Children's Media Lives

2022

A report for Ofcom

About Revealing Reality

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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 eight 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.

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Introduction

In 2021 most children's day-to-day lives were beginning to return to something like their pre-pandemic situation. Restrictions were eased, the children were spending less time at home, and they could once again see their friends in person. Unsurprisingly, their media habits shifted too.

But as the media landscape is always changing, it was never going to be possible for children's media lives to revert exactly to their pre-pandemic state. Therefore, we asked the questions: what trends had continued or re-started, which had accelerated, which had declined, and which were new?

As a longitudinal study which began in 2014, Children's Media Lives offers a unique opportunity to explore the answers to these questions. Every year we investigate the behaviours, experiences and attitudes of a group of children aged between 8 and 18, from all over the UK and with a variety of backgrounds. We track which media they are experiencing, how they are accessing them and what they think about them. We interview largely the same group of children each year, spending several hours with them as they talk to us from their homes. This provides rich insight into what they are doing, how they are feeling, and the context in which their media lives are being lived.

As the government introduces the Online Safety Bill and ahead of Ofcom's anticipated regulatory remit in this area, this year we have dedicated part of the research for this study to exploring the ways in which online experiences and behaviours could lead to harm.

We carry out this research under a strict ethics and safeguarding policy[1] to ensure that, as far as possible, taking part in the research is a positive experience for the children and that they are not placed under any undue risk, stress or discomfort.

An overview of our methodology is set out in 'About this study' (p.6).

Ofcom have requested that this report contains warnings to guide the reader

> ⚠️ **Warning:** **This report contains imagery and themes that may be offensive or upsetting, including:**
>
> - Content of a sexual nature
> - Content relating to self-harm and eating disorders
> - Racially offensive content

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[1] See Annex 5 to review Revealing Reality's ethics and safeguarding policy.

Key findings

The majority of the children were feeling better about their lives than in 2020

- They were **spending less time online** than at the height of the pandemic.
- They were taking part in more offline hobbies and activities.
- They talked about **feeling more positive** about the future, were less anxious and were more excited about growing up.
- However, for one child the pandemic and associated lockdowns do seem to be having long-lasting consequences.

TikTok was still the most popular platform

- **TikTok** was the platform **used by the most children** and **for the greatest amount of time**.
- **YouTube and Netflix** were the most popular platforms for watching **longer-form video content.**
- **All the boys spent time gaming,** and some of the girls did too. Several of the **children spoke about the 'need' to spend money** on gaming.

The children were being less 'social' on a lot of social media

- The balance had altered – they were **consuming more 'professionalised' content** from influencers, brands and people trying to use the platform to build a monetised following, while **posting less themselves**.
- This shift was **reflected in children's aspirations – seeking to be an online brand ambassador**, network marketer or crypto-entrepreneur rather than being famous online for the sake of it.

A lot of the children's behaviour online was increasingly passive

- Continuing a trend we have seen for a few years, the children were **posting less, watching more** and often **seeking to avoid actively choosing what they watched**, happy to be served a narrow range of content.
- Many preferred the **decision-free conveyor belt of short videos on TikTok**, even saying "YouTube is long" because it required too much decision-making.
- Some children were **struggling to pay attention to longer-form content**, struggling to focus on a single activity, **and were compulsively multi-screening.**

Most children were not consuming news via traditional news providers and for some, their consumption of news topics via social media included conspiracy theories

- Children consuming news through non-traditional media is a continuing trend, but this year there was **an increase in children both consuming and posting content on social media that might be described as about 'social justice'**.
- For some children, their engagement with news topics on social media **slipped into conspiracy theory territory**.

Children often have experiences online which could – but don't necessarily – lead to harm

Ahead of the passing of the Online Safety Bill, and regulation to tackle the causes of online harm, this research used a '**hazard-risk-harm**' framework[2] to explore potential online harm to children. This separates consideration of the hazardous content or interactions children experience online from the risk factors that make it more or less likely that such content will actually harm them.

We found:

- **Many of the participants were encountering hazardous content** that was inappropriate to their age or could potentially cause harm.
- **Some of the children** in this study were **frequently being contacted by adult strangers**, including being sent **sexual or inappropriate content**. The children often saw this as a normal part of being online.
- Most children were **not aware of, or didn't understand, the full range of safety features** on the sites/apps or online services they used, offered by the platforms **to keep them safe**.
- Some children felt **frustrated that they couldn't control some of the content** that was being served to them on social media.
- Most of the younger participants had either **easily circumvented social media age restrictions** to access the platforms – or were entirely unaware of them.
- **Parents' media literacy** and knowledge of different platforms, and the purpose of age restrictions or other safety measures, **did have some influence over the kinds of hazards children came into contact with.**

Children were being exposed to riskier ways of making money online, and most older girls had been approached to become 'brand ambassadors'

- Some children were **being promoted high-risk ways to make money**, such as 'investment' in cryptocurrency[3] and non-fungible tokens.[4]
- Almost all the older girls in the sample had **received messages asking them to become a 'brand ambassador'[5] or to 'collab'[6]**, although how they reacted to these messages varied.

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[2] See page 49 for more information.

[3] Any form of digital currency that is exchanged through computer networks. Cryptocurrencies are very volatile, and are also not currently regulated in the UK, meaning people are not protected if their funds are lost for any reason.

[4] 'One-of-a-kind' assets in the digital world that can be bought and sold like any other piece of property.

[5] Someone who is rewarded for promoting or endorsing a brand's product on social media. Ambassadors are commonly offered perks such as discounts on products, free items and in some cases money.

[6] Promoting another social media user's page, product or service on your profile in return for being featured in their posts yourself. In theory, this brings mutual benefit to both parties as it exposes users to more followers.

About this study

The Children's Media Lives study was set up in 2014 to provide a small-scale, rich and detailed qualitative complement to Ofcom's quantitative surveys of media literacy.

Ofcom has a statutory duty under The Communications Act 2003 to promote and to carry out research in media literacy across the UK. Ofcom's definition of media literacy is: "the ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts".

The report forms part of Ofcom's wider programme of work, Making Sense of Media, which aims to help improve the online skills, knowledge and understanding of UK adults and children. Ofcom does this through sharing its own insights, based on evidence and research, and by galvanising the wider media literacy community to progress and pilot activities and initiatives in support. This builds on Ofcom's substantial body of research into the UK's media habits, attitudes and critical understanding.

To find out more about Ofcom's Making Sense of Media programme and for details on how to join its network, please go to https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research.

The Children's Media Lives project follows, as far as possible, the same group of children aged 8 to 18, conducting filmed interviews each year to learn about their media habits and attitudes. It provides evidence about the motivations and the context for media use, and how media is a part of their daily life and domestic circumstances. The project also provides rich details of how children's media habits and attitudes change over time, particularly in the context of their emotional and cognitive development.

This year, we increased the sample from 18 to 21, to allow us to explore the media lives of children in a wider range of circumstances, including additional vulnerabilities.

Revealing Reality has a strict ethics and safeguarding policy 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.

This document provides analysis of the findings from the eighth wave of the study, and any changes or subtle shifts we have seen since wave 7[7] (February 2021).

Methodology

The fieldwork period of wave 8 of the study ran from October 2021 to January 2022. This was the first wave since the lockdowns that were in place during our *Life in Lockdown* study, conducted in the summer of 2020, and wave 7 of the study, conducted in February 2021.
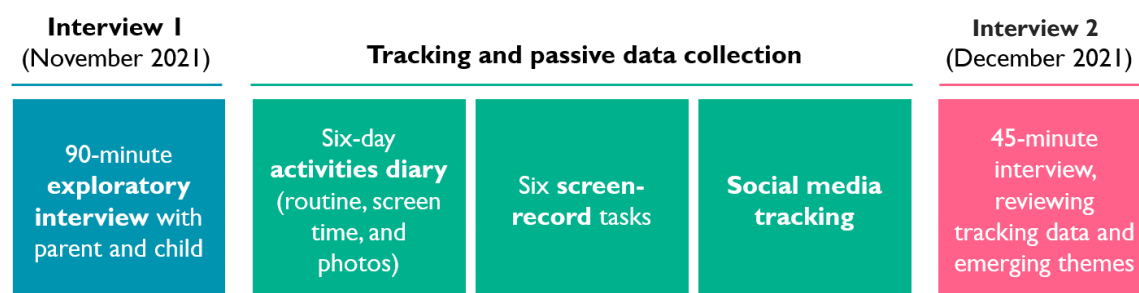
Innovating with research methods that go beyond self-reported behaviour

As in previous waves of Children's Media Lives, our research goes beyond looking at what children say they do, to explore what they really do. In the context of research with children, collecting reliable data on online behaviour is a challenge. This is particularly true when research is not face-to-face, as has been the case during this and the two previous waves of the project.

Before Covid, we conducted one face-to-face in-home interview (including collection of screen recordings, film footage, photography and 360-degree filming) with each child, followed by social media tracking for a short period of time (typically about two weeks).

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[7] Children's Media Lives - Year 7 Report (ofcom.org.uk)

As we were still unable to do face-to-face fieldwork for wave 8, we continued to use the three-part methodology that was introduced for wave 7. This methodology allows researchers to capture more detail about children's online behaviour, and to gain insight into how the participants perceive and explain their behaviour, by presenting data back to them for reflection.

Interview 1 (November 2021)	Tracking and passive data collection			Interview 2 (December 2021)
90-minute **exploratory interview** with parent and child	Six-day **activities diary** (routine, screen time, and photos)	Six **screen-record** tasks	**Social media tracking**	45-minute interview, reviewing tracking data and emerging themes

1. Initial exploratory interview:[8]

The initial exploratory interview explored the full range of media behaviours that children were engaged in and included a brief interview to gather parents' perspectives on their children's media lives.

2. Tracking and passive data collection

Children were asked to complete a six-day media diary, detailing where media activities fitted into their wider routine. First, they were asked to share a written diary of their various activities each day, along with photos of what they had been doing. They were also asked to share daily 'screen-time' data from their smartphones, to allow researchers to build an accurate picture of exactly what they were doing on their phones.

Children with smartphones were also asked to complete 'screen recording' tasks. Screen recording refers to real-time recording of what children are seeing as they use their phones. This is a good way to go beyond self-reported data, to uncover what content children actually see online, as well as how they use features on social media platforms. Children were asked to complete tasks from the following options:

- scrolling on their favourite social media platforms;
- showing their favourite social media accounts and explaining what they like about them; and
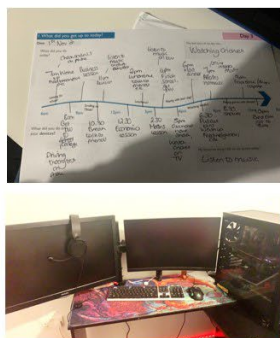- sharing their YouTube history over the previous week.

In addition, we conducted social media tracking – friending or following the children on social media (with their permission) using bespoke accounts set up by researchers. For those participants who agreed to this, we gained valuable insight into what, when and how often they were posting, as well as into how they interacted with others in semi-public spaces online. Tracking of this nature allows us to look back and review how posting behaviours have changed over time, providing further understanding of how children in our study are controlling their online presence and self-image.
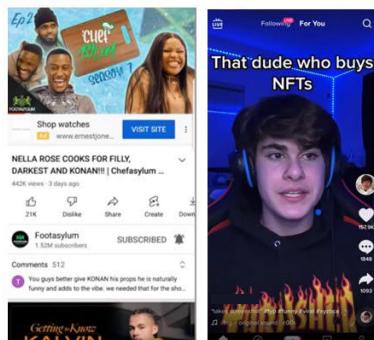
3. Follow-up interview:

In the final interview, participants were encouraged to reflect on the data gathered during the tracking phase of the fieldwork. Researchers used screen sharing to prompt them with key bits of content seen in their social media tracking and screen record tasks, or with elements of their routine seen in their screen-time data and written diary. By showing children their actual behaviour, researchers could learn what the children understood about the content they had seen online, and explore their critical thinking on specific features, trends or topic areas. The second interviews also allowed researchers to further explore any new questions that emerged over the course of the research.

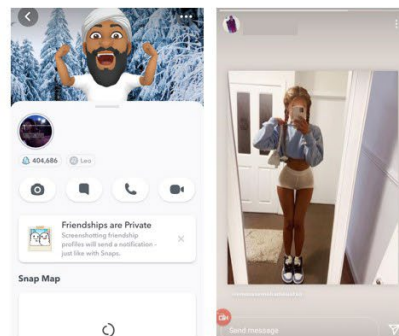[8] See Annexes 1, 2 and 3 to review Revealing Reality's research materials.

Daily activities diary	Screen record tasks	Social media tracking

Assets collected during the tracking phase for Jack (17)

Exploring potential online harm

This year a central focus of the project was to understand more about the potentially harmful experiences that children might experience as a result of being online. As part of this, we also wanted to explore what might make one child more at risk of experiencing potential harm than another.

To this end, we dedicated a section of the research materials specifically to do a 'deep dive' into experiences that children were having online which had the potential to cause harm. This included using age-appropriate stimuli with written prompts (for example "scary images online" and "bullying online" for the younger children and additional prompts for the older children such as "sexually explicit content" and "content that promotes unhealthy body image") to prompt them to reflect on specific pieces of content or interactions they might have encountered.

Meet the participants

In this wave, we expanded the sample to 21 children (up from 18 in wave 7).

Although the number of participants in the study is relatively small, these children have been chosen to reflect a broad cross-section of UK children in terms of age, location, ethnicity, social circumstances and access to technology.

The main sampling characteristics focused on the following variables:

- Age (spread across 8 to 18)
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Representation of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- Location, including urban and rural areas, and all four nations
- Family set-up, including a mixture of different sibling and parental relationships
- Access to devices (including smartphones, mobile phones, tablets, smart TVs, games consoles)
- Usage levels
- Parental approaches to managing media use
- Parental confidence with digital media

Adding more participants this year enabled us to explore the media lives of children in a wider range of circumstances and with additional vulnerabilities. This included:

- A child living in residential care
- A child with low digital access
- Children split between households with very different parenting styles
- Children with additional mental health needs

As children age out of the sample, new children are brought in, often at the younger end of the spectrum, to keep the age-spread balanced. Despite our best efforts to keep the sample consistent, some children may also drop out of the research due to personal circumstances.

Each year we replace anyone who has chosen to leave the study with a child representing similar demographic factors and behaviours.

**This year's sample included:**
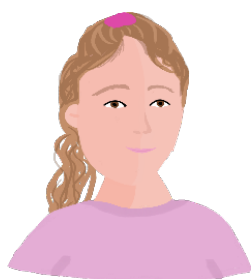
Lily, 8 – Leeds (new to this wave)

Lily lives with her parents and older sister (10) in the outskirts of Leeds. Her family are keen footballers and she and her sister train twice a week and have a match every weekend. Lily doesn't have her own devices yet, but she uses the family iPad to watch YouTube videos and play Roblox as well as watching TV in the living room with her sister. Recently the family have been watching films together at the weekends, including the *Home Alone* films. On YouTube Lily likes to watch the family vloggers Norris Nuts and watch videos about fidget spinners.

**Angus, 9 – Aberdeen** (new to this wave)

Angus lives with his mum, dad, two sisters (13 and 7) and dog in Aberdeen. He has a varied and active life and does after-school activities five nights a week, including music lessons, rugby and cubs. Angus' parents have strict rules about what he can do online. His favourite online activity is playing Fortnite with his friends, but he is only allowed to do this for two hours a day, and is not allowed to play on any game modes that involve talking to strangers. Angus watches a lot of YouTube before school on a TV in his room, and particularly enjoys gameplay videos of his favourite games. He also enjoys watching Marvel movies on Disney+, and some BBC programmes including *Strictly Come Dancing*.
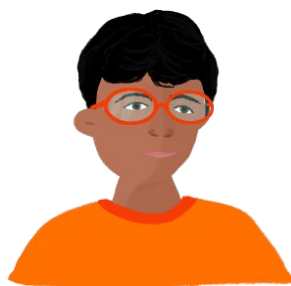
Arjun, 10 – Birmingham

Arjun lives in Birmingham with his mum and dad. He has just been accepted into a nearby grammar school, and he enjoys a range of hobbies including football and Thai boxing. Arjun doesn't have a phone yet, but he has more independence online than he had in previous years, and has claimed the family iPad as his own. Arjun is particularly enjoying playing FIFA 22 on his Nintendo Switch, and has got more into FIFA-focused videos on YouTube. He continues to play educational games online (including Geometry Dash) and has recently begun making music on Garageband.
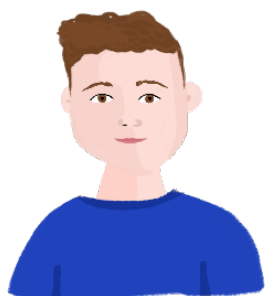
Freddie, 10 – Manchester

Freddie lives outside Manchester and splits his time between his mum's and dad's houses. He has a younger brother (9) and an older sister (15). Freddie is currently struggling with anxiety and wasn't able to return to full-time schooling when Covid lockdowns eased. He has recently moved school and is on a reduced timetable. As he is only at school for short periods, Freddie's screen time is very high. If he's not playing football or helping his mum with chores, he is normally playing FIFA 22 on his Xbox, watching YouTube or scrolling through TikTok. Freddie has also begun to make his own TikToks, and particularly enjoys making 'football edits' (collections of clips or photos of his favourite footballers set to music).
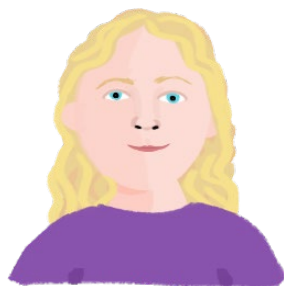
Suzy, 10 – Glasgow

Suzy lives with her mum and dogs in Scotland. Since the last wave Suzy's home life has undergone some changes; her mum's boyfriend has moved into their home, and they have adopted a third dog. Suzy is in her last year of primary school and is very excited about going to high school next year. She has recently gone back to her Acro classes (a combination of acrobatics, dance and gymnastics) after a break due to Covid. Suzy now has a TV in her room, where she watches her favourite show, *Riverdale*, on Netflix. She still posts regularly on TikTok.

Amira, 11 – Essex (new to this wave)

Amira, her younger brother (7) and mother live in Essex. Amira's family are on a very limited income and as a result don't have a wi-fi connection at their home. Instead, for all their digital needs they use the 150GB of data that comes with Amira's mother's phone contract. In September 2021 Amira began attending high school and she has been very much enjoying her new classes; her favourite subjects are science and cooking. Although they have very limited access to digital devices, Amira and her brother love to play Roblox. Amira uses the family tablet to create YouTube videos of Roblox edits[9] and to watch the latest videos posted by Norris Nuts.

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[9] Roblox edits are short video clips made of Roblox characters often edited to dance to music.
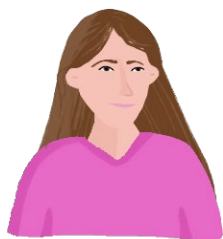
Niamh, 12 – rural Northern Ireland (new to this wave)

Niamh lives with her mum, her sister (14), brother (9) and dog, in a small village in Northern Ireland. Niamh suffered with anxiety during the Covid lockdowns but seems to be doing better this year. She's moved to junior high and has lots of friends at school. In her spare time, Niamh either meets up with her cousins or spends time on social media – mainly on Tiktok, where she likes to watch videos of people dancing or doing challenges.
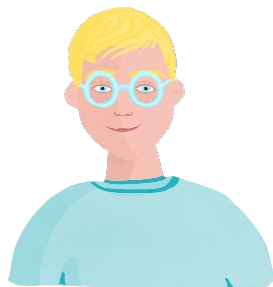
Sean, 12 – Northern Ireland (new to this wave)

Sean lives with his mum, dad, brother (19), and sister (16) on a farm outside Belfast. As a result, the family spend a lot of their time helping to look after the animals. His main hobby is go-karting, and he regularly competes in local tournaments. His main ambition is to become a Formula 1 driver. Sean says that as their local area is very rural, he often has a lot of trouble with the internet and sometimes struggles to load movies or talk to friends online. His mum has also put limits on his screen time, so he is only allowed to game for around two hours each day. When he is not gaming, he likes to sit down and watch TV with his family, often watching shows like *The Chase* and *Catchphrase* on ITV.

