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‘They are watching you do everything online’: Children's perceptions of social media surveillance

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Abstract

Through a Foucauldian lens, this qualitative study explored the perspectives and lived conditions of children's experiences of social media surveillance. Sixteen children between the ages of 10 and 11 years old participated in the creative method of collaging with an unstructured interview in four schools in South Wales, UK. Visual combined with verbal analysis found a nuanced picture of how social media surveillance has influenced children's cultural and social practices of their childhood. Despite the challenges of peer and adult control exemplified, children did demonstrate agency within their digital spaces. Policy implications should involve a stronger emphasis on developing children's emotional resilience and discernment surrounding perceived surveillance.

KEYWORDS

childhood, influence, perception, social media, surveillance

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the perspectives of children's experiences of social media surveillance and highlights their nuanced voices in relation to the cultural and social practices of their social media usage beyond the notion of a public/private or an online/offline binary. The

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emphasis of these experiences is related to the contextual affordance of their experience of childhood itself and how their social media practices are strongly related to their offline everyday life (Costa, 2018). This research argues that there is a shift of emphasis from viewing children's social media usage and perceptions of associated surveillance as a separate entity but rather viewing these practices within situated environments. Similarly, Miller (2016) suggests that social media should never be considered or viewed as just a virtual space that is separated from ordinary life and emphasises that as such the boundaries are permeable. Though both Costa (2018) and Miller's (2016) research is with adults and from more of an anthropological perspective, resonance can be drawn upon in relation to children's everyday practices in this research. Children and young people are heavy adopters of social media in the global north (Ofcom, 2022) and their inhabitation of digital spaces is now arguably firmly embedded in their peer culture (Charmaraman et al., 2022). For children, as mentioned, this invariably has an impact on the cultural and social practices of their childhood, and consequently, it is important to understand their subjectivity from their own perspective. This study draws upon fieldwork in the UK but may be applicable to a wider global context, particularly related to the notion of childhood practices in an underresearched area. Unlike everyday life though, social media does perpetuate the cultivation of an online persona (Duffy, 2019) which can be argued, is partly dependent on self-validation through likes and comments (Throuvala et al., 2019) while also being subject to algorithmic feeds and data surveillance (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2020). The digital space is not a value-free phenomenon, and the concept of surveillance takes many forms, most overtly with algorithms controlling advertisements and branding (Lyon, 2017). However, within children's digital spaces, it is perhaps parental, adult and peer surveillance which may be influencing their everyday life and cultural childhood practices in more subtle ways. Surveillance via social media is debatably a type of living condition that is a product of both mobile technology and digital affordances (Trottier, 2012).

Imagined social media surveillance

Overt social media surveillance such as data generation for economic purposes reduces the control over information that is disclosed in terms of identity and social preferences (Brown, 2014). Lyon (2017) argues that within digital spaces, surveillance is becoming part of everyday life and suggests that rather than individuals being complacent, they play an active role within this culture, through their own efforts to regulate and monitor that of themselves and others. Duffy and Chan (2018) use the phrase 'imagined surveillance' which they highlight steers individuals as social actors to present themselves within digital spaces in relation to how others perceive them. They also use the term 'cultural anxiety' to describe this fear of judgement, which can subsequently encourage social media users to overtly consider how their peers view them in digital spaces and enact a type of impression management (Goffman, 1959). For children, who may be more vulnerable in terms of identity portrayal and are more actively trying to fit in with their peers, this may be challenging to navigate, particularly because the rules of social media are ill-defined and unregulated (boyd, 2014). Evidently, social media technologies are not neutral and contribute to affordances of cultural and social context (Costa, 2018) which can contribute to children's perceptions of perceived surveillance.

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Peer social media surveillance

To further describe this complicated digital space, Jaynes (2019) suggests that a form of 'peer surveillance' occurs, 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 being portrayed on social media. Similarly, Gill (2021) reported that females expressed a concern that they were 'being watched' among friends and peers, a constant sense of being under scrutiny in a way that was both forensic (e.g. zooming in on photographs) and evaluative (making judgements). In Gill's (2021) research, most young people highlighted that they expected their photographs to be subject to critical scrutiny, even by close friends who might reasonably be expected to offer more affectionate and supportive feelings towards them. In research by Burnette et al. (2017), it was also highlighted that girls may be particularly susceptible to feeling scrutinised in relation to perceived beauty ideals and idealised imagery of perfection that filters generate. Arguably, social media amplifies perceptions of surveillance through the nature of the platforms with the premise of sharing photographs and creating profiles (Duffy, 2019).

