, producing, performing, playing with identity)	3. What do you need to consider or think about when using social media? (privacy, discernment, safety, issues)
<p>Child A: It is a game [Minecraft], that you like build and it tells you all about different things, so it is sort of educational too. Ludic/fun</p>	<p>Child C: If you’re on social media, you can contact other people in the world. Interaction</p>	<p>Child A: It could be a bad idea though because, some like old man or woman out there just scrolling through young kid’s accounts. Interviewer: Do you know what that is called? Child A: Yeah, paedos. Dangers</p>
<p>Child B: Facebook, old people use that. Positive communication</p>	<p>Child E: [Interrupts] that is Pinterest and my Mum has that, she lets me go on her phone to look stuff up for my bedroom. Relationships</p>	<p>Child D: They could end up catfishing you. Interviewer: Do you know what catfishing is? Child A: Yeah, when people pretend they are like a teenager, to like chat to a 15 year old girl and they like take photos off the internet, like a 15/16 year old boy and you tell them like that you want to be their friend and meet up. Dangers</p>
<p>Child B: This is my favourite filter [animal ears] it is fun and entertains people. Ludic/Fun</p>	<p>Child E: ...[Emojis] Because if people don’t speak the same language they can still communicate. You can understand more because it is like from a</p>	<p>Child E: I think there is like a good version and a bad version because of the social media stuff that I was talking about because you are not showing who you</p>

	<p>facial expression and you can tell how they feel by this.</p> <p>Positive communication</p>	<p>actually are. Because you are distorting your image.</p> <p>Impression management</p>
<p>Child E: [Emojis] They are ways to express yourself without words.</p> <p>Positive communication</p>	<p>Child D: [Filters] I only use this one as my sister has it. And she is like 17. They like take funny pictures and send them to me.</p> <p>Relationships</p>	<p>Child A: Use them sensibly. And if you can make your account private and only let people you know be your friends on social media, or only let them follow you, if you know them.</p> <p>Online safety</p>
<p>Child A: [Filters] Because it is funny, for a laugh. Child B: [Filters] I think that people do use them when they are bored though.</p> <p>Ludic/Fun</p>	<p>Child B: [Filters] They are trying to make them feel better about themselves.</p> <p>Child C: Like making them look more beautiful than they are.</p> <p>Impression management</p>	<p>Child E: I used to have TikTok and I used to have a private account but then I deleted it because there is a load of little kids but then it just went all like adults and everything and it went weird and there was like swearing and stuff on there.</p> <p>Agency/Discernment</p>
<p>Child E: [Filters] So that people have a better image of you.</p> <p>Child A: And then you get more attention.</p> <p>Self-expression</p>	<p>Child D: I like putting filters on because it doesn't show my birth mark at all. It takes the blemishes off my face.</p> <p>Impression management</p>	<p>Child E: [TikTok dances] Yeah, they have been doing it like in the school and the teachers took it down because they said that they should not be showing like their school badges and or anything or school. And they were showing other children in it, which is wrong because they might not be able to go on social media.</p> <p>Dangers</p>
<p>Child B: [Filters] To make people laugh, I do that.</p> <p>Child E: You can pull all kinds of faces.</p> <p>Child A: For fun. Boys do it more.</p> <p>Ludic/Fun</p>	<p>Child C: There are like dog photos too. My Mum set up my dog an Instagram, his own account, so she could post cute pictures. Because if you get enough followers you can have free stuff.</p>	<p>Child D: [Using Instagram] Because it is dangerous.</p> <p>Child E: it is for grown-ups.</p> <p>Child A: And teenagers.</p> <p>Dangers</p>

	Monetarisisation of online identity	
Child D: Because they see like grown-ups doing it and they think it is really cool , so they want to do it themselves. Being controlled	Child D: Because people put pictures of themselves . They post stuff they are doing and people they see. Sometimes it is boring like what they had for tea. Positive communication	Child C: Because like adults and stuff might like message the little kids that they are ugly and stuff and say like really mean things and comments to them. Dangers
Child B: On YouTube, there are loads of adverts about TikTok, because the app [YouTube] is paying famous people , YouTubers to obviously advertise on there. Monetarisisation of online identity	Child A: She is trying to show off . Child C: She is showing off her clothes and her designer bag. Self- validation	Interviewer: How do you think people feel when they get likes and comments? Child D: They feel good about themselves. Interviewer: What if you don't get many comments then? Child E: People can get like upset , like they are not good enough . They may take the post down. Being controlled
Child C: Yeah, because they are also earning money from what you do, your career but you also earn it from TikTok. Monetarisisation of online identity	Child D: People post what they are doing and some people do like Livestreams and stuff. Interaction	Child E: And a lot of them are like photoshopped . Like they take a photo in front of a building like that and then they like photoshop the background, so it looks really cool. But that does look quite fake actually. People do that with filters too on their faces. So things are not as they seem . Impression management
Child A: [Charli D'Amelio] She's like really rich . Child C: And famous from TikTok. Monetarisisation of online identity	Child A: This one? That is Kim Kardashian. She's like showing off , look at me and look at what I have got. Self- validation	Child A: You can't control it once you post it. Because people can take like a screenshot and they can repost it and they have it in their camera roll forever until they delete it. Child E: Once you post it, they own that photo. Being controlled

