Ofcom Children's Media Lives

Life in Lockdown

August 2020

Contents

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the lives of everyone. For children in particular, education, socialisation and other formative experiences have been disrupted or suspended, leading to changes and developments in digital behaviours.

This document provides analysis of the findings from a Covid-19-specific wave of the longitudinal Children's Media Lives study[1], which aimed to get an insight into the media lives of children during the Covid-19 pandemic and the months spent in lockdown. Specific objectives were to explore:

- new digital behaviours and offline behaviours children are adopting for education, socialising and other activities;
- the new digital spaces children are exploring – and whether they are encountering increased risk or pressure; and
- how these new digital behaviours fit into their wider life, including their hopes for the future.

For this wave, we interviewed a sample of 14 children:

- Arjun, 9, North-west England
- Suzy, 9, Glasgow
- Zak, 10, South Yorkshire
- Bryony, 12, Wales
- Ben, 12, London
- Ahmed, 14, London
- Peter, 14, West Midlands
- Alice, 15, London
- Jack, 15, West country
- Josie, 15, West Midlands
- Shaniqua, 15, London
- Shriya, 15, Midlands
- William, 16, Midlands
- Sarah, 16, North-west England

Although this is a relatively small sample, the participants were chosen to reflect a broad cross-section of UK children in terms of age, location, ethnicity, social circumstances and access to technology. We specifically weighted our selection to include older children, who would have experienced a greater impact on their school life – in particular around GCSEs. However, we also included some younger children to see the impact at the younger end of the spectrum. For more detail on the sample please see Annex 1.

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[1] 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. Reports from previous waves are available on the Ofcom website.
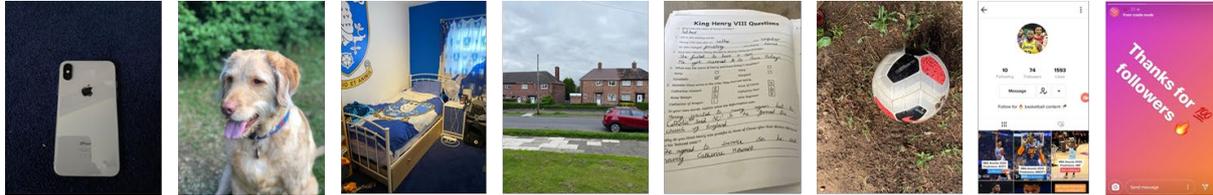
Methodology

Due to the restrictions in place as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown, we employed remote fieldwork techniques for this wave. As in previous waves, we recognised the importance of getting beyond self-reporting, to reveal what children *actually do online,* so we included some light-touch social media, schoolwork and activity tracking to understand and observe real-life behaviours[2].

Interviews[3] were conducted over six weeks from May to July 2020, so the children had been in lockdown for between 12 and 18 weeks and most were not attending school or leaving their homes to socialise. During these interviews, we saw the gradual 'easing up' of the lockdown restrictions, with slight differences in timings and guidance between England, Scotland and Wales.[4]

Zak's arts and crafts | **Sarah's college work** | **Jack's bike parts for sale on Instagram** | **Shaniqua's baking**

What did the research find?

It is clear that during lockdown children have been spending more time than ever before on their screens. Restrictions on normal life have left a space which they are filling with social media, gaming and watching content.

This research has found that during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020:

- most children in the study were lacking structure and tended to fill their time with online activities;
- TikTok was hugely popular, rivalling other media activities;

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[2] The research materials used in this project can be found in Annex 2 and Annex 3.

[3] Due to the constraints of social distancing, we used remote methods to interview children via calls on an online video platform.

[4] England saw the reopening of non-essential shops on 15th June 2020 (with pubs and restaurants following on 4th July 2020). England also saw the easing of the guidance around meeting with members of another household and the introduction of the 'bubble system' (whereby single adults living alone or single parents whose children are under 18 were able to spend the night in another household without the need for social distancing), with variations of these measures being implemented in Scotland and Wales shortly afterwards.

- socialisation had moved online, but was often done in conjunction with other activities such as gaming, and while multi-screening;
- body-conscious exercise content was popular among the teenage girls; and
- after an initial surge in interest, children had disengaged with the news about Covid-19.

Summary of key findings

Most children in the study were lacking structure and tended to fill their time with online activities

- Children learning remotely were not doing as much schoolwork as they would in regular term-time.
- This meant that most of the children were lacking structure and routine, and were instead spending a large amount of time online, and alone in their rooms (although some developed more of a structured routine) including getting up earlier and exercising, as lockdown went on.

TikTok was hugely popular, rivalling other media activities

- Most were using the TikTok app for several hours each day and reported that it was a good way to 'kill time'.
- A majority were posting their own content on TikTok, and in some cases children were copycatting content they had seen posted by others on the platform.

