


“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

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Abstract

Social media use is changing the experience of socialization for younger children, as they are heavy adopters of these platforms despite the terms of service being 13 years of age. This research recruited eight Year 6 focus groups in four primary schools and employed a range of activities to explore their views surrounding social media. Results indicate that young children are aware of overt dangers, such as catfishing, but may experience negative subjective experiences when interacting on social media. This was particularly apparent in the discussions around Snapchat filters (digital overlays placed over photographs). It is necessary to address emotional resilience in response to this.

Keywords

social media, childhood, identity, subjective experience, emotional risk

Introduction

Transformation of the digital landscape, made possible by ease of access to the internet and the pervasive influence of social media, is changing the way children and young people socialize (Pea et al., 2012). Siedman (2013) argues that social media cultures tend to prioritize a need to belong and encourage self-disclosure that is innately bound up with issues of self-presentation. Through online interactions, close friendships can be validated for children and strengthened (Vorderer et al., 2016), though children’s culture is caught within a dilemma of agency versus social vulnerability. On one hand, young people are described as oversharing by “broadcasting” their lives on social media and, on the other hand, they are seen as becoming socially isolated, awkwardly “hiding behind their screens” and engaging in virtual social interactions (Thomson et al., 2018). James and James (2004) argue that childhood is a social space within which children negotiate their own and other’s identities at both the macro-level (collective, structural, and institutional) and the micro-level of everyday interactions. Leppänen et al. (2015) stress that each social media platform has a particular set of rules, dynamics, and etiquette that users need to adhere to when posting. 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 have to navigate and social media

has irrevocably altered the notions of community, space, identity, and the relationship between them (Thomson et al., 2018). This article contributes to the field of social media by making the connection between identity portrayal and how children present themselves online and exploring their subjective experience of this. Despite apprehension from parents and teachers, children may have more autonomy than realized and discourse associated with social media risk may not be as dominant as adults fear. Identity formation begins in childhood, with children’s first tentative representations, and gains prominence during adolescence. Adolescents and pre-adolescents can experience an “identity crisis” (Erikson, 1968), that is, a temporary instability and confusion as they struggle with ego growth, alternatives, and choices. Identity portrayal is a key component of social media use (Dooly, 2017), but the contrived nature of social media platforms makes identity more of constructed reality compared with real-life interactions. For “twens” (8- to 12-year olds), who are on the cusp of adolescence, the presentation of a “digital identity” involves first steps in social positioning in terms of

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gender and culture, often across social media platforms, and the selection of visual images and words to construct “of-the-moment” online identities (Bourdieu, 1991). It could be argued that profile pages of social media networks are artifacts that exist to position the creator in relation to the reader/audience. They carry meaning, and they are representations of the world the author wishes to communicate, but are limited due to the constraint of the design (Brough et al., 2020). It is a deliberate presentation of self, an identity that is presented to the community in which socialization occurs (Thomson et al., 2018).

Recent theorizing about identity formation emphasizes the impact on the individual of the exponential growth of the digital landscape. Such growth takes the form of apps, social media platforms, data surveillance, and individualized algorithmic feeds for advertisements, alongside celebrity, blogger, and YouTuber’s widespread influence. The pervading nature of this digital landscape 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 that comprises 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 (Deleuze, 1992). 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 ever 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). For children, therefore, online activity signifies not only questions about identity formation but also the subjective experience of childhood itself.