Zak, 12 – South Yorkshire

Zak lives with his mum and dad in South Yorkshire. He has recently moved to secondary school and as a result his parents have given him permission to walk to school with friends rather than being driven. During the week, Zak enjoys going to Air Scout meetings and attending trampoline lessons, both hobbies that he had missed during lockdown. He is still a keen gamer and has been playing a range of games including Fortnite, Flight Simulator, Terraria, GTA 5, Minecraft and SplitGate. In his free time, Zak enjoys making TikTok videos of his nan's dog. These videos mainly feature the dog doing different funny activities, like painting or chasing dog toys. Each video currently gets around 100 views, but he is hoping to build more of an audience in the future.
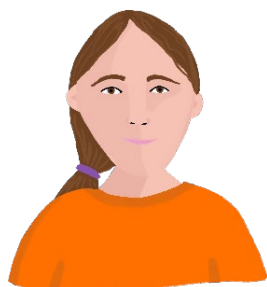
Bryony, 13 – Wales

Bryony lives on a farm in Wales with her mum and grandparents. An avid horse rider, Bryony looks after and rides the family's horses on the farm every day. She regularly competes in riding competitions and is excited to soon be competing against adult riders. Bryony now feels more positive about school and her social life than she did in recent waves, having made some new friends in year nine who she meets up with outside school hours. As she is now busier with school and competition work, she is spending less time on social media. Most of the time she does spend on social media is spent on TikTok, Facebook and Snapchat, and often revolves around horse-related content.
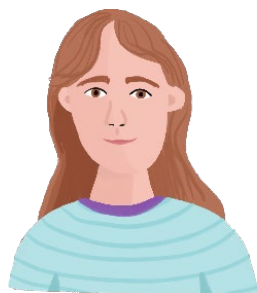
Taylor, 13 – Kent (new to this wave)

Taylor and her younger sister (10) split their time between their mum's and dad's homes. Taylor has a large group of friends that she spends a lot of time with, both in school and after school. Her dream is to study law and become a supreme court judge one day, although she questions how likely this is to happen, as she has been enjoying school less recently. One of Taylor's main media activities is watching TV shows on Netflix; she has watched *Vampire Diaries* six times and will usually watch a couple of episodes of the show every day. She also watches TikTok, although rarely posts her own, and plays Minecraft with her dad and sister at the weekends.

Ben, 14 – London

Ben is currently living in London with his mum, his older sister (16) and his brother (21). His dad lives in Essex so he sometimes spends weekends there. He is still a keen basketball player and spends two days a week training for his school team. This interest in basketball extends into his media consumption, as many of the social media accounts he follows are basketball-related. As many basketball games take place in America, he doesn't tend to watch games live due to the time difference. Instead, he chooses to watch the highlights on Instagram, YouTube or TikTok. He has recently started to play FIFA 22 on his Xbox, as this is what a lot of his friends are currently playing. He is currently trying to build his Ultimate Team on the game by completing the FIFA daily challenges.

Bobby, 15 – London – (new to this wave)

Bobby lives in a residential care home in London, where he is looked after by a range of staff. He entered care aged 11 as his parents were no longer able to look after him. He has had a range of care placements before moving to his current home. Bobby is currently going to college three days a week to study engineering, though he sometimes struggles with this due to his difficulties sticking to routines. If he's not at college or doing activities with the staff at his home, Bobby will be gaming on his PC (at the weekend, he can spend up to 13 hours doing this). His favourite game is Fortnite, although he also plays Counter Strike Global, League of Legends and SplitGate. Bobby has broken a lot of devices due to his frustration at losing games on Fortnite. Occasionally, he wagers money on Fortnite battles using third-party websites. Bobby also spends a lot of time on Discord, where he meets people to play games against. He is a moderator on the Fortnite Discord server, which means he takes responsibility for flagging abusive behaviour and banning users from the server. He told us that he sometimes abused this position to kick people off the server for arbitrary reasons.

Nathan, 15 – London

Nathan lives with his mum and two younger sisters (11 and 9) in London. He is currently preparing for his GCSEs, which he is feeling confident about. Nathan is taking basketball quite seriously – he practises many times a week and hopes to attend a sports-focused academy after his exams. Nathan is spending slightly less time online than in wave 7, and more time out with his friends or playing sport. He no longer spends much time gaming, because, since the lifting of lockdown restrictions, gaming has been less central to his friendships. Nathan does spend around two hours a day on TikTok and longer at the weekend. He is also spending more time on Discord than he did in previous waves. He and around 20 of his friends have their own Discord server where they can all chat as a group or set up 'channels' to talk privately. Nathan continues to watch a lot of anime and is a member of a range of anime-focused Discord servers where people discuss plot points and their favourite characters.
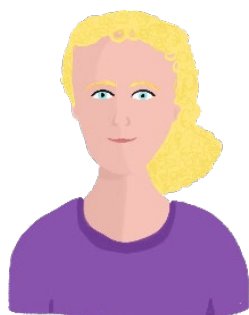
Alice 16 – near London

Alice lives in a small town near London with her mum, stepdad and older brother, who has started his first year of work after university. This year Alice started a cooking course at college, and she is looking forward to specialising in patisserie next year. She has also been able to build up her work experience in cookery since last year, having worked as a barista and in a kitchen over the summer. Outside college and work, Alice has been keeping up with her weekly personal trainer sessions. Most of her spare time is spent watching video content, and she particularly enjoys watching reaction videos on YouTube and sitcoms on Netflix.

Isaac, 16 – West Midlands

Isaac lives with his mum and two brothers (15 and 21) in the West Midlands. During the last wave, he reported finding remote learning difficult, so is happy to be back at school. He is currently getting extra tuition in maths and science to help him catch up, as he is hoping to train to be a vet in the future. He has a PlayStation 4 that he shares with his 15-year-old brother. They take it in turns to have a day on the console, so he plays on it every other day. He has been playing FIFA 2022 because he is able to play cross-platform with his friends who have a PlayStation 5. When he is not gaming he watches content on Netflix, TikTok and on an illegal streaming movie website.

Peter, 16 – Birmingham

Peter lives with his parents and younger sister (15) in suburban Birmingham. Peter is now at sixth form college, where he is studying maths, business and economics. He has recently set up his own business doing gardening services and other odd jobs for people in the local area. He advertises his business on Facebook and estimates that he has earned about £4000 over the past six months. Due to the amount of time he spends earning money, Peter's routine is now also quite different to wave 7 – he no longer goes to the gym regularly, he spends less time on the Xbox and he watches little TV. What Peter sees on his social media feeds has also changed recently – he sees less fitness-focused content, and more content focused on making money, investing and 'side hustles'.

Jack, 17 – Somerset

Jack lives with his mum in a small town in the West Country. He is currently back at college three days a week, training to be a mechanic. He has recently broken his Xbox and so has switched to personal computer gaming. However, this means he is unable to play with his friends online as there are not many cross-platform games that connect desktop computers and Xbox. As a result, he has started to Facetime his friends while he games so that he is still able to talk to them. He has also recently developed an interest in fitness and has started to go to the gym every day. His mum is also a big fan of the gym, so she is supporting this new interest. He is currently going for two hours a day and often posts social media updates about his progress.
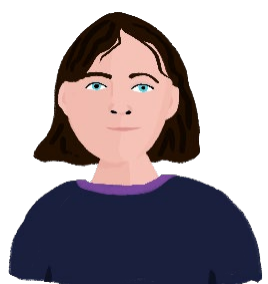
Josie, 17 – Birmingham

Josie lives in the West Midlands with her mum. In the previous wave Josie was struggling with her mental health, but she is feeling a lot more positive this year. She has a new boyfriend whom she met online and sees regularly. Balancing the rest of her time between catering college and working at her local pub, Josie feels busy and confident in what she's doing. Josie is also looking forward to next year, when she plans to live in Canada for a while with her friends from secondary school. A keen gamer, Josie still regularly plays the first-person shooter game Valorant, and has recently got into Pokémon Go with her college friends.
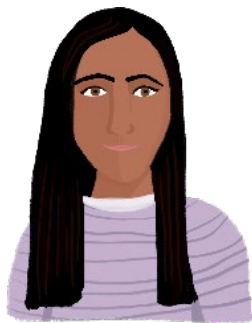
Shriya, 17 – Birmingham

Shriya lives in the outskirts of Birmingham with her two younger brothers (11 and 13) and her parents. Shriya is in her final year of college and is currently applying to go to university in September 2022, where she is hoping to study law. This year Shriya was feeling more settled at college and had become closer to her fellow classmates now that classes were happening in person again. As she has been very focused on getting into university, she decided to reduce her time spent on social media and is now following many fewer accounts on Instagram. She still enjoys watching Netflix shows and had recently completed the new seasons of *You* and *Squid Game.*

Shaniqua, 18 – London

Shaniqua is currently living at her grandmother's house during the week while she goes to college to finish her A-levels, and also works part time at Iceland. She is trying to get the grades so that she can do an apprenticeship and become a nurse. Due to her busy schedule with work and college she has been spending less time online. When she is online, she spends time on TikTok and on Instagram watching *Reels*[10] and had recently re-watched *Shameless* on Netflix.

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[10] Reels on Instagram are short videos (usually around 15-30 seconds) similar in format to videos found on TikTok.

How were the children doing since the previous year?
Most children were feeling more positive than in wave 7

In wave 7 many of the children reported feeling less positive about the future

In the last wave of the project (February 2021), many of the children told us that they weren't feeling very positive. Many were feeling lonely and less motivated by the activities they had once enjoyed. This was primarily due to the lockdowns and restrictions they faced as a result of the Covid pandemic. The lack of structure and uncertainty that children were experiencing left many of them feeling bored and under-stimulated.

As a result, in wave 7 the children were spending more time online than they had pre-pandemic, and many of them saw this as their only means to connect with others or have something to do. The participants reported feeling pessimistic about the future and having a sense that they weren't progressing as they felt they should be.

While many of them felt positive about their online activities, these weren't seen as true replacements for their usual offline activities. Most of the children were simply waiting for things to 'get back to normal'.

Most children in the study appeared to have resumed a more normal way of life since wave 7

In wave 8, most children seemed to be feeling more positive about their lives. With fewer Covid restrictions, many of the activities that they had previously enjoyed were resuming, and being back at school in person seemed to be a good thing for most of the children.

Many of the children were more optimistic and talked about feeling more positive about the future. They were also less anxious and more excited about growing up.

Suzy (10) was very excited that she was in her final year of primary school; she was looking forward to going to high school next year and the additional responsibilities that would come with that.

"I'm just kinda like really excited to go to high school. I just think you have a lot of privileges in high school and you get to learn more stuff and it's just, it's more grown up than primary."

Suzy, 10

Josie (17), who in the last wave was struggling with mental health, was feeling more positive this year about her relationships and her future. She has a boyfriend whom she is seeing regularly. She was also optimistic about the coming year; she is planning to stop working at her local pub so that she can dedicate more time and energy to college, seeing her boyfriend and learning how to drive. She's also looking forward to taking time off and living abroad next year.

"I'm going to Canada for the winter season next year…It's going to be in a ski resort town. You work for them and then you get free skiing lessons, free snowboarding lessons…for eight months. I've decided I'm going to learn how to snowboard because I don't know how to do that."

Josie, 17

Many children were spending more time with friends and less time online than last year

Another impact of reduced pandemic restrictions was that more children were returning to offline activities they had previously enjoyed, including going back to past hobbies and spending more time with friends. As a result, a number of children had seen their screentime decrease since wave 7.

In wave 7, Nathan (15) had been averaging more than eight hours a day on screens. In wave 8 his screen time had fallen to around six hours. He explained that this was partly because he was now playing basketball again which left less time for being online.

"When I come home from basketball training I'm pretty tired, so I won't really go on my phone like that – I'll just rest and do my homework."

Nathan, 15

Josie (17), who in wave 7 had been having a particularly difficult time dealing with the lockdowns, was now seeing her friends more and was once again able to do the things they had previously enjoyed offline.

"Now we're getting back into no Covid rules, me and my secondary school friends can start actually going to parties and doing stuff together again, which is good."

Josie, 17

For some children, their interactions with their friends had been shaped in long-lasting ways by the pandemic. For example, although Angus (9) did a lot of outdoor activities with his friends, he also regularly played Fortnite with his friends (a habit he had picked up during lockdown).

Angus' mum described how she felt she 'had' to allow Angus to play Fortnite during the lockdowns despite his age, as it was the only way that he would be able to stay in touch with his friends.

However, a small number of children were struggling

Although the majority of the sample were feeling more positive, a couple of children were struggling with their home and school lives. These children either had behavioural difficulties, or their carers or parents were juggling multiple responsibilities and were therefore overseeing less of their online activities.

Bobby (15) lives in a residential care home in East London. He went into care aged 11 as his parents were no longer able to care for him, and since then has had seven different care placements. Bobby has behavioural issues, and as a result struggles to stick to a routine without a large amount of support.

Bobby has particular issues around attending school regularly, and staff at his care home have to work hard to incentivise him. Despite this, he often won't go to school for days at a time. When this happens, his screen time increases dramatically, and he often spends whole days playing Fortnite on his PC.

"[On a normal day] it's six, seven hours [on the PC]… If I don't go out it's 14, 15, 16. I'm on my phone all the time really [as well]."

Bobby, 15

Freddie (10) was also having a difficult time in wave 8, and the easing of the Covid restrictions did not seem to have had a positive impact on him. During *Life in Lockdown* (August 2020)[11] and wave 7 (February 2021), he did very little schoolwork from home, something driven in part by his mum needing to give a lot of her attention to his younger brother who has behavioural issues.

In wave 8, Freddie told us that he was having real difficulty attending school, as he had developed severe anxiety about leaving his mum. He would become upset when he did go to school and would need to come home. As he and his mum felt his school were not sympathetic enough to this situation, Freddie had recently moved schools, and at the time of the study had started a programme to slowly get him back to full attendance, working his way up from 30 minutes a day.

"I don't really like school, so I do about an hour and ten minutes a day… I cry when I go in… It's leaving my mum that I don't like."

Freddie, 10

As a result of not going to school, Freddie has also lost a lot of the friends that he had in previous waves. He now only talks to his cousin (who he makes TikToks with) on a regular basis.

Like Bobby, when Freddie is not at school he spends the vast majority of his time on his Xbox and iPhone. He will spend almost the whole day trying to improve his Ultimate Team on FIFA and making 'football edits' on TikTok (his average daily screen time on TikTok was about 2 hours 20 minutes).

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[11] Children's Media Lives: Life in Lockdown (ofcom.org.uk)

How were the children spending their time online?
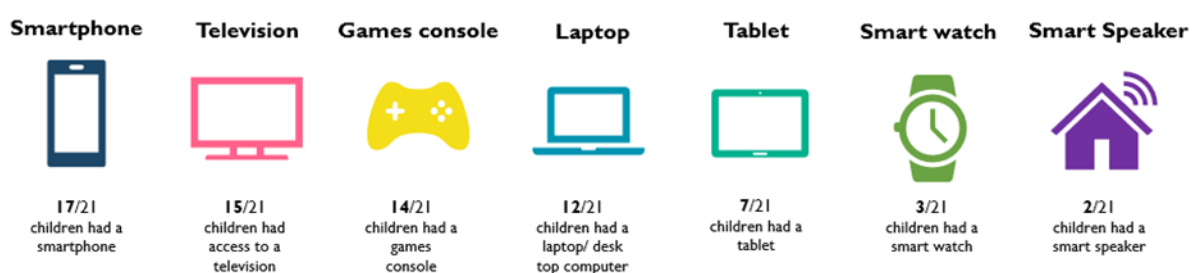## TikTok was the most popular platform, and all the boys were gaming

As in previous waves, mobile phones continued to be the most-used device

Smartphones continued to be the most popular device used. All but four participants - Lily (8), Angus (9), Arjun (10) and Amira (11) had their own smartphones.

The children who had their own phones were spending the majority of their screen time on these devices.

All the boys, and three of the ten girls, also had a games console, although the amount they used these depended on their age and on the rules their parents set around gaming.

How device use mapped across our sample of 21 children

| Smartphone	Television	Games console	Laptop	Tablet	Smart watch	Smart Speaker
17/21 children had a smartphone	15/21 children had access to a television	14/21 children had a games console	12/21 children had a laptop/ desk top computer	7/21 children had a tablet	3/21 children had a smart watch	2/21 children had a smart speaker

TikTok continued to be the dominant social media platform

As seen over the last few waves of the project, TikTok continued to be the platform where children spent the most time.

Seventeen of the 21 participants were regularly using TikTok, with those who used it spending an average of two hours a day on it across the whole week. This was around double the time children spent on the next most popular social media platform, Snapchat, which was used for an average of an hour a day.

TikTok also seemed to have displaced a lot of the time that participants had previously been spending on Instagram, which was now being used for an average of about half an hour by those children who had it.
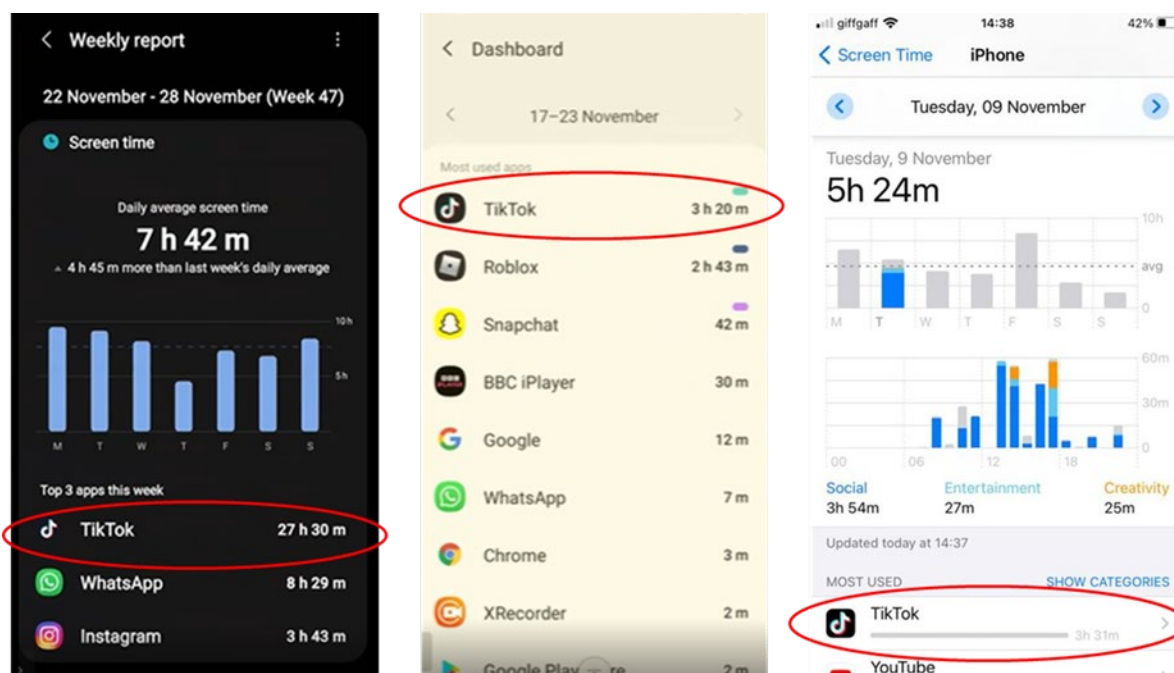
For 15 of the 21 children, TikTok was the app they used the most. The pictures above show that Taylor (13) had spent 27 hrs 30 mins on the app one week and Suzy (10) and Freddie (10) had spent more than three hours a day on the app.

