



Children's Media Lives 2023

A report for Ofcom

Foreword

Nine years into this study, Children's Media Lives have changed dramatically

Revealing Reality researchers have been working on Ofcom's Children's Media Lives study for nine years. From Zoella to Andrew Tate, from sharing an iPod Touch with your big sister to getting a smartphone when you turn eight, we've seen a lot of change – in behaviours, in experiences and in how children reflect on what they see and do online.

Blurred lines

We've seen social media platforms become a never-ending experiential conveyor belt of content in children's lives. Social content, news, opinion, entertainment and advertising are jumbled together, blurring boundaries between genres. Gossip is presented as news and vice versa. Advertising is portrayed as social discourse. Professional influencers talk to fans as though they're best friends while monetising those relationships.

In this wave of the research, we saw the popularity of 'commentary' formats, with reactions often presented via a split screen, mixing news and real-world events with social, emotional and opinion-based narratives. Sometimes it's on serious matters, sometimes it's banal. For the children in this study, it often seems it matters more whom something has been said by than whether it's true.

A lot of social media is not that social

People may think of TikTok as the place where children post videos of themselves copying the latest celebrity dance craze. But increasingly, children on TikTok are almost entirely consuming content rather than creating it. In the earlier years of Children's Media Lives, we used to see a lot more exploration and creativity by children on social media. For good or ill, they used it as a place to play and express themselves. Now children are posting less themselves, and, correspondingly, seeing less content created by their friends.

Instead, their social media feeds are dominated by professionalised content. While every viewer's experience is unique, and there are still social elements involved such as liking, following and sometimes sharing, their viewing of this endless stream is mostly passive – most of the content they see is served to them via recommender systems rather than actively searched for.

Individual apps may be offering an expanding array of functions, from messaging to short-form video feeds, but the spaces where children consume content and socialise are increasingly distinct. Social interaction is mostly confined to the chat apps or message functions within apps, rather than on public feeds. This might offer children some protection from the risks of having conversations in public, but with the majority of their social exchanges happening in more private spaces, it also has implications for regulation, for opportunities to teach children about safety, and therefore for children's media literacy.

Increasingly, social media is where children go to learn about the world

Over the years, the role that social media plays in children's learning and development has increased. Some might still turn to Google when they need specific information for their homework, but for many children in this wave of Children's Media Lives, their first action when they want to find something out is to 'search it up' on TikTok.

Relying on social media for information demands critical reflection – something some children in our study found difficult or irrelevant. The informational landscape they find themselves in is hard to navigate; the cues inviting their attention on social media lean towards drama, controversy or emotion rather than objectivity, nuance or balance. This year, we saw children struggling to find a benchmark for trustworthiness.

Children's media lives are becoming a larger part of their whole lives

From this research and other related work, we have observed that children are spending less time face-to-face with other children or adults outside of their families. We also see many of them spending less time with other children and adults *within* their families. Instead, they spend hours on their screens, where they are presented with guidance and clues about what to aspire to and how to behave. Inevitably, children's media behaviours – and their wider behaviours – reflect the society around them, and will ultimately shape the society we live in.

About Revealing Reality

Revealing Reality is an independent social research agency, working with regulators, Government and charities to provide independent and rigorous insight into young people's online behaviours and experiences.

Studying how the digital world is shaping people's lives is something we do every day. We have been tracking children's media use and the impact it has on them for the past nine years as part of Ofcom's Children's Media Lives research, and we've conducted some of the most detailed qualitative behavioural research on digital behaviours, observing how people really use digital products, services and technology.

Visit www.revealingreality.co.uk to find out more about our work or to get in touch.

Contents

Foreword	2
Introduction	5
Key findings summary	6
About this study	8
Meet the participants	11
What devices and platforms were the children using?	16
What media were the children consuming?	18
How were the children interacting online?	23
How were the children learning online?	31
How were the children playing in a digital world?	38
Annex 1: Profile of participants	41
Annex 2: Devices and platforms	42
Glossary	43

Introduction

What is Children's Media Lives?

Ofcom has a statutory duty under the Communications Act 2003 to promote and to carry out research into media literacy across the UK.¹ Ofcom's media literacy research forms part of Ofcom's wider programme of work, Making Sense of Media, which aims to improve the online skills, knowledge and understanding of UK adults and children. To find out more about Ofcom's Making Sense of Media programme and for details on how to join its network, please go to [Making Sense of Media](#).

Set up in 2014, Children's Media Lives tracks the media behaviours, experiences and attitudes of a group of children (with as consistent a cohort as possible) aged between eight and 17, from all over the UK and with a variety of backgrounds. There are currently 21 children who participate in the study, and who are introduced on page 11: 'Meet the participants'.

Children's Media Lives provides a rich and detailed qualitative complement to Ofcom's quantitative surveys of media literacy² on the motivations and context for media use and how media interacts with daily life and the domestic circumstances of the children in the study.³

Revealing Reality conducts the research and reports on the findings, and has a strict ethics and safeguarding policy⁴ in place to ensure, as far as possible, that taking part in research is a positive experience for children and that they are not placed under any undue risk, stress or discomfort during the project. This policy is reviewed regularly to ensure that it is in line with all industry standards, including those of the Market Research Society and the Government Social Research Service. An overview of our methodology is set out in 'About this study' (page 8).

This report provides analysis of the findings from this ninth wave of the study, for which the fieldwork was conducted during the last three months of 2022. In many cases we have drawn comparisons with the findings from wave 8⁵ and earlier – highlighting both new behaviours and continuing trends.

Exploring the children's online critical understanding – the extent to which the children have the skills, knowledge and understanding to navigate the online world safely and productively – is central to this work.

¹ Ofcom's definition of media literacy is "The ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts."

² Ofcom's [Children's Media Use and Attitudes report 2023](#)

³ When this report describes what "the children" are doing or saying, this refers to the children who are participating in this study. It cannot be extrapolated to children in the UK more widely.

⁴ Please see Annex 5 to review Revealing Reality's [ethics and safeguarding policy](#)

⁵ Ofcom's [Children's Media Lives 2022](#)

Key findings summary

What media were the children consuming?

Much of the content the children were consuming in this wave of the study seemed designed to maximise stimulation and minimise the investment required of them. Videos were fast-paced, short-form, with deliberately choppy editing. Where last year children reported short attention spans, and being unable to sit through whole films or even a complete episode of a programme, this year the rise of the 'split screen' format meant that they were often viewing two videos at once within the same social media post (i.e. on a single screen).

The content the children favoured across formats (films, TV shows and social media content) could be described as 'dramatic'. Gossip, conflict, extreme challenges, high stakes and often large sums of money are recurring themes.

Cycles of drama, rivalries, reaction videos and layers of commentary seemed to be blurring the lines between fact and fiction for many of the children. Children were not always clear or correct in assessing whether they were watching a drama series or a documentary, whether the events they were following were real or fabricated. In some cases, it did not appear to matter greatly to them.

How were the children interacting online?

The apps, and the functions within them, that the children used to interact with other children appear to be increasingly distinct from those used to consume content. 'Feeds' were for content, 'chat' was for social interaction.

With their social media feeds dominated by professionalised content, the children were increasingly self-conscious about how they portray themselves in public online spaces. For many children, this meant posting much less frequently, or not at all. Some even created content for the fun of it but chose never to post it.

Those who did post content were often consciously emulating trends and copying the strategies of those they saw were getting a lot of engagement online. For example, owning and making content showing a bottle of the influencer-backed drink 'Prime' was felt to guarantee attention and status, driving the well-reported hype⁶ around the product. When children did post more publicly online, it was sometimes prompted by arguments and drama in their peer group, for example, wanting to embarrass, punish or exclude somebody.

Rather than interacting with their friends on social media feeds 'in public', they were increasingly talking to them using apps' chat functions, where they have greater privacy. However, while a chat is a less public space than a social media feed, large group chats can still include a mixture of people who children know and those they don't know. In fact, being part of larger group chats was seen by some as a sign of social status and popularity.

How were the children learning online?

That children rely on the digital world to learn is not new, but among our sample this need is increasingly being served by social media. In some cases, it is being used like a search engine to answer questions, as well as to provide guidance, from study motivation to advice on 'side-hustles' such as e-commerce trading.

The degree to which children actively choose this content varies, and the distinction between active and passive learning online is not distinct – from what they search, to whom they follow, what they 'like' and, increasingly, what the recommender systems predict they want to see. Several of the children reported seeing content appear in their feeds that they had not sought out and sometimes that they would rather they had not seen.

⁶ See for example ['Prime drink: How KSI and Logan Paul made it so popular'](#), 27 January 2023, BBC News

Whether they consumed it actively or passively, children generally believed that what they saw, read or heard on social media was true. They rarely reflected on its veracity, reliability or relevance. Only in a few cases, where children were particularly invested in a topic or feared they would be called out later for believing something that was untrue, did they seem to reflect more actively.

How were the children playing in a digital world?

Gaming behaviours were varied, in particular differing by how much time, effort and money children invested in them.

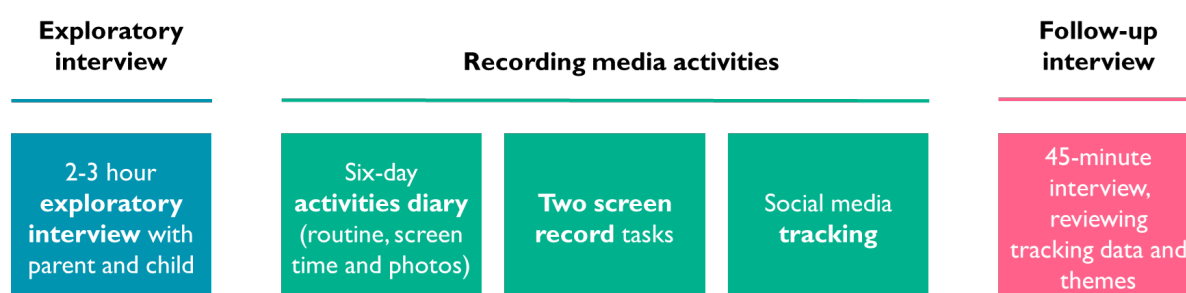
Several of the children, mainly boys, were devoted to a small number of games – Fortnite, FIFA, etc., and were investing a huge amount of time practising and playing. These games were often played competitively, and as such required the most time playing to make progress. Children also tended to spend more money on or within these games – either to buy, or sometimes to unlock, other benefits.

Others, more often girls, played a wider range of free or low-cost, less competitive games that don't require as much investment of time and money to play – with these children showing less loyalty to them as a result.

About this study

Methodology

Children's Media Lives uses a three-part methodology to incorporate actual as well as self-reported behaviour.⁷ This is summarised below.



Part 1: Initial exploratory interview

The initial exploratory interviews, conducted from October to November 2022, explored the full range of media behaviours that the children were engaged in, and included a brief interview to gather parents' perspectives on their children's media lives. The research team conducted 15 remote exploratory interviews and six face-to-face exploratory interviews.

Part 2: Recording media activities

Children were asked to record their media behaviour in three ways:

- **Media diary and 'screen time' data:** Children were asked to complete a six-day media diary, which captured how media activities fitted into their wider routine. This comprised a written diary of their activities each day, along with photos of what they had been doing, and daily 'screen-time'⁸ data from their smartphones.
- **Screen recording:** Children with smartphones also completed a 'screen recording'⁹ task, which captured the content the children see on their phones, as well as how they use features on social media platforms. Children were asked to record two 12- to 15-minute clips scrolling on two of their favourite social media platforms. They were encouraged to visit accounts that they liked and disliked.
- **Social media tracking:** With permission from the child and their parents, researchers 'friended' or followed¹⁰ the children on social media for two weeks using bespoke social media accounts. This provided insight into what, when and how often they were posting, as well as how they interacted with others in semi-public spaces online.

Part 3: Follow-up interview

The 15 children who had taken part in a remote initial interview took part in a follow-up interview. All those who had had face-to-face initial interviews in greater depth did not take part in a follow-up interview, except Bobby (16), who took part in a remote follow-up interview to enable the researcher to collect all the necessary data (see below). During these interviews researchers used screen-sharing to prompt children with

⁷ Introduced from wave 7.

⁸ 'Screen-time' is a smartphone function which provides a breakdown of how much time a child has spent on different apps on their device that day.

⁹ Screen recording refers to real-time recording of what the children are seeing as they use their phones.

¹⁰ 'Friending' and 'following' refer to different ways of connecting with other users on social media platforms. A user is able to see the content shared by the individual they have 'friended' or 'followed'.

elements of content from the media tracking and screen record tasks, or with elements of their routine seen in their screen-time data and written diary. This allowed the researchers to establish what the children understood about the content they had seen, and explore their critical thinking on specific features, trends or topic areas. The second interviews also allowed researchers to explore any new questions that emerged over the course of the research.