Numbers of users of social media have exponentially increased in recent years with children and young people recognized as heavy adopters of virtual social networks (Ranzini & Hoek, 2017). Terms of service for the major social media platforms stipulate that the recommended age for joining social media sites is 13 years old (Children’s Commissioner, 2018). However, 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 age, when the number of online social media profile doubles from 21% to 43%, for this age group (Ofcom, 2018). This sharp increase in social media use at this key age may be because the final year of primary school is a pivotal time for the development of social networks independent from parents and, ideally, the formation of supportive peer relationships to navigate the social world (Pea et al., 2012). Likewise, Cirucci (2013) highlights the fact 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. Consequently, they are

potentially in a vulnerable position in terms of how they portray themselves online as they are not always aware of what is appropriate for the public domain or the particular social media platform they are navigating (Rideout et al., 2010). The distinction between online and offline subjectivities is not always clear and boundaries are not rigid; for example, children may subjectively perceive other people’s “highlight reel” depicted via social media as their real life (Burnette et al., 2017). Possible and idealized selves can be presented online and this can propagate pressure to continually adopt this fictitious persona (Burnette et al., 2017). Allowing others to “like” and comment on personal lives can have implications for self-esteem; how they are perceived by others is inextricably linked to how they feel about themselves and this social acceptance and approval by peers is essential for the wellbeing of children and young people (Brough et al., 2020; Chae, 2017; Koutamantis et al., 2015).

Public debates about children’s digital use are often infused with sweeping claims about social change; they are over-stated or unduly polarized with little attempt to access children’s voices and perspectives (Buckingham, 2017). Moral panics about digital childhoods, grounded or not, play an integral part in shaping discourse surrounding social media use (Thomson et al., 2018). Social media use is significantly under-researched within the tween contingent (Huk, 2016) and much that is known about social media is derived from research conducted with older teenagers and adults (Burnette et al., 2017). In addition, most research documents specific problems associated with usage, such as Facebook depression, cyber bullying, sexting, and negative body image (McDool et al., 2016). Furthermore, the rules of engagement are ill-defined and unregulated, so that unprotected “imagined communities” are created (boyd, 2014). Lincoln (2012) argues that young people are digital natives and social media has become a normalized part of their everyday lives. This may not be the case though and the impact of digital footprints, digital identity, and inappropriate social media use are a concern of schools and parents, particularly as adults may use social media in a very different way (Martin et al., 2018). A real apprehension is that younger children are accessing these platforms and engaging in activities that could shape their social, emotional, and cognitive development and expose them to tasks that were previously reserved for adolescents or adults who are better equipped to deal with the potential pitfalls (Rideout et al., 2010). To complicate matters further, some teachers and parents are not “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001; White & LeCornu, 2011) and consequently do not necessarily know the implications of social media use and how they can appropriately safeguard children.

Methodology

This article describes an exploratory pilot study that forms part of a wider doctoral study. The primary aim was to explore children’s perceptions of social media, identity

portrayal, and subjectivities that emerged within the target age group (Year 6 pupils aged 10 and 11 years old). Specific research questions focused on children's understanding of social media use and how they made sense of their engagement online. Due to ethical concerns regarding collusion, the study sought to explore children's general views of social media rather than their own particular usage at this point as the children were under the age of the recommended terms of service and there were risk concerns due to the possibility of participants making disclosures of a sensitive nature. Ongoing consent was paramount to this study, for example, checking participants' understandings of their ethical rights throughout the research process and ensuring they had an active role in data collection (O'Reilly et al., 2013).

Social media affords a significant amount of time viewing idealized profiles, pictures, and status updates that may affect psychological wellbeing (Chou & Edge, 2012). In this research, a theoretical underpinning of Goffman's (1959) impression management was adopted which is frequently employed to explain social media-based self-perception and identity within contemporary research (Hogan, 2010). This was specifically selected as a lens for analyzing these data, as Erikson's psycho-social theory is deterministic in terms of being a conceptualized model and has a trajectory that is age-related, which may not be relatable to children's social media experiences. Similarly, post-modernist theory highlights power and control that culminates in dominant discourse. 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. Goffman (1959) asserted that individuals strive to control or guide the impression of how others perceive them through how they present their appearance, attitude, and manner depending on the audience they encounter, therefore, giving individuals more autonomy than psycho-social and post-modernist theories. Social interactions with others as an audience could consequently be viewed as the building blocks of our identity formation and how our beliefs, values, and behaviors are shaped. Goffman's (1971) dramaturgical approach refers to the theatrical representation of life, individuals like stage performers have both a back stage (private identity) and a frontstage identity (the public self). Identities that are depicted in this way can therefore shift depending on both the roles and the stages in use. Social media provides an additional platform for performances to be acted out, with individuals having the ability to alter, manipulate, or conceal their physical identity if they so desire. However, this distinction in identity may not be as definitive and impression management may not be as straight forward to manipulate as it is in real life. Furthermore, Goffman 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 in managing ones' identity and social relations. This "imaginary audience" is a useful lens to attempt to understand how users present their identity online and how they interact with each other via social media.