Facebook was used by only four children in the sample. As in previous waves, it was mainly used for self-promotion or for buying items on Facebook Marketplace, rather than to interact with friends. Unlike in previous waves, no children were using it to keep up with adult relatives.

For example, Bryony (13), who had been seeking a sponsor to support her in horse-riding competitions over the past year, had created a Facebook page dedicated to her career. She hoped to gain a large social media following which she thought might bring her opportunities and encourage a company to sponsor her, as she had seen happen to her favourite influencers such as 'This Esme'. It's worth noting that Facebook wasn't the only platform that Bryony was using to try and promote her riding career online. She had dedicated 'horse accounts' on both Instagram and TikTok, and thought that Instagram was probably the best platform for attracting sponsors:

> *"Last year I had just started a Facebook page for my horse riding. I've got quite a few people on there now. It's not as much as I would like, but it may come with time… I've got just under a hundred followers, but then lately I haven't posted as much on it. I completely forgot about it…. I made the account with hopes that I would get sponsors to support me. It didn't work, but I'm still trying."*

Bryony, 13

Similarly, Peter (16) was using Facebook to promote his gardening business, posting links to his own Facebook page on local groups in order to attract custom. He reflected that Facebook seemed more effective than Snapchat or Instagram for reaching potential customers because its users tended to be 'a little older'.

One participant, Alice (16), was going to Facebook to watch videos, but she explained that she would only do this when she felt she had 'run out' of content on TikTok and YouTube.

As in wave 7, Discord was only used by a small proportion of the sample (4/21), but for those who did use it, it tended to be one of their most-used platforms.

Nathan (15), for example, used Discord throughout his day, both to discuss anime on servers[12] with thousands of people, and also to keep up with his friends on private servers. Nathan described how the many different functionalities within Discord (large group chats, voice calls, private one-on-one channels) made it more appealing than platforms like Snapchat as a place to interact with his friends.

"You can have servers with all of your friends, and it's basically another place to talk… With Discord it's all together, it's all together in the same place, you don't have to keep switching between [platforms]. In the same server you can go on the voice chat and switch between chats and stuff like that."

Nathan, 15

Bobby (15) would also be on Discord for the entirety of the time that he spent gaming on his desktop computer (sometimes up to 15 hours a day) and used it to meet new people to play with online, including in the US.


Bobby's role as a Discord moderator

As well as using Discord to make new friends, Bobby (15) was an official moderator of the Fortnite Discord server (which has over 800,000 members). He got this role by being asked by one of the 'primary' moderators who are assigned by Fortnite's parent company, Epic Games.

When he is 'on duty' he is tasked with reviewing new posts on the server and identifying content that should be removed (e.g. that is racist or abusive), triggering automatic 'warnings' that may lead to being banned.

Bobby admitted that he had been told that he was 'abusing' this position by doing things like changing the names of group chats inappropriately and ejecting people from the server for arbitrary reasons.

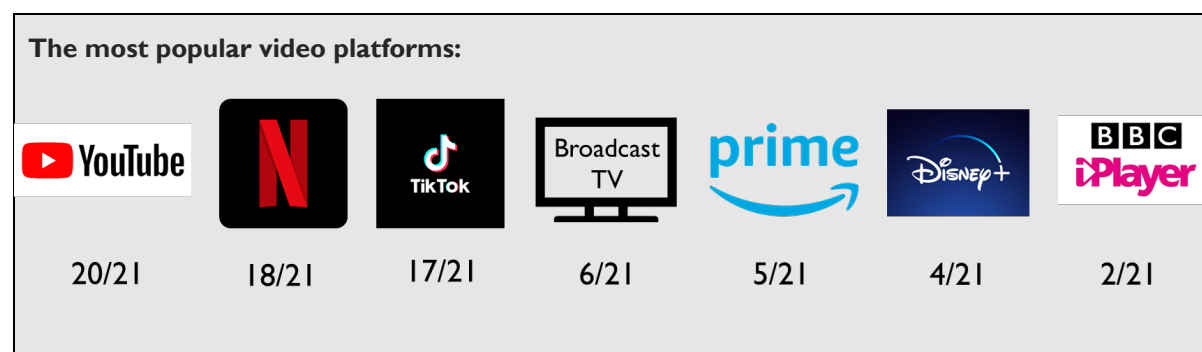*"[I like] the power over everybody… I kicked the top moderator out of the group, and he didn't know it was me – I just got bored one time."*
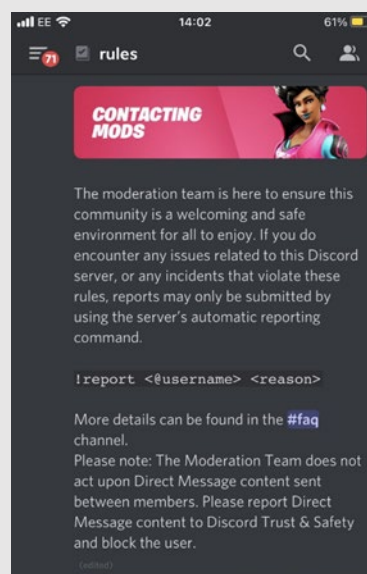
Information about moderators on the official Fortnite Discord server

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[12] Servers on Discord are spaces on the app made by friends, communities or groups which act as group chats where people typically discuss a particular topic.

YouTube and Netflix were the most popular platforms for watching video content

The most popular video platforms:

| YouTube	Netflix	TikTok	Broadcast TV	prime	Disney+	BBC iPlayer
20/21	18/21	17/21	6/21	5/21	4/21	2/21

While TikTok was popular across most of the sample, the majority of the children were also engaging with watched video content on YouTube (20/21) and Netflix (18/21). In this wave, Disney+ was emerging as a competitor to other streaming services like Amazon Prime and Netflix. It was particularly popular among the younger children in the sample.

"The girls have gotten really into Disney+, we've been watching the Home Alones."

Lily's (8) dad

Children's favourite shows[13]
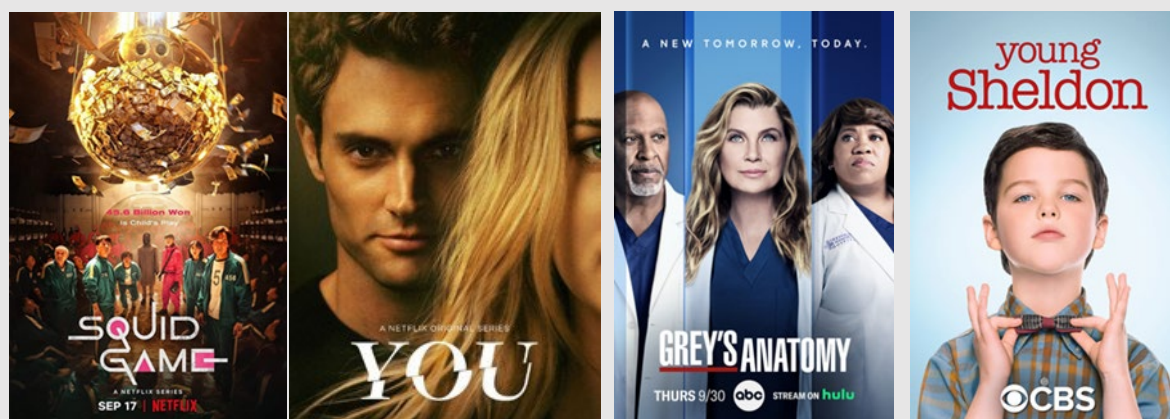
One show stood out this year – Netflix's *Squid Game*. *Squid Game* was well known by many of the children, even if they hadn't actually watched it. Seven children in the sample had watched the show on Netflix, while three additional participants had heard of the show or seen clips of it in other places, such as on social media apps like TikTok.

*"Squid game is such a trend, it's everywhere, I feel like everyone's been talking about it."*

Shriya, 17

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[13] Images of: *Squid Game,* Netflix (2021); *You*, Netflix (2018-2021); *Grey's Anatomy,* ABC (2005-2022); *Young Sheldon*, CBS (2017-2022)

"One of my friends wanted to watch Squid Game, but her parents wouldn't let her, so we watched at [school] break on my phone. We only watched one episode. She didn't want to watch all the boring stuff, so we skipped straight to the game… I'd already seen clips of it on TikTok so I sort of already knew what it looked like. I'd only seen the red light green light bit – I hadn't actually seen the people getting shot so I didn't know about that… It's a bit gruesome, I didn't really like it."
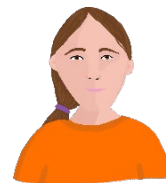
Bryony, 13

"There have been a few trends [on social media]… There was like this one called 'Squid' something. I can't remember…There was this honeycomb sweet being made that you press down. You have to carve it out without it breaking or something like that… my uncle made them for Halloween. I survived it but my cousins didn't, they cracked it."

Niamh, 12

What is *Squid Game*?

Squid Game is a Netflix series that came out in September 2021 and has become one of the most popular Netflix shows ever released.

The series is a South Korean thriller that tells the story of severely indebted people being invited to take part in a series of brutal challenges based on children's games for the chance to win 45.6 billion South Korean Won. Losing a game results in immediate death.

Squid Game has been rated as 15 due to the violence and sexual content in the show.
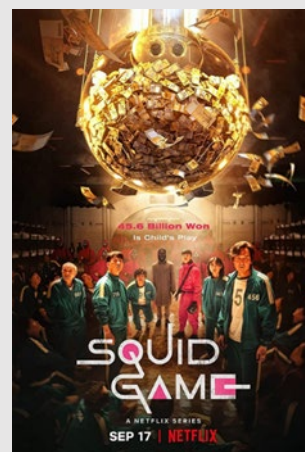
As in previous waves, broadcast TV contributed a relatively small amount to what children were watching, with only six of the 21 children saying they watched it. These six children only watched broadcast TV occasionally, and this tended to be in situations where family members were already watching it. These children very rarely sought out broadcast TV themselves.

"I normally just watch live TV when it's on downstairs… I watched two episodes of Naked and Afraid[14] with my boyfriend's dad and sister."

Josie,17

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[14] Naked and Afraid is a reality TV show on Sky where strangers race across the countryside naked.

A few children were still engaging with anime

Three children in the sample were regularly watching anime[15] or non-Japanese 'anime-style' content.

Nathan (15) watched a range of anime shows on the streaming site YugenAnime, including *Boruto* and *Tokyo Revengers*. His feeds on social media were also dominated by anime content, including compilations of clips or discussion of particular characters and plot points.

Other children were also watching anime-style content on more mainstream platforms. Angus (9) was watching a show called *The Legend of Korra*, while Josie (17) had also recently watched Studio Ghibli's *Howl's Moving Castle.*

Shriya (17), who had been watching a lot of anime in wave 7 (and particularly enjoyed its more 'unpredictable' storylines), no longer did so, and was instead watching Netflix shows like *You* and *Squid Game*. She explained that she had become a little bored of anime.

"I've watched all the ones that I was interested in, and after that I just wanted something else."
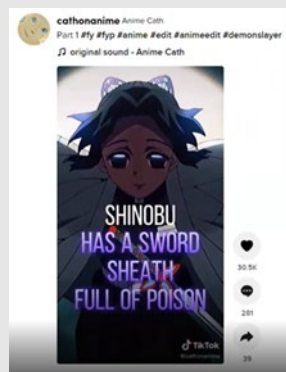
Shriya, 17

Nathan's engagement with anime[16]

Examples of anime shows that Nathan watches: *Boruto* – *"An adventure of how [the main character] is going to grow up as a Ninja"* and *Tokyo Revengers* – a time-travelling action-romance.

Examples of anime-related content on Nathan's TikTok For You page. Many of these TikToks offer opinions on specific anime plotlines, show 'cool' clips, or are anime-focused memes and jokes.

All of the boys and a few of the girls gamed regularly, mostly on the same games they were playing in wave 7

For some of the children, gaming was their primary media activity. Freddie (10) and Bobby (15), for example, spent most of their days gaming whenever they could.

The vast majority of these children were playing games that they had been playing in previous years. For example, all of the eight children who were playing FIFA 22 had played previous earlier editions of FIFA. There were no examples of participants playing more 'niche' or alternative games.

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[15] Anime typically refers to animation that originates from Japan.

[16] Images of: *Boruto: Naruto Next Generations*, Pierrot (2017-2022); *Tokyo Revengers*, Liden Films (2021)

Which games were most popular this year?
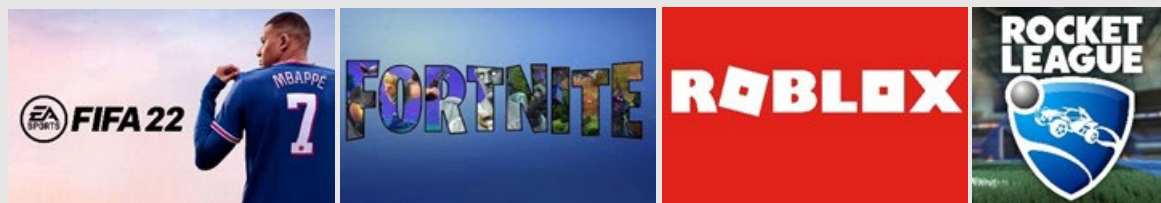
Eight out of 11 boys were playing **FIFA 22**[17] (a football simulation game), four were playing **Fortnite** (a first-person shooter game), three were playing **Roblox** (a platform hosting a range of different games) and two were playing **Rocket League** (a car-based football game).

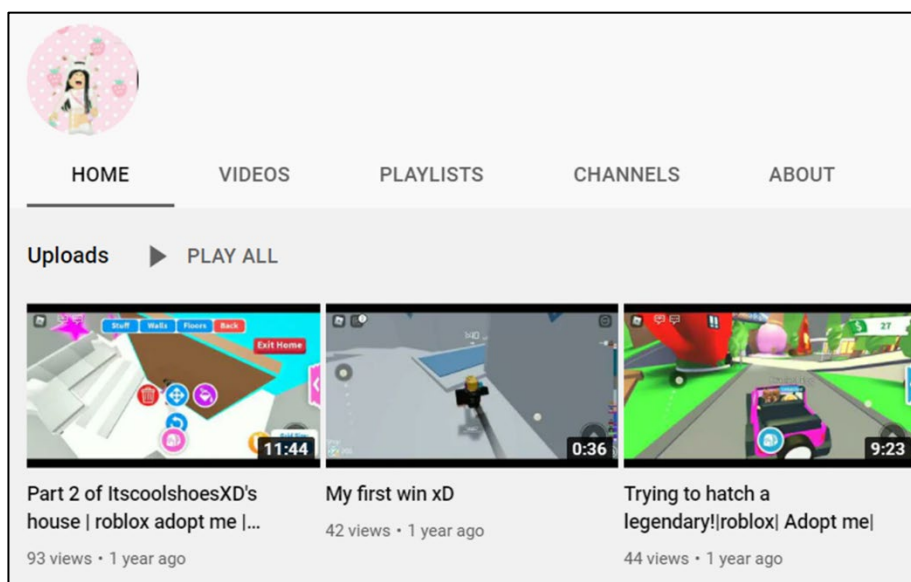For some of the younger children, the engagement with gaming went beyond the game itself. Both Freddie (10) and Amira (11) were posting TikToks and, in Amira's case, YouTube edits of their favourite games.

Amira (11) had her own YouTube channel where she posted her Roblox edits

A few of the children were increasingly reflecting on the 'need' to spend money on gaming

In comparison with previous waves, more of the children who gamed regularly were more likely to say that they felt there was a 'need' to spend money when gaming.

For some of this group this was seen as a positive way of getting more out of a game. For example, on Valorant[18] Josie (17) had bought four battle passes and three guns that she was very proud of, each of which cost between £15 and £20. These passes enabled her to access additional rewards and cosmetic items in the

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[17] Images of: FIFA 22, EA Sports (2021); Fortnite, Epic Games (2017-2022); Roblox, Roblox Corporation (2006-2022); Rocket League, Psyonix (2015-2022)

[18] Valorant is a collaborative first-person sci-fi shooter game.

game, such as skins[19], sprays[20] and titles[21]. More recently her boyfriend had also bought her a skin as a present in the game.

> *"This is what I normally get the battle pass for: the melee skins, it's very nice…I bought this gun because it looks cool. It was £15… This other one I didn't buy - my boyfriend bought it for me because I love this skin and it was in my store. It's so smooth. It costed about £20… I just begged my boyfriend to pay for it and he did."*
>
> **Josie, 17**

Josie explained that she wasn't always able to buy the passes and skins she wanted and would have to wait and save up her money to be able to buy them. She said that while she was waiting for her money to accumulate, she was quite happy to *'grind it out'* until she reached the next tier.

> *"I made a deal with myself that I would have to get to at least tier 6 before I paid for the battle pass… there's no point paying for it in the beginning you get to the same point… and I think I had no money, or I was trying to save money, and I was like 'If I wait, that will take me at least two weeks to get to, so it's two weeks extra pay."*
>
> **Josie, 17**

What is grinding?

'Grinding' is a term used in gaming to refer to long stretches of time spent doing repetitive tasks in order to progress through a game. The opposite of grinding is commonly seen to be paying to progress quickly to certain stages of a game, or to access items that allow this to happen more easily.

For other children, having to pay for items or certain parts of the game was seen as a way of 'locking them out' of being able to play as they wished.

Freddie (10) spent a lot of time grinding on FIFA to upgrade his ultimate team and wished that he had the money to progress faster by opening 'player packs'[22]. He was frustrated that some people were able to quickly get good players by paying for and then opening packs; he had even started playing a phone game where he could continuously open packs for free.

When asked what he'd change about spending time online, Freddie said that he wished he could progress through games faster without spending money.

> *"I wish they start giving out more free stuff – they make it so everything is like money. Every single thing you want you have to have money to buy it."*
>
> **Freddie, 10**

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[19] Skins on Valorant are simply aesthetic, they change the way a character or a gun look without impacting gameplay.

[20] Sprays on Valorant are cosmetic images that can be applied to the map surface during a game.

[21] Valorant titles are a game cosmetic. They are displayed beneath each player's name in the game lobby.

[22] Player packs are randomised loot boxes – you can open them either by grinding or paying money, but there is no guarantee that you'll get good players.

How were online identities and ambitions changing?
Children were posting less, and consuming more commercial content

Children were seeing less content from peers, and more from brands, celebrities and influencers

The balance of what children were seeing on their social media feeds and on video-sharing platforms seemed to have shifted since wave 7 (February 2021). In general, children were seeing less content posted by friends or peers, and more from influencers, celebrities and brands. This was true both for feeds showing accounts children had chosen to follow (like Instagram's home page) and for feeds based on their previous preferences and activity (like Instagram's Explore page). Much of this content had a commercial aspect to it, and was linked to brands, products or showcasing a service.

"It's more influencers than people I know, to be honest."