Approach to fieldwork

Other than the exceptions outlined below, all interviews were conducted remotely:

- Researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with the four new respondents aged 10 or under who joined the sample this year: Frankie (8), Bailey (8), Alfie (8) and Amber (10). With these children, the research team conducted face-to-face interviews and the diary task phase. These children did not complete a follow-up interview, as the face-to-face element of the research allowed the researchers to explore the content of the follow-up interviews with the child in the initial visit.
- The research team also chose to hold face-to-face exploratory interviews with Amira (12) and Bobby (16), whose personal circumstances did not allow a fully remote approach to interviewing. Amira's family is digitally excluded and would have been unable to take part in a remote video call. She therefore completed a face-to-face interview and a diary task, with no remote follow-up interview. Bobby struggled to engage in the exploratory phase of the research remotely, so researchers conducted a face-to-face exploratory interview to better meet his needs. Bobby then completed the diary task and was able to engage in a remote follow-up interview.

Exploring media literacy

This year, in addition to exploring the children's media behaviours and attitudes as a whole, the research was designed to explore in particular detail the children's media literacy, specifically their critical understanding. This was investigated in three ways:

1. During the phase of research that recorded media activities, children were asked to record or take screenshots of content they saw when using their phones, which they felt captured something related to the news; something they felt was untrue; and an advert or sponsored post. The children were asked to reflect on several of these in the follow-up interviews.
2. During the follow-up interviews, the children were prompted to discuss their screen recordings. Researchers analysed how the children critically reflected on the pieces of content they engaged with, the actors or creators behind that piece of content, the tool or device they were using to access that piece of content, and how their own biases and preconceptions shaped the way they perceived the content.
3. During the follow-up interview, the researchers explored how children assessed information they might come across online, using scenarios that Ofcom had used in its quantitative research into children's media literacy. These scenarios explored whether and how the children:
 - were able to identify advertising on search results;
 - were able to identify a paid partnership on an 'influencer' post;
 - could assess whether a social media profile was genuine or not; and
 - could assess whether a social media post was genuine or not.

For each scenario, the children were shown and asked about real online content. This material is displayed in the relevant sections of the findings in this report.

References in the report

For legal reasons, we have decided not to show any online content that the children viewed, recorded or talked about. We have endeavoured to describe the content in the body of the report, using hyperlinks and referenced source material where relevant, and there is a glossary of key terms on page 43.

To ensure a diverse sample, some participants with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) have been specifically recruited to take part in this study. A breakdown of this sample can be found in [Annex I](#). In

addition, several children in the sample chose to disclose diagnosed or suspected mental health conditions during their interviews. We have included information about both SEND and mental health conditions where this is relevant to understanding these children's media experiences. The anonymity of participants is ensured by use of pseudonyms and the removal of other personally identifiable information.

This is a longitudinal qualitative study exploring the media lives of 21 children from around the UK. Understanding the children's attitudes is a key objective of this research. Any opinions on public figures or specific social media platforms in this report are the children's own, and do not reflect the position of Ofcom or of Revealing Reality.

Meet the participants

Twenty-one children took part in this wave of the study. This was the same total as in the previous wave. However, six of the participants are new to the study in this wave. They replace four who turned 18 and so are no longer in scope, and two children who did not want to take part this year.

The main sampling characteristics focused on the following variables:

- Age (spread from eight to 17)
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Representation of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- Location, including urban and rural areas, and all four UK nations
- Family set-up, including a mixture of different sibling and parental relationships
- Access to devices (including smartphones, tablets, smart TVs, games consoles)
- Use of devices
- Parental approaches to managing media use

For a breakdown of the sample, see [Annex I](#).

About the children

The information provided in this section and throughout the report has been carefully considered to ensure the anonymity of participants.



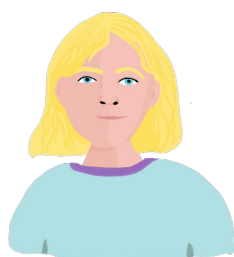
Alfie, 8, South East England

Alfie has recently moved house with his mum, dad, and a younger sibling to a new area, where he is now allowed to play outside. In his spare time, he enjoys spending time with his new friends, playing with Lego, collecting Pokémon cards and taking part in extra-curricular sports. His main devices are his TV and PlayStation 5. On YouTube, he likes watching challenge videos, Pokémon and football-related content. He also plays video games on his console, saying competition excites and motivates him. Alfie also has an iPad and a Nintendo Switch, but both have recently broken.



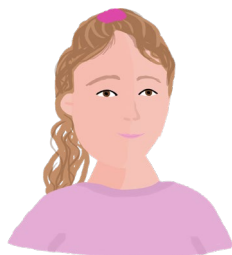
Bailey, 8, Northern England

Bailey is an active child who lives with his mum. He is awaiting a diagnosis for ADHD and his mum is worried that his behaviour may be holding him back at school. Although he finds school difficult, he enjoys extra-curricular sports and music lessons. At home, he enjoys watching YouTube challenge videos on his Amazon Fire TV stick and making TikTok videos. He also has an iPad and an Xbox, which he typically uses to play games such as FIFA 21. His mum monitors his behaviour while playing video games and tries to make sure what he does online is age-appropriate. To his disappointment, this means Bailey is not allowed to play Fortnite.



Frankie, 8, South East England

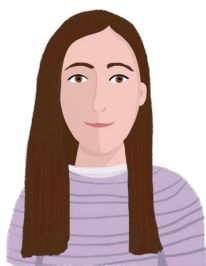
Frankie lives with her mum, dad, and younger sibling. She enjoys school and doing lots of activities, attending extra-curricular sports clubs and Brownies. At home, she likes to relax by reading and playing imaginative games with her dolls. She also enjoys playing digital games, such as Gymnastics Salon, on her Amazon Kids Fire tablet and sometimes borrows her mum's phone to play other app-based games not available on her tablet. She has recently started watching the BBC show The Next Step on her family TV and is excited by the dance competitions and drama between the characters. Frankie's parents keep a close eye on what she is doing online, enabling parental controls on her devices and regularly talking to her about what she is seeing online.



Lily, 9, Northern England

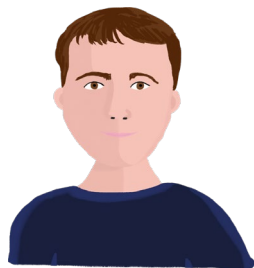
Lily lives with her parents and her older sibling. Now in year 4, she is enjoying school more than in previous years. In her spare time, she does sports and plays with her friends. She has her own laptop and likes writing short stories. Lily watches YouTube on her family's smart TV, where she likes watching videos of people playing *Among Us*, a game popular with children in which players must guess which team member is an imposter. Lily has access to Alexa on an Amazon Echo, which she uses to listen to the sound of rain when she is trying to fall asleep.

Amber, 10, North West England



Amber lives with her parents and an older sibling. She found a recent class reorganisation at her primary school difficult, but she has now made new friends. Amber's mum generally trusts her to be sensible online but does look through her messages to see if she is involved in any arguments. Amber has her own smartphone, desktop computer, and a smart TV, which she uses to stream shows on Netflix or Disney+. She particularly likes watching challenge-style content on YouTube and teenage dramas on Netflix. She also enjoys free-to-play games on her phone and Fortnite on her desktop. Amber's favourite platform is TikTok, where she is hoping to increase her following.

Angus, 10, Scotland



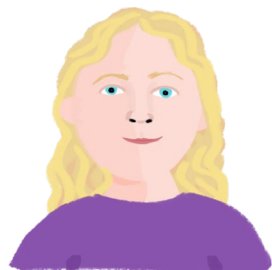
Angus lives with his parents and siblings. Now in his penultimate year of primary school, he enjoys watching *Newsround* at school every day and keeping up with world events. He has a busy extra-curricular schedule, playing multiple sports, musical instruments, and going to Scouts. Angus has a smartphone but he does not use it much. He prefers to stream content on Disney+, Netflix and YouTube, where he enjoys watching videos of people playing with Lego. Angus is gaming less than he was in the previous wave of the research, instead spending his time watching content or doing offline activities.

Arjun, 11, North West England



Arjun, an only child, lives with his parents. Now in year 7, he initially found the transition from a smaller primary school to a larger secondary school challenging. Arjun is involved in several sports clubs and enjoys a variety of extra-curricular activities. Since starting secondary school, his parents have given him his own smartphone and he has been enjoying using his new device to talk to friends and watch Formula 1 content on YouTube. While he sometimes plays free-to-play games on his phone during his commute to school, he prefers to game using his new PlayStation 5, playing FIFA, F1 and Fall Guys, a free-to-play elimination game on PlayStation.

Suzy, 11, Scotland

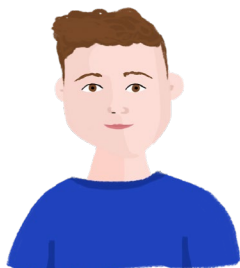


Suzy lives with her mum and her mum's partner and has step-siblings who visit during the week. She is in year 7 and is enjoying the increased freedom and maturity of being in secondary school. But she has found moving to a bigger school challenging and has had a few arguments with her friendship group that have resulted in some of them trying to get each other's TikTok accounts banned. Suzy's main device is her phone, which she uses for TikTok, Pinterest, Snapchat and YouTube. She enjoys watching make-up tutorials and will sometimes post her own TikTok videos. She also likes watching Netflix on the family TV and although she claims not to play games often, her mum has said that she spends some time on Roblox and Toca World.



Amira, 12, South East England

Amira lives with her mum and a younger sibling and has recently started year 8 at school. Amira shares devices with her sibling, and they both use a tablet for YouTube and games, and the TV for YouTube. Amira has three close friends, whom she messages and calls often on WhatsApp. She has stopped using TikTok and Snapchat because they took up too much storage space on her mum's phone and now only uses YouTube, Roblox and app-based 'scary games'. She watches Norris Nuts, other channels on pranks and challenges, and Roblox tutorials. She is also spending more time watching content on YouTube Shorts.



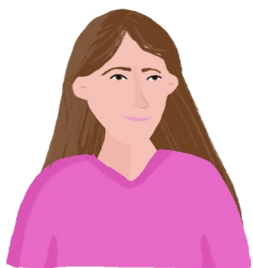
Freddie, 12, North West England

Freddie splits his time between his mum's and his dad's homes. After taking a year out of formal education with anxiety, he is now back in secondary school and being assessed for ADHD and ASD. A talented footballer, he is popular among his peers and has signed a contract with a local football academy club. He spends a lot of time on his phone, primarily on Snapchat and TikTok, from which he has been banned several times by the platforms, although he's not sure why. He watches Netflix and plays video games most evenings. His favourite games are FIFA 23 and Fortnite. He used to make in-game purchases but now prefers to spend his money on clothes.



Zak, 12, North West England

Zak, now in year 8, has applied to go to a different college after year 9. He enjoys Air Scouts, going to the local shopping centre and spending time with his family. He plays video games such as Splatoon 3, Mario Kart, and Kirby and the Forgotten Land on his new Nintendo Switch. He likes social media, particularly TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. Zak enjoys keeping up with trends – during this period of fieldwork he had been trying to buy Prime, a drink created by Logan Paul and KSI that was in short supply, and had switched on notifications for Elon Musk on Twitter to get the latest news on Tesla.



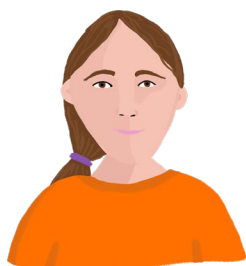
Niamh, 13, Northern Ireland

Niamh lives with her parents and older sibling. She has a large extended family who live nearby and she spends a lot of time with family members after school. She has a close group of friends with whom she communicates mainly on Snapchat. Niamh has a laptop for schoolwork and entertainment, and an Apple Watch for telling the time and occasional games. Her main device is her iPhone XR, which she uses for TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram. She enjoys watching FI edits, travel videos and unboxing videos but has come across mental health content that she would rather not see.



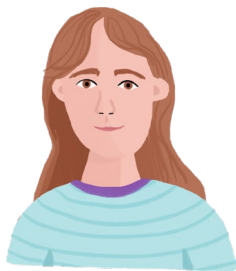
Terri, 13, North West England

Terri lives with her mum. She has changed secondary school several times but is now settled at a new school where she has made caring friends. She enjoys dancing and hopes to become a professional dancer. Terri spends an average of six hours a day on her phone, scrolling TikTok, chatting with friends, and online shopping. Her mum trusts her to make sensible decisions about her online activities.