Newby (2014) asserts that focus groups can be used in the early stages of an investigation to obtain insights prior to the main investigation and can complement other methods. This method can reveal attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and feelings of participants and can help facilitate a holistic picture of children's culture and language; a consensual view with rich responses (O'Reilly et al., 2013). While there are many strengths when using this method, there are inevitably weaknesses; groups can feel inhibiting to some children, some participants may dominate the discussion and their behavior may lead to a false sense of consensus and a "group effect" of conformity (Wilson, 2017). Four primary schools in the South Wales area were recruited for the research with varying demographics of both a higher and a lower socio-economic bias based on their intake indicated by Free School Meal status. Eight focus groups were conducted in total, two in each setting, $N=40$ (participants were between 10 and 11 years old) self-nominated children, 18 males and 22 females. In total, 169.23 min of audio discussion were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The focus group discussions varied considerably in length, the longest was 37.14 min and the shortest was 11.29 min with an average of 21.15 min. In each focus group discussion, four activities were utilized in an attempt to stimulate discussion and arouse interest in the topic. These are shown in Figure 1.

Focus Group Activity 1—"Sorting of Logos"

Participants were asked to sort the cards into two categories—"social media logos" and "not social media logos." Cards depicting social media logos of the main online platforms were created along with cards depicting other generic logos (such as Starbucks, Nike, and Google). Following the sorting activity, the researcher asked:

1. How did you know which were the social media logos?
2. What do you know about social media?
3. What is social media used for?

Focus Group Activity 2—"Snapchat Filters"

Participants were shown profile photographs of people with various Snapchat filters added (digital overlays placed over photographs). The researcher asked:

1. What are these filters for?
2. How do they make people look?
3. How are these different from how they look in real life?
4. Why do people use these filters?



Figure 1. Examples of the focus group activities used.

Focus Group Activity 3—“Emojis”

Participants were shown a selection of emojis and asked to categorize them according to different criteria, for example, emojis that show “happiness,” “sadness,” “places,” and “activity.” The researcher asked:

1. How are these emojis used?
2. Are these emojis helpful? How?
3. Do you always know how people are feeling when they use emojis? How?
4. Why do people use emojis?
5. How do people use emojis on social media?

Focus Group Activity 4—“Profiles”

Participants were shown three faux profiles from Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook, and the researcher asked:

1. What are these showing?
2. Do you think these people are real? How do you know?

3. What do you know about these people?
4. How can we show our identity on social media?
5. What problems may happen? Why?

The four activities were presented in the same order to each focus group and the same questions were asked (as depicted above). However, using stimulus within the focus groups allowed a depth of conversation that moved beyond the answering of these questions (Newby, 2014). The researcher also made field notes about conversations with children as well as a reflexive diary to record personal responses to the process of data collection.

Data Analysis

The transcripts of the focus groups were typed up verbatim shortly after they took place in the four different settings. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilized to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social worlds (Smith & Osborn, 2003), in this case, their digital world. Consequently, this data analysis

is concerned with individual and group perceptions of social media; how it is used and how identity formation is perceived as a subjective experience rather than trying to make a consensus or objective statement. Steps followed adhered to Smith et al.'s (1999) model, initially, the transcript was read and re-read several times to achieve a general sense of what was being said by the group. Initial notes were then made by hand on the transcripts and emergent themes were created from these, which were clustered together into subordinate themes. The same process was repeated for each focus group and NVivo software was employed to collate emergent sub-ordinate themes (Smith et al., 2009) from the eight focus groups. Finally, super-ordinate themes were developed from these sub-ordinate themes of the pilot study.