<p>Child E: And they always, when you are on like a game with people, they always like advertise the newest thing. Being controlled</p>	<p>Child E: Yes, with brands because some brands have famous people in it, so, they use it and they are famous, so let's copy them. Being controlled</p>	<p>Child C: But I have WhatsApp but that is safer because it says when you first get WhatsApp, that WhatsApp cannot see your messages only the person you are sending it to. And there have not been as many problems on there. Online safety</p>
<p>Child A: I think, Facebook is a good place to find someone, because I watched a YouTube video the other day and this man filming on a GoPro and it said their name and then like he searched up that name in like Facebook and then he found the people that he ended up giving it to and gave it back to them. Positive communication</p>	<p>Child B: By like uploading pictures of yourself, what you are doing, what interests you. Interaction</p>	<p>Child A: And you can also add like double verification and when you go on it, you have to sign like a pass code or something. Online safety</p>
<p>Child E: Videos of like your daily life, like a lot of people post Vlogs and stuff because it is like the real part of themselves. Because they post what they do. Positive communication</p>		<p>Child C: Same as me, I used to have TikTok until it got bad and then I took myself off it but now it keeps like popping up all the time, saying like, come and get TikTok. Agency/Discernment</p>
		<p>Child E: They have like their actual name on their account. Putting your actual name on there as well is quite dangerous. Dangers</p>
		<p>Child E: Because you might have photoshopped your photo, because you want people to like you and like it. Child B: You may look beautiful in your photo but in</p>

		<p>reality, you may not look so beautiful. More girls do this. Impression management</p>
		<p>Child E: Because they don't like the way they look, there is a lot of pressure to look a certain way. Child C: You want to look like someone else that you have seen on social media. Impression management</p>
		<p>Child C: It can be fake though. Look at me. Look at my clothes. Fakeness</p>
		<p>Child A: Because like you can be so happy on like the Internet and then after you have posted that photo, you could be like judging yourself and then like be waiting for likes and comments and then you could end up deleting that photo when people could think you were not beautiful enough. Self- validation</p>
		<p>Interviewer: Do you think it is just you judging yourself? Child A: It is other people as well because you have posted online. Interaction</p>
		<p>Interviewer: Do you think it matters how many likes you have on a post? Child C: You can see this, and it does make you feel popular or not. Self- validation</p>

Appendix G: Example of analysis tracking individual children within the focus group

Quote	Analysis
Child A: Respect each other's opinions.	Proactive in discerning rules for the focus group, presented as confident within group.
<p>Child A: Because I think that football and Nike are like a company.</p> <p>Child C: I don't know what these are [Beats logo]</p> <p>Child A: They're like music and headphones.</p> <p>Child A: [name, name, name] that is used like on old computers [MySpace].</p> <p>Interviewer: So, did you say that one was Beats?</p> <p>Child A: Yeah. Is it like a music company?</p>	Child A has a good idea of what social media is and was able to sort the logos confidently.
<p>Child A: Minecraft definitely because I have it on my iPad.</p> <p>Interviewer: What is Minecraft then?</p> <p>Child A: It is a game, that you like build and it tells you all about different things, so it is sort of educational too.</p>	Uses personal experience to discern different social media platforms. Recognises that there is a positive side to social media and states that it can be 'educational'.
Child A: You put stuff online?	Discernment – understands the premise of social media and how it may be used.
<p>Interviewer: Yes. Do you think there are any problems with using emojis?</p> <p>Child A: Sort of, sort of not.</p>	Balanced view presented but due to another child interrupting, the interviewer never got to pursue this line of enquiry – this is drawback of focus groups.
<p>[Emojis] Interviewer: Why do people use it then?</p> <p>Child A: Just like to show that you think it is funny, it is exaggerated.</p>	Awareness of the distinction between real life and social media as an amplified space particularly when communicating with emojis.
<p>Interviewer: So, why do you think people use these filters?</p> <p>Child A: Because it is funny, for a laugh.</p>	Gender divide – filters are used for fun and entertainment purposes – concurs with evidence found in the pilot study. Does not necessarily see the use of filters at something that is just about