Shaniqua, 18

"It's mainly like clothing and fashion pages on Instagram, just like anything to do with fashion"

Taylor, 13

For example, Shaniqua (18) explained that on her For You page on TikTok she predominantly saw content from accounts that had large online followings. On Instagram she spent most of her time watching *Reels*[23] of beauty procedures that were posted by various salons including videos of eyebrow styling and nail art, as opposed to engaging with content her friends were posting on the app.

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[23] Reels on Instagram are short videos (usually around 15-30 seconds) similar in format to videos found on TikTok.
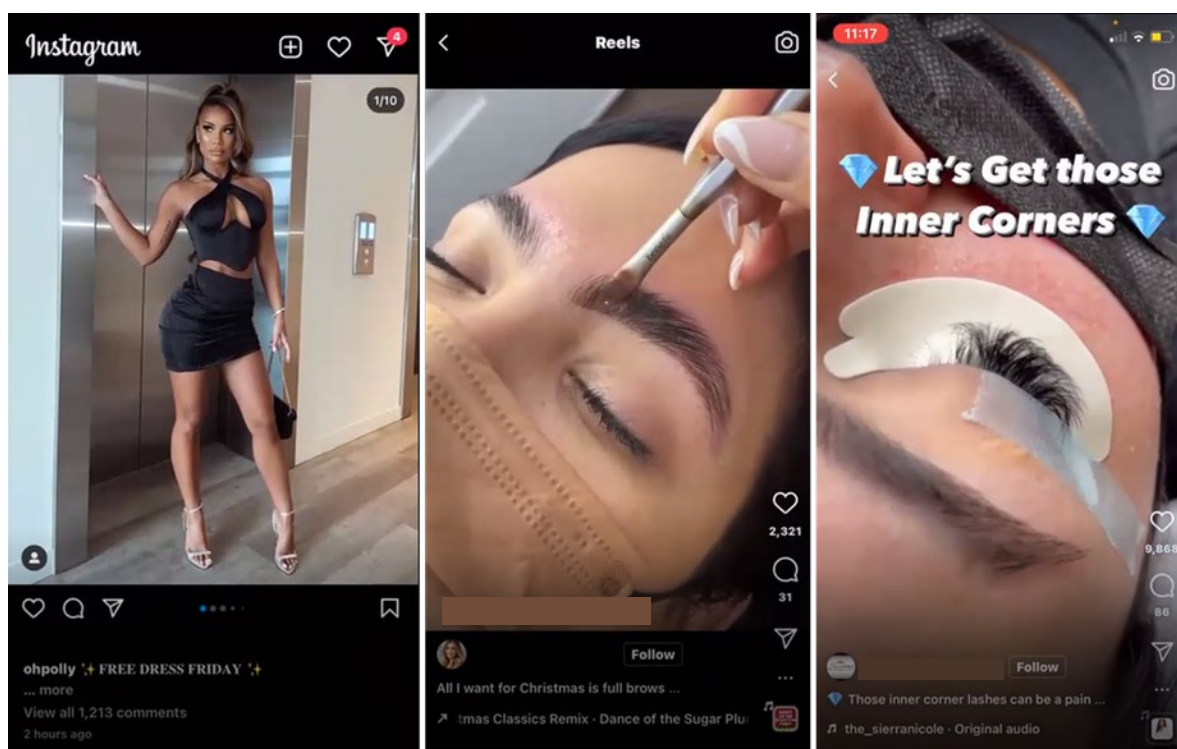
Shaniqua's home feed on Instagram featured clothing brand @ohpolly, advertising clothing, and her Explore page featured salons advertising eyebrow and lash treatments via Instagram Reels

Josie (17) also reflected on the fact that a lot of the content that she saw on social media was from brands. She explained that she frequently saw food-related adverts on Instagram and would often click on these posts and explore the brand's other content. Josie's Instagram screen recording showed her engaging with a vegan sweet advent calendar, which she later bought. She described how she now preferred engaging with this type of content rather than seeing content posted by her friends.

"I love my friends, but there's only so many times I could see their face… I love having pictures with my friends, but I don't think I could look at pictures of them constantly."

Josie, 17

In wave 6 (February 2020)[24] children in the study had begun engaging more with influencers online, including micro- and nano-influencers.

Influencers: Influencers are generally social media users with more than a million followers who exert influence over the digital and material consumption habits of their audience. 'Influencer Marketing' is now a well-established advertising technique, in which 'expert' influencers promote a product by using it on their channel.

Micro-influencers: Micro-influencers are individuals with social media followings of between 5,000 and a million people, who are considered influential in a particular niche – for instance, cookery, fitness, or fashion. These smaller-scale influencers tend to be more amenable to direct engagement with their followers.

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[24] Children's Media Lives – Wave 6 (ofcom.org.uk)

Nano-influencers: Nano-influencers are social media users at the lower threshold for micro-influencers, with followings of between 1,000 and 5,000 people, who are influential at a local level. They are usually trying to build a profile as a public figure.

This year the children in the sample who were using social media platforms were aware that more of the content they were seeing was from influencers or brands and that much of it had a commercial component, rather than being content from friends and peers.

As a result, the content that children were consuming tended to feel more 'professionalised'

Due to the decreasing proportion of content from friends and peers on social media, children's social media feeds appeared increasingly 'professionalised'.

More than in previous waves, the content that children were seeing was highly polished – people doing the 'perfect' TikTok dance, sinking the ultimate slam dunk, or scoring an amazing goal on Rocket League.

"[My feed is] normally celebrities talking about their channels and other celebrities, like Mike Tyson… they're normally promoting their business."

Isaac, 16
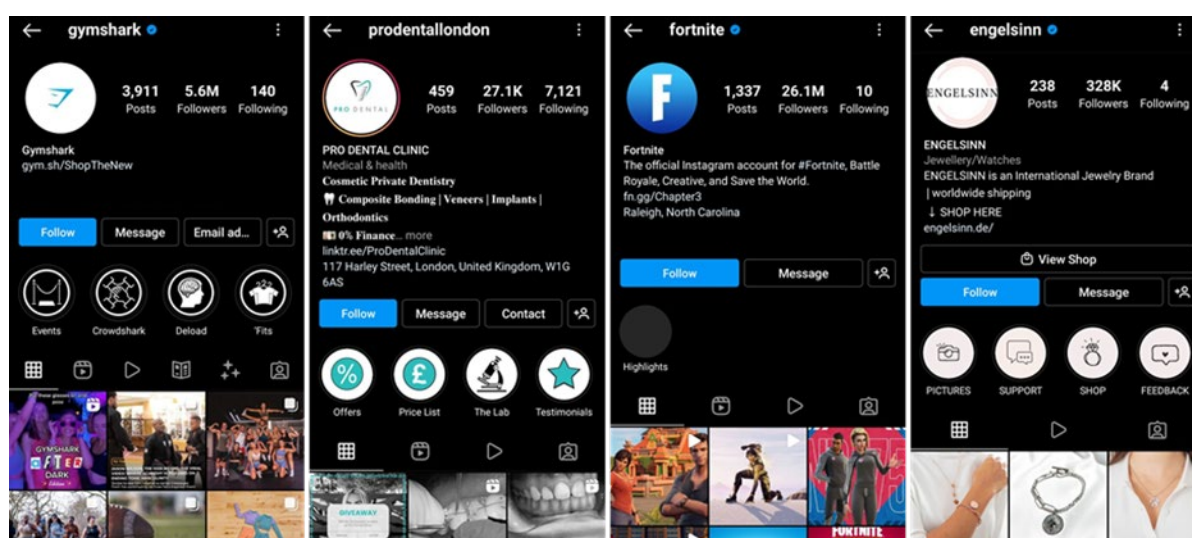
Some of the brands that children in the study were following on Instagram

A lot of children were also seeing content from larger 'pages'. 'Pages' is how many of the children referred to accounts, often on Instagram, that were not linked to one specific individual, and on which memes, local 'updates' or sporting statistics were posted.

'Pages' that children were following online

On TikTok and Instagram it was common for children to be following accounts that are not linked to one individual or brand but which post content on a theme, such as 'relatable' memes a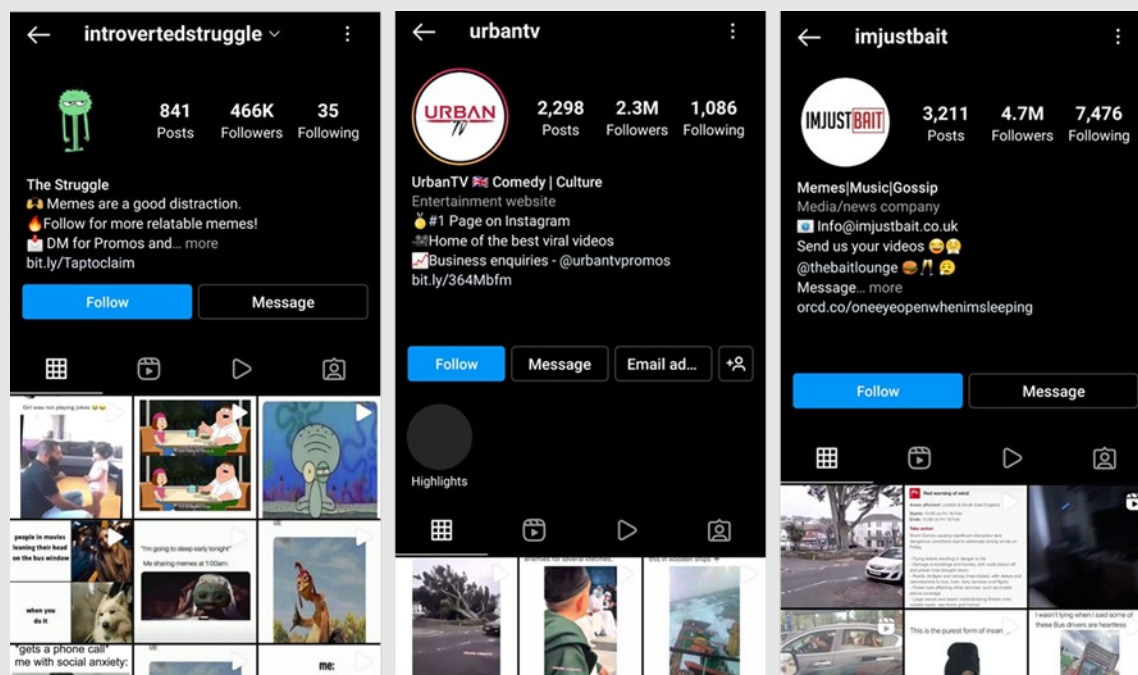bout being an introvert. Some of these pages, such as the popular meme account page @imjustbait and @urbantv, have large online followings with 4.7 million and 2.3 million followers respectively.

Posting on social media was seen as less appealing

In this increasingly professionalised context, many children were reducing the extent to which they were putting themselves 'out there' online.

Although this trend is not new (some children had reduced their activity between wave 6 and wave 7, for example), this year a larger proportion of children were posting less. Even some of the most active children in wave 7 such as Suzy (10) and Zak (12) were no longer posting with the same frequency or enthusiasm as before.

In wave 7, Suzy would post regularly (daily) on her TikTok, often copying dance trends or make-up videos. In wave 8, she was no longer as enthusiastic and posted only sporadically (every other week). She had become more self-conscious about posting online, explaining that you could be made fun of if your video wasn't deemed to be good enough.

"You really need to think about what you're posting, because people can be really mean on the app."

Suzy, 10

Similarly, Zak, who had been one of the most active children in the sample (posting on social media almost every day), had also decided to reduce his activity, going as far as to have an account purely for consuming content.

"I do have my own [TikTok] but I don't post on it anymore. It is a private account that nobody follows me on."

Zak, 12

Among some of the children there was a sense that they were reducing their activity because they felt they had to compete with the professionalised content they were seeing every day. Last year, for example, we saw Ben (14) posting lots of basketball videos on TikTok and really enjoying this, but this year he was not posting this kind of content at all. Ben had also decided to remove many of his previous posts, and as a result his accounts looked very bare in comparison to previous waves.

"I just feel like there is no real need to [post a picture of myself on social media] because I can't be asked [sic] to look great and stuff."

Ben, 14

Many children had become more realistic about the prospect of online fame

As well as posting less often on social media, children also seemed to have become more realistic about the prospect of achieving online fame. Although some children were starting to realise this in wave 7 (February 21), it seemed to be more prevalent this year.

In previous waves of the project, some of the younger children had spoken about their dreams of becoming 'TikTok famous'. This year that had changed: they seemed to realise that this was probably unlikely and that there were also downsides to online fame.

In wave 7, for example, Bryony (13) had just created a new Facebook page and had dedicated '*horsey*' Instagram and TikTok accounts, in the hope that she might attract a sponsor to fund her riding competitions. She also aspired to the online fame of some of her favourite riding influencers such as 'Elphick.Event.Ponies' who she thinks has had "*amazing opportunities*" come from her online fame, such as being able to interview some of the top riders and make friends with equestrian bloggers. Whilst Bryony still aspired to fame, she seemed more aware this year that this might not become a reality.

"I have 325 followers on my horse account on Instagram…I'd like to get thousands of followers … but a girl can dream."

Bryony, 13

Suzy (10), who in wave 7 had been posting on TikTok multiple times a day and was hoping to one day become TikTok famous, was now hoping to become an interior designer or architect when she grew up. Now she posted on TikTok more for fun and had disabled the option for people to comment on her videos due to concerns about being teased at school about her posts.

"It's more fun just doing it [posting TikToks] than wanting more followers because if you don't get that amount of followers you want, you just get a bit upset because you don't get that many."

Suzy, 10

Suzy had also witnessed the drama that often surrounded her favourite TikTokkers, such as people trying to cancel[25] Addison Rae. All of this had made Suzy reflect that being famous wasn't necessarily all that it was initially made to seem.

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[25] Being cancelled refers to someone (typically a well-known figure) being boycotted or ostracised online.

"You see all these influencers who have millions of followers and are verified[26], and you think oh I want that, but really I don't care that much anymore because like anything you do if you're big and famous, you actually get a lot more hate than likes and followers and stuff."

Suzy, 10

In wave 7, Arjun (10) had harboured ambitions of starting his own cooking YouTube channel called 'Kids' Cooking'. However, he had recently begun to question whether this would ever happen, and worried that he might not be able to stand out from the crowd.

"I'm still thinking about it, the only thing is I don't know how good I'll be on camera. I don't want to be disappointed when I only get like 10 subscribers and I have to do like 100 videos, so… I don't know. "

Arjun, 10

For others online fame still held appeal. For example, Amira (11), who has her own YouTube channel where she posts 'Roblox edits', hoped that if she got more subscribers she might be able to help her family with their financial situation.

"So, if like we get money, then my mum can use it for the bus and then to feed us and stuff like that."

Amira, 11

However, she questioned whether she would be able to achieve YouTube fame, given how much effort was needed to achieve this.

"So, for me, I'm like I think I have like 16 or 17 subscribers. So, it might take a while for me to get up to a million [subscribers] or something."

Amira, 11

Overall, children seemed to be realising that in the professionalised context of social media they would struggle to stand out from the crowd.

When children did post, they often mimicked what others were doing online

Imitation is not new to Children's Media Lives, but this year it was even more dominant, with very few posts that felt 'creative' or different to other content already in the online space.

It is important to note that although imitation *can* be creative – if it is the basis for developing or tweaking an idea – this was not the sort of imitation that most children were doing. Most of the posts that participants made were straightforward copies of content they'd seen others post, with little or none of their own personality or ideas woven into the new content.

Amira (11) described how certain online activities could become worldwide 'trends' that she would eagerly become part of.

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[26] Being verified on TikTok means that a blue tick appears by your username. TikTok describes it as a stamp of approval which can build credibility and increase exposure.

"So, like when one video blows up like the whole internet tries it and then it gets like really famous. So then I just do what everyone does."

Amira, 11

Shriya (17) also imitated things very closely. Her Instagram photos were all closely inspired by Bella Hadid, with her profile having a similarly tailored feel. She spoke about the importance of having a consistent Instagram home profile and curating it carefully to ensure that there was the right balance of colours.

Shriya took inspiration from @bellahadid for her own posts on Instagram

Even the content that seemed objectively the most 'creative' was often a close copy of something the children had seen elsewhere. Zak (12) had posted a video of his dog making artwork that was inspired by other accounts he had seen online.

Certain features on social media platforms also made imitating others easier. The 'this sound' button on TikTok, for example, allows users to easily take music or soundtracks and add it to their own posts.

'This sound' feature on Instagram

On each TikTok video there is a 'this sound' feature on the bottom right-hand side of the screen. This is the music or sound that is being played in the TikTok video. Clicking on this feature takes the user to a window with all the other videos that have used that sound. TikTok also makes it easy for other people to copy the video or create related content with the 'use this sound' feature which enables them to create their own TikTok with the same sound.
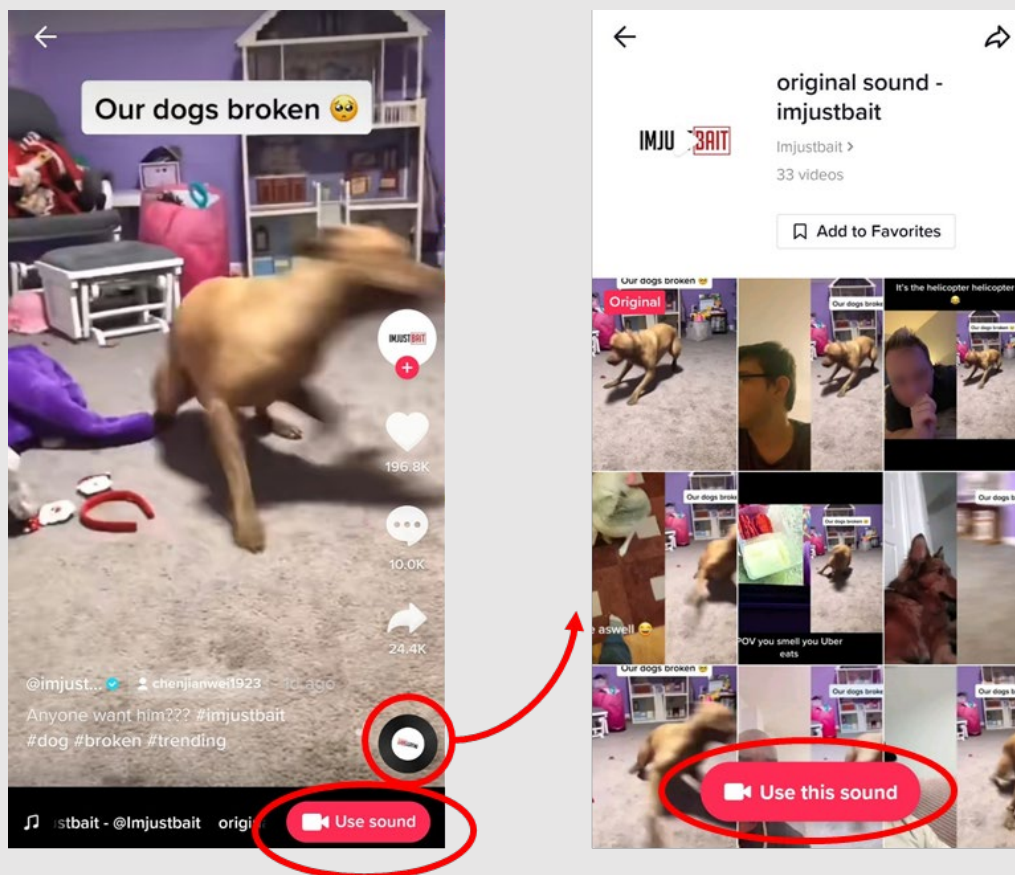
Imitation was seen as a good strategy for maximising attention online

For the children in the sample who were still posting this imitation-style content, they did so principally because they felt that this was most likely to get them attention in the form of likes, follows or views. This was particularly driven by the fact that an increasing proportion of the social media content they were seeing had high numbers of likes, which could be interpreted as a marker of 'proven success'.