Children's Knowledge of Social Media Use is Astute

In all of the focus groups, the first sorting activity prompted the participants to identify appropriately Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp as social media logos. A couple of children thought that Google and Firefox should also be in this category, but this was disputed by other children. All groups were confident giving a definition of what social media is with many citing similar answers, such as, "technically you communicate to other people" (Child E, FG1) and "you can post stuff on it" (Child B, FG4). All were clear about why people use social media and gave similar definitions: "you can send pictures and that and you can play games which each other" (Child K, FG3), and "you can share things with your friends" (Child N, FG7). Evidently, participants were clear about the reasons for posting online via social media, with reasons cited including, to entertain, to share news, and "just to celebrate something" (Child B, FG4). Furthermore, children were generally aware that these were outward facing platforms, where others have the capacity to interact and communicate about a post or status, and "can comment on it" (Child A, FG4). Some participants discussed the notion that the rules and boundaries of what is appropriate to share are not clear. This is illustrated by Child N (FG3) who noted that some people overshare on social media:

Don't expose too much about yourself but enough if you want to share your victory, your successes. Then you can do that, but not every single thing, like that you had fish fingers for tea and then I went for a walk in the park with my dog.

Child N (FG3) was aware of the permanence of social media posts. They remarked that even with Snapchat and Instagram, there is the danger that someone has taken a screenshot or saved the post, "because once it is live, you can't delete or bring it back." Child I (FG2) suggested that there is an inherent interactional basis to social media that it is contingent on others' perceptions of you. "It is not just you doing all the work," they commented, "You have to let

everyone get involved." Therefore, what you post online is susceptible to comments, likes, and opinions, which may not always resound with the way you perceived it yourself. The vast majority of participants in the groups disclosed that they were on social media platforms. One child commented, for example, that they were "pretty much on every one of them apart from MySpace" (Child I, FG2). However, none of the participants explicitly described their own usage and how they engage with social media platforms. Out of the forty participants, only two children said that they did not have any social media accounts. One child commented, "I'm not allowed it, any of these things" (Child B, FG5) and the other said, "most social media says if you are thirteen or over you can only make an account if you are thirteen or over" (Child F, FG2). Many children spoke about the age restrictions that were in place on social media, however and, interestingly in Focus Group 1, no one disclosed that they had their own account until the researcher stopped recording. Some children said how easy it was to falsify your age on social media accounts and how this was the norm among their age group. Children in the focus groups had a clear idea of boundaries when using social media. Some of these involved being able to tell a parent or trusted adult if there was a problem. Child A (FG1) said, "it is always safe to go and tell someone that you trust," while Child C in the same group raised the importance of being open about social media use, advising, "don't keep a secret, tell your parents and stuff."

Discretion and Discernment in Relation to Impression Management

It was not clear from all the participants, if their parents knew if they had social media accounts or not but some children did discuss how their parents did have control over their social media use. Child D (FG5) said "my Mum like checks every week" and has access to her accounts. This appeared to happen on an ad hoc basis though and participants did not make it clear if parents monitored this via a phone, handheld device, or laptop. Child N (FG7) was specific when questioned further and said "[Mum] always checks every week and checks on my activity, what I have done and everything and she always checks and says don't do this or don't do that." Several children discussed making their account private. Another child discussed being careful with the settings and on Snapchat can adapt them accordingly, saying, "there used to be like a tracking thing with a ghost but you can turn that off" (Child L, FG3). Other children emphasized that it was important that the people you add as "friends" are known to you in real life "on Snapchat only your friends can see" (Child D, FG5). This fits partially with the privacy settings previously mentioned but goes beyond this into the realms of what they post and why. Child L (FG7) describes their sense of agency in making choices about sharing details of her life with her family:

Yes, so you can share videos with your family and friends or like distant family when they are like far away. So if they were like in Australia or something and you had to, you couldn't see them for a long time then you could text them and stuff and have conversation about different things.