	appearance as the girls in the study suggest.
<p>Interviewer: Why might you do that, do you think?</p> <p>Child E: So that people have a better image of you.</p> <p>Child A: And then you get more attention.</p>	<p>Though, Child A does recognise that there is a discursive element to social media and that this is generated by the responses that posts elicit which may be for attention.</p>
<p>Child A: Basically, if you are a girl, because you are trying to make yourself look more beautiful than you actually are.</p>	<p>Gender divide is evident again here in this comment, girls go to lengths to enhance their physical appearance for social acceptance purposes.</p>
<p>[Filters] Child A: For fun. Boys do it more.</p>	<p>Gender divide – boys use filters for a different purpose than girls.</p>
<p>Child A: It could be a bad idea though because, some like old man or woman out there just scrolling through young kid's accounts.</p> <p>Interviewer: Do you know what that is called?</p> <p>Child A: Yeah, paedos.</p>	<p>Child A is aware of potential dangers when using social media and used the extreme of 'paedos' but also this shows that accounts are in a digital space where there is little control and people can look at this. There is also the suggestion of surveillance here – the unknown of who is out there or intentions not always being good.</p>
<p>Interviewer: Do you know what catfishing is?</p> <p>Child A: Yeah, when people pretend they are like a teenager, to like chat to a 15 year old girl and they like take photos off the internet, like a 15/16 year old boy and you tell them like that you want to be their friend and meet up.</p>	<p>Aware of online dangers – discernment and agency demonstrated.</p>
<p>Interviewer: What problems can that cause, if you are not showing your real self?</p> <p>Child E: People might think you are older.</p> <p>Child A: Or younger.</p>	<p>The audience is never truly aware of how someone presents themselves, appearances can be altered, there is a pretend/fake element to how people portray themselves on social media. Again, their reasons for this may be unclear.</p>
<p>[Filters] Interviewer: How can we educate children to use them?</p> <p>Child A: Use them sensibly. And if you can make your account private and only let people you know be your friends on</p>	<p>Discernment – aware of the implications of social media use and the potential dangers exposed to. Has strategies for keeping himself safe online.</p>

<p>social media, or only let them follow you, if you know them.</p>	
<p>Child A: This one [child with a Snapchat filter] he looks about three and the rest of them look like they are like in our year.</p>	<p>Varied ages use social media.</p>
<p>Interviewer: So, should you be using them with young children? Child D: No, definitely not. Child A: No because if you find that on the Internet it is obviously not private and then.</p>	<p>Dangers of young children using social media commented on but the reasons for this are not made explicit.</p>
<p>Child A: A few weeks ago as well someone started a rumour that there was like someone in the bushes. Child C: Just to scare people. Child A: A lot of people started crying and...</p>	<p>Scaremongering – this is gossip that often occurs in school cultures, this is a physical danger though and not necessarily one from online.</p>
<p>Child A: Yeah and my Mum has it on her phone and she allows me to go on it, like have a look at my football team because my football team has like a group for fans and they have an Instagram account, so I go on there to look at that. Child A: And if my Mum has seen something cool that she wants me to see, she shows me. But if she is on it, sometimes she turns her phone away from me. Just in case there are inappropriate things on it.</p>	<p>Child A like Child E has experiences on social media that are part of their relationship with a parent. They are able to experience social media in a controlled way, the ensorship and surveillance of the parent monitoring use is commented on in relation to not exposing them to inappropriate content.</p>
<p>Child E: It is for grown-ups. Child A: And teenagers.</p>	<p>Awareness that social media is for 'others' but not necessarily for children – discernment.</p>
<p>Child C: Because like adults and stuff might like message the little kids that they are ugly and stuff and say like really mean things and comments to them. Interviewer: Okay. Child A: That did happen to me and that is why I deleted Tiktok.</p>	<p>Child A discusses personal experience in relation to the content of negative comments that they have received, though there is self-censorship and discernment demonstrated in deciding to delete own account.</p>
<p>Child A: I know them, that is [name] and that is [name], they are footballers.</p>	<p>The superficial nature of social media is demonstrated here with the opinion</p>