Bryony, 14, Wales

Bryony lives in Wales with members of her extended family. Now in year 10, she recently had a falling out with her group of friends, spending her breaks and lunch by herself in the guidance counsellor's room. As in previous waves of the research, she's passionate about equine sport and spends a lot of time at the stables taking care of her horse. Bryony watches a lot of Netflix, particularly SWAT and Dynasty. She also enjoys the dramatic cartoons *My Story Animated* on YouTube. On TikTok, she likes seeing content from influencers and enjoys 'motivational mindset' videos.



Taylor, 14, South East England

Taylor splits her time between her parents' homes. She has several hobbies, and a particular interest in sports leadership, all of which she hopes will help her get into her preferred college. Like the year before, Taylor still likes simulation games, but she has stopped playing BitLife because she feels the in-app purchases (which she regards as essential to the game) are too expensive. Instead, she is playing Sims more frequently. She has an on-off relationship with social media. Having deleted most of her apps over the summer to make sure she spent time doing 'other stuff', she then re-downloaded apps such as TikTok, and at the time of fieldwork she was watching a range of content on there, including some motivational lifestyle videos and posts.



Ben, 15, South East England

Ben, 15, is in year 10, studying for his GCSEs. Basketball is his favourite pastime, and he devotes a lot of time to playing it each week. Online, he plays FIFA and NKA 2K on his Xbox, and he enjoys the games' periodic releases of new players and new features. He says that he spends around three to four hours a day on Instagram and TikTok, using Instagram to keep up with friends and watching sporting, gaming, or funny content on TikTok. On YouTube, he predominantly watches other gamers playing or opening packs in-game as well as sports commentators/vloggers talking about basketball in real life. He uses Snapchat to talk to his friends for about 30 minutes per day. He doesn't watch or stream any TV programmes or films.



Oscar, 15, Northern Ireland

Oscar lives with his mum, step-dad and a younger sibling. Oscar enjoys school and likes to spend time playing basketball. In his spare time he practises guitar and he and his friend have a dedicated Instagram page where they post videos of themselves playing songs together. Oscar has a wide circle of friends with whom he communicates on Snapchat. Recently, he fell out with one of his close friends, with the drama unfolding on Snapchat and Instagram. He also spends time on YouTube, mostly to watch guitar-playing videos, but he also likes channels such as 'Brightside' which features riddles and challenges. He had a TikTok account but deleted it because he saw inappropriate content on it which he didn't like. He also uses US streaming service Plex and Netflix, watching *Only Fools and Horses* and *Game of Thrones*.



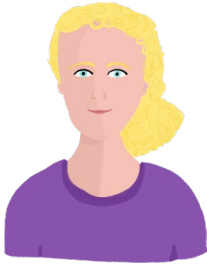
Bobby, 16, South East England

Bobby has moved care homes since the previous wave of the research. He is still not in formal education and is struggling to decide exactly what he wants to do. Bobby is spending considerably less time playing games than he was last year. This wave he mainly played FIFA, often for a couple of hours per day with his housemate in their living room. However, he still spends a lot of time on his phone, mostly using Snapchat, YouTube and TikTok. He uses Snapchat almost exclusively to communicate. On YouTube, Bobby will regularly watch dirt bike content and videos about 'pimped out' cars – something he has always been interested in.



Isaac, 16, Midlands

Isaac started at a specialist college this year. He loves his subject but finds the course challenging and as a result he says he's playing less sport and socialising less than last year. He also started doing work experience, which he says is the best part of his week. Isaac spends around nine hours a day on his phone on average, mostly on TikTok, Snapchat and YouTube. He also watches Netflix on his phone, which sometimes significantly increases the hours. He loves the YouTube influencers Side Men and KSI. He also plays games. Isaac has an Oculus Meta VR headset on which he mainly uses Rec Room. He shares this device with his sibling.

**Alice, 17, South East England**

Alice is a second-year college student studying cooking. She spends what limited free time she has seeing friends and going to house parties. She spends about four hours a day on her iPad, predominantly watching Netflix and Disney+, focusing on true crime content and rewatching shows such as *Grey's Anatomy* and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. She also watches YouTube drama and beauty content. On her phone, Alice uses TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram, but she does not post often. She is interested in mental health and seeks out alternative viewpoints on social media. She has started using Yubo, an app designed for making new friends, and she uses this more than Snapchat to meet new people.

**Peter, 17, Midlands**

Peter is in his final year of college. As in the previous wave, he spends much of his time at college and on the business he set up last year. Peter says he is not interested in gaming anymore. His main media activities are scrolling through TikTok or watching YouTube, predominantly channels about construction or sports. He does not use social media much, but he has Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook accounts and he pays to advertise his business on Facebook. Peter has become much more interested in the news this year, as it ties in with his studies. He says that now he understands more of it, he finds it more interesting. His interest focuses on current affairs and politics, which he consumes via the BBC news app.

What devices and platforms were the children using?

This section provides an overview of the devices and platforms the children used to access and engage with media. The themes introduced here relate to their usage and habits and will be explored in greater detail later in the report. For a more granular breakdown of the devices and platforms the children were using, see [Annex 2](#).

The children were predominantly using personal, rather than shared, devices for various online activities

- Of the 21 children in the sample this year, 16 owned a smartphone, which they used mainly to access social media, speak to their friends, and in some cases, play games.
- The younger children who did not have their own phone were sometimes able to use their parents' phones to play games or use social media.

The children rarely used television sets to watch live TV.

- All the children lived in households with a TV and some children had personal TV sets in their bedrooms. However, roughly half of the children did not count the TV as an important device in their media lives.
- TV sets were more often used for gaming than watching content.
- The children rarely chose to watch live broadcast television. Rather, they streamed TV content on demand. App-based streaming platforms enabled the children to choose which device to watch television content on. These included smart TVs, smartphones, tablets and in some cases laptops.
- The children often watched this content by themselves or in their bedrooms.
- Most of the children opted to stream programmes from subscription streaming platforms, such as Netflix or Disney+, and preferred the content available on these platforms. Some of the shows the children enjoyed were not available outside these platforms.
- A few of the children also streamed broadcast television on demand.

Almost all the children played video games, but not always via a console.

- Of the 21 children, 15 had at least one games console. The children playing competitive, sports or combat games tended to be using a PlayStation or Xbox and were more often boys.
- Other games consoles owned by children in the sample included Nintendo Switch, and one child had newer tech in the form of an Oculus VR headset.
- Some of the children only played free solo-player games but these were mostly played on their laptops or smartphones.
- Some of the children who spent most of their time gaming in wave 8 (early 2022) reported in this wave that they had cut down their gaming time in favour of using social media or doing offline activities.

Apps or sites used by the children

For the majority of the children who had TikTok on their personal devices, this was the app they used more than any other, with only one exception. TikTok was mainly used for entertainment. The children enjoyed consuming short-form content served on their For You page, which typically lasted up to one minute. However, while the children watched a lot of content on TikTok, they rarely created or shared self-produced content themselves, as described in 'How were the children interacting online?' on page 23

A few of the children were also consuming short-form content on other platforms; for example, via YouTube Shorts, Instagram Reels and occasionally the Spotlight feature on Snapchat.¹¹

Almost all the children used YouTube. Unlike TikTok, YouTube was used most commonly to watch longer-form content that typically ranged from five to 30 minutes in length.

Some of the children using social media also had an Instagram account but spent less time on it than on other social media platforms. On Instagram, they typically followed a mixture of their real-life friends and internet personalities. As on TikTok, they rarely posted their own content, and when they did, it was more likely to be on their Instagram 'Story' rather than as a permanent post on their profile.

Most of the children were using Snapchat to talk with their friends, and some were part of group chats with other young people they did not know personally. There is more detail in the 'How are the children interacting?' section.

The children also used text and WhatsApp, especially for chatting with family, but their screentime on these apps was lower than on Snapchat.

Other platforms used by the children included Facebook, Pinterest, Yubo, Twitch and Wizz, which are described in more detail in [Annex 2](#).

Further detail on the range of content the children consumed on these platforms is described in 'What media were the children consuming?' on page 18.

¹¹ A reel-style feature on Snapchat that showcases popular short-form videos from users who have submitted content. [Snapchat describes Spotlight as](#): "The easiest way to discover the world of Snapchat in one place and see perspectives from across [the] community."

What media were the children consuming?

Section summary

- Children gravitated to content that appeared to maximise stimulation and minimise the investment required of them.
 - TV and video content was often characterised by drama: gossip, conflict, extreme challenges, high stakes and often large sums of money are recurring themes.
 - Videos were fast-paced and short-form, with a deliberately choppy, jumpy editing style.
 - The rise of the 'split screen' format meant children were often viewing two videos at once.
 - The cycle of drama, rivalries, reaction videos and layers of commentary seemed to be blurring the lines between fact and fiction for the children.
-

Professionalised content

The children were consuming more 'professionalised' content on social media and were seeing less content online produced by their friends

In recent waves of this study, children have been seeing less content produced by their peers on social media than several years ago. In wave 8 (early 2022), an increase in children seeing 'professionalised' content was reported. This year, this trend has become more pronounced. The content that children were consuming on their social media feeds was often produced for commercial purposes by companies or influencers, or appeared to be pursuing commercial goals, if not actually generating revenue; for example, content clearly made with the intention to self-promote or grow follower bases.

This meant that although some of the younger children in the sample saw some content from other children in less polished formats, most of the children's social media feeds were saturated with 'professionalised' content from people they did not know.

Bryony reflected on how she enjoyed seeing this type of content on TikTok.

"I really like going on the For You page, it's quite interesting. You get these different people talking about different things. On TikTok, there's a lot more influencers who have a paid partnership with different companies so they're obviously promoting a lot of the products."

Bryony, 14

The children were seeing less content produced by people they knew on their social media feeds this year than in previous waves of research. And when they did see posts from their friends, they interacted with them less than they had done formerly, restricting themselves to liking their friends' posts or occasionally leaving a comment. As described in 'How were the children interacting online', social media feeds had become less of a place for the children to socialise and more of a platform where they consumed content, some more actively than others.

Drawn to drama

The content children were seeing across social media, YouTube and on-demand TV was characterised by 'drama': gossip, conflict, extreme challenges, high stakes and often large sums of money were key features

Children of all ages across the sample described drama as something they loved in video content. More than a genre, 'drama' here refers to themes that appear across content formats, genres and topics. Dramatic themes encouraged children to choose particular films, TV, and longer-form social media videos.

Amber (10), for example, was interested in the love triangle in *The Kissing Booth* films and had watched all three with her sibling in one weekend. Frankie (8) was a fan of the show *The Next Step* due to its dramatic portrayal of dance competitions – she was particularly thrilled at the 'poaching' between different teams and the tension of whether certain teams would make it past regionals. Meanwhile, Suzy (11) and Alice (17) were drawn to the gory and shocking aspects of true crime shows.

Similarly, Freddie enjoyed the action-packed and violent aspects of TV shows and films about gangs, such as *Blue Story*.

"I like all that type of stuff, it's entertaining – the fighting and talking."

Freddie, 12

Niamh watched *Drive to Survive* on Netflix and enjoyed the drama between the F1 drivers.

"There was quite a lot of drama and it showed everything behind F1 and things like that... When you think of F1, you just kind of think of the racing aspect of it. But it showed what it was like from the team's point of view and the drivers' point of view and the team managers and all the rivalries that go on, so it's pretty cool."

Niamh, 13

Bryony liked dramatic animated short films on YouTube from *My Story Animated*. She enjoyed the storylines involving romance, rivalry and conflict, and felt they were different to content she sees elsewhere.

"It's a bit weird because it's like, 'I fell over and he caught me in his arms!' Some of them are a bit over the top but I enjoy it, it's very different."

Bryony, 14

Many of these shows that the children gravitated towards were produced in the US or streamed on US platforms such as Disney+ or Netflix. And as the children rarely watched live UK-based TV, they were not consuming many British shows or films.

Some children enjoyed following the wider drama that surrounded the content they watched. For example, after watching *Drive to Survive*, Niamh followed several F1 drivers on social media to stay up-to-date with their personal lives. Terri, enjoyed keeping up with the Kardashians and Jenners across different platforms, sometimes finding them relatable and sometimes aspirational.

"Sometimes when you look at the Kardashians and people like that, you think they're stuck up. But really they're just down to earth, they just talk like normal people."

Terri, 13

On YouTube, many videos that children watched centred on high-stakes challenges, involving high-value cash prizes. The younger children in the sample, including Amira (12), Arjun (11), Lily (9) and Amber (10) seemed particularly engaged with this type of video content. The format typically followed is: a famous YouTuber offers a large cash prize to anyone who can complete a challenge, examples include ["LAST TO LEAVE THE BOUNCY CASTLE HOUSE WINS \\$1000 DOLLARS"](#) from Norris Nuts and ["Last To Take Hand Off \\$1,000,000 Keeps It"](#) by MrBeast.