A typical example of this was Bobby (15) deciding to update his TikTok profile picture to signal his membership of the 'Ghostface cult' – a trend where people change their profile picture to be an image of the movie character Ghostface[27] blowing out a cloud of vape smoke. Jack (17) and Freddie (10) had also done this.

"The Ghostface Cult… Everyone has made that their profile picture, and you gain followers from that. If you join the cult, everyone supports each other. It's [a] worldwide thing all over TikTok… you make a post and the little voiceover says 'guys I've joined the Ghostface cult, follow me'… then people start following you if you get on the For You page"

Bobby, 15
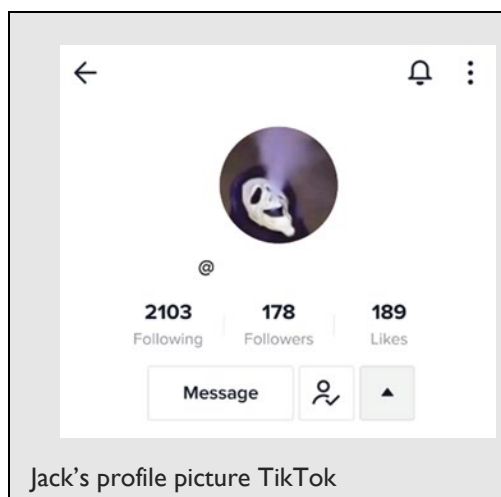
Jack's profile picture TikTok

Freddie (10) described how he had seen a TikTok video of a dog using the soundtrack of Carly Rae Jepsen's 'Call Me Maybe' and decided to make his own version. His favourite thing about the video he copied was that it got "loads of likes".

"I really like that video. It's just really funny and it just gets loads of likes – that's why it inspired me, how many likes it got. And how well they did it – how they got the song and the picture of the dog like that."

Freddie, 10

Similarly, Amira (11) would recreate TikToks that she could see were receiving lots of attention online.

"So, what I like to find are trends like of Roblox edits. So, say if there is one and the whole internet blows up and then they like get lots of loads of likes and they come up on my For You page, I'll just do like whatever tons of people are doing at the moment."

Amira, 11

But, even when children no longer thought they would get attention by imitating posts, some still wanted to do it. Bryony (13), for example, copied a TikTok trend called 'Four Lives'[28]. She was aware that it was unlikely to get her lots of likes, but still felt an urge to make the post, as this was what everyone else around her was doing.

"I made a TikTok video of my four different lives as an equestrian. It's been a bit of a trend at the moment with people whether they ride horses or not. I decided I wanted to do it because it looked cool… although I don't get that many likes on TikTok, I just enjoy making the TikToks. It just gives me something to do… I just saw the trend and that everyone else was doing it, so I just decided: right, I want to do it."

Bryony, 13

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[27] Ghostface is the main villain in the *Scream* horror film franchise.

[28] 'Four Lives' is a TikTok trend where creators make videos which depict four key aspects of the creator's life, for example friends and hobbies.

What content were the children engaging with online?
Most children preferred short-form content, multi-screening, and often avoided actively choosing what to view

Children increasingly preferred short-form content, especially on TikTok

Since wave 6 (February 2020) we have seen children preferring to engage with short-form video content, and this trend was even more marked this year.

More than half of the children in the study saw short-form content as a way of easily consuming a high quantity and variety of content, as they were able to see lots of different videos in a short space of time.

"I do like TikTok when I'm bored, because when you don't fancy watching a whole big thing, you get to watch ten TikToks really quickly."

Freddie, 10

Short-form video content

Short-form video content refers to short video clips that are posted online. There is no specified length of time that short form videos last, though the 15-30 seconds that most TikToks last is seen as typical.

While TikTok is synonymous with short-form videos, many other platforms have similar features. This includes Instagram (through Instagram Reels), Facebook (through Facebook Reels), YouTube (through YouTube Shorts), Pinterest and LinkedIn.

The short-form-only platform TikTok was more popular and dominant than in previous waves. In wave 7 (February 2021) TikTok was the third most-used app in the sample (coming closely behind Snapchat and Instagram)[29]. However, this year it was the most popular social media platform, used by 17 out of 21 children.

For the participants who were using TikTok, it was almost always their favourite platform. The children using TikTok were averaging two hours on the platform each day. On some days, children's use of the app was far exceeding two hours – one day during the diary task Niamh (12) spent 4 hours 54 minutes on it, and Taylor (13) averaged 4 hours a day on the platform during a week when she was off school.

While TikTok was the platform of choice for viewing short-form content, some children in the sample were engaging with it elsewhere, such as via Instagram Stories, YouTube Shorts and Facebook. As in wave 7, some of the short-form content that appeared on these other platforms appeared to be re-posted TikToks.

Arjun (10) for example, who didn't have TikTok or even a phone of his own, was able to watch YouTube Shorts on his iPad. Ben (14) and Shriya (17) also mentioned seeing short-form content elsewhere.

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[29] Children's Media Lives - Year 7 Report (ofcom.org.uk)

"YouTube Shorts is like TikTok where you scroll, and you don't get to choose exactly what you see."

Ben, 14

"I scroll through the reels on Instagram a lot… I think they're good but they're not as good as TikTok. Half the time it is just TikTok videos put onto Instagram."

Shriya, 17

Building on previous insight

Live television continued to play a limited role in participants' media consumption

Throughout all the waves of Children's Media Lives, we have seen the participants moving away from watching live TV. This continued in wave 8, with only six participants occasionally watching live TV.

Some children were struggling to pay attention to longer-form content

Children in the study seemed less interested and less able to engage with longer-form content than they had been previously.

For the first time, this year we found several participants saying that they would struggle to engage with an hour-long episode or a feature film. This content was seen as being 'too long' and prevented children engaging with the amount of shorter-form content that they wanted to view.

Watching video content has been Alice's (16) favourite thing to do online for a number of waves. In wave 7 she described how she would binge-watch *Grey's Anatomy* for hours at a time. Although she is still watching a lot of this series, this year she reflected on how she sometimes struggles to get through an hour-long episode and that she avoids anything longer than this.

"I often find that when I'm watching Orange Is the New Black, I always stop watching it before the end of the episode because it's really long …whereas on YouTube, if it's shorter, you can watch one person for 15 minutes, another person and then another person… I never watch films. They're just so long. I can barely watch an hour episode of something, so a film is just so long … With a film you have to use your brain for like two and a half hours straight."

Alice, 16

Peter (16), explained that though he was happy to spend hours watching TikTok, he struggled to pay attention to longer shows unless they were *"in the background"* while he was doing other things. He has a TV in his room, but only uses this to watch short YouTube videos.

"I don't use Netflix really… I can't just sit there and watch something, I have to be doing something. I'd rather like play a game or whatever. I have stuff on in the background, as a bit of background noise."

Peter, 16

Some children also said that they had experienced, or expected to encounter, 'boring' moments in long-form content, which would sometimes make them disengage.

"I'm watching Young Sheldon. I do like it but sometimes it is quite like boring. There's normally only a couple of scenes that are really interesting… so sometimes I'll text my friends at the same time."

Niamh, 12

As a result, some children would either avoid long-form content or would watch it less often, as they thought it took more effort and energy. In comparison, short-form content was seen as easy viewing.

Many children struggled to focus on a single activity, and were compulsively multi-screening

When children did watch longer form content, many used other devices at the same time as they found it difficult to give their full attention to what they were watching.

Although children have been multi-screening for a number of waves of Children's Media Lives, this year it seemed to be both more widespread and more compulsive. Some children felt that they *had to* be on other devices while watching longer-form content. Children's motivations to be on multiple devices at once also seemed to be less to do with worries about missing out on what their friends were up to (as they had been in previous waves) and more about difficulties in paying attention to just one activity.

As in Niamh's case above, for around half of the sample multi-screening was a way to address feelings of boredom that arose while watching content or doing other activities.

"Sometimes when I am playing [on my PS4] I like to just watch a YouTube video. Obviously, I can't really focus on it [when gaming] but during the waiting times it is already on so I can watch it and wait."

Isaac, 16

However, other children felt that they simply had to go on their phone while watching content and avoided situations where they wouldn't be able to do this. Josie (17) said that she loved the cinema but had recently stopped going as she knew she wouldn't be able to use her phone.

Some children who multi-screened saw it as a positive, as it allowed them to focus on multiple things at once.

"[If I'm multi-screening] I'm actually really paying attention because if I'm on my phone it makes it easier for me to focus on the film. I can't just sit and watch a film. I love the idea of going to the cinema but literally 20 minutes into the film I'm bored and I want to go home. I like watching movies at home so I can be on my phone."

Josie, 17

"I scroll through Facebook on my phone…so instead of watching Grey's Anatomy, I'm listening to it… I do look up every so often, but I can sort of look at my phone with one eye and my screen with the other."

Bryony, 13

Multi-screening in previous waves of CML – from 'fear of missing out' to struggling to concentrate on a single activity

Participants in Children's Media Lives have been regularly multi-screening since wave 5 (Jan 2019). For the most part, this is to browse social media while also watching video content, but can also happen while gaming or learning on another device.

In wave 5 we identified that children typically multi-screened in order to chat to friends and 'keep up' with what was going on social media. This year, multi-screening seemed to be driven more by an inability to pay attention to any one thing for too long.

Most children were aware they were being served a narrow range of content on social media, but most didn't mind

The majority of children in the sample were aware that the content that they were presented with on social media was only a narrow selection of what they could be seeing online.

Across the sample, children acknowledged that the combination of feeds based on people they had chosen to follow[30], and also on their general activity and preferences[31], had resulted in them seeing only a narrow range of content.

"It's pretty much all gym and property stuff."

Peter, 16

"Something like Instagram just shows you stuff that you like. At the moment, my Instagram is a lot of pictures of ducks because on my Explore page there's a bunch of cute ducks and I started liking them…"

Josie, 17

In general, this narrowness wasn't seen as a bad thing, but as a way to make it more probable that they would like what they saw online.

Ben (14), for example, saw the close tailoring of his social media feeds as helpful; a way of ensuring that he would only see things he already knew that he liked.

"I don't think there's that much variation in what I see… I only follow accounts which show certain topics. I'm not interested in all types of content. There is some variation but it's only really things I like… I like it as I don't choose exactly what I'm going to see, but I at least have an idea of what type of thing I'm going to see."

Ben, 14

Similarly, Alice (16) described her "whole Instagram" as "basically baking". As she mainly wanted to use Instagram for baking inspiration, she found this useful. Her feeds essentially served as a concentrated bank of content related to a single topic.

Many children tended to prefer platforms that serve content automatically and remove the need for decision-making, especially TikTok

In line with this preference for content that they already liked, children liked platforms that served them content 'automatically', removing the need for them to make any decisions or actively look for things to engage with.

TikTok was seen as perfect for this; it is essentially an endless, automatic conveyor belt of content chosen for you based on previous activity, all packaged neatly into a short-form format.

"When you get a new TikTok account it's a random mixture of videos, but after that it will based on things that you like… Most of the time I'll watch everything because there's nothing really that I don't like on my For You page."

Niamh, 12

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[30] Like Instagram's Home feed and TikTok's Following feed.

[31] Like Instagram's Explore feed and TikTok's For You feed.

For the first time, some children told us that they didn't like using platforms where they had to make active decisions, and even avoided these situations in some cases.

"On YouTube you have to decide what to watch all the time and sometimes I can never think what to pick… But on TikTok it just comes up for you."

Zak, 12

"I don't really use You Tube…I think TikTok's taken over… on YouTube there's a lot of stuff to watch, but you have to find it whereas on TikTok it's just there. It's just easier to scroll through."

Shaniqua, 18

This trend towards not making active decisions extended beyond these short-form platforms, with children choosing to rely on recommendations in a range of situations.

"I tend to go off other people's recommendations when I'm looking for something new on Netflix. There are just so many shows and you don't really know what they are… I probably wouldn't watch Netflix without [the recommendations], can't lie."

Alice, 16

"I just rely on my YouTube recommended[32] to be honest."

Bobby, 15

This avoidance of decision-making was echoed in wider repetitive behaviours

The narrowness of the content that children were consuming on social media was also reflected in the narrow and repetitive behaviours some of the children were showing in their other media activities. They were often reluctant to try new things, or didn't explore other options once they had alighted on something they liked.

Josie (17), for example, had used the same filter on her posts for two years. Other children re-watched series over and over.

"I'll find something, and then I just use that thing until I get bored of it."

Josie, 17

"I couldn't be bothered to start something new… I guess it's just when you're re-watching something you don't have to use your brain… I do binge watch new series but only when I have time."

Alice, 16

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[32] A feed on YouTube that suggests videos that users might be interested in watching next

"This is my fifth time watching it [Vampire Diaries]…I don't know, I just really like the characters and the storyline and stuff."

Taylor, 13

However, there was evidence that a few children were trying new things online. Arjun (10) had recently started making his own house and garage music mixes on GarageBand[33] and had entered a competition at his school with his creations. Angus (9) had recently started researching exotic animals on YouTube, including watching (with his sister) videos of baby sloths.

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[33] GarageBand is a programme developed by Apple for macOS and iOs devices that allows users to create music or podcasts.

How were the children engaging with the news?
Engagement with news was mostly through viral social content, and sometimes veered into conspiracy theories

As in previous waves, few children were engaging with traditional news sources[34]

In wave 8 nearly all the participants remained disengaged from traditional news sources. Few were regularly watching the news on TV, few were reading online news from sources like the BBC, ITV or the Daily Mail, and none were reading newspapers.

"I don't know when the last time I looked at the news was. I actually don't think I have ever looked at the news."

Jack, 17

"I don't read the news... I just go off what people tell me."

Alice, 16

"When I was younger, 100% the news would be on, but I get up later now. The news is normally over by the time I'm awake."

Josie, 17

When children did engage with traditional news sources, this was typically because they had been required to do so or because people around them were doing it

Only seven children were regularly engaging with traditional news provision. In the majority of these cases, they did so only because they were required to do by an authority figure.

Peter (16) for example, used the BBC News app on his phone occasionally, but only when he had been asked to look into something as part of his homework. He remembered reading about the fuel shortages of summer 2021 for his business studies class. Similarly, Ben (14) watched Newsround because it was put on in certain lessons at school but wouldn't engage with other types of traditional news.

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[34] By traditional news sources, we mean established broadcasters, journalistic new sites and newspapers, such as BBC News, ITV News and the Daily Mail.

"I wouldn't watch [Newsround] by myself, it's not that interesting… but because it's at school it is definitely more interesting than some of the [other] stuff."

Ben, 14

Other participants only engaged with news content when their parents were doing so.

"In the morning when I'm getting ready for school my mum's got Good Morning Britain on."

Suzy, 10

The only participant who engaged with traditional news sources unprompted was Arjun (10) who would sometimes go on to the Newsround website of his own volition.

"I go on Newsround sometimes and just watch – I picked it up from year 4 when we started watching it. Go on once or twice a month to check on the world of news. It's not that bad. It's pretty much the kids' BBC news… I know about COP 26 – I don't know if it's going to be a big waste of time or it could change the future."

Arjun, 10

Content relating to news was predominantly seen on social media

As in previous waves, most children reported hearing about the news and what was going on in the world through social media.

This content tended to be produced by individuals or pages offering 'local updates' rather than traditional news organisations. Most children also came across this content passively when it appeared on their feeds, rather than seeking it out.

"Honestly, I don't really see any news, unless it is celebrity news. If it is really, really bad or it is really popular like the Black Lives Matter protests then I'll see that."

Isaac, 16

Some children became aware of news or current affairs topics when the influencers they followed on social media posted about them. One of Shriya's (17) favourite accounts to follow on Instagram was Bella Hadid, a famous model and influencer. She particularly liked her because she also posts about current issues.

"A lot of people do [share posts] to influence people when they see them [being posted by influencers]. I do it myself, if something comes up and I feel like strongly about it, I'll post it."

Shriya, 17

Other children saw content that was shared by meme pages or other 'clip' pages.

"I've seen a lot of protestors gluing themselves to the floor and police vans… It was on Instagram, on some 'UK Viral' page or 'Street Vlogs' or something."

Bobby, 15

There was a growing focus on 'social justice'

In wave 7 (February 2020), a few of the older participants were engaging with news and current affairs content to do with 'social justice' issues like the Black Lives Matter movement[35] on social media.

In wave 8, the number of children coming across these topics had increased significantly, with more younger children also seeing them. Again, this content primarily came from influencers, pages and peers on social media, rather than from traditional news sources.

Shriya (17), for example, was seeing lots of content to do with the Israel-Palestine conflict. These stories were typically re-shared by individuals whom Shriya followed but also appeared on pages she followed that were specifically for news of interest to people of Muslim faith.
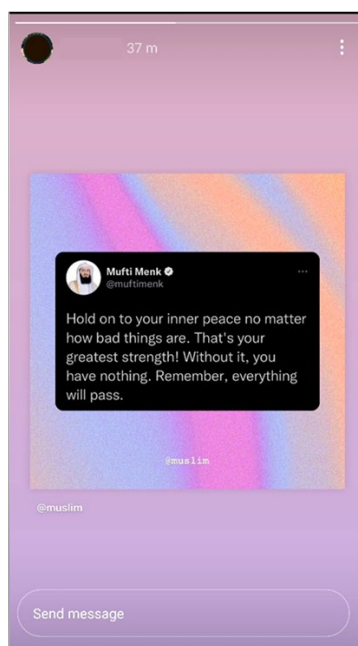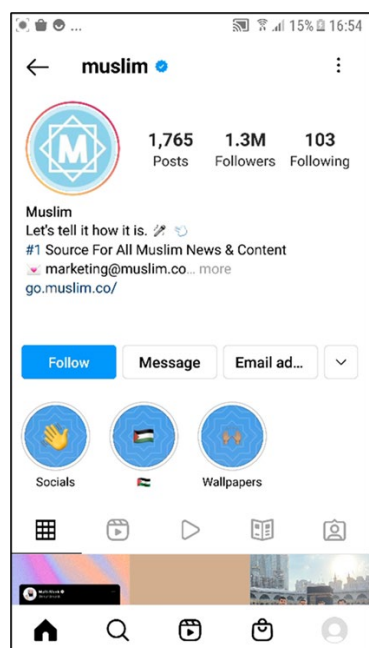
Shriya followed and re-shared posts related to Muslim news as well as the Israeli-Palestine conflict

Around a third of the participants were engaging with content about racism. Many of the children had seen posts about racism following England's elimination from Euro 2020, even if they did not follow the news deliberately.

"*It was all over social media… about how bad [the abuse] was, and how they're still playing for our country and everyone makes mistakes.*"

Peter, 16

"*So, the Euros, England's last two penalties were taken by two black footballers and then people went on [the internet] and were racist because they didn't score the goals… You just hear it around you… like my brother [24] is on Twitter, my brother is a big football fan, so you hear it.*"

Alice, 16

Others remembered seeing a lot of coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020.

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[35] Black Lives Matter is a movement that highlights and fights racism against Black people.

"Last year when the Black Lives Matter thing was happening – people were posting stuff about that, all the people who were shot and killed… People were saying it was injustice and it shouldn't be happening – a lot of people were posting stuff about that"

Ben, 14

Even within celebrity news, there was a growing focus on these topics. In previous waves Suzy (10) has always spoken about Addison Rae being her favourite TikTokker; she would regularly copy her dances. However, this year Suzy explained that she had stopped watching her videos after seeing lots of stories about her on TikTok reporting that she had been racist or homophobic to her fans.