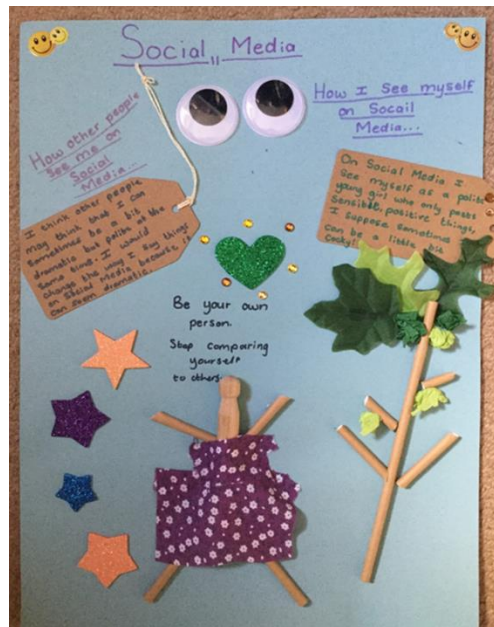
<p>Interviewers: What do you think this girl has posted this? Why do you think she has put that up? Child A: She is trying to show off.</p>	<p>that the girl is ‘trying to show off’ which potential has a different resonance than footballers post which is related to their talent or their sportsmanship.</p>
<p>Interviewer: Look how many likes she has. How do you think people feel when they have these likes? Child A: She is verified, she is famous.</p>	<p>Celebrity culture and the fame of certain individuals warrants a large fan base and egotistical validation in the form of likes.</p>
<p>Child A: Sometimes I hate Instagram. Interviewer: Why do you hate Instagram? Child A: Because, on like these photos, some of them, you can literally see where that photo is taken and that will give you a general area of where they live.</p>	<p>Expresses a strong dislike of Instagram which is largely based on the perceived dangers of posting photos with the potential of the location of the person being involved.</p>
<p>Child A: Like they might have went to see a massive football team and they met the mascots.</p>	<p>Social media can have a positive focus and is again related to sport in this instance.</p>
<p>Child A: And also, I know him and that is his little brother, he is a YouTuber and them two are YouTubers, this kid and that kid are the exact same people.</p>	<p>Celebrity culture, popularity of certain individuals permeating youth culture.</p>
<p>Child A: This one? That is Kim Kardashian. She’s like showing off, look at me and look at what I have got.</p>	<p>The fakeness that celebrity can engender and the egotistical validation that social media affords.</p>
<p>Child A: You can’t control it once you post it. Because people can take like a screenshot and they can repost it and they have it in their camera roll forever until they delete it.</p>	<p>Discernment over surveillance and an awareness that there can be a lack of control when posting within a digital space.</p>
<p>Child A: And you can also add like double verification and when you go on it, you have to sign like a pass code or something.</p>	<p>Discernment – privacy settings can be used on your devices to gain some control of what you can see and whether other people can access your account.</p>
<p>Child A: Oh yeah, on TikTok now, there is like TikTok greater fun, like, you can sign up and if TikTok accept you, like every like 1000 views you have I think it is, they pay you like 3 cent.</p>	<p>Celebrity nature and influencers who use social media as a space for self-promotion and making money.</p>

<p>Child E: And she got like loads of money from TikTok. Child A: She's like really rich.</p>	<p>Child A is aware that people can make money from their accounts and that it can be a lucrative industry.</p>
<p>Child A: The most adverts that I have seen of all these is TikTok. Child B: Same. Interviewer: And why do you think that keeps coming up when you're on it then? Child A: Because it's like the latest trend. They have obviously spent like lots of money.</p>	<p>Aware of the trend led nature of social media and that trends become popular sometimes through advertisements. The omnipresent 'other' is mentioned here in relation to control over what is promoted via social media – a type of surveillance.</p>
<p>Child A: I think, Facebook is a good place to find someone, because I watched a YouTube video the other day and this man filming on a GoPro and it said their name and then like he searched up that name in like Facebook and then he found the people that he ended up giving it to and gave it back to them.</p>	<p>Positive side of social media and can be used to connect and interact with people all over the world.</p>
<p>Child A: Like accounts and their profiles.</p>	<p>Awareness of what social media is used for and the nature of how it operates.</p>
<p>Child A: Yes, that is a bit emoji, so that is Snapchat. I know that because of my cousins.</p>	<p>Like the comments made earlier in relation to using his Mum's social media, some of his knowledge has come from observing other people. This may provide a safer space for children of this age.</p>
<p>Child A: Um, like you could literally be like 31 with one filter you can be like 14.</p>	<p>Social media can be fake and people do not always portray themselves as they are – discernment.</p>
<p>Interviewer: Do you think it is all about looks? Child A: Some of it is.</p>	<p>The superficial nature of social media is presented but as with an earlier comment, due to the nature of focus groups another child took the conversation in a different direction and this line of enquiry was not pursued by the researcher.</p>
<p>Interviewer: How can you show your personality on social media? Child E: You can like show videos. Child A: By being yourself.</p>	<p>Despite the fakeness that can form part of social media culture, Child A states that it is important to be yourself but</p>

	does not distinguish how this can be achieved on social media.
<p>Child A: Because like you can be so happy on like the Internet and then after you have posted that photo, you could be like judging yourself and then like be waiting for likes and comments and then you could end up deleting that photo when people could think you were not beautiful enough.</p> <p>Interviewer: Do you think it is just you judging yourself?</p> <p>Child A: It is other people as well because you have posted online.</p>	<p>This fakeness is further commented on, and the preoccupation with egotistical validation that can affect how someone feels about themselves. This judgemental element can come from yourself and others and could be perceived as a form of subtle control. Judgement can come in the form of physical appearance and idealised notions of beauty that is culturally conceived. It is not clear if Child A is referring to females as he did in earlier comments.</p>
<p>Child A: If you are like famous, like Charli D'Amelio, she posted a picture of herself on a trampoline just screaming and she got like about 10 million likes. Then a man, with a bayonet, like an army gun got only like 1000 likes.</p>	<p>Again, the fakeness and superficiality of social media is emphasised by Child A. Validation is often in relation to fame and culturally deemed important values. People are quantified on social media by the amount of likes they receive, this can be viewed by others which potentially gives a barometer of what constitutes popularity.</p>