Nawab and Khatin (2022) highlight how George Orwell's novel 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' has become glaringly apparent in connection with the digital life that now pervades society. They suggest that there is an artificial pressure for people to look and feel 'perfect' and that social currency in the forms of likes and comments can amplify this. Furthermore, this magnification of perceived surveillance for young people in current times encourages them to showcase themselves in a favourable light, which led Nawab and Khatin (2022) to use the term 'screenager' in reference to how their perception of self is so intrinsically and symbiotically linked to their image via social media. Children may be less aware of this surveillance and therefore less able to make informed decisions about what they wish to publicise (Trottier, 2012). Consequently, children may require more overt teachings about potential surveillance to have a shrewder control of their self-presentation, especially as their impression management now must translate to digital contexts (Litt, 2012). Similarly, they need support to ensure that their social media usage and perceptions of surveillance better reflect their social and cultural practices, as an enactment of their situated usage (Costa, 2018).

UK context of children's education—Adult surveillance

Currently, in schools in the UK, children are taught about the overt physical dangers of social media such as catfishing, paedophiles, grooming and the dangers of communicating with strangers. In addition, safety concerns also address the inappropriate content that children may access and the possibility of cyberbullying. This is concurrent with the Children's Commissioner Report (2018), where there is also a strong sense of staying safe online and strict privacy rules are seen as a reflection of teacher and parental messages about online safety. In addition to parental and teacher concerns, new legislation in the form of the Online Safety Bill (Online Safety Bill, 2022) will help to protect children from harm, with social media platforms being more accountable for the content that children can access and easier mechanisms for reporting inappropriate use such as material that supports child exploitation and terrorism.

However, moving beyond an e-safety agenda it is useful to view how social media is pervading children's lives in a less overt way and how 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

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algorithmic judgements (Alford, 2012). Children's digital spaces which now heavily incorporate social media use are arguably forcing a change in the way children socialise. It is therefore essential that further attention needs to be directed at hearing the child's voice and really understanding the nuanced experience of children's social media use. Utilising first-hand accounts of the socially contingent and divergent nature of children and young people's experiences, that facilitate both positive and negative encounters will help promote resilience in a way that formal legislation and current education measures cannot attend to.

Parental social media surveillance

The ethical rights of the child and their sense of agency have come into question in recent years, as children often have an involuntary involvement and a 'digital footprint' before they are born. Parents may share the foetal ultrasound scan photograph as a way of announcing the pregnancy and documenting their children's milestones in a public forum (Phippen & Bond, 2019). This 'intimate surveillance' has become a commonplace practice among parents and this 'datafication' of childhood is a norm (Lupton & Williamson, 2017). Interestingly, though, when children themselves start having a social media presence a dichotomy exists between those parents that are fearful of the implications and those that embrace it (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Gentile et al. (2014) suggest that there are two distinctly different surveillance approaches that parents may adopt in relation to their children's digital use. Namely, at one end of the spectrum, 'restrictive monitoring' is a parenting style characterised by checking and censoring what children are allowed to view and interact with. On the other end, 'active mediation' is typified by discussing the 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. 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 & Schreurs, 2020).

Research aim

This qualitative study explored the perspectives and lived conditions of children's experiences of social media surveillance. An active commitment to hearing the child's voice when researching childhood was situated at the heart of this research, particularly as much that is known about children's social media use is reported by adults and often through a discourse of risk and harm (Phippen & Street, 2022). Specifically, this study explored:

1. How children between 10 and 11 years of age understand and experience social media surveillance
2. How these experiences of social media surveillance affect their cultural practices of childhood.