This sense of agency is also evident in children's discussion of their choice of profile picture, particularly in relation to choices about using an avatar or "bit emoji" and how much information they revealed about themselves in profiles and posts. Focus Group participants generally appeared to have a good knowledge and understanding of what identity is and a seemingly strong concept of self and how this was portrayed via a social media platform. This was often described, however, as being intrinsically bound by physical appearance as described by Child I (FG2) who said, "um, take a photo and put it on your profile picture." Sometimes, this was extended with an added dimension of personal description, for example, Child L (FG3) who said, "like you could have your profile picture of you and then a little caption underneath and tell them what you like." This was also reiterated by Child D (FG5) who similarly made the connection to other attributes beyond the physical with their comment relating to identity as "who you are, what your name is and what your age is maybe . . ." However, some participants went beyond this basic description of identity and connected the concept of how people perceive them with what they choose to reveal on social media. This was evident with Child T (FG8) with their comment "say like you look at the identity of someone, it gives you information about them." Two participants commented that your perception of self may be affected by how many followers you have and your perceived popularity and the fact that "people might like argue if people have more followers than them" (Child K, FG3). Self-confidence was also commented on in response to how people might use filters on social media platforms (Child O, FG3). This was often linked to physical appearance "so people wouldn't really know the real you. There is a lot of makeup and filters" (Child B, FG5).

Some children in the focus groups appeared to have a good understanding of the difference between how they are in real life and how they present themselves on social media. For example, a conversation between the following two children in FG3 included this turn:

- Child K: Is it like yourself?
 Child L: Yourself. Your character.

Similarly, Child F (FG2) discussed that you did not have to reveal your true identity:

On my TikTok I don't show my face or show my real name because I don't want people to know me. You can have a fake name, like Unicorn 1, 2, 3 it doesn't have to be [name].

This demonstrates an element of discernment and an overt attempt to differentiate between real life and social media.

Focus Group activity 3 "Snapchat filters" (digital overlays placed over photographs) yielded rich discussion with the participants keen to discuss how they are used and why they are an integral part of social media use. From the data, it emerged that there were two distinct reasons for using these filters with a clear and distinct gender divide: for entertainment (manipulation of mood) or to make themselves look prettier (manipulation of images). The majority of the boys discussed using animal filters, adding moveable ears, exaggerating features, and making themselves look silly for entertainment purposes. Using these filters was seen as "to cheer people up" (Child L, FG3) "or just to entertain people" (Child F, FG2), with a humorous intention, "yeah you can look funny" (Child L, FG7). It was portrayed as a relatively harmless pastime that was evidently popular among the boys in this age group "so it can be to have fun and a joke and that" (Child G FG2). In contrast, the majority of girls explained that they used them to alter and enhance their appearance, "to make you look prettier and unrecognisable" (Child B, FG5) and in the same group, Child A said, "lots of girls use it to make themselves look better." Covering up of perceived flaws was also commented on, for example, Child A (FG5) said, "Snapchat can make you look flawless, you don't have spots, you don't have pores or nothing, no scars or anything." Similarly, Child R (FG8) said, "and sometimes if they want to, so say they don't think they look very good they might change their face to look a bit better." In addition, adhering to perceived goals and idealized versions was also noted "because you might have spots and other people may think you are ugly. But you're not. You may think that you need filters but you don't" (Child B, FG1). Similarly, one participant (Child K, FG3) emphasized that changing your appearance is not just for your own feeling of self-worth but "to make people interested in them," thus illustrating that popularity is to do with appearance rather than personality. This preoccupation with body image was also commented on by Child D, (FG5), who said, "it means it goes thinner [referring to the face] by here and you can contour your nose so it doesn't look fat." Child S (FG8) discussed that images were sometimes so manipulated that "you're not really sure because they have filtered their face. So unless you go and meet them, you're not sure what they look like." Perhaps, the most concerning comment was made by Child G, (FG2) who said, "I wish I was wearing a filter right now" emphasizing the subjective experience of how these filters were making her feel. It is clear from this research, that children, particularly girls, were very aware of the importance of their appearance and the manipulation of this on social media, thereby demonstrating that subjectivity and identity formation are closely bound up together.