The challenges in the videos watched by children in the sample ranged from ["Survive 100 Days in Circle, Win \\$500,000"](#) (MrBeast), to aiming to [be the last person to get angry in response to pranks \(Dad V Girls\)](#) and being the [last person to stop kissing \(Ben Azelart\)](#).

‘Commentary’ formats were particularly popular on YouTube and drove the children’s interest in interpersonal drama between influencers, encouraging them to pick sides

On YouTube, many children in the sample were watching commentary-style videos where creators would reference, challenge, or even stir up rivalry with other creators. ‘Commentary’ refers to the fact that creators are offering commentary and opinion on content, storylines or gossip referring to people not present in the video.

Commentary style videos were not unique to YouTube, with many TikTok and (more rarely) Instagram videos also using this format.

JackSucksAtStuff, a YouTuber that Arjun (11) watched, often called out his fellow YouTubers to a challenge. For example, he had recently made a video titled ‘How I STOLE MrBeast’s 100 Million Play Button’, featuring an image of a shouting MrBeast in the thumbnail image.

Commentary videos, some from dedicated gossip channels on YouTube such as Tea Spill, often featured a commentator talking about an argument or a conflict between other influencers. These videos use attention-grabbing, sometimes sensationalist titles like ‘[Named YouTuber] EXPOSED by...or [Named YouTuber] LIED about THIS...’, echoing tabloid headlines.

While Alice did not feel strongly enough to follow individual people online and see the drama unfold in their lives she watched drama commentary channels on YouTube, for example covering controversy around high-profile beauty influencers like Jeffree Star and James Charles:

“I like watching the drama about it. I play it in the background and tend to watch YouTube just before I go to bed... probably like an hour in the evening.”

Alice, 17

Being part of the drama was a key driver of engagement in these videos. The themes in the content the children were watching were reminiscent of reality TV shows and soap operas, but with additional emphasis placed on giving the impression of events unfolding in real-time.

These videos often used fast-paced editing to bring in snippets of other people talking about the issue, or even viewers’ comments. This seemed to heighten the urgency and importance of the drama.

The children keeping tabs on drama between influencers were often watching these commentary videos, and sometimes picked sides and developed loyalties to online figures. Bobby, for example, admired Andrew Tate, primarily for his wealth and success – in particular for his collection of supercars. Bobby watched both Tate’s own videos and commentary videos about him which informed his view:

“Tate is a smart man but he’s in jail right now [...]. They’re trying to tarnish his name because obviously he’s a very successful person.”¹²

Bobby, 16

Based on following the accusations and counter-accusations via these commentary-style videos, Bobby thought that Tate had been unfairly criticised by the public:

“He was telling the truth about the world, and not many people like that.”

Bobby, 16

Even those who did not intentionally keep up to date with such events still came across them and used this information to form an opinion about them. For example, Taylor saw content on TikTok about Caitlyn Jenner reacting to Dylan Mulvaney’s transition journey.

¹² At the time of Bobby’s interview (January 2023), Andrew Tate had been detained by police in Romania on suspicion of human trafficking and rape. These issues have been widely discussed in the media (see, for example, [Andrew Tate: A timeline](#), 31 January 2023, Sky News; [‘Who is Andrew Tate? The self-proclaimed misogynist influencer’](#), 12 January 2023, BBC News). As of date of publication (29 March 2023), Andrew Tate remains in custody. He has posted publicly on social media regarding these events and his innocence. He denies any wrongdoing and no charges have been brought against him to date.

“Even when Caitlyn Jenner was ‘dragging’ [disrespecting] her, she made a video responding to Caitlyn. It was the kindest response to someone dragging you that I’ve seen – she hasn’t got [a] bad bone in her body.”

Taylor, 14

The line between fictional drama and factual documentary seemed to be increasingly blurred for the children

Several children were unclear or mistaken about whether content they were consuming was real or fictional. However, distinguishing between fact and fiction did not appear to be a priority or a cause for concern for these children.

Bryony’s favourite show was *Dynasty*, a contemporary reboot of a 1980s soap of the same name. The show streams on Netflix and follows the personal and business rivalries between two fictional wealthy families in the US. Bryony liked that it gave an insight into how businesses worked.

“It’s about this really rich family. A lot of family drama.... It’s non-fiction. It’s all about the business and shows like some families can be like that.”

Bryony, 14

Similarly, Freddie (12) had watched *Blue Story*, a film involving a fictional rap storyline based in London. Freddie described the film as a realistic and truthful depiction of life in his local area, despite living in the North of England. He believed the conflict in the film was an accurate portrayal of events that happen in everyday life, with no reflection that the storyline might be dramatised or sensationalised for the purposes of the film.

These fictional stories and events often felt real to the children, reflecting the rivalries they saw play out between public figures and influencers online.

At the same time as mistaking fictional characters and storylines for fact, some children showed a lack of critical reflection on how real people, such as influencers, portrayed themselves online. Children who were fans of influencers often perceived their online personas as genuine, without considering the ways in which they might be manipulating their online image.

Terri (13) followed Kim Kardashian on TikTok and liked that she was able to see an unfiltered and real version on the app. She liked that the influencer’s TikTok showed she was just a ‘normal’ person like everyone else. Frankie (8) also enjoyed watching *Grace’s World* on YouTube and liked that it was very ‘real’. Neither of them reflected on how these influencers might be shaping and deliberately modifying the version of themselves displayed online to attract viewers and gain attention.

Stimulating formats

Videos the children watched online were often heavily edited to be very fast-paced, jumpy and stimulating

Over a quarter of the children in the sample were engaging with content from MrBeast, a hugely popular YouTube content creator (137 million subscribers at time of writing) whose videos are characterised by strikingly fast-paced ‘challenge’ videos. Many children were also watching similarly edited content from creators like Infinite and JackSucksAtStuff.

These influencers’ videos all have in common a distinct editing style involving heavy use of jump cuts, rapidly changing camera angle changes, special effects, animations and fast-paced speech.

The pace of these videos and stimulating editing style appears to appeal to children and to hold their attention, with Amber (10) describing Infinite’s video style as ‘cool’.

Children were often watching two videos at once via ‘split screen’ formats

In previous waves, some of the children were multi-screening (using more than one type of device at the same time). For example, Josie (who has since turned 18 so is no longer part of the study) talked in the last wave about struggling to sit through a film at the cinema as she was unable to simultaneously go on her phone.

Other children talked about scrolling on their phones continuously while watching TV programmes, unable to focus on only one screen. This use of multiple devices at the same time continued in this wave.

However, in this wave, 'split screen' videos, where children were simultaneously watching more than one video playing within a single social media post, were a noticeable trend. In these posts, two short-form videos have been edited to play on a single screen, stacked on top of one another.

'Split screen' videos appeared in the children's screen record diary tasks. Sometimes the two videos were related to each other; for example, where one of the videos would be providing commentary on the other. For instance, Taylor (14) watched news videos from Dylan Page on TikTok that used a 'split screen' format to enable him to react to events and add his own commentary. In one of these videos, entitled 'Terrifying reason this woman stopped existing last year', he talks about an influencer, who appeared to be a young female but had recently revealed that he was a middle-aged man using a filter to appear more 'attractive' to his followers. A compilation of images released by the influencer plays on the top half of the screen while Dylan presents the story in the lower half. 'Split screening' was also popular among content from MrBeast and JacksSucksAtStuff, where the YouTubers would react to various challenges, pranks or trivial events.

In other cases, the two videos shown side by side appeared to have no obvious connection. For example, Amber (10) watched videos where the top half of the screen was a snippet from films she did not recognise, while the bottom video was a random 'satisfying' or 'sensory' video, for example someone playing with slime. Videos from an account that solely posted 'split screen' videos was served to Amber on her TikTok For You page and she consequently followed the account as she enjoyed being able to watch two things at once. Amber said that it gave her the opportunity to learn something from the sensory play video on the bottom screen at the same time as enjoying a snippet of a TV programme.

How were the children interacting online?

Section summary

- **The apps children used to interact with each other were increasingly distinct from those used to consume content.**
 - **With their social media feeds dominated by professionalised content, children were increasingly self-conscious about how they portrayed themselves in public online spaces.**
 - **Rather than interacting with their friends on social media feeds 'in public', children were increasingly talking to them using apps' chat functions.**
 - **However, although chats were less public, large group chats could still include a mixture of people they knew and those they didn't.**
 - **Some felt social pressure to build their networks and engage with strangers.**
-

More careful, less creative

Children were even more careful about how they portrayed themselves in public online spaces, posting more rarely, to limited circles, or not at all

Based on data from the social media tracking phase of this project, it appears that the children, particularly the older participants, were posting much less frequently than they had done in previous waves of this research. Only three children from the sample of 21 posted any content to a social media story (where the content is viewable by friends and followers for a 24-hour period, a feature popular on Instagram and Snapchat) during the social media tracking phase of the research. Only four children posted on a social media profile during the tracking period (where the content is viewable by friends and followers, or other users depending on privacy settings, and which may appear in the feeds of other users or by viewing that child's profile, a feature popular on Instagram and TikTok).

Suzy (11), who posted on her profile more than any of the other children in the sample, posted three times in the two-week tracking period, with the other three children who posted only posting on their profiles once during that period.

When the children did post, there were a variety of methods that they used to limit or control how they were portrayed online. Some children were creating content, e.g. edited or filtered videos and photos, but then not posting it. Most of the children using social media who had posts saved in their 'drafts' said they did not intend to post them.

Bailey (8), for example, enjoyed making draft posts using the audio, templates and filters available on TikTok on his mum's phone, but was embarrassed by the possibility of them being seen by others, either online or if his mum showed them to other people in person. Niamh (13) also enjoyed making drafts when she was bored or spending time with her family – she and her sibling often made drafts on TikTok together but rarely posted them. These draft posts emulated many of the trends and templates these children saw other people posting publicly on platforms like TikTok.

Those children who did choose to post content would use other methods to limit or control who saw the posts. Some children in the sample used private Stories (Stories posted with pre-set limited audiences of close friends) or used alternative accounts such as 'Finstas' (private accounts where the children only connected

with their close friends so could post more freely), so they could control exactly who saw the content that they posted.

Niamh distinguished between the content she would want to keep within her close friendship group, and content she would like to broadcast to a wider audience – in this example, sharing images of her going on holiday.

“If me and my friend were messing around... if I were posting that, I’d put it on my private story. But if I were about to get on a plane, I’d stick the location on.”

Niamh, 13

Children were concerned about how they would be perceived in a critical and highly professionalised online environment

As discussed in the ‘What media were the children consuming?’ section, social media feeds were increasingly dominated by more professionalised, polished content, posted in pursuit of commercial goals. In this context, many of the children seemed to feel more concerned about posting their own content, for fear of judgement or embarrassment.

Many of the children said that they were hesitant to post on social media. Some of the explanations the children gave for this included feeling self-conscious, concerns that they might regret having posted content in the future, and only wanting to share with their immediate friendship group.

“I used to post. When I first downloaded it, it was mortifying. About two years, I used to post photo dumps and stuff, just cringy things that I don’t like any more, so I hid them. I’ve deleted those ones, but I have other ones that I post just straight into My Eyes Only.”¹³

Taylor, 14

A continued trend from wave 8 of this research (early 2022), is a minority of children telling us that ‘cancel culture’ was a factor in their posting habits. For example, Suzy was conscious of the possibility of receiving negative feedback on the content she shared. When talking about the content that celebrities posted, she said:

“They don’t really care about it unless it’s something that will get them cancelled. Then they won’t post.”

Suzy, 11

As has been observed in several previous waves of this research, this pressure also meant that when they did post, some children edited their appearance with a filter or lens to ‘enhance’ their photos. Alice (17) was concerned about her online image and was conscious that she wouldn’t post something if she “looked bad”, a concern she had expressed in previous years as well. Similarly, Suzy said that she would not post a photo of herself without using a filter as she thinks she looks “better this way”.

Some children were concerned about appearing popular among their peers online and posted content that they felt portrayed them as such. For example, Taylor (14) posted screenshots of her Snapchat ‘streaks’, a count of how many consecutive days two contacts have been chatting on Snapchat, to show people that she had had a long, ongoing conversation with someone. Taylor also felt validated when other friends posted about their friendship, and reposted this content to reinforce this sense of friendship and popularity online:

“A couple of days ago, my friend posted a picture of me and her on her Snapchat story, so I posted it on mine. I thought – ‘Yes! Finally somebody posted me.’”

Taylor, 14

Children who did post were carefully copying strategies they saw others use to maximise status and attention

In previous years, children were using a range of strategies to get more attention online. They did this by engaging with popular trends, using hashtags or tagging other users in their posts.