Socialisation had moved online, but was often done in conjunction with other activities

- Although face-to-face socialisation was limited during lockdown, children had developed new routines and behaviours around socialising online, including regular check-ins on certain apps.
- Many were using gaming as a way to catch-up with friends, and most were regularly 'multi-screening'. either while gaming or using social media.
- Some cited examples of people coming under pressure on social media because they had broken the 'rules' around lockdown.

Body-conscious exercise content was popular among the teenage girls

- Some of the teenage girls reported consuming body-conscious exercise content online.
- In some cases, the girls talked openly about feeling insecure about their own bodies and were feeling pressure from seeing others exercise on social media.

After an initial surge in interest, the children had disengaged with the news about Covid-19

- Some had followed the news at the start of lockdown and during the development of the pandemic.
- However, most had disengaged over time, some due to feeling anxious and others due to lack of interest.
- After disengaging with news content, some continued to receive news passively via their social media networks.
- There were a couple examples of children distrusting the news around Covid-19.

What were children doing during lockdown?

Most children in the study were lacking structure and tended to fill their time with online activities

Summary:

- Children learning remotely were not doing as much schoolwork as they would in regular term-time.
- Many were also missing extra-curricular activities and the 'rites of passage' that they would otherwise be experiencing.
- This meant that most of the children were lacking structure and routine, and were instead spending a large amount of time online, and alone in their rooms.
- Parents talked about relaxing some of their normal rules around routines and online activities, given this was 'a hard time' for their children.
- Some children had modified their habits over time, and started to build up more of a structured routine, including getting up earlier and exercising, as lockdown went on.

Children learning remotely were not doing as much schoolwork as they would in regular term-time

Most of the children were learning remotely through completing activities set by their school online. However, the majority of these were not completing full school days. Of the sample, only Alice, Ben and Zak (15, 12, 10, respectively) were being given full days of tuition: Alice and Ben were given a full timetable of lessons via MS Teams and additional assignments, and Zak was attending school for the full day because his mum was a keyworker at the school and so took him with her.

Of the remaining 11 children in the sample, most were completing around one to two hours of schoolwork a day. This was often set in the form of short quizzes or 'gamified' activities. Generally, these were sent to children via email or digital learning platforms like 'Show my homework' (now called Satchel one)[5].

For example, Arjun, 9, had been set gamified exercises from school on learning websites and apps such as MyMaths, Sumdog, Spelling Shed and Times Tables Rockstars. These were sent to him in weekly emails on a Friday. They were held to be optional by the school, but his parents insisted he do them anyway. He enjoyed the exercises - which he completed on his iPad - to the extent that he did more than he was asked. He was initially set ten games to complete in a month but had completed 140.

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[5] https://www.satchelone.com/login
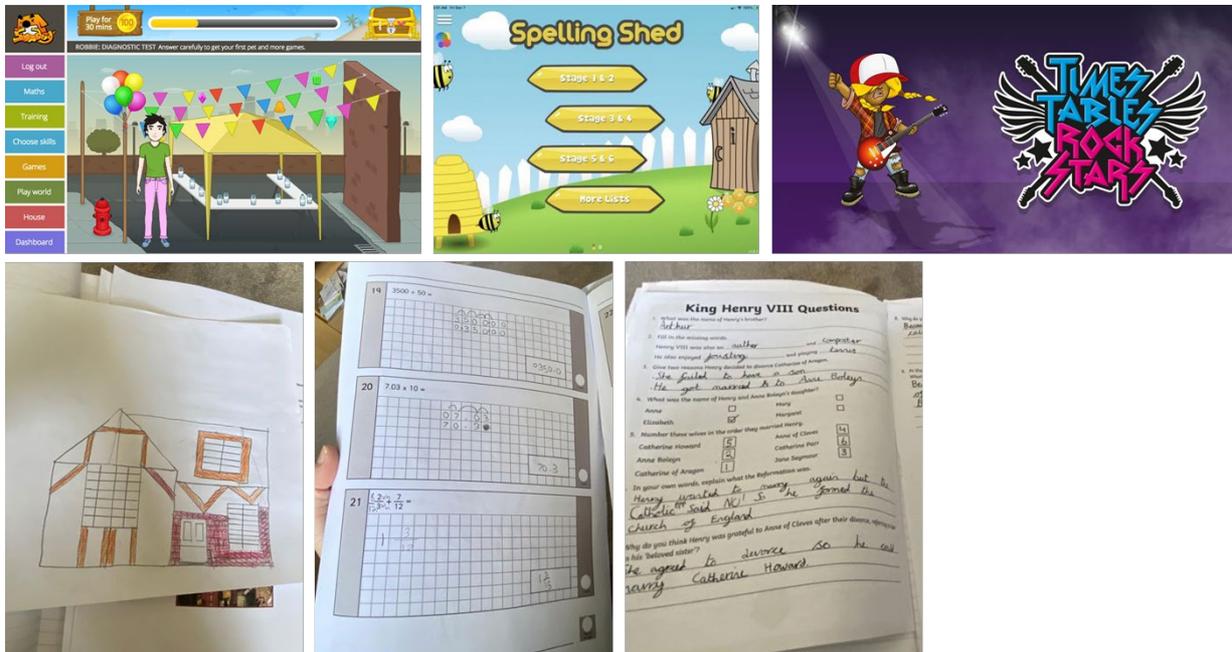
"On Spelling Shed, I smashed it by a lot"

Arjun, 9

Arjun's parents were concerned at the lack of support he was getting; in particular that he was not receiving video tuition or feedback, and had complained to the school.