Perceived Threats and Risks

Participants in this study seemed well aware of the physical risks of using social media. It was clear from all the Focus

Groups, for example, that the safe use of the internet had been stressed to the participants from both parents and teachers. From all groups, there was very strong evidence that they perceived online predators as a threat to their safe use of the internet and social media use. This was presented by children as taking one of three main forms: catfishing, pedophiles, and stalkers. Participants in six out of the eight groups made specific reference to “catfishing” and how “the biggest thing about social media is like a 70 year old man could go and like make an account as if they were 15” (Child C, FG1). Child E (FG1) explained this at length:

You can get catfished on it and it is actually pretty dangerous with some stuff on there, because who knows who can be on the other side, sometimes, yeah it might be true, I may be talking to [name] and it is him and it might be him saying it but at the same time it could have been someone else.

Other participants referred to predators as adults being interested in relationships with children and they referred to these as “paedos” (Child O, FG3). Likewise, Child B (FG1) said, “weird people that look at your photos and adults look at your photos and some adults actually fancy little children. It is not nice.” “Stalkers” were perceived by the participants slightly differently, they were seen as individuals who were at pains to find out where they live, this was highlighted by Child B (FG1) who said, “On Snapchat you can see where people live and that, you could try and track them down to see.”

As well as these overt physical risks, the participants commented on the more obvious emotional dangers, for example, cyber bullying. Child E (FG1) alluded to this saying, “my cousin [name,] she got picked on in High School and she took a selfie and put it on Instagram and these girls were writing on there.” This can also occur in a subtler way as described by Child A (FG1): “You start doubting yourself, I mean, I never do because I’m free enough to talk to my parents and stuff, so people just need to do that more and sometimes actually does solve the problem.” This issue of doubting yourself is obviously amplified when children and young people keep it a secret. Child A further discusses the implications of this, saying, “. . . they had obviously been bottling it up and yeah, they got overwhelmed.” Similarly, Child D (FG2) reiterated that it is essential to disclose how you are feeling “if you don’t want to speak to your parents, you could always tell the teacher, talk to a teacher or a trusted adult.” Putting yourself in the public domain, albeit those restricted to “friends,” renders you exposed to what people think is appropriate to comment on and can elicit negative as well as a positive narrative which can have implications for self-esteem. Child K (FG3) suggests that sometimes this is the case “and people could put rude comments on the photo.” Child A (FG1) reiterated this saying, “people could make nasty comments,” as did Child E (FG6) who said, “it could get saved and you may be embarrassed and everyone will

laugh at you.” Likewise, Child O’s (FG3) comments suggest the importance of audience to emotional wellbeing: “. . . people might just say that you’re doing this for attention or you just get hate comments which makes you stressed and affects you emotionally.” Child A (FG4) noted that this can cause conflict in real life “people get into rows over like pictures and all that and some people could post like a really nice place, send a picture and people could be like stop showing off.”

Discussion

This pilot study had the aim of exploring children’s perceptions of social media, identity portrayal, and emergent subjectivities within the target age group. The research design took an interpretive approach, which allows for reflexivity with the researcher considering their own role in shaping the data (Creswell, 2014). Findings indicate that children in this age group had an astute understanding of what social media is and how it is used, but may not always be aware of the subtle nuances of the etiquette for each platform. In addition, they may not be fully aware of what is appropriate to share in a public domain and consequently children of this age may be deemed as vulnerable in terms of online portrayal (Rideout et al., 2010). Children were mindful that they should not be on social media platforms, an awareness that was demonstrated by comments they made referring to how adults may use these platforms and the explicit mention of the age limit (McDool et al., 2016). Nevertheless, despite the recommended age for joining social media sites being 13 years old, nearly, all of the participants in the focus groups disclosed that they were using social media platforms. Furthermore, for those who said that they abstained or were not allowed by their parents to use social media, it was not clear if they were saying this because the researcher was perceived as an authority figure or, alternatively, that they did not use social media in actuality. This evidence concurs with recent research that suggests social media is central for both tweens (8–12 years of age) and teenagers (NSPCC, 2018). However, according to this research, this estimate is conservative and the vast majority of children who participated in this study are probably active on social media platforms.