¹³ For My Eyes Only is an area of Snapchat where posts can be put which are only viewable to the user and are password protected

The few children in the sample who did post during this wave of research very rarely shared original content of their own; instead they mostly reused content or emulated popular trends, formats and templates that they had observed being used by other creators.

For example, Amber wanted to reach 100 followers on TikTok and copied the strategy she saw other content creators using, mentioning this goal in her posts and Stories, in the hope that more users would follow her. In an attempt to gain followers, Amber also copied trends and templates that she thought were popular without really understanding what they meant. In one instance she recreated a contentious meme, which had been the subject of some debate on social media as to whether it is racist or anti-racist. She did not appear to be aware of any of this context:

"I just posted this. I don't really know what it means."

Amber, 10

Oscar (15) rarely posted, but when he did, he made guitar covers of popular songs in a bid to get noticed on Instagram. He would post these videos with a series of hashtags selected to maximise the chance that his video would get viewed by large numbers of users. For example, he had posted a cover of a song by Oasis on his Instagram profile during the mourning period following the Queen's death and had tagged his video with '#thequeen', as he recognised the hashtag was trending, and wanted his video to be seen by more users.

Similarly, Terri (13) had a dance Instagram with roughly a thousand followers and wanted to reach more people. So, whenever she posted a dance video, she tagged her peers or other professional dancers, in an effort to ensure a wider audience saw her video in their feeds.

Engagement with viral online trends was also often motivated by gaining status, popularity and attention

During the fieldwork period, many of the children talked about the online popularity and viral trends surrounding a drink called 'Prime'.

Prime is a range of energy drinks promoted by influencers Logan Paul and KSI who, having once been rivals, teamed up at the beginning of 2022 to create the Prime brand to "showcase what happens when rivals come together [...] and fill the void where great taste meets function".¹⁴ Posts about the drink were extremely popular on social media and made news headlines due to high demand for the drink in the US and the UK.¹⁵ Prime was also difficult to obtain and children in the sample had watched TikTok videos of other users travelling far and wide to find a shop where the drink was in stock.

Some of the children in our study had tried to buy it in order to show it off.

Amber was not herself a fan of KSI or Logan Paul but had seen that other children gained popularity after buying the drink and posting about it, so she wanted to obtain a bottle herself. She had heard about a wine shop where the drink was being sold and told us she had asked her dad to drive her there. As the shop was a couple of hours drive away, her parents had told her they were not able to go.

"I would love to get [Prime] but it's too expensive. I'd probably send a picture of it to my friend like 'I've got Prime', because a lot of people want it so I'll share that I have it."

Amber, 10

Freddie had also wanted to get Prime so he could show it off, online and offline.

"Everyone wants to try it and it just feels good when you have it because it's a dead popular drink and everyone wants it. So, when you have it you just feel like flexing [bragging] on everyone."

Freddie, 12

Zak went to various shops before and after school with his mum to find the drink. While many in the sample had heard of Prime, few cared about the influencers behind the drink or how the drink tasted. After multiple attempts to find a bottle, Zak succeeded, but didn't think the drink tasted good, although he was still very happy to have obtained it. The 'hype' surrounding the drink was what appealed to the children most.

¹⁴ [About Prime: KSI and Logan Paul](#)

¹⁵ ['Prime drink: How KSI and Logan Paul made it so popular'](#), 27 January 2023, BBC News

“Every day, we’ve been going after school or in the morning to try and get it because it is hard to find. Really, it’s not even that good. I think it’s just because it was made by YouTubers.”

Zak, 12

In Terri’s (13) follow-up interview, she reflected that Prime was now ‘over’. Children wanted to be one of the first people to have the drink before it became more ‘mainstream’. It seemed that the status around Prime was tied to how exclusive it was early on. Posting about the drink before everyone had access to it was part of its appeal and fed into the status surrounding it.

When shown specific scenarios to explore media literacy¹⁶...

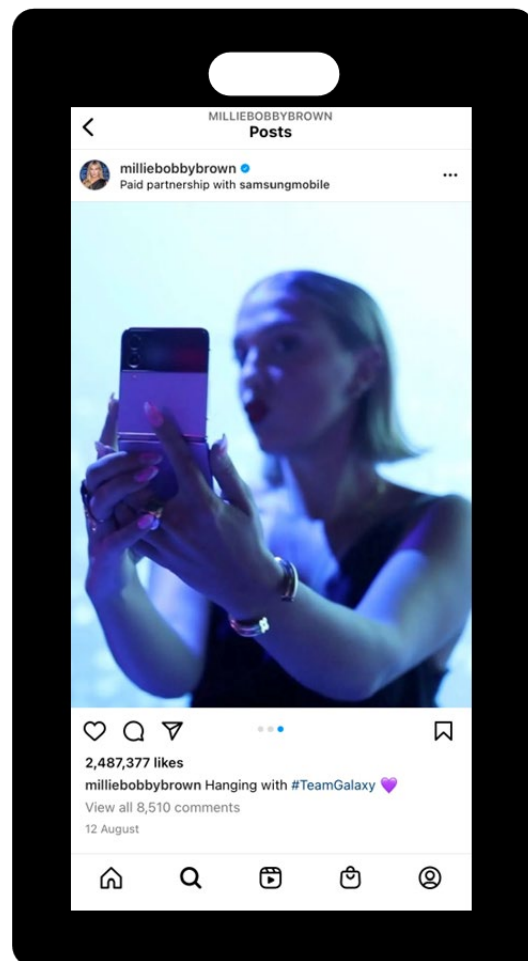
Children generally recognised more overt influencer marketing, but not more subtle product promotion

When presented with posts from celebrities like Millie Bobby Brown¹⁷, most of the children in this study were able to identify sponsored posts from celebrities and understood the features that indicated a partnership. For example, many pointed out that the content was labelled as a partnership and that the captions’ hashtags featured the brands to market the product.

However, some struggled to identify more discreet forms of advertising.

For example, some of the children seeing posts about the drink Prime seemed to be influenced by its popularity on social media. But they did not consider how these posts created by other users could be seen as a form of advertising in itself, nor did they reflect on how these posts helped encourage their decision to purchase the drink.

Bryony (14) had also seen videos about the ‘Airup’ bottle, a water bottle with a scented lid that was purported to trick the user’s sensory system into thinking they were drinking flavoured water. After watching some of these videos, she decided to buy the bottle, which cost at least £37. However, she did not reflect on how the reviews might have been a form of advertising that had influenced her decision to buy the product.



¹⁶ These scenarios were shown in the quantitative media literacy surveys, see Ofcom’s [Children’s Media Use and Attitudes report 2023](#)

¹⁷ Source: Millie Bobby Brown Instagram account, 12th August 2022, ([Millie Bobby Brown on Instagram: “Hanging with #TeamGalaxy”](#)).

Arguments between the children and their peers sometimes played out on social media

A minority of children in the sample who were interacting in more public spaces on social media were engaged in arguments and conflicts with their peers. This kind of drama online was similar to events in previous waves, when the children used the online world as a tool to fuel and play out disputes.

Suzy, who talked about conflicts with her friends on social media in wave 8 (early 2022) as well, explained how a girl at school used TikTok's reporting mechanism to fuel arguments between them:

"There was one girl that joined my school, and she was really annoying, and nearly all my friendship group had their TikTok accounts banned at least twice. She does it because she goes and reports the accounts for being underage, because TikTok has to ban you. And she gets her wee friends and all that to do it as well."

Suzy, 11

Suzy said that this girl was later banned from TikTok herself. Suzy was happy that the girl had been banned and thought it was because she had been reported for buying 'fake followers', i.e., paying for fake 'bot' accounts to follow her, creating the illusion of greater popularity online.

"She's a bit of a 'pick me' [attention seeking] honestly. She really thinks she's so cool but she's really not."

Suzy, 11

Oscar had experienced conflict on social media through 'live streams' on Instagram. A boy in his year repeatedly live-streamed insults and abusive comments about Oscar and his friends. He would 'invite' Oscar into the live stream video, so that he and Oscar would be live-streamed side-by-side in a split screen format, and continue to insult him. Oscar would try to defend himself during these live streams, but felt it was unfair of the boy to bring him into these live arguments without warning.

"It was live videos on Instagram. He would say stuff about us and so we'd go in and try and say that it's not true."

Oscar, 15

Bobby regularly hosted Yubo and Instagram 'lives' (live-streamed videos where other friends or followers can comment and interact) where he insulted other young people joining his livestream. When others argued back, Bobby resorted to saying 'the most disrespectful' thing he could think of.

"That's the way it's got to go. Just to stop the argument there and then I'll say something so disrespectful. You don't want to argue with me, you'll either leave [the stream] or just sit there quiet."

Bobby, 16

Bobby enjoyed having arguments online and his status increased when he won arguments by making someone leave a stream or stop replying.

Group chat culture

With less social interaction playing out in public social media spaces, children were increasingly confining this activity to 'chat' functions

In earlier waves of the project, social media feeds were places where friends socialised through liking, commenting, resharing and tagging each other. In more recent waves, the children rarely used Instagram and TikTok for peer-to-peer social interaction beyond liking content shared by their friends. Instead, Instagram and TikTok were primarily used for consuming content, posted mostly by people the children did not know rather than their friends.

In wave 9, this trend continued, with an increasingly clear division between the spaces where children consumed content, and where they interacted with friends. All the children in the sample who had the Snapchat app used it as their main app for messaging friends. As well as one-to-one messaging, several children in the sample were in group chats with groups of friends from school, people from their area, or friends from hobbies and activities.

Many children also used text and WhatsApp, especially for chatting with family, but their screentime on these apps was much lower compared to Snapchat.

Children were often part of many large group chats, and saw this as a sign of status and popularity

Some of the children in the sample felt that being included in large group chats was a signifier of status and popularity. The fear of being excluded, or of missing out on knowing what was going on, often kept children in the sample engaged with these group chats.

A few children, both younger and older, were part of large Snapchat groups with strangers. Among the examples shared by children in these group chats, those with strangers in them appear to have been more likely to include the sharing of hazardous or inappropriate content.

Bobby (16) was part of several group chats, including one with his friends where they shared voice notes with each other. These chats often involved the friends joking with each other, insulting each other, and rapping. Another of his group chats included people he did not know. In this chat, he frequently saw gory and violent content.

Suzy (11) reported that she had decided to leave some group chats that had included strangers in the past because she did not like the content shared in them, which she felt was sometimes “quite homophobic and racist”. At the time of the interview, Suzy was in a group chat with other people in her year group across her local area, many of whom she did not know. In the chat, she once saw a leaked video of a boy she knew performing a sexual act, but she chose not to leave this group as she wanted to carry on seeing some of the other content and conversation in it.

While many of the children were aware of the dangers of interacting with strangers online, they did not think much about the safety risks of joining groups with strangers on apps like Snapchat. It seemed that most of the children presumed that the other members of these group chats were young people, and therefore not a risk to them.

Reflecting on previous waves of Children's Media Lives

Some girls were continuing to receive inappropriate messages from strangers but made active choices not to engage with them

In wave 8 (early 2022), there was a specific focus on online harms, and the research found that some of the girls in the sample had been contacted by people they did not know. Taylor (then 13) and Alice (then 16) had both received sexualised messages over social media like this.

For example, Taylor used to talk to people who added her on Snapchat using the Quick Add feature. She would also sometimes get messages on Instagram from strangers, whom she would then add on Snapchat. She once received sexually explicit content during one of these interactions.

“I'd probably get one or two messages a month. They want [to add you on Snapchat] because on Snapchat, you can send pictures that you can't get away with on Instagram.”

Taylor, 13 (wave 8)

In this latest wave, Taylor said she did not add people on Snapchat after they had messaged her on Instagram, or use Snapchat's Quick Add feature to talk to strangers.

“It [receiving a message from a stranger on Instagram] hasn't happened in a long time. Maybe once in the last year... It doesn't happen much anymore because I don't really talk to people I don't know any more... I used to talk to people I didn't know when my friends were all grounded and I've got no one to talk to, I just sort of talked to people on Snapchat. But now, I don't really do it because obviously I've got loads of people I can talk with.”

Taylor, 14 (wave 9)

In both wave 8 and wave 9, Alice (17) talked about sexual messages she had received from strangers on Instagram. For her, it was something to expect when having a public Instagram account (an account which she uses to share what she produces at culinary college) – “You just block them, it's no big deal”.

Some children used specific, less well-known apps to connect and chat with strangers online, as well as more familiar apps

Apps like Yubo and Wizz were used by a few children in the sample. Both apps allow children to connect with other users via an interface which allows young people to swipe left or right to either 'match' and become friends with or ignore new people. Once 'matched', they were able to chat in the app.

"[Wizz] is basically this place where, like, you meet new people. It's like, you just meet new mates on it. You make a profile and then, it's kind of like Snapchat to be honest. You can send friend requests to people and text them on there too. It shows people's profiles and then it says 'send friend request.'"