"She was being really mean to someone online and she was getting cancelled for that or something, and she was being like racist or homophobic… I can't really remember."

Suzy, 10

More children were sharing news content this year, and their understanding of current affairs was increasingly shaped by their peers

In wave 7 (February 2021), a few children were re-sharing news and current affairs content that they had seen on social media.

This year, far more children in the sample were doing this. Around half had shared something in the past year, typically by linking to someone else's Instagram post in their story, which their followers could then click on. This was more common among the older children, with nine of the 16 children aged 12 or older having done it.

There was a lot of variation in the sort of content that children re-shared. Jack (17) shared his opinions on 'victim blaming' on his Snapchat story, and also a post to mark Remembrance Day.

Other children shared content to do with social justice issues. As above, Shriya (17), shared content about UK politicians' opinions on the Israel-Palestine content, and about death threats received by Muslim US politician Ilhan Omar.

Due to this increase in sharing, what children saw and understood of the world was now being shaped more by what their peers decided to promote than in previous waves.

One child, Isaac (16), recognised that this might give a false impression of what was going on in the world, as topics that his peers were focused on would get more airtime. He reflected that during the violence between Israel and Palestine in May 2021 his Instagram had become full of his peers re-sharing content on this topic, but that this had dropped off soon after. Isaac felt that this issue shouldn't be seen as a popular trend, but as something with which to engage more meaningfully.

"They haven't posted about the Palestine thing as much because it's not as popular anymore, which I don't really understand. But if it was popular then they would start talking about it again."

Isaac, 16

Children struggled to express exactly what sharing news content achieved

Children in the study gave a number of explanations for why they re-shared news content on social media. Many said they did this in order to 'raise awareness' of a particular issue.

"[I want to] raise awareness because I know a lot of people who aren't aware about issues at all. It's not forcing… but as long as people know… then they know."

Shriya, 17

"That was to do with remembrance… I just wanted to do it out of respect really."

Jack, 17

Though it was clear that they did have positive intentions when doing this, some participants struggled to explain exactly what re-sharing content was achieving.

Bobby (15), for example, felt that re-sharing content about Black Lives Matter was an important way to *"get the word across"* that everyone's rights should be respected. He hadn't reflected, however, on whether he wanted people to read up on the issue or take a different course of action.

"It is worth it [posting about Black Lives Matter] because everyone has their own rights, don't they. You need to try and help in any way that you can. I did it so the word would get across."

Bobby, 15

There was some suggestion that children saw re-sharing as a way to fit in

Some children seemed to have other motivations for re-sharing content, beyond raising awareness.

Some suggested that there was an expectation in their peer groups that they would share certain kinds of political content. Bobby (15), for example, described sharing a black square on his Instagram on Blackout Tuesday as something he 'had to do' because his peers were doing the same thing.

"On Blackout Tuesday, you can't not really [share a black square]."
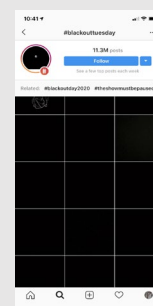
Bobby, 15

What was Blackout Tuesday?

Blackout Tuesday was a day-long movement in June 2020 sparked by the death of George Floyd.

Led by the music industry, it called for normal business to be 'paused' and for there to be a day of reflection on racism in the US.

On social media, many people posted a black square with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to participate in this.

Similarly, Niamh (12) had decided to reshare an Instagram post that some of her friends had shared about donating to elephant sanctuaries.

"Just like, everyone was [sharing it]…and to share awareness.

Niamh, 12

In a few cases, referencing or re-sharing political content or current affairs was explicitly about receiving online attention

Taylor (13), for example, shared a selfie on Instagram with the caption 'RIP Prince Phillip'. For her, there was clearly little distinction between a post that she hoped would get her likes, and one that was paying her respects.

Freddie (10) made a number of TikToks in support of England's Black football players following stories of racist online abuse after the EURO 2020 final. He explained that he had seen similar posts get lots of likes and views and wanted to imitate this in the hope that he would reap similar benefits.

In one of these posts, Freddie overlaid an image of Marcus Rashford with the text "*If you was racist to this man unfollow me.*" The photo was also captioned '#marcus rashford black lives mater' and #fyp.

Rather than creating this content to encourage others to engage with these issues or to promote an anti-racist message, it was clear that Freddie did this in order to get online attention.

"I made one of the TikToks because it seemed like a pretty good TikTok…. and it is actually pretty good to be fair, it's good thinking. I just kind of wanted to get a lot of likes and follows."

Freddie, 10

For some, engagement with the news via social media led them into the territory of conspiracy theories

At the time of the interviews a key news story, which some children were engaging with, was the deaths of ten people at Astroworld, an annual music festival in Texas run by the rapper Travis Scott.[36]

For some of the children this incident was a popular talking point among their peers, and was also featured heavily in content shared by individuals whom they didn't know on social media (rather than on traditional news platforms). Nathan (15), Shaniqua (18) and Shriya (17) all mentioned that they had seen content about this, including a range of different theories about what exactly had happened.

Some of these theories claimed that the concert was part of a satanic ritual in which people had been 'sacrificed' on purpose. Although these children didn't fully believe these claims, they were engaging with some of the ideas in the videos.

"There was a flaming bird at the start of the performance and that symbolised sacrifice… I don't know what to believe but the only thing that really surprised me was when people started dying and he didn't stop the concert."

Nathan, 15

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[36] At the 2021 edition of Astroworld, ten people died as a result of a 'crowd surge', with many more sustaining serious injuries. There was particular controversy as Travis Scott continued performing despite the developing situation, though it is unclear whether he had any sense of what was happening. In his statement after the event, Travis Scott stated that he was 'devastated' by the events.

While some children did question what was true in relation to the event, the quantity of the content posted about the event made Shaniqua and Shriya feel that there might be some truth to the rumours and that there was something more sinister going on.

"I kind of believe it like because he was just watching all these people die in vain and everything."

Shaniqua, 18

"I don't fully believe all of it but like I do think he probably is part of the illuminati."

Shriya, 17

Shriya (17) had mainly seen content about Travis Scott posted on Twitter and being shared on Instagram. This included graphic pictures and videos from the event as well as theories linking Travis with the 'illuminati'.

"I saw loads of videos about it on Twitter. Nothing's censored, so you see bodies and stuff…I've just been hearing all these theories that it was the illuminati and like satanists stuff."

Shriya, 17

What is the illuminati?

The illuminati were originally a Bavarian secret society, formed in 1776 by academics who opposed religious influences[37]. Modern mentions of the illuminati are typically linked to conspiracy theories about an exclusive group of powerful individuals supposedly controlling parts of the government, media, business and other areas of power.

There are a number of symbols associated with the Illuminati, such as triangles, pentagons, goats and the all-seeing eye.[38]

Shriya had reflected on what she had seen and even tried to understand more about the subject. She had recently watched a 'documentary' on YouTube about the illuminati, which she had seen people talking about on Twitter. She commented that this video was regularly removed by YouTube and then re-posted.

"Every time it gets uploaded, it gets deleted, when you look at the comments and stuff people say – yeah it always gets deleted and stuff."

Shriya, 17

Interestingly, Shriya interpreted the fact that this video kept getting removed as evidence that there was some credibility to its claims. In this instance, YouTube's policies around misinformation actually lent credence to these ideas, rather than stopping people from engaging with them.

YouTube's community guidelines around misinformation: "*Certain types of misleading or deceptive content with serious risk of egregious harm are not allowed on YouTube. This includes certain types of misinformation that can cause real-world harm, like promoting harmful remedies or treatments, types of technically manipulated content, or content interfering with democratic processes.*"

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[37] https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20170809-the-accidental-invention-of-the-illuminati-conspiracy

[38] https://www.theweek.co.uk/62399/what-is-the-illuminati-and-what-does-it-control

⚠ **Warning:** **The next section contains imagery and themes that may be offensive or upsetting, including:**

- Content of a sexual nature
- Content relating to self-harm and eating disorders
- Racially offensive content

What could put children at risk online?

Children frequently have experiences online which could – but don't necessarily – lead to harm

Exploring online harm

This year a central focus of the project was to understand more about the potentially harmful experiences that children may have as a result of being online. As part of this, we also wanted to explore what might put one child more at risk of experiencing harm than another.

To do this, we dedicated a section of the research materials as a 'deep dive' into experiences that the participants were having online and which had the potential to cause harm. This included using age-appropriate stimuli with written prompts to get children to reflect on specific content or interactions they might have encountered.

The terminology that is used to describe online harm can often be confusing to navigate, and makes it difficult to identify where, why and how harm occurs. To bring clarity to this, we used the language of **hazards, risks and harms**.

Hazards, risks and harms

'Online harm' is a term often used collectively to refer to online experiences or interactions with content, and the impact this has on people. To disentangle this and to be clear about what we are talking about, we have borrowed the language of 'hazards', 'risks' and 'harms' widely used in the health and safety sector.

This identifies:

Hazards are online experiences that are a potential source of, or route to, harm – this includes content that people see, as well as the interactions they may have with others online. Hazards do not cause harm in all cases and may even have a positive impact on people in particular circumstances (for example if it educates them about an issue).

Risk factors are the things that change the likelihood that a hazard will cause harm to an individual.

Harm refers to the negative consequence that someone may experience as a result of a hazard being combined with a risk factor.

An example of what this might look like in the online world:

- A **hazard** could be an Instagram post promoting eating disorders.
- A person's **risk factors** would include things like their demographics, the context in which they are seeing the content and whether they have any history of eating disorders.
- **Harm** would occur if they were to become distressed as a result of viewing that content or if it caused them to develop an eating disorder.

Many children in the study were encountering content that was inappropriate for their age or that had the potential to cause harm

Twelve of the children had encountered some form of content that had the potential to be harmful. Although this was more common among older children, it also included younger participants, including Suzy (10) and Amira (11). This was often in the form of content that was not age-appropriate, and in some cases linked to potentially more serious themes, like self-harm.

These children were encountering a mix of material, including content of a sexual nature, offensive content and content promoting unhealthy body image and self-harm, on a range of mainstream popular platforms including Snapchat, Instagram and TikTok. For many of them, encountering this type of content wasn't something they gave much thought to, as it just felt like part and parcel of being online.

There were a number of ways in which children came across content that could be harmful:

- they were being served it by platforms, and in some cases felt unable to change what they were seeing once it was on the screen;
- they were able to actively explore 'niche' communities and corners of the online world which seemed to have a greater proportion of potentially harmful content; and
- in a few cases, children saw adverts that were obviously inappropriate for their age.

Freddie seeing gambling adverts online

Freddie (10) was seeing adverts for gambling on Snapchat. He had set up the account with his mother and thought she had probably entered her age in order for him to have access to the app, as the minimum age requirement to use Snapchat is 13.

He saw adverts for gambling companies like 'Boyle Sports' and described seeing some of these (including while watching football with his dad) as 'pretty fun'. He added that he thought he might give betting a go in the future.

"I saw one where there's a little man playing football and running, [it was] *fun to watch."*

Some children were regularly encountering content of a sexual nature

Five children (Suzy (10), Isaac (16), Peter (16), Josie (17) and Jack (17)) reported having encountered content of a sexual nature. This could be implicitly sexual (i.e. only suggestive of sexual activities) or much more explicit. Children's attitudes towards this varied. Some were happy to see this sort of content or had even deliberately engaged with it, while others didn't like the fact that this was on their feeds.

"I don't know why I'm seeing this"

Suzy, 10

Peter (16) regularly saw content of a sexual nature on his TikTok For You page. This included dances that were implicitly sexual, and also videos that more explicitly referenced sexual activities. Often these posts used emojis to replace words or had 'scored out' certain phrases that would prevent them being automatically removed by the platform. For example, one TikTok video on Peter's For You page had the caption *"When he can make you sq**rt."*

Peter was also following a TikTok account that posted short descriptions of sexual acts to do with BDSM (a sexual fetish involving aggression and dominance).[39] This account had over 270k followers and over 11 million likes. It was also public and could be followed without the user having to prove their age.
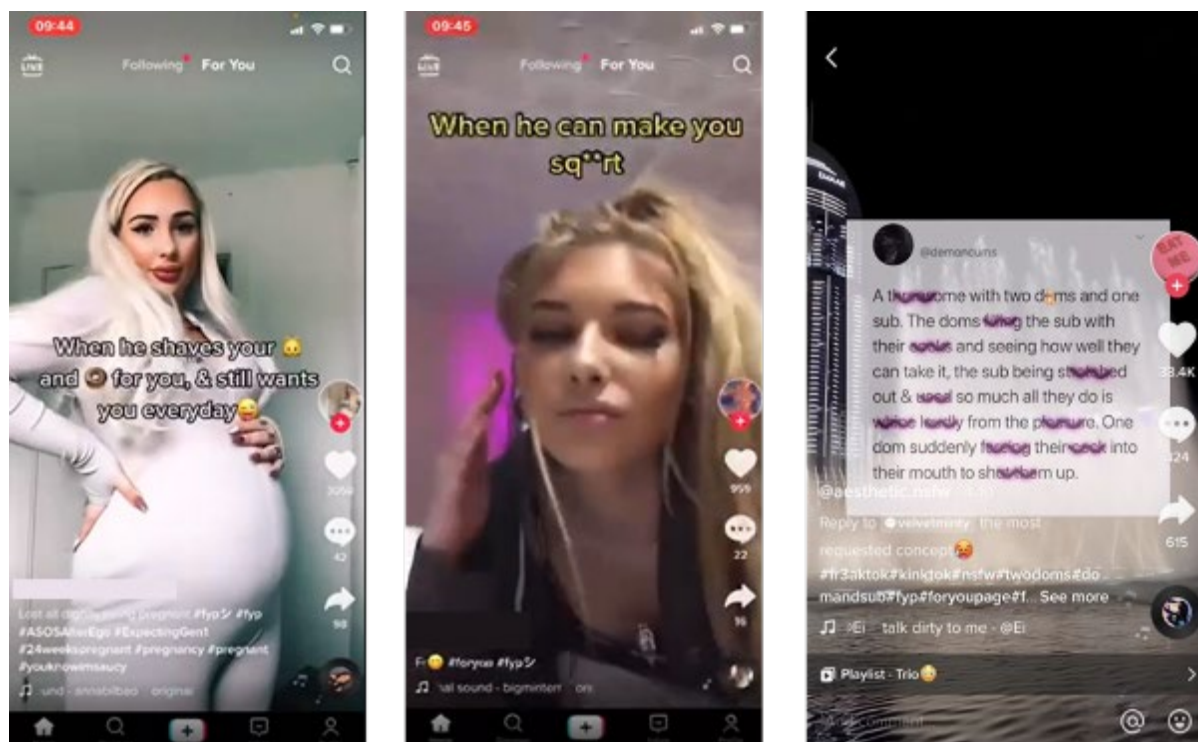
Content of a sexual nature on Peter's TikTok (two posts on his For You page, and an example of a post on the BDSM page he followed)

There was also some evidence of children actively sharing implicitly sexual images of other people online. Jack (17) regularly shared pictures of women on his Instagram stories, often wearing little clothing and posing in suggestive ways. He struggled to explain why he was sharing these posts and suggested that he was trying to *"help them"* get views. His mother also found it confusing and said she sometimes tried to get him to think more about what he was sharing.

"Sometimes I do say 'your grandmama might see that', because he has started to post pictures of girls and I have started to say 'I'm not sure that is really appropriate."

Jack's mum

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[39] BDSM: Bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism

Even some of the younger children were seeing content with sexual themes. Suzy (10) was seeing posts on her TikTok For You page featuring TikTokkers talking about feeling 'horny' as well as seeing posts talking about sexual assault. Although Suzy is 10, she has a TikTok account that she set up on her own. To gain access to the platform she had set her age as over 18.

Suzy (10) saw a video on her For You page of a TikTokkers talking about "tips for if you're horny"
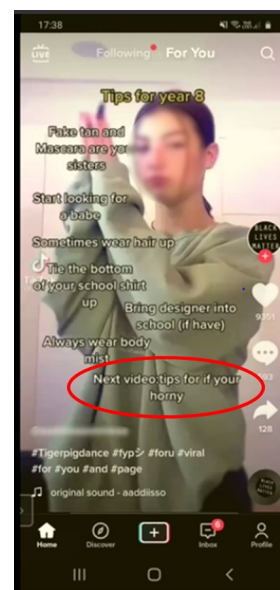
We also saw children engaging with more niche interests that had a sexual edge. In wave 7, some children were engaging with anime and manga[40] content that was implicitly sexual. This year Josie (17) had started to follow a number of cosplay accounts online which were suggestive of sexual activity.


What is cosplay?

Cosplay is the name given to the activity of dressing up as a character, often from a video game or comic. For many people it is more than just dressing up and includes elements of role-playing as the character they are emulating.

Cosplay can often be implicit of sexual activity, with cosplayers adopting suggestive outfits, poses and captions. It also has strong links to certain types of pornography.

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[40] Anime refers to animation deriving from Japan, while manga refers to comic books and graphic novels. In Wave 7, two children were engaging with sexually implicit content deriving from anime and manga, including following Instagram accounts that posted sexual images from manga and explored less mainstream storylines and sexual themes such as romances between teachers and pupils.

Below are some of the cosplay accounts that Josie (17) was following.
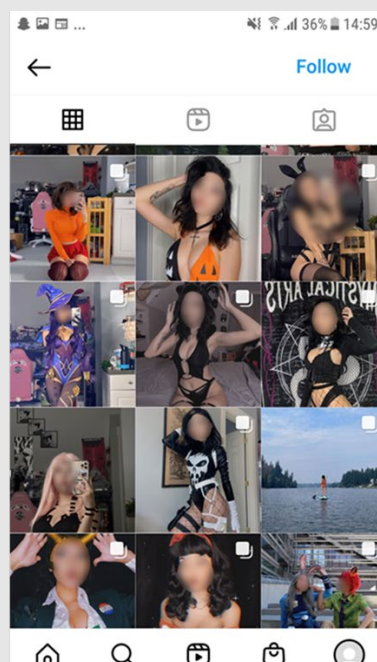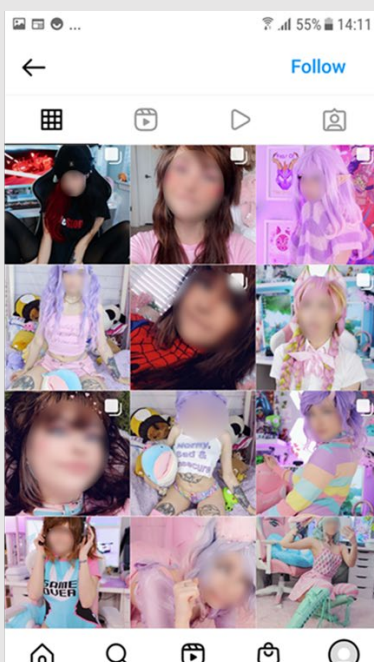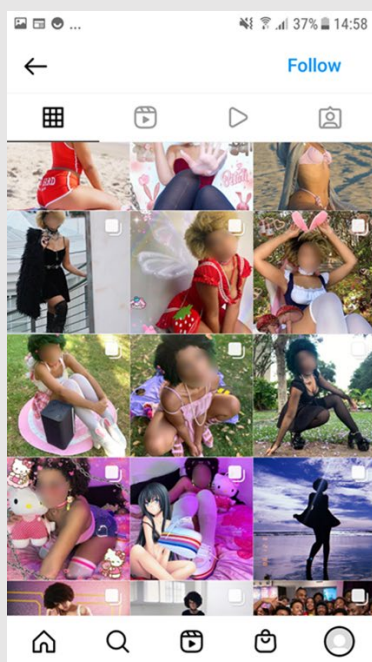
A couple of children were also engaging with offensive content described as 'dark humour'

Another type of potentially harmful content that some of the participants were engaging with was offensive content. Children tended to refer to this kind of content as 'dark humour' or 'controversial' jokes, rather than acknowledging its potential to cause offence. A couple of children were seeing these types of posts and occasionally reposting them.