Appendix H: Example of analysis of collages using a combination of Grbich's (2012) and Rose's (2016) analytical questions

Collage 1 - Isabel:



Analytic question	Participant collage
<p>What is being shown? (Rose, 2016)</p>	<p>At the top of the collage there are a large pair of googly eyes. The image has been separated in two in response to the interviewer questions posed, but this is not depicted with a line but by the sides of the collage, the titles given and was verbally attested. On the left is written 'how other people see me on social media' and on the right 'how I see myself on social media'. On two labels the participant has described herself in terms of personality rather than appearance. She viewed herself on social media as 'polite but sometimes cocky' and that she posted 'sensitive things'. She wrote that others viewed her on social media as 'sometimes a bit dramatic' and she should perhaps change what she posted on social media, in response to comments she had received. A person has been made from a peg and cut straws that represents the participant, Isabel. The body is covered by a piece of purple fabric that has been made to look like a dress. A love heart in green is above the peg person, it has jewels around it and the phrases "Be your own</p>

	<p>person” and “Stop comparing yourself”. There are four stars on the left-hand side of the image. On the bottom right of the collage is a tree made from straws and leaves and scrunched pieces of tissue paper. At the top left and right of the image are emojis.</p>
<p>How are the components arranged? (Rose, 2016)</p>	<p>The components are arranged to make the best use of the space. The collage emerged organically, and the participant did not specifically plan what she would put on the collage. The large googly eyes are at the top of the collage and the viewer’s eyes are drawn to that. The components are arranged to show two sides of the participant with the central component of ‘self’ placed at the bottom of the collage. The tree is placed on the side of how she sees herself on social media. The messages are central to the poster and very near to the peg person. They are also near the green heart with the jewels which is symbolic of the message.</p>
<p>What medium is used for the components?</p>	<p>A combination of writing, pre stuck shapes, jewels, emojis, leaves, straws and labels are used in the image.</p>
	<p>The background colour chosen was pale blue. The dress on the peg person is purple and was chosen because she likes that colour. There is also purple writing and a purple star. The heart is green, and the stars are a range of colours (orange, purple and blue).</p>
<p>What relationships are established between the components of the image visually? (Rose, 2016)</p>	<p>The components are arranged with three dominant spaces. The peg person is central, and this was a deliberate choice by the participant to show that she thinks she is herself on social media which she deemed important.</p>
<p>How does the image convey meaning? (Grbich, 2012)</p>	<p>The image conveys meaning with what is written and what the participant said during the making of the collage. The prevalent meaning is that Isabel is clear that she has an online identity and an identity in real life. By the depiction of this in a binary way with the two labels shows that she recognises that real life and online are not the same. Isabel is aware that what you post online is a deliberate act to show yourself to an audience. She has a strong sense of self and can represent herself online in a way that she is happy with, that she says is like how she is in real life. The stars reinforce this as they represent that you should ‘shine’ on social media by being yourself. This is also reinforced by the green heart with jewels above it, which she said was to be ‘true to your heart’ on social media. Self-esteem and feeling good about yourself are important to Isabel. Isabel is</p>

	<p>aware that online you have a persona, and that other people may perceive you differently from how you perceive yourself. There is a clear danger of using social media, that Isabel depicts by the messages 'be your own person' and 'stop comparing yourself', she is aware of how people use impression management on social media and can manipulate the way they look and therefore this can elicit feelings of comparison. Interesting that the peg self does not have a face</p>
<p>How does the image reflect or depart from dominant cultural values? (Grbich, 2012)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple identities, construction of identities (Darvin, 2016) presenting ourselves through interaction with others (Seargent and Tagg, 2014) • Identity as a social construct enacted through social interaction with others and our relationships with them (Ellison, 2013) • Actor and audience performing a role as a way to portray personality (Goffman, 1959). • Awareness of self and own identity – children's agency (James and James, 2004) social media affords a platform of ongoing construction and a reflexive performance of self-hood (Cover, 2013). • Gender divide – stop comparing yourself – aware of impression management/image enhancement (Tantangelo and Riccardelli, 2017; Burnette et al., 2017). • 'Shine in your own right', self-esteem, feelings of worth associated with how others perceive you (Koutamanis <i>et al.</i>, 2015)
<p>What is the most obvious reading of the image? (Grbich, 2012)</p>	<p>Identity portrayal and social media are important to Isabel, she is aware of how her identity is shown on social media and how she can deliberately portray herself in a certain way to an imagined audience. Isabel has a strong sense of self that is predominantly discussed in terms of her personality rather than her appearance. Isabel is also aware of the reciprocal relationship of social media and that how others perceive her is part of this digital space. She wants to show an authentic version of herself on social media.</p>
<p>What alternative readings can be made? (Grbich, 2012)</p>	<p>Isabel has low self-esteem and is aware of self-validation on social media. The reason she is so keen to present an authentic version of herself is her experience of viewing idealised profiles and feeds is affecting how she feels about herself and is influencing her own self-worth.</p>
<p>Other themes that emerged from the interview</p>	<p>Self-validation Interviewer: Why did you post it on social media? Isabel: I was sad and wanted a reaction.</p>

Interviewer: Did you get a reaction?
Isabel: Yes, lots of sad face responses and comments.