Terri, 13

Two of the children speaking to people they did not know online said they did so because of peer pressure. Both Alice and Terri spoke about how they had been encouraged, directly and indirectly, to download either Yubo or Wizz because of what their peers were doing.

"All my friends from dance were on Wizz so I decided to go on it and download it."

Terri, 13

"It's because all my friends were like 'you need to speak to boys' so I was like yeah, basically. I used it for like a day, but I've not used it since."

Alice, 17

Children could also connect with people they did not know using the Quick Add function on Snapchat, which provides a list of recommended 'friends'.

Oscar often used the Quick Add function to connect with people he did not know and he would chat with them.

But on one occasion, Oscar later realised that he had been 'catfished' (tricked into interacting with someone using a fake identity) by someone using a girl's name on Snapchat and he has since been more cautious when speaking to people via Quick Add. He said that if he were speaking to someone whom he had added via Quick Add again, he would try to use their picture to find their account on another platform and verify they were real.

"I do find myself talking to strangers online, but I'm always careful with it. Before, there has been a girl that I was talking to that was fake, completely fake. They ended up not being a girl at all."

Oscar, 15

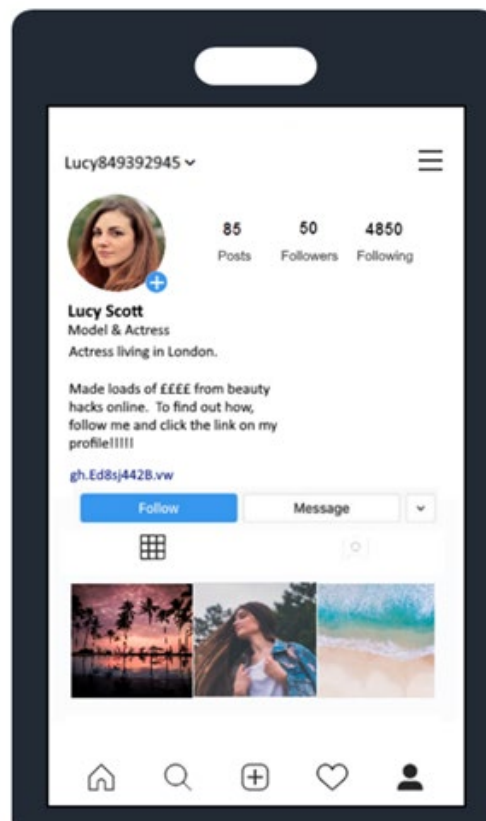
When shown specific scenarios to explore media literacy¹⁸...

Some younger children were unable to identify fake accounts

The children were presented with an image of a profile¹⁹ that had been used in Ofcom's media literacy tracking study to assess if and how they were able to reflect on whether the account was of a real person or was fake, and what indicators they used to determine this.

Most of the children said they would probably not follow or accept a request from this account. Alice (17), for example, pointed out the unbalanced following to follower ratio, which suggested to her that the account was likely to be 'dodgy'. Suzy (11) also found the images posted on the account 'weird', as they appeared to be Google stock images rather than real photos.

However, some children considered that the account might belong to a real user. Suzy pointed out that the link in the person's bio could lead to a website or business, as she had seen with other social media influencers. For Zak (12), the bio, profile picture and link added to the account's legitimacy because he thought it might lead to the user's other social media profiles.



¹⁸ These scenarios were shown in the quantitative media literacy surveys, see Ofcom's [Children's Media Use and Attitudes report 2023](#)

¹⁹ Source: This profile is a fictional profile. Image source: Pexels

How were the children learning online?

Section summary

- Children using the digital world for learning is not new, but from this sample it appears that children are increasingly using social media platforms to meet this need.
- Social media was used like a search engine to answer questions, as well as to provide guidance, from study motivation to advice on 'side-hustles' such as e-commerce trading.
- Children receive information through a range of active and passive behaviours, from actively searching for answers to scrolling feeds generated by recommender systems.
- Several children reported seeing content appear in their feeds that they had not sought out (and sometimes that they would rather not have seen), particularly relating to mental health topics.
- Whether consumed actively or passively, children generally believed what they saw, read or heard on social media. They rarely considered its reliability or relevance, often applying it to their own lives with little reflection.

Turning to social media for answers

When the children in the sample had a question, they were more likely to turn to social media platforms than a search engine

In this wave, children were still using dedicated search engines for specific tasks such as homework and questions where they were expecting to find a definitive answer.

"Just for my homework, I have to research artists and write about them... For my research I use Google Chrome."

Arjun, 11

The children used Google and other search engines less often to research topics relating to their personal interests. Several children in the sample talked about how they used social media to seek information before any other search tool, using search engines as a 'back-up' option.

Terri (13), for example, preferred to look at reviews of clothes on TikTok before buying them and did not look on search engines until after she had searched on TikTok.

Amber said she preferred to use TikTok to search for information because she liked the fact it was a more visual format.

"I find TikTok better because of, like, you can see the videos."

Amber, 10

Amber, an avid Michael Jackson fan, had recently seen negative videos about the musician that had upset her. She decided to find out more by typing "Is Michael Jackson a weirdo" into the TikTok search bar. As Amber was already using TikTok at this time, she found it easier to stay within the app to ask this question. Using built-in platform functionalities was less frictional than leaving the app and searching on a dedicated search engine.

The children did not think about any of the limitations or implications of searching for information on social media. Nor did they reflect on how searching on social media might affect the results the platform showed them and how this could affect the recommender systems that determined what they were subsequently

shown in their feeds more generally. It was only when the children were dissatisfied with a search result on social media that they decided to look elsewhere.

When Amber did not feel she had found the answer to her question on TikTok, she turned to Google.

"I don't know what to think... first I use TikTok and then if that doesn't say anything, I'll look on Google."

Amber, 10

When the children did use Google, their trust in the results was high, but as on social media, they did not tend to critically reflect on the results they were shown (see box, below).

When shown specific scenarios to explore media literacy²⁰...

Children struggled to understand the ranking of sponsored search results

The children were shown Google search results²¹ for children's trainers and asked to reflect on why they thought the search results appeared in the order they did. While many of the children quickly identified sponsored posts in the social media scenarios (see page 26), most of them did not recognise sponsored search results on Google. When asked, many, especially the younger children, said the results at the top were probably there because they were the most popular. Only some of the children, almost always the older children in the sample, commented on the text which stated the link was an 'Ad' or expressed a need or desire to reflect critically on the results.

The screenshot shows a Google search for "childrens trainers". The search bar is at the top with "childrens trainers" entered. Below the search bar, there are tabs for "All", "Shopping", "Images", "News", "Maps", and "More". The search results are displayed in a grid format. On the left side, there are several sponsored results (Ads) for Nike, MandM Direct, Schuh, JD Sports, Sports Direct, and Nike GB. On the right side, there is a "Shop now" section with a grid of shoe images and prices from various retailers like Nike Official, Decathlon UK, MandM Direct, JD Sports, John Lewis & Partners, Sports Direct, and H&M.

²⁰ These scenarios were shown in the quantitative media literacy surveys, see Ofcom's [Children's Media Use and Attitudes report 2023](#).

²¹ Source: Google search for children's trainers. Images (reading from top to bottom): Nike Official, Decathlon UK, M and M Direct, JD Sports

Some of the children were taking life advice from content that was served to them on social media, spanning motivation, emotional support and diagnosis of conditions

Footage of screen recordings from Taylor (14), Bryony (14), Amber (10) and Bobby (16) featured videos of content creators sharing information, motivation, or advice.

On her TikTok For You page, Amber had seen two videos from a content creator who had edited a video of herself dancing in a tracksuit with the captions 'What ADHD can look like' and 'What anxiety can look like' with shots of herself 'zoning out', "being forgetful", 'picking [her] nails' and 'lip biting' which she claimed were characteristics of ADHD and anxiety. The videos were set to music and the tone was light-hearted.

When Amber saw the two videos, it prompted her to consider whether she might have anxiety or ADHD, and she discussed this with her mum. Amber's reaction demonstrated that she was quick to take the information in the video at face value without critically reflecting on or checking its reliability.

"I didn't even know that those were the symptoms for the ADHD one or something like that... I don't know what ADHD stands for...like I don't know how to explain it."

Amber, 10

Taylor (14), Bryony (14) and Bobby (16) were consuming life advice and motivational content on their social media feeds. All three displayed low levels of critical thinking when determining the applicability of the content to their own lives. None reflected on the content creator's potential motivations for sharing the content, for example, to increase revenue or to increase the number of views or their follower count.

Having recently decided to 'knuckle down' at school, Taylor (14) had turned to StudyTok, a community on TikTok that promoted studying and shared tips to achieve top grades. She also followed hashtags within StudyTok such as #ToxicStudyTraits. Posts under this hashtag prompted strict study behaviours and Taylor liked this as it kept her motivated, knowing that others were 'telling her' to work hard. She had also recently started following an account offering advice about how to get into Ivy League colleges in the United States. Taylor said she found the page useful, but did not comment on how the advice in the video might be targeted at a US audience and perhaps be less applicable to her own situation, applying for sixth form colleges in the UK.

Bryony (14) also followed several 'motivational' and 'inspirational' influencers. One of the people she followed, Xgilham, was a popular influencer with 7.5 million followers. His bio reads that he shares 'relatable quotes and emotions' and his videos feature Xgilham staring intensely into the camera and whispering life advice into the mic. Bryony said of Xgilham that she only watches his videos if they come up, but she does follow him. She likes that 'if you're having a bad day, he would help you find a solution for that, or whatever'.

As explored in the 'What media were the children consuming' section, Bobby engaged with content from Andrew Tate. On the advice that Tate shares within the Hustlers University Discord server, Bobby said:

"He teaches how to get rich, how to get money. Once you're in the Discord server, he shares his ways... every week he'll share like something about crypto... it's pretty useful. It gives good advice. Like 'Don't let other people tell you what to do. You're your own person.'"

Bobby, 16

These examples show children turning to social media for advice on how to improve their lives, without considering whether these role models are best placed to provide it.

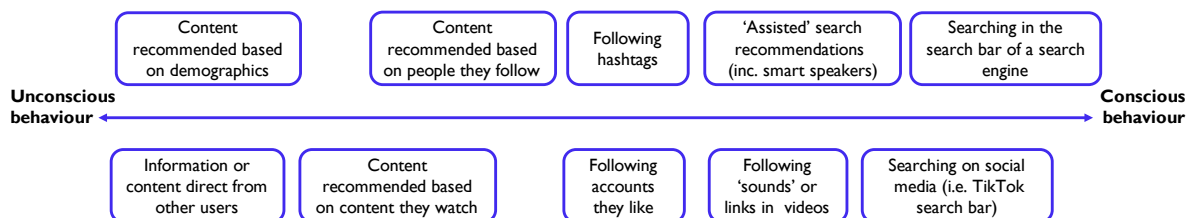
Passive learning

Much of the content children consume is not actively sought out, but served to them by recommender systems

A lot of information that children consumed was not actively sought out. There was a range of behaviour – from more active to more passive – that led them to the information they saw, including whom they followed and what they 'liked' More active behaviours included searching directly on a search engine or social media. More passive behaviours included scrolling content served to them by recommender systems used for the

curation and ranking of content feeds, . Recommender systems often generate feeds based on presumed user demographics, past preferences and user behaviours.²²

In the middle of this spectrum, there were other mechanisms that shaped how information was served to children. Autocompletes in search bars introduced a degree of passivity in actively sourcing information – something that was captured in Terri's (13) screen record and Frankie's (8) interview. This also applied to seeking information using smart speakers, which both Arjun (11) and Niamh (13) did.



At the more passive end of the spectrum, some children were learning about issues they hadn't previously engaged with much on their social media feeds. Sometimes this informed their thinking about famous figures and their view of the world.

As explored earlier in the 'What are the children consuming?' section, Taylor had seen videos about a debate between a transgender influencer, Dylan Mulvaney, (who often commented on issues of gender identity) and Caitlyn Jenner on her For You page. The content that Taylor had stumbled across led her to reflect on trans rights, the debate between the influencers, and her position on it.

"It's just very hypocritical and like, [Caitlyn] has had access to all of this money their whole life. It's not the same for everyone. Not everyone can afford to get top and bottom surgery and hormones. I support trans people but I'm not part of the group... I have opinions about it."

Taylor, 14

She went on to seek additional information, following Mulvaney to see more content about gender identity.

Reflecting on previous waves

Some children encountered mature themes through content they were served

Wave 8 (early 2022) of Children's Media Lives had a particular focus on online harms. In that wave, the children were seeing a range of hazardous content online, some of which was served to them by the recommender systems that generated their feeds. Many of the children had not wanted to see this content and were not expecting to do so. Although online harm was not explored in the same depth during this wave, the research once again found that some of the children were being served content they did not want to see.