Theoretical framework

A Foucauldian lens was adopted to view these childhood experiences, relating social media surveillance to power and control and how the ephemeral nature of social media and the virtual reality that it perpetuates affects how children view themselves and others. These power relations

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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 panopticon[i] with power and control now more covertly facilitated by technology and the oscillation of virtual realities affecting identity construction and subjective experience (Foucault, 1980). The theoretical underpinning of this research supports the view that children's social media use is related to both peer and parental/adult surveillance and consequently navigating digital spaces is complex. Foucault (1980, 1995) refers primarily to institutional mechanisms and dominant discourses enacted by the government, Lyon (2017), extending this notion in the context of social media, suggests that individuals perceive the scrutiny that *could* take place. Consequently, efforts to control the perceived audience within digital spaces is a more hidden type of surveillance that in effect does reaffirm power relations but in a much less overt way. Lyon (2017) coined the term 'surveillance imaginaries' to describe this concept in relation to the monitoring that may take place for both data purposes and consumerism as well as by others within digital spaces. 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). Essentially, this covert type of surveillance infiltrates social culture and affects the way individuals interact with each other and how they perceive themselves. However, the concept of 'perceived surveillance' in this research is not deterministic but rather an exploration of peer culture, while also considering a more negative embodied surveillance that is linked to power and control.

METHODOLOGY

Creative participatory methodology

The study reported in this article utilised a creative participatory methodology employing collaging with an unstructured interview. This exploratory approach facilitated an investigation into how children make-meaning of their perceptions of social media surveillance and how this is part of their interpretation of the digital spaces that they occupy. Within the social sciences, methodological boundaries are expanding, and creative methods are a growing area (Kara, 2015), which is useful when working with children, as it allows a vehicle of expression that is not reliant on linguistic ability and arguably a broader repertoire of inclusion (Mackworth-Young et al., 2020). While these methods do not necessarily provide greater authenticity, they do legitimise their views (Kaplun, 2019) and allow for a richer description of their lived condition (Trottier, 2012).

Recruitment

Four primary schools in South Wales (UK) were recruited for the research, each of these schools had a varying socio-economic bias, based on their Free School Meal status. In addition, the schools had a different geographical context, for example, rural, inner city and suburban as well as incidence of English as an additional language (EAL). In each of the settings, the class teacher helped to select potential children suitable to provide a range of participants in terms of educational attainment, gender and ethnicity. Sixteen self-nominated children, in Year 6 (the final year of primary school in the UK) and between 10 and 11 years old participated in the study. This age group was of particular interest because it is often the time when children gain more

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independence, have their first mobile phone and when social media usage increases sharply, despite the terms of service being 13 years of age (Ofcom, 2022).

Ethics

Ethical considerations beyond the binary view of what is right or wrong were held paramount in this research, with the child participants positioned centrally (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Ethical approval from the University of South Wales was gained prior to the school gatekeeper's being approached. Parents were given detailed information about the research study and parental consent was gained once the children had expressed an interest in the research. The children were provided with age-appropriate information sheets and invited to ask questions, with assent taken verbally. However, this was not viewed as a definitive agreement of participation and signs of dissent both behaviourally and emotionally were continually monitored (Alderson & Morrow, 2011).

Method

The children, in this study, were invited to create a visual representation of their perceptions of social media surveillance using collage-making materials such as coloured beads, scrabble letters, ribbon, sequins, tissue paper and feathers, for example, alongside an informal unstructured interview (Roberts & Woods, 2018). Creative methods allow children to be situated as social actors within the embodiment of childhood research and facilitate a response that is more visceral (Eldén, 2013). Mannay (2016) suggests that producing images requires self-reflection and deeper thought, which consequently encourages participants to slow down and engage with their deeper consciousness. Furthermore, collaging permits ideas to be conceptualised in a more organic way, where profound feelings and subtle nuances can be explored, while also acting as a 'tin opener' for talk (Roberts & Woods, 2018). The children were presented with the collage materials depicted in Figure 1 and were encouraged to create a mixed media artefact that involved cutting, arranging and sticking materials onto a piece of coloured card (Dutton et al., 2019).