In spite of the covert nature of social media use and that only a small minority of children suggested their parents monitor their social media accounts, children in the Focus Groups did to some degree demonstrate a sense of agency and may be more aware of the social parameters than given credit for (Thomson et al., 2018). A preoccupation with perceived surveillance also concurs with data by Jaynes (2019) who highlights a distinction between young people’s relationship with digital technologies and adults perceptions of this. In this case though, this enactment of agency, however, largely took the form of adjusting privacy settings and being astute about online friends/befriending other children online. This could suggest that the physicality of the boundaries of

social media use was not the issue for children who participated in this study, but rather the emotional risk and implications of allowing people to like, validate and comment on aspects of your life are. Putting oneself in the public domain, albeit those restricted to “friends,” renders one exposed to other peoples’ responses, whether invited or not, and can elicit negative as well as positive narratives which may have implications for self-esteem (Rideout et al., 2010). Children within this research had some idea of what “identity” is and how this can be represented on social media platforms through profile pictures, photographs of social interaction, and selfies, as well as through enactments of their personality, through descriptions of what they like doing, and through interactions with other children’s likes and comments. This resonates with Goffman’s (1971) dramaturgical analogy of front and backstage identities, but it is not clear from this research, if the children understand the implications of this in relation to the unknown imagined audience to which that they are presenting their identity. Moreover, for children who have grown up with virtual relationships that are perhaps as important as their real-life social repertoire, the boundary and differentiation between “real” and “virtual” may not be so clear and the distinction between this front and backstage identity blurred. A few participants in this study were aware that you did not have to reveal your true self on social media and this could demonstrate that children may have more awareness of the perceptions of others than thought in other studies (Huk, 2016).

Some children did display discernment about the images they portrayed on social media and the comments they made to others, but this is certainly an area that needs investigating more thoroughly. Goffman’s (1959) analogy of an audience both real and imagined does evidently have an effect on identity formation and this was particularly the case for physical appearance, with the use of Snapchat filters being particularly pertinent for children in this study. These filters have a profound effect on how children present themselves online and there was a clear distinction between boys and girls responses during the discussion and subsequent analysis. The majority of the boys saw Snapchat filters as a source of entertainment and fun, whereas the majority of girls typified them as enhancing appearance and making people look prettier (Chae, 2017; Ranzini & Hoek, 2017). This could have emotional ramifications with potential risks, such as negative body image and overt social comparison based primarily on physical appearance (Burnette et al., 2017). Social and physical comparison that social media engenders is therefore a significant risk for children, who may not be aware that other people they follow have a filter on their face and, consequently, that the ideal they aspire to is unachievable in real life (Chae, 2017). Overt physical impression management with a significant front stage persona (Goffman, 1971) typified by exaggerated and contoured facial features that are heavily manipulated was certainly an issue for girls in the study. Continuing with Goffman’s (1971) analogy, these

filters could be viewed as types of props or costumes that are used virtually, in a similar way to how make up and clothes are used in real life. It is apparent from the analysis of data that the use of Snapchat filters is not always just harmless fun used to entertain people, but can have serious and long-lasting emotional repercussions. Possible and idealized selves can be presented online and this can propagate pressure to continually adopt this fictitious persona (Burnette et al., 2017), particularly in relation to maintaining a polished physical appearance. Unlike real-life interaction, where children can perhaps control their social group and encounters, this imaginary audience on social media is both unknown and more explicitly related to public scrutiny with implications for subjective experience. However, children may have more autonomy over this “fakeness” and rather than viewing in an essentialist way, the distinction between real and fake has blurred lines (Jaynes, 2019).