Arjun (10) used YouTube Shorts for entertainment, likening the functionality to a TikTok feed, and in a similar manner did not actively choose videos but scrolled through whatever was served to him. Sometimes this meant he saw content that was age-inappropriate. In Arjun's case, he saw a video which referenced seeing your teacher on Pornhub. He had not searched for this type of content, nor did he understand its meaning.

²² [How TikTok recommends videos #ForYou](#); [YouTube: Recommended Videos](#); [Facebook Help Centre: Recommendations on Instagram](#)

Some children were seeing content they did not want to see, such as content about mental health

A few of the girls in the sample talked about seeing content about mental health on their TikTok For You page that they did not search for and did not want to see.

Alice, who said during the research this year that she had previously struggled with her mental health, said she sometimes saw eating disorder content on her feed that was tagged 'recovery', but which was not about recovery.

"I normally skip past them... I don't need other people's depressing-ness to make me depressed."

Alice, 17

While she said she might once have engaged with these accounts, this year she said she did not want to see them. Instead, she actively avoided posts from these accounts if they came up on her feed.

Niamh, who struggled with anxiety, found that her For You page sometimes served her content on depression and anxiety. Like Alice, she did not want to see this content.

"Sometimes there are these posts with quotes and stuff about anxiety and depression... I don't know... I don't really want to see that."

Niamh, 13

Both these children were being exposed to content that they did not want to see while they were passively scrolling through online content.

The value the children placed on truth

Any news that reached the children was usually through social media, and often not via news providers

As in last year's wave (early 2022), very few children in the sample reported watching mainstream news. Three children mentioned that their schools made them watch *Newsround*, a children's news programme on the BBC. Outside school, however, there was very little engagement with traditional news sources.

Social media was generally the first place most of the children found out about local, national and global events. Some children in the sample were receiving updates about breaking news through social media.

For example, Bryony, Amber and Amira had found out about the death of HM Queen Elizabeth II on various social media platforms.

"I was on TikTok and I was refreshing it over and over again and the next minute 'RIP Queen Elizabeth' and I was like 'Oh my God, she has died!' so I rang up my mum."

Bryony, 14

"The Queen died, I saw that on TikTok and I was like 'Oh my God, that can't be true!' and I told my dad and he didn't believe me so we searched it and it was."

Amber, 10

"I was scrolling through YouTube shorts, and then I saw people posting about it, and that's when I found out the Queen died."

Amira, 12

Many of the children, more than seen in previous waves, were receiving news content mediated by content creators on social media. The formatting and style of the videos varied from individuals reading out headlines and articles published by mainstream news sources to camera, to content that stylistically mimicked television news broadcasts. In some cases, content creators aggregated different news sources and provided their own spin on a situation.

For example, Oscar (15) had heard a lot of news about Russia and Ukraine on his social media platforms. He had recently seen a post *"that had a lot of writing on it"* – which Oscar took as a signal the content was news –

detailing how Russia was going to bomb the United Kingdom. At the time he had believed it although he later changed his mind after he saw other content creators on TikTok saying it was not true.

A few of the children were using social media to actively search for views and sources beyond the mainstream

Two children in the sample sought out alternative sources online for clarity on certain political issues, or to hear a different perspective.

Alice actively sought out accounts on Instagram that she felt gave a more nuanced viewpoint than she saw on more mainstream news.

“I follow a couple of pages that stand with Israel. I think I found it when there were terror attacks going on. So they post a lot of updates about Israel, because obviously the news doesn't really portray Israel. You don't really even hear about it on the news. So that's kind of how I find out about things in Israel.”

Alice, 17

Isaac (16) had been using Rec Room, a virtual reality multiplayer online gaming space, to explore topics he was interested in. He would search for virtual rooms hosting conversations about topics such as the Israel-Palestine conflict or the war in Ukraine. Often, the speakers would also use a pop-up virtual screen to host a presentation for listeners. He liked to join the rooms simply to listen to conversations unfolding but chose not to proffer his own opinion for fear that he might get called out if he was wrong.

Isaac preferred to use Rec Room than TikTok, as he felt that TikTok content creators did not explore the content fully, and the debates on TikTok often became volatile and heated. However, he also said the conversations in Rec Room often appeared to be one-sided, as well as noting that they seemed to be hosted by people, usually men, who were older than him.

Overall, children rarely expressed a desire to verify or reflect on the truthfulness of what they saw online

The children in the sample rarely thought about whether the information they saw on social media was truthful – only doing so when they were already interested in a topic or feared they would be called out later for believing something that was untrue.

“If it's something I don't know about, then I probably wouldn't think about it too much. But if it's something I'm interested in, I think I would know if it's true or false most of the time.”

Ben, 15

Overall, however, they tended to accept most information as reliable, without critically reflecting on the content itself, its source, the content creator, or the motivations the creator might have for posting.

Taylor (14) enjoyed watching NewsWithChris on TikTok. Chris is an English content creator with over 240,000 followers at time of writing, who films himself reporting the headlines. He doesn't attribute what he's reporting, but from the content Taylor saw, it seemed to be mostly UK-focused mainstream news. When probed about why she liked and trusted NewsWithChris so much, Taylor was not able to give any reasons. She simply said *“He's the one that I trust.”*

Asked about news, Suzy (11) talked about seeing a commentary-style video about former prime minister Boris Johnson allegedly firing a member of his entourage because he had been given a bag of crisps he did not like. There was no evidence to suggest that this was true and the video may well have been a spoof, but Suzy had thought it was news and believed it.

A few children in the sample struggled to find a reference point for what online information was trustworthy and what might be fake news. Most of the children had heard about 'fake news' but when probed further often didn't have a clear or consistent way of making these judgements. For example, they knew little about what kinds of publishers or channels might be trustworthy.

Oscar (15) had mistaken a legitimate article from *The Guardian* for a piece of fake news as he felt the headline was exaggerated. He did not reflect on the fact that the article was published by a mainstream news outlet or that it was served to him via a news aggregator app on his phone.

Having searched on both TikTok and then Google for information about Michael Jackson, when she did get search results, Amber still was not sure how to work out what was most likely to be trustworthy.

"I don't know [which one to believe]...Like I can ask people what they think and see how many people will say yes or no... like the more people who say yes [makes it trustworthy] but I don't know."

Amber, 10

These children did not have a benchmark for trustworthiness and struggled to work out what was true.

When shown specific scenarios to explore media literacy²³...

The children saw recognisable logos and blue ticks as signifiers of trustworthiness on online posts

Posts from the NHS Instagram account²⁴ were shown to the children who took part in Children's Media Lives, who were then asked to reflect on how trustworthy they found the content.

All the children presented with this scenario considered the posts trustworthy because they came from a large and well-known organisation. The NHS logo was recognised by the majority of the children.

"They are reliable social media posts because they're from the NHS who are a well-known medical company throughout the whole of the UK."

Bryony, 14

Several of the children also pointed out the verified blue tick in the post. More generally, and especially for accounts that might be less well-known than the NHS, the children regarded a blue tick as a sign of trustworthiness.

"On Instagram you're going to have to be fairly reputable to have a verified account."

Peter, 17



²³ These scenarios were shown in the quantitative media literacy surveys, see Ofcom's [Children's Media Use and Attitudes report 2023](#).

²⁴ Source: NHS Instagram account, 16th January 2022 (NHS on Instagram - [Get a booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, and protect yourself, your family and the NHS](#).) Contains public sector information licensed under the [Open Government Licence v3.0](#)

How were the children playing in a digital world?

Section summary

- In line with previous waves of this research, both boys and girls spent time playing digital or online games, although they tended to play different kinds of games.
 - Many children, more often girls, played a varied range of free or lower-cost smartphone-based games that were less competitive and didn't involve a lot of investment or dedication to play. These children spent less time playing games overall, and had less loyalty to specific games.
 - In contrast, several children in the sample, mainly boys, remained devoted to a smaller number of console-based games such as FIFA and Fortnite. These games tended to be more competitive and involved greater time and sometimes financial investment from children.
 - Interest and investment in more competitive games also played out in engagement with related video content, for example learning tips and tricks or following influencer gamers on YouTube.
-

Diversity in gaming

Children across the sample were engaging with a huge range of digital or online games, and their associated playing behaviours were equally varied.

Play varied in whether it was solo or social, focused on competition and skill or exploration and creativity, or simply distraction and passing time. The activity at the heart of games ranged across sport, combat, world-building, life simulation, roleplaying, even digital versions of traditional offline games like Uno.

Some children played games via a console – in fact this was the only reason several children were using a TV set – but others were played on smartphones, tablets and laptops.

Across this diversity, a key factor shaping how children played was how much they invested in individual games, in terms of time, developing skills, and often money.

Gaming investment: time, money and loyalty

Many children, more often girls, played a wider variety of free or low-cost games

Several children in the sample were playing games that involved elements of life simulation (e.g., BitLife and Sims Mobile) or social roleplay (e.g., Toca World and Roblox). These games were nearly all free to play, although they could include in-app purchases to gain access to ad-free play or in-game items and benefits.

Frankie (8) liked playing several different free, solo-player games. She was playing Gymnastics Salon, where she could style her own gymnast and perform a routine at a virtual gymnastics competition a few times a week on her tablet. She also played HayDay, where she could create her own farm, grow crops, raise livestock and trade with other farmers, from time to time using her mum's phone.

Suzy (11) played Toca World, a game where players can imagine stories for characters, build worlds and act out role-play. Taylor (14) cycled between playing BitLife, Minecraft and Sims Mobile, all of which are free-to-play mobile versions of games and involved elements of building, role-playing and life simulation. Taylor had paid a small amount to get access to an ad-free version of BitLife but saw spending much more on these games as a waste of money.

"[On BitLife] I have like the first level, a Bitizenship, where I don't get adverts. But I don't pay beyond that. There's the Everything Pack where it gives you all the jobs, like they've added CEO and Acting and stuff. But you have to pay. For the whole thing its £12.50 when my original one was only £2.50, I wouldn't pay more than that."

"I just like simulation games... I have Sims Mobile on my phone. It's not as advanced as the laptop game but it's free and it's got most of the same basic layout."

Taylor, 14

Others were playing fairly simple mobile games on smartphones. On her laptop, Frankie (8) played several free solo-player games using Poki.com, a website with several thousand free online games. She especially liked a game called Merge Cake – a simple pair-matching game. None of these games involved elements of multi-player competition, status or skill-improvement, and Frankie did not invest a lot of time in any of them. Instead, she enjoyed trialling several different games by searching on Poki.com and on the app store of her tablet.

Amber (10) had over 25 free solo-player games saved to a folder on her phone. She would download an app whenever it was advertised to her on the app store or on TikTok to see if she liked it. She had so many, she couldn't remember the premise of a lot of the games. She would often only play them once and switch to another game when she got bored.

A common thread across these games was a lower level of competitive skill development. Many of them were single-player, and those that did involve playing with other people tended to have a more social rather than competitive focus for the children playing them (e.g., Roblox). Children playing games in this way were often engaging with a wider range of games, investing less effort and time in each individual game, and picking up new games with greater frequency.

Most children did not spend money on, or within, these less-competitive games, although Suzy (11) talked about buying expansion packs and clothes on Toca Life. Suzy's mum had warned Suzy about spending money in the app, but hadn't realised that her PayPal account was signed up to Toca World, enabling Suzy to secretly spend £12 in the app on furniture and characters. Suzy's mum only found out later when checking her emails.

Some children, mainly boys, remained committed to a smaller number of console-based games, involving greater competition and associated investment from the children

The games in which children in this sample invested the most time usually involved competitive sport or combat themes and were played on consoles, such as Fortnite and FIFA.

Although Ben's (15) gaming had reduced since the previous wave, he still gamed for about two hours per night. He played FIFA and NBA 2K against other players online and preferred these online game modes because of their competitive nature. For example, new players on NBA 2K were released each evening, and the better, more desirable players cost more. To improve his team, Ben was motivated to play for several hours each day to earn more credits, which he could use to buy new players and improve his team.

Alfie (8) also enjoyed the competitive and challenging nature of games, preferring to play against real players online rather than the in-game Zombie modes on Fortnite. He found playing against real people more engaging, because active players represented a real challenge and a chance for him to improve.

The children playing games like this typically focused on just one or two games and invested much more time on each of them to improve and better compete against other players. Some boys in the sample have been loyal to the same series of games across several years of this study, e.g. Freddie (12), who has been playing both FIFA and Rocket League since wave 6 (2020), and Ben (15), who has been a dedicated Fortnite player since wave 5 (2019).