Isabel: I think there are some people in the world that think, they feel unloved, and they want people to like them a bit more, to have followers and interact with people. That is just what I am saying.

Online safety

Isabel: ...but I genuinely don't think it is right to have so many forms and the reason I do have Facebook, it is so I can talk to my friends and that is mostly on messenger but that is about it.

Dangers

Isabel: I know it sounds a bit extreme but kidnapping because there are kids out there who have social media, but all of their identity is on there and you can't really trust anyone, so there are people who will ask for other people's identity, you know like, not take them away but there are people who will eventually do it.

Impression management

Isabel: I wanna say like, I want people to know that I am polite and that I like to help people on social media.

Isabel: Sometimes by using filters and sometimes by showing what they actually look like...

Isabel: Because if you post something of your face, of how you look, I think then, you can show your identity, say I have done it on mine, I put a photo of myself and posted it online, but my Mum has made my profile in such a way, so nobody can see my post unless they are one of my Facebook friends.

Isabel: So, I am going to show like some people see me as quite a big chatterbox because I sometimes write a lot of comments on people's posts and that I could change by not doing this as much. I'm going to make myself out of a peg. I'm putting these eyes right in the middle, looking, people are always judging you on social media.

Isabel: I'm going to add this heart, to show you need to be true to your heart [pause: 2:03]and be yourself.

Appendix I: Example of Brown and Collins' (2021) analysis employed to the data from the collage with interview

Lloyd's collage



	Element 1 Visual only	Element 2 Transcript only	Element 3 Visuo-textual combined
Level 1 Noticing and describing	<p>'Stay safe' written in gold letters.</p> <p>Christmas present sticker.</p> <p>Emojis.</p> <p>Name written in gold letters, concealed with a piece of animal paper</p>	<p>"...they could be like an old man or woman, watching you, without you knowing".</p> <p>Catfishing.</p> <p>"Like stay safe on the internet, like only let people you know follow you".</p> <p>Online safety.</p> <p>"...the good times I have shared with family and friends..."</p> <p>Communication on social media.</p> <p>"So, if I do it like this, I can pretend I</p>	<p>Online safety.</p> <p>Agency/discernment.</p> <p>Relationships. Interaction. Positive communication.</p> <p>Identity concealment.</p>

	<p>(just the top is showing).</p> <p>Heart.</p> <p>Self - depicted with googly eyes, a pompom nose, and a leaf body.</p>	<p>am hiding my name”.</p> <p>“Yes, so I have camouflaged the letters, to show you need to hide who you really are on social media”.</p> <p>“...I don’t show like my face or like say my name or let them hear my voice, I do like, I do play like some games, and I do music over the top [TikTok]”.</p> <p>Self-censorship.</p> <p>The love of his family.</p> <p>“And then I can do some random googly eyes and I could make a face; it is different on social media because I use a lot of filters. Filtered image.</p> <p>“...Sometimes I am the same as I normally am in real life but sometimes, I am not”.</p> <p>[Identity] “It means who I am, in my personality, like how other people think of you and of how like I think about myself. It is like what you like and what you like doing”. Sense of identity.</p>	<p>Relationships.</p> <p>Self-expression.</p> <p>Impression management.</p> <p>Identity portrayal.</p> <p>Impression management.</p>
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	<p>Goal post made of lollipop sticks with a pompom inside and one to the right.</p>	<p>“Like, sometimes I act silly on camera and on social media sometimes, but most of the time in real life I am sensible...” Self-expression.</p> <p>[Identity] “...sometimes they can, sometimes they won’t because they could be really sad in real life world and then like really happy on the internet”.</p> <p>Portrayal of feelings.</p> <p>“...yeah. This is to show one of my favourite sports, football but it is orange so it could be basketball as well”.</p> <p>“This is for all like my friends I play football with the reason why I have picked red, is that they are like family, and you share the same blood as you family. They are important to me, more than my friends on social media...”</p> <p>Hobbies/interests.</p>	<p>Interaction.</p> <p>Ludic/Fun.</p>
	<p>Element 1 Visual only Essential elements that unite artefacts</p>	<p>Element 2 Transcript only Words, phrases that capture patterns/themes</p>	<p>Element 3 Visuo-textual combined</p>