Lessons around online safety use in schools tend to concentrate on physical rather than emotional risk, with “stranger danger,” physical scenarios of risk presented as part of the traditional e-Safety talks and videos that police, and teachers share (Digital Competence Framework, [Welsh Government 2018]). Children of both sexes in this research were aware of potential physical dangers of social media and were forthright in their sharing of their knowledge about catfishing, pedophiles, and stalkers, which resonates with other research (McDool et al., 2016). It was as if parents and teachers had reinforced this and they were able consequently to repeat this information when asked by an authority figure. The Children’s Commissioner (2018), England describes children of 10 and 11 years old being at the “cliff edge” of social media exposure as they make the transition to secondary school and, as with this research, more likely to be exposed to emotional risk in relation to their online life. Bourdieu (1991) emphasizes the negotiation of social identities as an agentive process driven by the interrelationship of the social field in which the “game” is played. It is not clear from this research that children were aware of this practice across social spaces that are not always consciously negotiated. Furthermore, how we connect with others is no longer just in real life, but via a digital landscape where the rules and boundaries are not as fixed as in real-life interaction (Braidotti, 2014). In the case of social media use, this could highlight a possible dichotomy between the perceived risks of parents and practitioners and the significant risks that children face in reality. Furthermore, there seems to be a more profound level of subjectivity evident in contrast to a more conscious experience of identity formation. It could be argued using Deleuze’s (1992) notion that there are free-floating mechanisms of control that are more effective but harder to grasp as they are less visible and not tangible, which are shaping children’s subjectivities in relation to social media use. More research needs to be conducted with children to ascertain their views on emotional risk and how social media may render them emotionally vulnerable. Overall, the results of this pilot study suggest that equipping children with

emotional resilience and coping strategies to deal with overt physical comparison and idealized versions of “self” depicted via social media platforms is of high importance. Exploring with children how they feel when images are liked, not liked or commented upon, and how their identity is produced and perceived online will help safeguard them against the more nuanced risk of social comparison and impression management that social media perpetuates and provide an important counterbalance for childhood socialization. These could be important targets for educational support particularly as the pace of technology advancement and social media use is increasing for tweens (NSPCC, 2018; Ofcom, 2018). This group is beginning to develop a sense of self and identity in a virtual landscape and could be seen as a vulnerable group in this respect. Further exploration of the emotional risks of using social media for this age group needs to be researched and children’s voices heard, so that appropriate school policies can be developed, and hence, parents and teachers can have more understanding of how to safeguard them.

Limitations

Although focus groups can engender a safe environment to explore concepts and elicit discussion, there are also potential limitations. In all of the eight Focus Groups, there was a child who dominated the discussions (Punch & Oancea, 2014), this was especially apparent in Focus Group 2, where a child had to be asked several times to let others speak and not to speak over other people. Managing the dynamics of the groups was at times challenging, particularly as the researcher was not known to the participants (Wilson, 2017). In addition, privately held opinions might not have been expressed, this may have been because the children were aware that they should not be using social media as they are below the recommended age and the researcher was a perceived authority figure. Social desirability might have been another factor and may have influenced the participants, making those with nonconforming opinions hesitant to share, particularly as there were dominant voices within the groups. The research may lack external validity due to the small sample employed and the general homogeneous nature of the groups, though this was partially addressed by the diverse aspect of the four settings in terms of school size and economic catchment of pupils. It may also be viewed as a strength though as it fostered rapport and encouraged fluid dialogue within the groups (Newby, 2014). Another concern is the bias inherent in qualitative research (Wilson, 2017) because the methodology does not rely on quantitative and standardized measures; the empirical data were interpreted subjectively. Nevertheless, utilizing qualitative data is an important first step into researching children’s understanding of social media, exploring how subjectivity plays a part in their online engagement and how they manage their identity formation within a digital landscape.

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