Some girls in the sample were also playing these more competitive games. Amber and Terri both played Fortnite, although they spent significantly less time doing so than the boys in the sample who played the same game. These girls were less invested in developing or improving their skills within the game, both citing social reasons for playing it:

"My [sibling] started playing it because [their] friends do and then [they] told me to get it."

Amber, 10

"I don't even know [why I like Fortnite], I think it's because it's proper popular, like everyone was playing it. So sometimes it's just, fitting in with the trends until it grows on you, really."

Terri, 13

Investment in more competitive games also played out in engagement with related video content; for example, learning tips and tricks or following influencer gamers on YouTube

A lot of the content the children watched on YouTube was either made by influencers who were famous for sharing content of themselves playing games or discussing gaming-related topics. This included content from popular influencers such as the Sidemen, JackSucksAtLife, or about FIFA Ultimate Team pack reveals, in which YouTubers 'reveal' news about the FIFA Ultimate Team mode in FIFA that lets you build your dream squad.

Some of the children in the sample watching this content played it in the background while they gamed themselves. Others used it to learn tips and tricks about the games they played, or to engage with an online community of people interested in the games.

Ben (15) watched videos about his favourite games because he wanted to hear commentary about them. He also liked hearing general tips about how to improve his game play.

Some children were watching gaming content to keep updated on any dramatic events related to their game. Zak (12) watched content from JackSucksAtLife, where the content creator joked about stealing KSI's Diamond Play Button and being kicked out of Minecraft servers. Ben enjoyed content revealing the latest packs of players available in FIFA or NBA 2K.

Even Lily (9), one of the youngest children in the sample, liked watching people play Among Us. She preferred this to playing the game herself, partially because her parents felt she was too young to understand the rules well enough to play alone. She also watched YouTube content from creators who made stories from their recorded game play – with narration and different voices being used for the people they played against, who acted as characters in these stories.

Annex I: Profile of participants

Gender	
Male	11
Female	10
Age	
8	3
9	1
10	2
11	2
12	3
13	2
14	2
15	2
16	2
17	2
18	0
Age bands	
8-11	8
12-15	9
16-17	4
Age and gender	
Male and 8-11	4
Male and 12-15	4
Male and 16-17	3
Female and 8-11	4
Female and 12-15	5
Female and 16-17	1

Location	
England	16
Wales	1
Scotland	2
Northern Ireland	2
Type of location	
City/ large town	4
Town/ small town	12
Village/ hamlet	5
Family circumstances	
Older sibling(s)	9
Younger sibling(s)	11
Only child	5
Living with one parent	11
Living with both parents	9
Living without parents	1
Ethnicity	
White English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, White other	15
Mixed or multiple ethnic background	1
Asian or Asian British	3
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	2
Disabilities/ SEND (including mental health issues)	
Diagnosed/ awaiting diagnosis	6

Annex 2: Devices and platforms

From combining the different sources of behavioural data, it is possible to develop an estimate of children's screentime spent across different activities. The data used to develop this includes:

- Screenshots of children's device (smartphone, tablet) screen time statistics, i.e., objective data about time on platforms.
- Children's media diary entries, i.e., self-reported data about time on platforms.

The chart below illustrates these estimates. The chart indicates where estimates are based on self-reported and therefore less reliable data. There are some gaps in the data and a high likelihood that multi-screening means that estimates of some time spent on platforms overlaps with others, so the chart should not be taken as an accurate depiction of total screentime for children.

Figure 1: Estimates of children's daily screen time across different apps

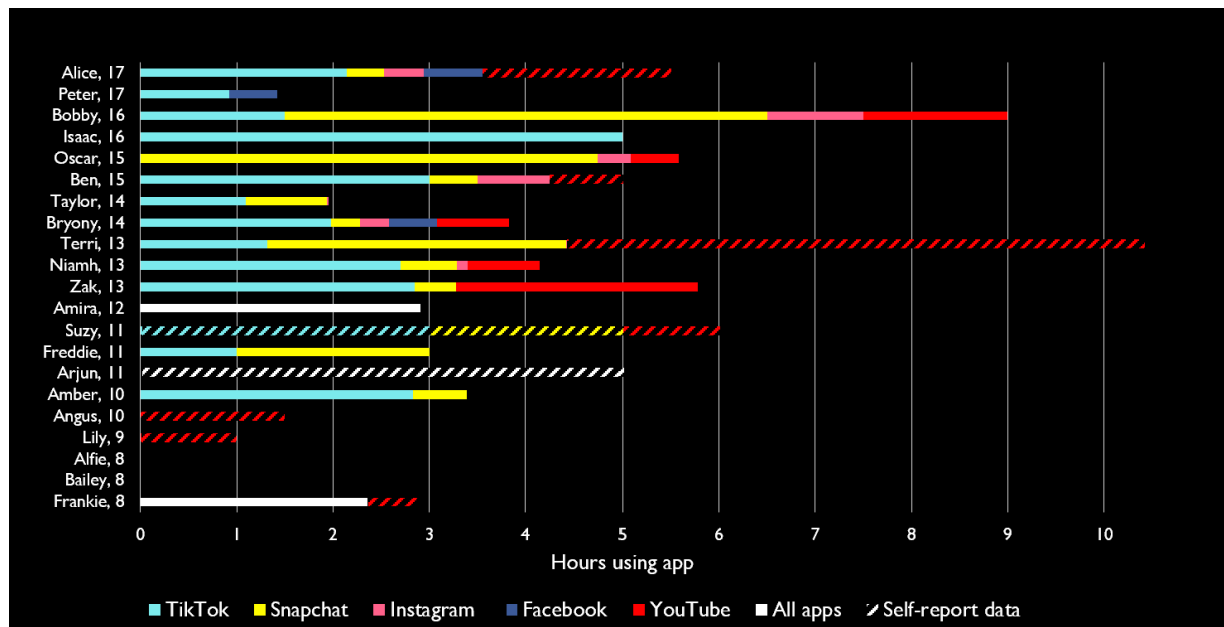
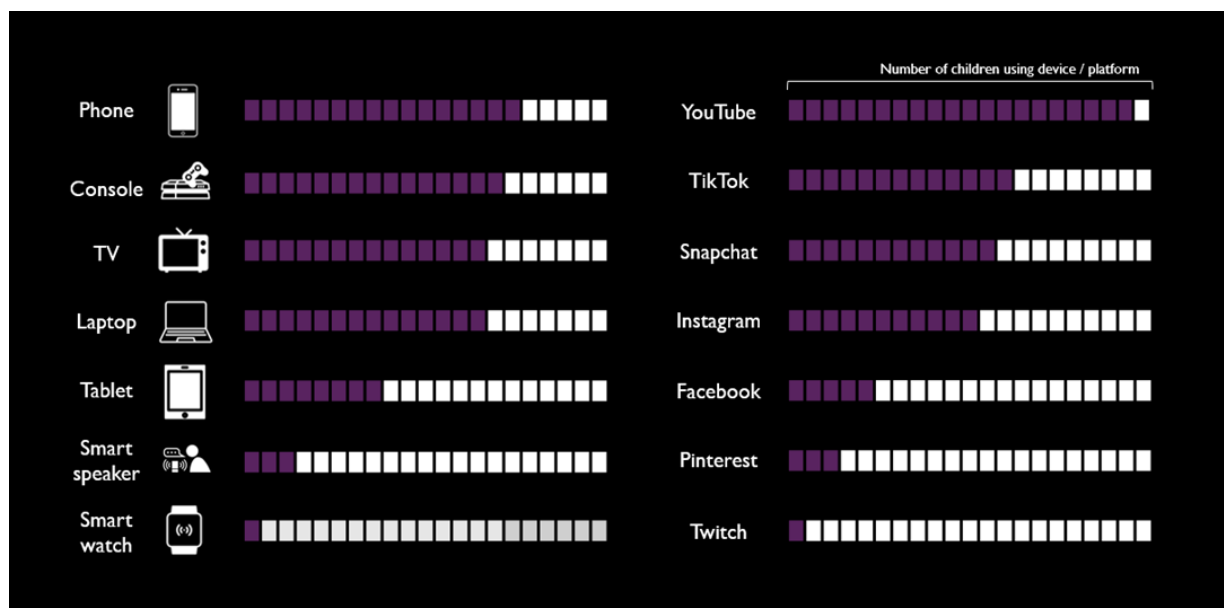


Figure 2: How many children out of the total of 21 were using different devices and apps.



Glossary

Bio: A short summary found beneath an Instagram user's name. This could be a short description of them, a set of emojis or a link to another profile.

Cryptocurrency (crypto): Any form of digital currency that is exchanged through computer networks. Cryptocurrencies are very volatile, and are not currently regulated in the UK, so people are not protected if their funds are lost for any reason.

Diamond play button: An award given by YouTube to YouTubers when they reach 10 million subscribers.

Discord: A group chat-focused social media platform particularly popular with gamers. Discord allows users to interact on 'servers' – chat rooms that can range in size from two individuals to thousands-strong gaming communities.

FIFA: FIFA 22 is the latest in a series of popular football video game, available on all major consoles.

Finsta: A slang term short for 'Finstagram, a contraction of 'fake' and 'Instagram'. A Finsta is an account, offered by Instagram, that some users typically create to post images and interact with a closer group of followers. These typically include more candid and less polished posts than what users might post on their main account.

Fortnite: A multiplayer online game which can be played for free on multiple gaming platforms (e.g. Xbox, PlayStation). In the most popular game mode, Battle Royale, the game pits players against each other to be the last survivor on an island.

Instagram Reels: The short-form section of Instagram, hosting reels of short-form content. Reels on Instagram are short videos (usually around 15-30 seconds) similar in format to videos found on TikTok.

Influencer: A social media user who exerts influence over the digital and material consumption habits of their audience. 'Influencer marketing' is now a well-established advertising technique whereby 'expert' influencers promote a product through public use on their 'channel'.

Likes: This feature allows users to express their appreciation of a particular post on social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, by either giving it a 'thumbs up' (Facebook) or clicking the heart (on Instagram). Instagram allows other users to look at what you have liked.

Lives: A feature which allows people to live-stream what they are doing in real time on social media, and they can be viewed by others online.

My Eyes Only: A private folder on Snapchat where saved posts are password protected and can only be viewed by the user.

Nintendo Switch: A games console released by Nintendo in 2017, which can be used as a stationary or portable device. 'Switch' games use motion sensing and tactile feedback.

Pinterest: An image based social media platform that is modelled on a pinboard. Users can engage with current interests, find ideas for recipes or outfits, for example, and 'pin' these to their digital boards. Users must be 13 or over.

Post: A post is an image, comment or video uploaded by the user to a social media platform.

Rec Room: A virtual reality multiplayer game where users can create rooms (online spaces), for different experiences. One room might be for a debate while another could be a virtual game of tag. Users can enter rooms and interact with other users within that space. There are no age restrictions on Rec Room but users registered under 13 will automatically have a junior account.

Recommender Systems: Systems used by platforms to rank and curate content that users see on their feeds. These are often based on several criteria, which can include demographics, preferences and past behaviours.

Spotlight: A reel-style feature on Snapchat that showcases popular short-form videos from users who have posted content onto the 'spotlight story'.

Split-screen: A single post or piece of content which displays two different (often unrelated) videos, playing simultaneously, either side by side or one on top of the other. Some social media platforms provide templates for 'split-screen' content to be produced.

Stories (Instagram/Snapchat): Stories allow users to post photos and videos for their followers to see that last for 24 hours on the platform before vanishing.

TikTok: TikTok is a video-sharing social networking platform which is used to watch algorithmically generated short-form content (lasting between 15 seconds and 10 minutes) in a feed, and create short-form videos. Users must be 13 or over to use the platform and 18 or over to stream on TikTok Live.

Toca Life World: An app-based life-simulation game for children. Users can access different worlds and play out different storylines.

Ultimate Team: A game mode in FIFA where players can assemble a team using players from any international football league.

Wizz: A social media platform that allows users to chat live online with other users from around the world. It features a swiping system that allows users to choose who they want to chat to. Users must be 13 or over.

Xbox: A line of consoles manufactured by global manufacturing giants, Microsoft. The Xbox is primarily a gaming console but can also be used to stream TV programmes and access social media.

YouTuber: A YouTuber is a person who uses, produces and uploads video content to the video-sharing platform, YouTube. Children in the sample have generally differentiated between vloggers and YouTubers, according to how popular and well known the personality is, with YouTubers generally referring to famous personalities who make a living from their vlogging.

YouTube Shorts: The short-form section of YouTube, hosting reels of short-form content up to 60 seconds. There are no age restrictions on YouTube Shorts.

Yubo: A social networking site aimed at young adults to make online friends. Its key features include adding new friends by swiping left or right (much like a dating app) and live streaming features that allows people across the world connect online in group chats. Users must be 13 or over.