Alongside this, the interviews took an unstructured approach, to allow the children to direct their own lens, to encourage reflexivity and for the participants to feel as comfortable and as empowered as possible (Yin, 2016). There was one interviewer for all participants and two initial questions were asked: How do you see yourself on social media? How do others see you on social media? Following this, lines of enquiry were pursued in relation to their emerging visual tableau as a verbal vehicle of self-expression. Roberts and Woods (2018) suggest that the collage and the interview are intrinsically linked and cannot be viewed in isolation, this Grbich (2012) coins an 'intermingling' of methods. Moreover, the collage can act as a catalyst to help conceptualise and articulate abstract ideas, which may be particularly helpful for children (Eldén, 2013). Collaging can also facilitate visual metaphors and can open dialogue in a non-threatening way (Mannay et al., 2017). The combination of the verbal and the visual can add more depth to responses and a deep richness to the meaning-making process with a self-directed narrative (Mackworth-Young et al., 2020). Despite the participatory nature of the method adopted, the research took place in a school setting, during the school day and consequently this was not a value-free space and power differentials may still exist between children and adults (Bland, 2017). Nevertheless, Mannay (2016) discusses that rather than viewing participatory research as an all–or-nothing

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FIGURE 1 Collage materials presented to the participants in the research.

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. This was exemplified in this research by the length of the interview and collaging process which ranged from 20 min to an hour, depending on the child's interest and continuing signs of assent.

Analysis

Data generated in this study went through a robust analysis process, which is particularly important to make transparent as often in creative, participatory research this element is scantily documented (Yin, 2016). Kara et al. (2021, p. 83) acknowledge the difficulties with creative data analysis but suggest viewing it as the 'beating heart' rather than a form of mysterious 'dark art'. Adopting this reframing analogy, the 'messiness' of the data was embraced, and the interpretation drew upon several stages. Firstly, questions derived from Grbich (2012) and Rose (2016) were used to analyse the data, these were initially basic: What is being shown? How are the components being arranged? 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? The analytical process then adopted a more semiotic approach that linked the image and the narrative, with a visuo-textual framework created by Brown and Collins (2021). 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

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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). Though the analysis process was less participatory for the children than the method, member checking did take place to ensure that it was reflective of their views and that they were involved in a participatory way.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of this research situates the study and its participants within the cultural and social practices of how they perceived social media surveillance and its impact on their childhood experience. Layers of analysis that combined the verbal- and visual-derived meaning from three themes presented in this article: (1) the omnipresent other—surveillance imaginaries, (2) looking and judging—peer surveillance and (3) limiting and restricting—adult surveillance. All these themes served to demonstrate through a Foucauldian lens differing ways of how power and control are apparent within children's digital spaces, though a prevailing sense of child agency also remained apparent.

The omnipresent other—Surveillance imaginaries

A more subtle control that social media perpetuates was demonstrated in many children's comments, which related to an 'omnipresent other', a wider force that was not specifically referred to but seemingly took the form of George Orwell's 'big brother'.[ii] The pronoun 'they' was often referred to in this context, which sometimes had a monetary/economic slant but sometimes a more sinister one. James (CI13)[iii] suggested that 'they are watching everything you do online', though did not specify who he meant by 'they'. This also took a menacing turn for Simon (CI9) who said, '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'. The control and power demonstrated here from this seemingly outside force suggest that mechanisms are in place in digital spaces to necessitate certain behaviours and feelings of being watched. Furthermore, rather than being ephemeral in nature, as apps like Snapchat necessitate, James (CI13) explained the permanence of social media with his 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.

These examples demonstrate that essentially this type of imagined 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). In this research, as the participants are young, they may be less aware of this type of surveillance and less able to make decisions about what they wish to publicise.

This type of surveillance was discussed by Isabel (CI1) as a form of being judged on social media, which she depicted on her collage with googly eyes that she placed centrally at the top of her collage as seen in Figure 2.

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FIGURE 2 Excerpt from Isabel's collage, showing eyes that are always watching.

Her narration further emphasised this, by saying, 'I'm putting these eyes right in the middle, looking, people are always judging you on social media'. Similarly, Henry (CI16) also depicted an image of eyes, to metaphorically reflect the watching and judging element of social media and he also commented that 'other people can see your stuff on social media, they can see your life online…' which highlights the voyeuristic element of social media and the subtle control that this imposes.