Nathan (15) viewed, and sometimes shared offensive content or content involving violence on his Instagram. This included images of people being slapped, videos of children falling downstairs, and jokes about incest. Sean (12) had also shared a meme that included offensive content about people with learning disabilities.

When asked about this content, neither Nathan nor Sean felt that it was particularly offensive and didn't think about why some of it might be upsetting to others. Nathan saw dark humour as part of his online personality, and said that he was known among his group of friends for making 'out there' jokes.

"It's a controversial joke… I think I saw it and reposted it from somewhere. [My followers] know it's a joke so they wouldn't take offence."
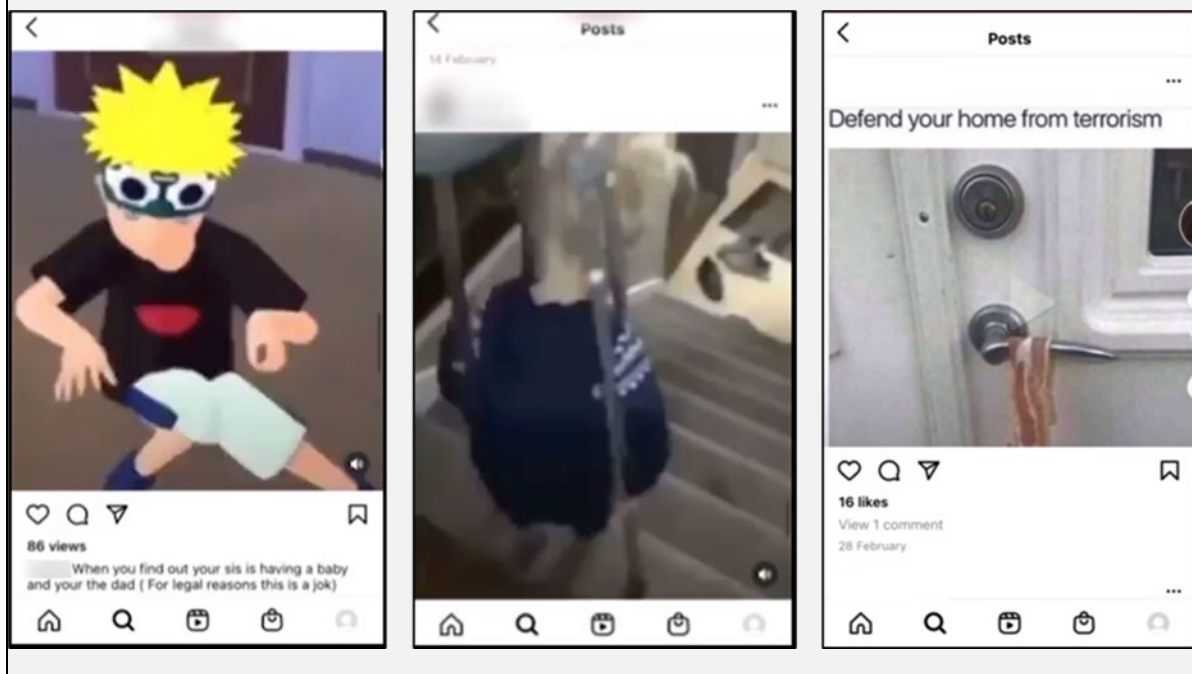
**Nathan, 15**

Nathan's 'dark humour'

Below are examples of the types of content that Nathan (15) viewed and sometimes shared on his Instagram (a description of incest combined with an upbeat song and dance video, a child on crutches falling down the stairs, and a joke about racial stereotypes and terrorism).

Two participants had come across content related to depression and self-harm, either by seeking it out or by being 'pushed' it

Jack (17) was following a number of pages on TikTok that focused on airing negative thoughts and ideas. This included pages called 'Sadhub' and 'Painhub' (named as a play on the porn website Pornhub) which have hundreds of thousands of followers.

Many of the posts on these pages do not explicitly reference self-harm or depression (they are often moody photos with captions like "*I don't wanna live a thousand years. If I just live through today, that'll be enough*"), and in some cases seem to offer support for people with mental health difficulties (for example, photos with the caption "*sending love to everyone who's trying*"). However, at the time of Jack's interview, one of these pages included images of razors and promoted restricted eating.
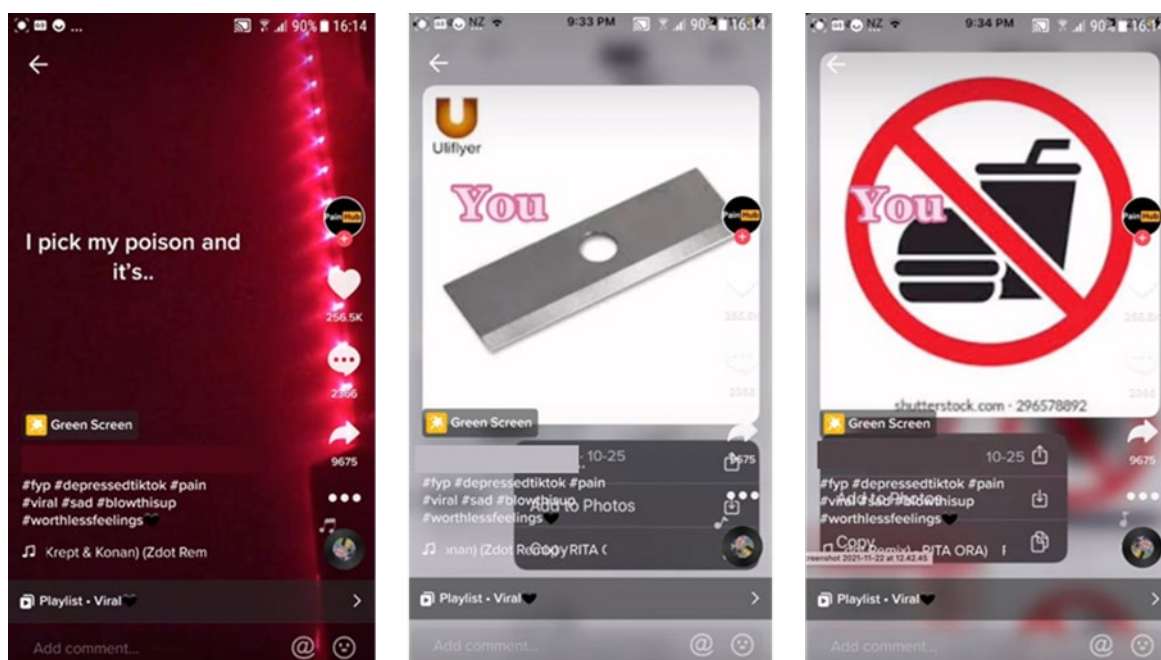
Examples of content on 'Painhub', a TikTok page that Jack (17) followed

Alice (16) told us that she sometimes saw content about self-harm and suicide on her TikTok involuntarily, and she didn't know how to stop this content being pushed to her.

"On TikTok a lot of people like saying they want to… off themselves."

Alice, 16

She explained that while she wasn't searching for this content, the mechanics of TikTok (for example, the fact that she had liked popular hashtags, such as '#foryoupage', that were also used on these posts) meant that it still appeared on her feed.

"I've seen a few, sometimes they'll just pop up on my For You page, 'cause they'll put like a really common hashtag and if you've like, liked something with that hashtag then it's going to come up."

Alice, 16

Children were also experiencing hazardous online interactions

A few children were receiving unwanted messages from strangers on social media platforms

This wasn't seen as something particularly unusual by many children in the study – it was simply part of being online.

"Oh yeah I've had messages – [I] just move on, we don't message them back."

Bobby, 15

"There are people saying like "Oh you're so pretty, I want to have your babies". Really strange things but you just block them…because I'm public on Instagram I've had a few of them. You just block them. For me it's not too big a deal."

Alice, 16

Receiving messages from strangers was especially common among some of the older girls in the sample, and this was more likely to happen to them on Instagram than on any other platform. The messages they received might come from people who were simply looking to chat to them, or from those who were trying to get them to engage in riskier behaviour like sharing images of themselves.

Taylor (13) said she typically gets "*one or two messages a month*" from someone she doesn't know on Instagram, but said that this had been more frequent when she was younger (when she was 11 and 12). She felt that since she had started posting less on Instagram the number of messages she had received had decreased.

She explained that she replies to almost every message she receives because she doesn't want to be 'rude' and thinks that some people simply want to 'chat'. In all but one case, however, Taylor said that these messages quickly became *"inappropriate"*. She explained that the conversations she had with strangers would typically become 'flirty' or sexual, and she would often be asked to add the person messaging on Snapchat, and move the chat away from Instagram. When this began to happen, Taylor either blocked or started ignoring the messages. Taylor recognised that the people messaging her might have a specific motivation for wanting to move the conversation to Snapchat.

"On Snapchat you can send pictures that you can't get away with on Instagram."

Taylor, 13

There was evidence of children seeing, or receiving, unsolicited explicit images

In this wave of the project there was more evidence of children seeing, or receiving, explicit images or having heard of peers who have had this experience.

Josie (17), Alice (16) and Taylor (13) each had experiences of people sending them unsolicited explicit images. Josie explained that when she had used the app Yubo[41], once the conversation moved to Snapchat it often involved being sent an explicit image.

"I had one of those 'make friends' apps… I'd talk to people and they'd be like 'Move to Snapchat.' There'd be a two-minute conversation and then there'd be a picture of a penis."

Josie, 17

Alice had received images from strangers on Instagram. She told us that these often came from accounts that had very few followers and no posts of their own, which led her to question whether they had been set up purely for the purpose of sending these kinds of messages.

"People send like pictures of themselves which you don't necessarily want to see… people with these Instagram accounts where they'll have like one follower. They'll have like zero pics and one follower."

Alice, 16

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[41] Yubo is a social networking site aimed at young adults to make online friends. Its key features include adding new friends by swiping left of right (much like a dating app) and live streaming features that allows people across the world connect online in group chats.

When Taylor was 12, she was sent an explicit image by a stranger who she had been spoken to a couple of times on Instagram Messenger. This stranger asked her to send him a picture of her face, so she decided to send him an image of her that was already on her public Instagram profile. He then replied with an explicit image. Taylor then blocked him and never heard from him again.

"I blocked and reported him after that."

Taylor 13

Bobby (15) had not received explicit images himself but had seen nude images of his peers being shared on social media.

"I've seen them being leaked by people on Snapchat stories… it just happens, it's not a good thing, but you need to be smarter, you shouldn't be posting these pictures anyway."

Bobby, 15

A couple of children had experience of racist or abusive interactions online

Another potentially harmful interaction that children mentioned in this wave was abusive interpersonal interactions.

Amira (11) told us that she had been the target of racial abuse while playing Roblox. Amira really enjoys playing the Roblox life-simulating mini-game 'Bloxburg', where her avatar role does everyday activities with other Roblox users. She explained that another user had begun being "*weird and mean"* towards her, using racial slurs and saying that they didn't believe she looked like her in-game avatar in real life.

Amira described feeling upset by this, so she reported the incident and since then hasn't had any more negative interactions in the game.

Bobby (15) had been on the other side of negative interactions. He described taking advantage of his role as a Discord moderator to rename chats with inappropriately sexual names, and also banning people from the server for no reason. He also described a process whereby he was able to 'boot' people off their wi-fi network remotely in retaliation for doing certain things on Fortnite.

"Someone tried to be rude to me when online gaming… it didn't end well for them."

Bobby, 15

Bobby's 'booting'

'Booting' refers to being removed from an online game following an attack on your internet connection. It is usually done through a technique called 'distributed denial of service' (DDOS), which is something previous CML participants have experienced.

Bobby described accessing sites that would generate a 'fake link' to a YouTube video or in-game currency, which he would then send to a player he wanted to boot. If they clicked on this link, this would give him access to their IP address.

He could then find a 'booter' on a separate site who would overload their IP address with traffic and cause their connection to go down.

Children's exposure to online hazards was affected by their own and their carers' understanding of online safety measures

This included the platforms that they chose to spend time on, what they did on those platforms, and their engagement with and understanding of features intended to keep them safe. It also included wider contextual factors such as their parents' or carers' media literacy.

Parents' and carers' media literacy and knowledge of online safety influenced the kinds of hazards children came into contact with

There was a great deal of variation in parents' and carers' media literacy and levels of knowledge about online safety. This affected their understanding of what might be likely to put their children at risk of harm, and as a result influenced the things they allowed their children to do or the advice they gave about spending time online.

Some parents said that they didn't know which online activities might put their child at risk.

"When they are in their bedroom, and the door is shut, they do get lost in the world of it. But I don't understand any of it…"

Sean's (12) mum

"Sometimes I don't understand what they are posting that for… I don't understand the words they've put on, but they seem to understand. It makes me feel old."

Jack's (17) mum

Other parents had identified that certain platforms or activities were risky, but had overlooked other platforms due to limited knowledge or their assumptions about how they worked. Niamh's mum had decided that Facebook was 'too adult', but that other platforms like TikTok and Instagram were ok for her daughter to use. Although Niamh did not tell us about any negative experiences that she'd had on TikTok, other children in the sample had had potentially harmful experiences on the platform.

"I still don't allow the girls to have Facebook. I think it's too adult, probably because I use it myself… TikTok I don't really know much about, but the girls do use it. I do try to look at it but don't really understand it to be honest."

Niamh's (12) mum

Even where parents or carers did have rules or advice about online activities, some children were able to easily ignore or work around these. At Bobby's residential home, staff spoke to him regularly about online safety, and had set up restrictions on the home's wi-fi network to block certain sites. Bobby (15) was able to easily circumvent these restrictions by using his mobile data which he paid for himself, and which staff had no way of restricting or monitoring.

"[The staff] do have rules, but I just use my own data. I don't even know what sites are blocked. They gave everyone a letter about it, but I didn't even read it."

Bobby, 15

Similarly, despite his mum telling him that he was too young, Sean (12) was using Instagram regularly without her knowledge, having set up an account with an incorrect date of birth.

On the other hand, some parents had more knowledge of the specific risks associated with certain platforms, and as a result had identified that certain activities had the potential to cause their child harm. Having talked to other parents, Angus's (9) mum felt that playing Fortnite could put Angus at risk of unwanted contact from strangers and of spending too long gaming. Therefore, she decided to draw up a 'contract' on how Angus would have to behave on Fortnite. If he broke this even once, he wouldn't be allowed to play again.

"When we first got Fortnite, I drew up a contract… because I'd heard things about Fortnite and children's behaviour. Angus has to abide by the rules or that's it. Maximum two hours, not after half past seven, and no speaking to people you don't know."

Angus (9)'s mum

Most children in the study didn't use or understand the full range of safety features that are designed by platforms to keep them safe online

There was a lot of variation in how familiar the children were with platforms' safety features, and how they felt about these.

Most children knew about the 'report' feature on social media platforms, but some said they would rarely use it as it was *"none of my business"* what other people were posting. Even if they saw content that they personally didn't like, they didn't feel that it was their responsibility to act on it. In Bobby's (15) case, content would have to be *"really bad"* in order for him to report it.

"It's none of my business so I'd just keep scrolling. If it's really bad I may report it, but I don't do that very often… You see videos of people in other countries getting their heads cut off – stuff like that is a bit far isn't it."

Bobby, 15

"I don't think [I have reported anything] … If it's not harming anyone else… I suppose it's none of my business really."

Jack, 17

Peter (16) was sceptical that reporting inappropriate content that he saw on Instagram would actually lead to it being removed.

"I don't really believe that [reporting] does anything."

Peter, 16

Freddie (10) was also familiar with the report function on Fortnite but said that it tended to be used to eject people from the game who were doing particularly well (rather than for its intended uses).

"If someone is proper beating you and they kill you in Fortnite… people sometimes report them – so they get banned."

Freddie, 10

Some children felt frustrated that they weren't able to control some of what they saw on social media

Several children referred to this, with TikTok's For You page and Instagram's Explore pages mentioned as the places where the children most frequently encountered content they didn't want to see. These children reported being surprised by what they saw on these pages, even if they knew that the content they were served might be a result of their previous activity.

"The For You page is like anything. It's not like recommended. It is literally just anything."

Jack, 17

"I kept on getting pictures of beaches and little Italian towns. I was like 'I'm so confused, why are you showing me these things?' Instagram has done a thing where it's like 'based on what you're liking on your Instagram feed'. I think it was just annoying me that I had so many pictures of beaches."

Josie, 17

In one case in particular, Suzy (10) actively disliked what she was being served by these, and other, social media platforms. Suzy was really frustrated that she kept seeing "*weird*" things on her For You page. In her second interview she showed us some of the videos she was seeing on her For You page that she didn't like. This included a video titled 'Woman exposes man who r@ped her' and videos of girls made up to look as though they had been injured or beaten. She wanted to know if there was a way to 'reset' her TikTok so she would only see 'normal' content again.

"It's really annoying, because I keep getting things that I don't like… I don't know how to change it. I actually have no clue [why I'm seeing these things] and I really want to change my For You page and just have normal things on it. My For You page has really 'weird' things on it and I don't know how to change it." – **Suzy, 10**
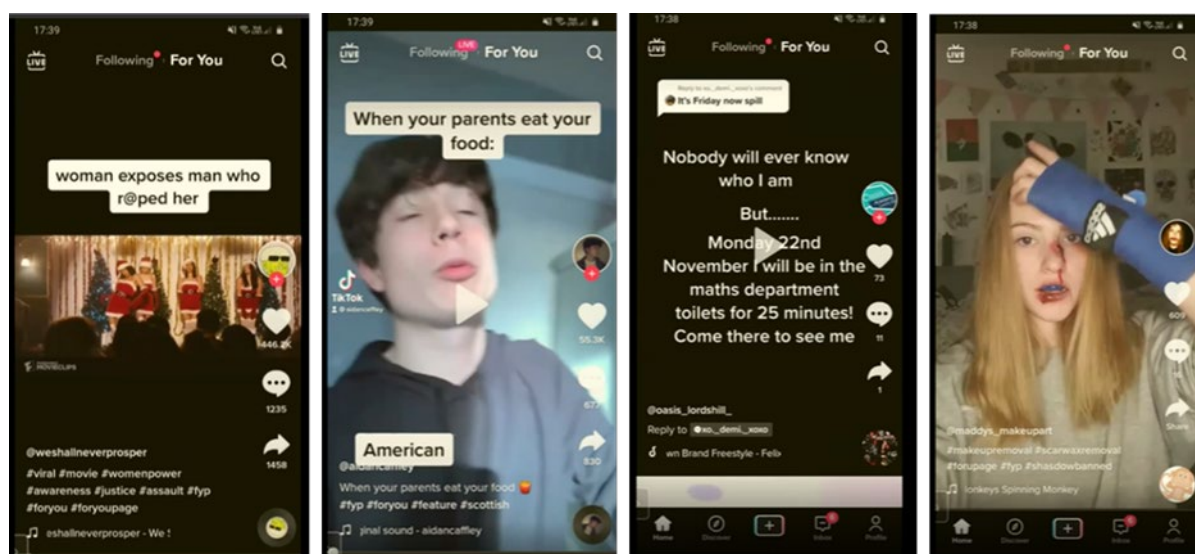
Suzy (10) was frustrated by the 'storytime' [42] videos she was seeing on her For You page

Like Suzy, other participants were unsure how they could change what they were served by platforms. Josie (17), for example, knew that she could say she was 'not interested' in content on her Instagram Explore page, which stopped her seeing those specific ads again, but wasn't sure how to do the same thing on TikTok.