			Connections between the artefacts and themes
Level 2 Conceptualising	<p>Distinction between real life self and social media self is not depicted in a binary way like Isabel and Sophie and is not apparent in the image.</p> <p>Lloyd is concerned with concealment and hiding his identity online whereas Isabel and Sophie wish to portray an authentic version of themselves.</p> <p>Sport is important to Lloyd – this is like other male participants.</p> <p>Depicted self in an abstract way.</p>	<p>Lloyd does make the distinction that how he portrays himself on social media and real life can be different. Recognises that other people may conceal their real feelings on social media to portray themselves in a particular way.</p> <p>“Camouflage” and concealment of image on social media for safety reasons.</p> <p>Experimenting with your identity online.</p> <p>Social media can be used in a positive way to share a mutual interest e.g., football and make connections online.</p> <p>His real friends are more important to him than social media friends. Online interaction does not replace the quality of real-life interaction.</p>	<p>Lloyd is aware of online dangers and demonstrates agency and discernment to overcome perceived dangers. Unlike Isabel and Sophie, Lloyd attests that the ‘real self’ should not be shown on social media and identity should be concealed wherever possible and an online identity should be curated.</p> <p>Using filters has a concealment and protection from danger capacity rather than to enhance appearance – gender divide.</p> <p>The sharing of interests on social media can improve the quality of online relationships.</p>

Appendix J: Member checking collage used via Microsoft Teams with the participants from the school settings



You mostly all use social media

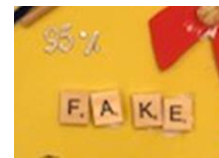


Being popular/

showing off



Positive	Negative
Can make you feel like you belong	People can make mean comments
Can be fun and entertaining	Emojis can show rude symbols
Share happy events	Emojis may be misinterpreted
Get your feelings known with emojis	Can compare your life to others
Keep in touch with people	Can make you feel left out
Strengthen relationships	People post too much



Judging



Online dangers



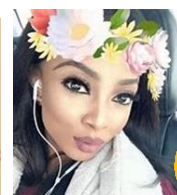
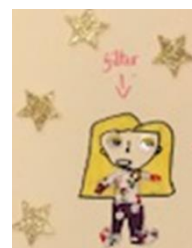
Identity



Boys

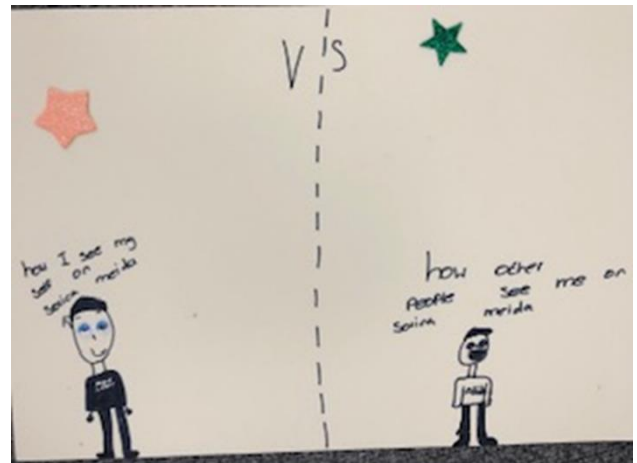
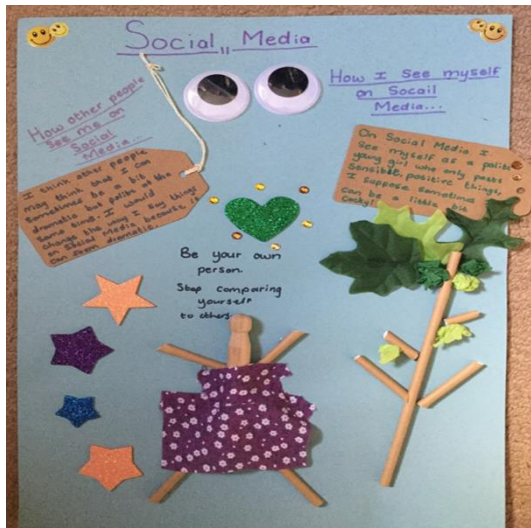


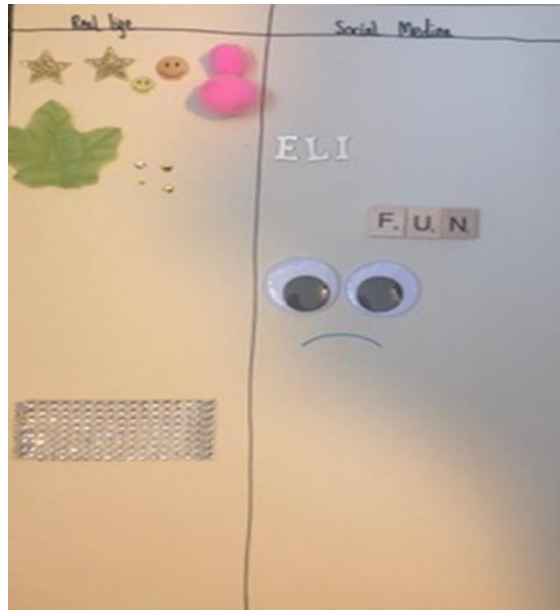
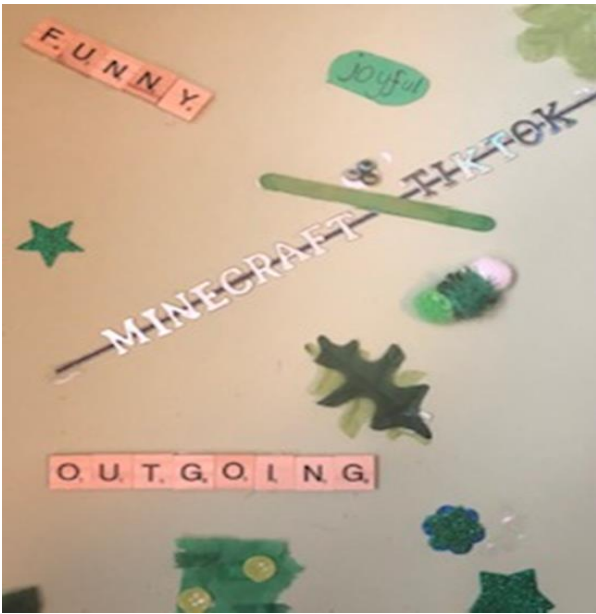
Body image