This can lead to what Duffy and Chan (2018) coin as 'cultural anxiety', the notion that potential online surveillance and the subsequent implications of social media use, can encourage an unduly concern with a type of impression management (Goffman, 1959). Though Duffy and Chan (2018) utilise an older sample in their research (18–24 years), their qualitative data suggest similar results to this data. Furthermore, within this data, as the sample is considerably younger, they may be even more concerned with this type of perceived imaginary scrutiny as 10 and 11 years of age is a pivotal time for embarking with social media platforms for the first time (Ofcom, 2022), and a transitional period (Cirucci, 2013) in terms of peer acceptance and friendship group formation (Pea et al., 2012).

Looking and judging—Peer surveillance

Millie (CI6) in her interview and college excerpt illustrated in Figure 3 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 below shows her visualisation of how her phone looks.

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.

She further emphasises this subtle control that exists by saying 'all my friends have them [apps]' which could exemplify peer pressure and a desire to fit in with peers. Moreover, Millie (CI6)

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FIGURE 3 Excerpt from Millie's collage showing social media apps on a smartphone.

highlights pressure to engage with certain apps and social media platforms through her comment 'there are a lot of apps out there. This is what my friend's phones looks like too, full of apps, loaded with lots and lots of stuff like this'. Arguably, then this pressure to use social media has become part of peer culture (Charmaraman et al., 2022).

Also worth noting is that children now have full-time access to their peers in a way that previous generations did not and consequently, this overriding feeling of needing to belong and fit in with peers could be heightened through this type of perceived surveillance (Omrod, 2014).

Oscar (CI5) also alludes 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 4 emphasises this.

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 et al., 2017) which demonstrates an understanding of how peer surveillance may be influencing children's digital spaces.

The reciprocal element of social media, which requires a subtle type of surveillance, whereby likes and comments are made on posts, was sometimes portrayed in problematic terms in relation to emotional dangers that could affect self-esteem. Karen (CI11), for example, suggested that

> 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

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FIGURE 4 Excerpt from Oscar's collage, showing his metaphorical handle for keeping things in perspective on social media.

> using social media. When other people do these things, they 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 & John, 2018). Consequently, this type of peer surveillance can have emotional ramifications and can affect how children behave and permeate their peer culture.

There was also a clear gender divide in terms of the perceived scrutiny and peer surveillance that took place in relation to physical looks. Emotional dangers were mentioned, more so by the girls and this was explored in relation to Snapchat filters and perceived beauty ideals. For example, Karen (CI11) 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, which resonates with Gill's (2021) research, which also documents this type of scrutiny based on typified beauty. This notion was also termed in hypothetical situations or relating to other people's experiences though as mentioned by Millie (CI6):

> 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

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> 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 et al. (2017) who suggested that body image concerns were 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 (Chou & Edge, 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.

Limiting and restricting—Adult surveillance

This theme has incorporated both parental and teacher/practitioner surveillance to encompass a wider term of 'adult surveillance' whereby the power is highlighted as more overt in terms of restricting and controlling children's social media use. Parental monitoring was seen to be a way of controlling both children's access to social media and which platforms they were allowed to go on (Gentile et al., 2014). This was also particularly apparent with the two girls who disclosed at the outset that they were not allowed 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 (Phippen & Bond, 2019). 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.

However, 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. 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. However, this type of 'restrictive monitoring' described is not without consequences for children, in terms of cultural norms and peer acceptance.

Parental monitoring by Lloyd (CI3) was depicted in less binary terms than the two female non-social media users and he discussed his parent's supervising in terms of their 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. It is therefore apparent that control by parents may not be about the values of social media but rather relating to concerns about safeguarding (Baccarella et al., 2018) which do not consider consumerism nor the more subtle emotional risks (Throuvala et al., 2019).

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Self-censorship and a form of agency were demonstrated by many children in this research in relation to safety concerns, particularly from potential predatory behaviour, that may take the form of grooming and catfishing (Reeves & Crowther, 2019). Comments such as 'paedos' (Karen, CI11) were iterated many times. Other opinions also suggested this, for example, Sophie (CI2) said that certain individuals could 'hurt you or do something to you'. Similarly, Ian (CI12) suggested that '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'. Though it is unclear where this perceived unwanted surveillance comes from and whether this is an inevitable jeopardy of using social media or more the rhetoric that the media and adults reiterate. Comparisons can be drawn 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 in 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 lay less in the hands of so-called 'strangers' though, as most victims of such abuse are known to the perpetrator (Wodda, 2018). Despite the unlikely circumstances of experiencing predatory behaviour online (Reeves & Crowther, 2019), this perceived danger was seemingly indoctrinated in many children's consciousness and identity concealment was exemplified as an overt safety measure by adult surveillance measures. For example, Lloyd (CI3) was keen to express how he obscured his real identity on social media, as a means of keeping safe and 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 5, where his name is partially obscured with the tops of the gold letters apparent, with the rest of the name has been covered with a piece of animal print paper.[iv]