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[42] 'Storytime' videos on TikTok refer to videos where people talk about an experience. Occasionally, this can be across multiple videos.

How to change what you see on TikTok

On TikTok a user can change what they see in two ways:

- By holding down your finger on a video you don't like and selecting 'not interested'.
- By going to the settings on a TikTok account and selecting 'free up space', and then selecting 'clear cache'. This means that the For You page is 'reset'.
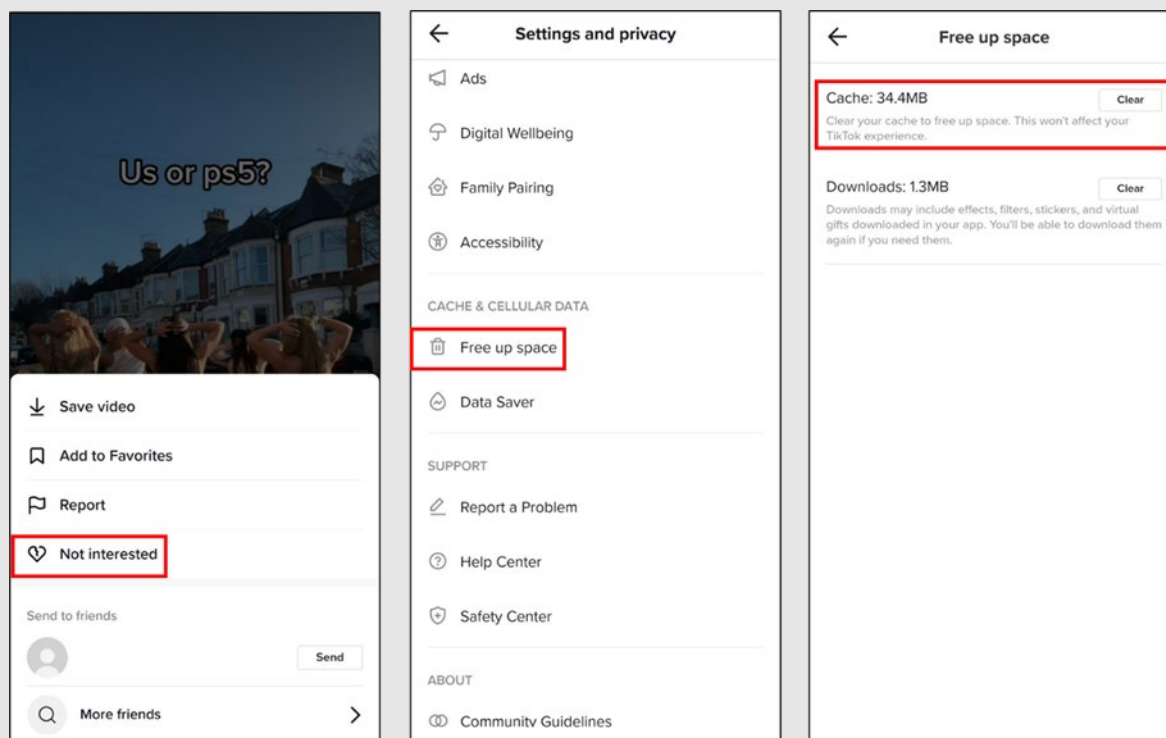
Most younger participants had either easily circumvented social media age restrictions, or were entirely unaware of them

Almost all the participants who were using social media had begun to do so before they turned 13 (the current minimum age to sign up for the majority of social media platforms). In this wave, only three of the nine participants who were under the age of 13 were *not* using social media: (Lily (8), Angus (9) and Arjun (10)), in all cases because their parents had not allowed them to.

Most of the younger participants who were using social media had made an account by providing a fake date of birth. This was described as something completely normal and easy to do – a necessary step to allow them to keep up with what other people their age were doing online. In most cases they had done this without their parents' knowledge, although Freddie (10) had made his Snapchat account with his mum.

In fact, many participants were using accounts where they were registered as being over 18. Freddie (10), for example, thought that he had used his mum's date of birth to set up his account, while Suzy (10) always made sure she said she was over 18 as she said she didn't understand why the platform needed to know her real age.

"I think they think that I am 21 right now."

Zak, 12

"On some things you can fake your date of birth and anyone can really go on it. So, I think I did that on maybe a couple of things."

Ben, 14

Some participants struggled to understand why platforms would need to know their age. Suzy (10), for example, had not made the connection that being registered as an adult might have made her more likely to see content that she didn't like – despite stating that she was seeing such content, including the 'storytime' videos mentioned above.

In a few cases, the children were so used to the idea of providing an incorrect date of birth that they had no idea what the actual minimum age requirement was.

"I have no clue what the restriction is for Instagram is. I could have it quite young because I could make a private account…For TikTok and Snapchat I think I put in a fake birthday because I was allowed to have it."

Niamh, 12

The fact that children had registered incorrect ages was influencing what they were seeing online. For example, Freddie (10) (registered with his mum's date of birth) was seeing adverts for gambling companies like 'Boyle Sports' on his Snapchat stories (see above).

What did the children think about making money online?

Children were being exposed to riskier ways of making money online, and many girls had been approached to become 'brand ambassadors'

Some of the children in the sample were being promoted high-risk ways of making money

Five of the older children in the sample were seeing content on social media about investing, cryptocurrency and non-fungible tokens.

These are all examples of high risk or volatile ways of making money, as they have no fixed value.

Children were accessing this content in a number of ways on social media, including being pushed it on feeds based on their previous activity.

Peter (16), who this year was running his own gardening business, was following a range of social media accounts and YouTube channels about property and stock investments. Presumably, as a result of this, he was being pushed a range of content on both his Instagram Explore page and his TikTok For You page. A lot of this content was about cryptocurrency, despite Peter not having originally been interested in this.

Peter didn't mind the amount of content he was seeing about these topics, as he saw it all as "*relatable*".

"Most of it is business stuff… it's like investing and stuff like that - side hustles. Ideas of what to put your money into rather than leaving it in your bank account… It's kind of relatable."

Peter, 16

Cryptocurrency

Cryptocurrency refers to any form of digital currency that is exchanged through computer networks. Cryptocurrency units are created through a process called 'mining' – using computer system to solve complex mathematical problems.

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.

One of the most famous cryptocurrencies is Bitcoin, which was created in 2008.

Non-fungible token (NFT)

NFTs are 'one-of-a-kind' assets in the digital world that can be bought and sold like any other piece of property, but which have no tangible form of their own.

The digital tokens can be thought of as certificates of ownership for virtual or physical assets.
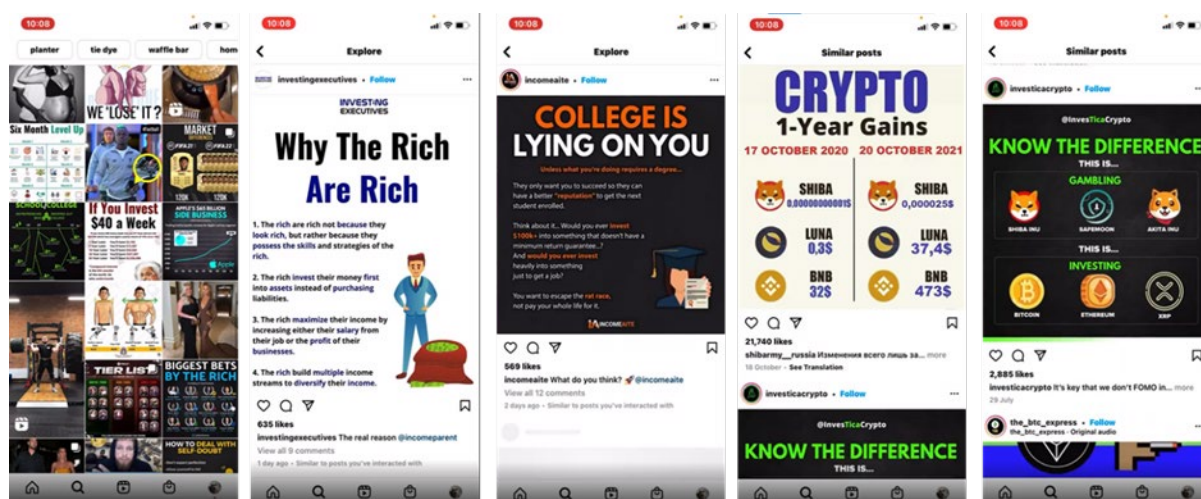
Cryptocurrency and investment content on Peter's Instagram 'Explore' page

Similarly, during the screen record tasks in the tracking phase of fieldwork, Jack (17) came across a video about non-fungible tokens (NFTs) on his TikTok For You page. He watched the whole video but didn't quite understand what it was about.

Other children were seeing these money-making strategies promoted by pages or channels they had previously followed for other reasons.

Isaac (16) also saw a post about NFTs on a page he was following called 'funnyhoodvidz', which typically posts funny videos and memes.

Ben (14) noticed that one of his favourite gaming YouTubers, Joe Knows, was posting about NFTs and encouraging his subscribers to buy them. Although he wasn't entirely sure what an NFT was or what it would do for him, Ben was intrigued at what he might be able to do if he did buy one.

> "He is talking about NFTs... I don't know anything about them, I just know that it is something online that you can buy, and they are quite expensive, and they are worth money… you can get invited to places with some of them."
>
> **Ben, 14**

It's important to note that none of these participants were buying volatile assets, and most didn't even seem to understand how they worked or how they might make them money. Nonetheless, some had expressed interest in exploring these in the future.

As well as money-making schemes, some children were seeing content that encouraged them to think about alternative aspirations more generally.

Peter (16), for example, was being pushed posts with titles like 'College is lying on you', that encouraged him not to waste money on formal education.

Shaniqua (18) had heard about 'creator funds' on TikTok where people were paid to make videos, which was something she saw as appealing. She was also seeing videos on her For You page about cryptocurrency and other alternative investment routes.

Almost all the older girls in the sample had received messages inviting them to become a 'brand ambassador' or to 'collab'

Being a 'brand ambassador' is something that is common among influencers and celebrities online; it usually means that they are paid to promote or endorse a brand's product on social media. Ambassadors are commonly offered perks such as discounts or free products, and in some cases are also offered money.

Five of the older girls in the sample, aged between 13 and 18, had experienced being approached on social media to become a 'brand ambassador' or to 'collab' with a brand online.

The girls had been contacted to become brand ambassadors via direct message on Instagram or by comments left on posts they had made on the app. Typically, the account that reached out would have few followers and would not be visibly linked with the brand they were 'recruiting' for.

The types of messages that the girls were getting tended to follow a few patterns: they were often very complimentary, they mentioned pictures that they had on their profile, and were framed as a chance to 'collaborate' on something or to get offers of free products.

Most of the older girls had been sent multiple messages like this, for many different types of companies including jewellery, clothing and beauty brands.
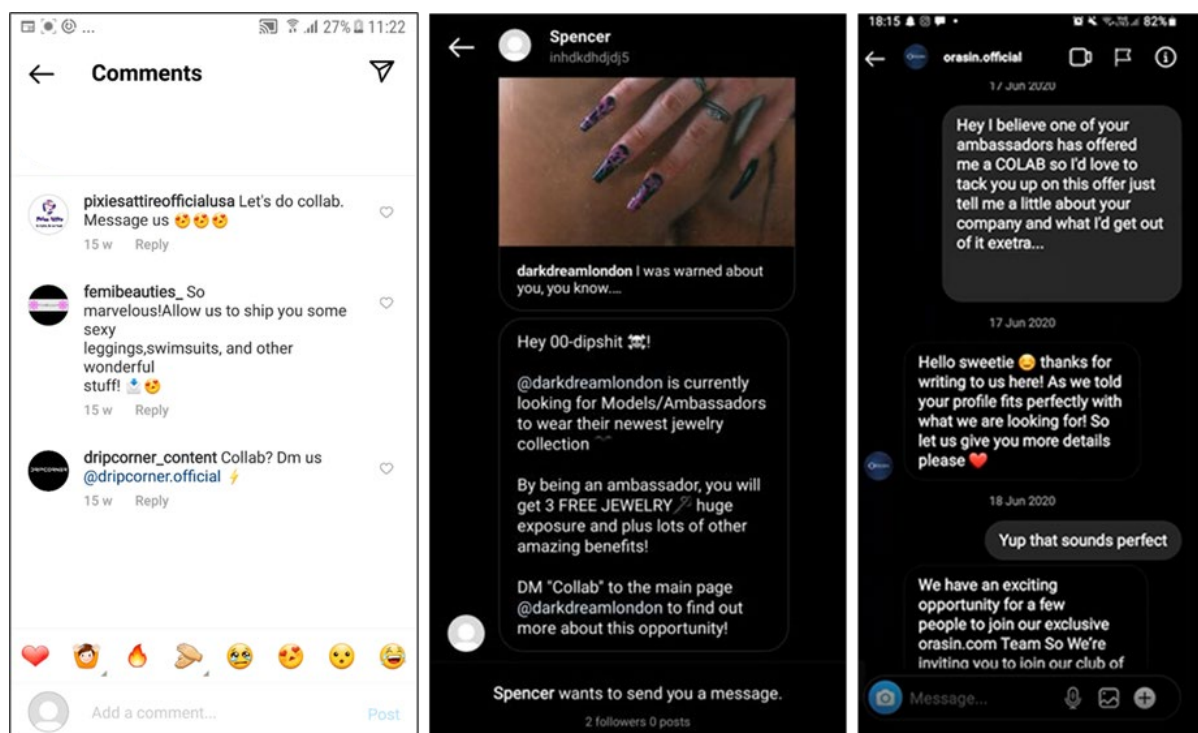
Bryony (13) received the two messages on the left and, on the right, we see a discussion that Taylor (13) had about the possibility of becoming a brand ambassador in her direct messages on Instagram

Some of the messages the girls received seemed to be quite 'flirty' in their tone, even verging on sexual. This often felt inappropriate to them. For example, Bryony (13) had received offers to be sent 'sexy leggings and swimwear' in the comments of one of her posts.

Some of the girls ignored these messages while others chose to reply

Some of the girls who received these messages were sceptical of them and simply ignored them. They saw the messages as scams or 'dodgy' and they recognised that the people sending them didn't seem credible as they often didn't have many followers or any posts on their accounts. These girls tended to ignore the messages or delete them.

> *"It's a scam… I look on their Instagram first and see if they post on there or not…I just ignore the messages half the time… sometimes I've just deleted them."* –
> **Bryony, 13**

Like Bryony, Alice (16) was also sceptical of the messages she had received.

"It'll be from someone really random, like really random. They'll ask you to be a sponsor for these really big companies… and they'll be like someone with zero followers… I probably get like one a week… I just kind of delete them or ignore them. They're not explicit photos or anything, you know?"

Alice, 16

Other girls who had received the 'ambassador' messages had engaged with them with differing results. Josie (17) tended not to answer the messages when she received them. However, recently she had responded to a message she had received from a brand she hadn't encountered before. The message offered a *"55% discount on ALL PRODUCTS! After that you get 40% commission and free products after 2 months of being an ambassador plus your free gift from our products."* At the time she had thought it might have been a scam but was pleasantly surprised when the product did arrive a few weeks later and she was featured on the brand's Instagram story, after she posted a picture of herself with the jumper on her story.

Taylor (13) was also engaging with the messages she got to 'collab' with or be an ambassador for brands. She explained that when she was younger, she was excited to see the messages and had thought it was her opportunity to "*become famous*". She had also bought jewellery and posted with it as a result of one of the messages she received. But after buying the jewellery had never heard from the brand again.

"When I first started getting them I would like message back, but then I realised it was like a triangle kind of system, a scam sort of thing."

Taylor, 13

In summary

This wave of Children's Media Lives, coming after the societal shocks of the Covid pandemic and as the government introduces the Online Safety Bill, provides a rich picture of children's experience of media at a moment in time.

It can help inform policy development and industry thinking now, as well as providing the basis for comparison in future, as both the landscape and the technology continue to evolve.

The notable trends we saw this year include:

- Most, but not all, of the children in the survey were feeling better than they had done in 2020 and were spending less time online than during Covid restrictions.
- The participants are increasingly tending towards more passive consumption of content.
- They are posting less about themselves on social media, but sharing more content about 'social justice'.
- They are frequently exposed to hazardous content and interactions online that could lead to harm.

These are all areas we will follow up on in the next wave of Children's Media Lives. No doubt there will be new behaviours, experiences or attitudes to explore as well – and we look forward to catching up with the children one year on.

Glossary

Anime: Anime typically refers to animation that originates from Japan. It encompasses every genre, including drama, sci-fi, romance, action-adventure and horror. Over the last few decades, it has grown in popularity internationally, and has recently begun to be hosted on streaming platforms like Netflix.

Brand ambassador: Someone (often an established influencer or celebrity) who is paid to promote or endorse a brand's product on social media. Ambassadors are commonly offered perks such as discounts on products, free items and in some cases cash.

Collab: Promoting another social media user's page, product or service on your profile in return for being featured in their posts yourself. In theory, this brings mutual benefit to both parties as it exposes users to more followers.

Counter-strike: A multiplayer first-person shooter game where teams of terrorists and counter-terrorists battle against each other in different objective-based game modes.

Cross-play: A gaming functionality allowing players to play games across different consoles, platforms or operating systems at the same time.

Cryptocurrency: 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.

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.

Facebook Marketplace: An online marketplace on Facebook where users can arrange to buy and sell items in their local area.

FaceTime: A mobile application which allows users to video call other people.

FIFA: FIFA22 is the latest in a series of popular football video game, available on all major consoles.

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.

Garageband: A music creation software found on Apple products.

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'.

Instagram 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.

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.

League of Legends: A multiplayer online game where two teams battle each to destroy the other's base.

Manga: Comic books and graphic novels originating in Japan.

Marvel: Marvel is one of the big publishers of American comic books. More recently the company has been behind the Marvel Cinematic Universe – a series films based on character that appear in the Marvel comics, such as Iron Man and Spider-Man.

Meme: A meme is an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations.

Moderator: The person who presides over an online forum discussion and is responsible for ensuring that it doesn't include offensive language, insults, or 'spam' content which is not related to the discussion topic.

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.

Non-fungible token (NFT): 'One-of-a-kind' assets in the digital world that can be bought and sold like any other piece of property, but which have no tangible form of their own.

Norris Nuts: A family of Australian YouTubers who make videos both about general family life and the sports played by different members of the family.

Pokémon Go: A mobile game that uses GPS to allow users to find, train and battle Pokémon characters in different physical locations. Pokémon characters appear on users' phone screens as if they are in the player's real location.

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

Re-post: A re-post is where a user posts an image or video that was initially posted by another user.

Rocket League: Rocket League is a car-based football video game. In Rocket League, eight players are assigned to two teams, who compete to score goals using rocket-powered vehicles.

Side hustle: A term for a paid job that people do alongside their main work or study.

Skins: Skins are outfits/costumes that can be bought for use in video games, using either in-game currency or real money. Skins allow users to change the appearance of their character.

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 create short lip-sync, comedy and talent videos.

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

Xbox: A line of consoles manufactured by global manufacturing giants, Flex. 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.

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