Girls

Appendix K: Photographs of children's collages







Appendix L: Research outputs

<p>Presented at: Childhood and Youth group, Cardiff University. March 2019. “Me, my Selfie and I:” The ethical contentions of researching children's use of social media using creative participatory methods.</p>
<p>Presented at: BERA Conference, Manchester. September 2019. “Me, my selfie and I”: An exploration of children’s perceptions of social media – a pilot study.</p>
<p>BERA Blog – ‘Me, my selfie and I’: An exploration of children’s perceptions of social media – a PhD pilot study. November 2019. Available at: https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/me-my-selfie-and-i-an-exploration-of-childrens-perceptions-of-social-media-a-phd-pilot-study</p>
<p>Pescott, C. K. (2020) “I wish I was wearing a filter right now”: An exploration of identity formation and subjectivity of 10- and 11-year olds’ social media use’, <i>Social Media + Society</i>, doi: 10.1177/2056305120965155. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120965155</p>
<p>The Conversation article ‘I wish I was wearing a filter right now’: why tweens need more emotional support to deal with social media. 7th December 2020. Available at: https://theconversation.com/i-wish-i-was-wearing-a-filter-right-now-why-tweens-need-more-emotional-support-to-deal-with-social-media-149876</p>
<p>Interview with MIT Technology Review. 23rd March 2021. Available at: https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/04/02/1021635/beauty-filters-young-girls-augmented-reality-social-media/</p>
<p>River Radio interview – School of Parenting Hour – 29th March 2021. Available at: https://www.dropbox.com/sh/snmu5pdhk423es2/AACyOCy4sxDe7uMi4ppDEaKBa?dl=0</p>

Robert Gordon University (Seminar Series) 6th April 2021(virtual) – 50 attendants – Available at:

https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL83GEree5OqIp5UMfeb5LuhKEWIV_Kfvt

Interview for BBC Wales X-Ray – 20th April 2021/7th May 2021. Video recording took place – 18th May 2021 and screened on BBC X-Ray 31st May 2021. Series 20, Episode 21. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000wqmm>

Interview by Italian journalist for a report NGO "Terre des hommes" dedicated to the conditions of girls in the world. Chapter dedicated to the theme of self-presentation and the role of social media on the development of young girls. 14th May 2021.

Interview by Netherlands journalist – for a project on the dangers of social media and wisdom for lessons in schools. 17th May 2021.

PhD Poster submission – WISERD – ‘Highly Commended’ – July 2021.

ECER 2021 – Presentation at Emerging Researcher’s Conference – 3rd September 2021. Unfortunately, I was unable to present due to illness.

USW Children’s Mental Health Week article – ‘Social media use of tweens...looking beyond e-safety’. 9th February 2022. Available at: <https://www.southwales.ac.uk/news/news-2022/childrens-mental-health-week-social-media-use-of-tweens-looking-beyond-e-safety/>

Invitation to evaluate a book proposal ‘Children, young people and online harms: Conceptualisations, experiences and responses’ for Palgrave MacMillan. April 2022.

The scope of this book draws upon children’s and young people’s voices and narratives to discuss ways to protect children online. This book proposal endeavours to demonstrate that formal legislation and often adult’s views fail to capture digital spaces that children and young people now occupy and the nuance of their digital lives, that can be diverse, socially contingent, and have positive aspects as well as risks. This resonates with my own research. After submitting my review, the authors invited me to write a chapter using research from my PhD– deadline December 2022.

Presented a 3MT (3 Minute Thesis) at the USW Graduate Presentation Day – 15th June 2022.

Presented research at Cardiff and Vale College Higher Education conference – 22nd June 2022.

Presented research at Education Conference USW – 28th June 2022.

Journal article “They should just show their real self, no one is perfect:” using collage to explore 10- and 11-year-old's identity portrayal to help reframe e-safety is under review pending minor revisions in *Education 3-13* (2022).