Like Lloyd, Oscar (CI5) also reiterated this strategy and suggested that he camouflages and distorts his face on social media to protect his identity and keep himself safe online, 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 6, his representation of this is depicted with the pompoms he has used to show his distorted face.

FIGURE 5 Excerpt from Lloyd's collage, showing the concealment of his name on social media to protect his identity.

FIGURE 6 Excerpt from Oscar's collage, showing his distorted face on social media.

Both examples emphasise that children, rather than being passive social agents, 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 et al., 2016). While they demonstrate that they are aware of surveillance and how others view them, this is not without agency. As resonates with other research (Pyer et al., 2019), the surveillance dangers of social media that children commented on were physical in the main in the form of online grooming, catfishing and predatory behaviour, which aligns with the predominance of e-safety concerns of parents and teachers (Alford, 2012). Seemingly, the anonymity that social media allows makes the grounds for deceit possible jeopardy that they can encounter (Reeves & Crowther, 2019). Children in this research employed various strategies to keep safe within digital spaces as mentioned in terms of identity concealment. Another example was to ensure that they did not reveal any personal information that could identify where they lived or went to school. David (CI4) was very 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 7, where he has drawn himself in his Nike sweatshirt so that no one can identify him from his school uniform.

CONCLUSION

In this article, surveillance is exemplified as a type of lived condition by the narrative and images that the children depicted through their collages. It could be suggested that consequently, surveillance is a product of mobile technology and social media use and thus a more complex and intricate phenomenon that is more than just a public/private or online/offline binary in terms of identity portrayal and perception of others. Children in this research demonstrated discernment and self-censorship in terms of perceived physical dangers as well as more imagined surveillance. However, what has emerged from the analysis, is a complex and nuanced picture of children's engagement with social media, which can be active and passive, though with the overriding goal of maintaining a feeling of safety regarding their sense of self. Their experiences noted are in relation to the cultural and social practices of their childhood and are not contextually

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FIGURE 7 Excerpt from David's collage, showing him not wearing his school uniform.

different or separate from their offline everyday life (Costa, 2018; Miller, 2016). In agreement with Lyon's (2017) notion of 'surveillance imaginaries', children in this research, perceived the scrutiny they may receive as more definitive than 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). Peer 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 to adhere to beauty ideals (Duffy & Chan, 2018).

From a Foucauldian perspective, while 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. Young social media users may be less aware of how to curate their own identities 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). Evidently, this social media type of lived condition goes beyond the apps themselves and is 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 needed the opportunity to discuss the repercussions of this surveillance and how it may affect their decision-making. In terms of Foucault's (1980) analysis of cultural 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 children's childhood and how they interpret

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these cultural practices. Evidently, this is not without discourses of power and control, relating specifically to how social media practices are portrayed by adults and interpreted by children.

Policy and practice implications

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. Open-ended discussions, with a more individualised approach, are advised in terms of helping children to explore their feelings about their social media use and how they perceive their digital spaces. Arguably, the real danger for children's social media use lies less with predatory behaviour and perceived surveillance but more from peer-to-peer surveillance which renders children emotionally vulnerable. Evidently, the way that more physical 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. The Online Safety Bill (Online Safety Bill, 2022) with a government manifesto to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online while still defending free expression, is an important move forward in terms of safeguarding children and young people. However, further attention needs to be directed at hearing the child's voice and really understanding the nuanced experience of children's social media use. Researching with children and giving them the opportunity to narrate their own experiences of social media use must play a more important role in understanding the broader agenda that social media facilitates.

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The author declares no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

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

[ii] 'Big brother' is a term used in George Orwell's (2014) book '1984' and is used commonly to describe a person or organisation that gains control over people's lives.

[iii] A pseudonym followed by Collage Interview (CI, number) indicates a participant.

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

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