Many of the children in this study reported low levels of support and infrequent or no check-ins when completing schoolwork. This meant that both the children and the parents struggled to keep up with the child's education. For example, 15-year-old Jack's support worker at school was sending him some links to activities on the free online study site BBC Bitesize – but he was not completing these, and said there was no follow-up. Similarly, Ahmed, 14, said he was sent a couple of 'tasks' a day from school in the form of worksheets. He was unclear as to whether anyone was checking or marking these. He reported working on these until he got bored, which was generally quickly, as he has ADHD and so struggles to concentrate.

Some parents struggled to support their children with remote learning alongside working from home, and this was exacerbated by the format in which schoolwork was set. 12-year-old Ben's mum was concerned that he was sent work primarily in the form of PowerPoint presentations that she said looked more like lesson plans to be used by teachers. She reported that it was difficult for Ben to understand what was asked of him in these activities, and hard for her to help him to decode them alongside her full-time job.

Nine-year-old Suzy's mum faced similar challenges in supporting her daughter with online learning: while the school set activities via their blog, she found it difficult to help Suzy with her work owing to time pressures from her own job. She also said that she felt insecure when she received communications from Suzy's school sharing good work done by other students, as she felt she couldn't help her daughter to do the same:

"Thinking 'my child's done nothing'… it makes you feel inadequate."

Suzy's (9) mum

Four children in the sample were due to complete their GCSEs this year, and as a result of Covid-19 they knew they would receive grades based on their predicted marks. At first, these children (Jack, Shaniqua, Jose and Shriya, aged 15) were given schoolwork to complete, but they reported that this gradually stopped, and at the time of their interviews, they were not being asked to complete any schoolwork. Shaniqua, Josie and Jack were somewhat relieved about this – they were not looking forward to completing their exams. In particular, Josie felt she would get higher marks based on her coursework, as she struggled with her dyslexia during exams. However, Shriya was disappointed. She had worked hard this year to boost her grades and felt that her final mark, if based on grades predicted earlier on in the year, would not reflect this. She was also disappointed never to have sat a formal exam, as both she and her mother considered this important.

Many were also missing the extra-curricular activities and 'rites of passage' they would otherwise be experiencing

Across all ages, the children in the sample talked about missing a variety of extra-curricular activities they would normally be engaged with at this time of year. For example, Alice, 15, was missing the netball and athletics training she normally did in the summer; Ben, 12, had been looking forward to joining the school basketball team; and Josie,15, had been going to help in a school production of 'Les Misérables'. She knew that after leaving school, she might not be able to pursue drama in the same way:

"It's quite sad I'll never get to do that [help in a school play] again"

Josie, 15

In particular, those in Year 11 talked about missing some of the rites of passage they might otherwise have experienced in their final year of school. For example, Shaniqua and Shriya (both 15) had been looking forward to their school prom and knew some girls in their year who had already bought their dresses for the event:

"I feel quite sad about missing prom because that's like a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

Shaniqua, 15

Shriya was also concerned with missing other end-of-year activities, such as the leaver's assembly hosted at her school. She had been 'rushed off' the school premises at the start of the lockdown, after their family had a scare that her brother was showing symptoms of Covid-19. As a result, she had to leave school suddenly without saying goodbye to many of her peers, which she found surreal:

"I had no closure"

Shriya, 15

This meant that most of the children in the study were lacking structure and routine, and were instead spending a large amount of time online, and alone in their rooms

The fact that the children were not taking part in normal schooling or the usual extra-curricular routines meant that the majority had very little structure to their days and had large expanses of free time to fill. Most in the sample talked about staying up late, sleeping in for a long time and spending many hours on their devices. In some cases, this had been especially marked at the start of the lockdown. For example, Josie, 15, said that at the start of lockdown her routine had been 'thrown off' because she was finding it difficult to sleep. She would find herself staying up late into the night – sometimes until 3am – scrolling through YouTube. She especially liked watching the YouTuber 'TomSka Ridgewell' - an online personality Josie has followed for a while and whom she met at a Comicon last year. She also browsed things like film reviews on YouTube to help her get to sleep.

These late nights meant she woke up late the next day – typically around midday. She said that after getting something to eat, she would spend the rest of the day in bed, 'watching TV' (by which she meant content on Netflix, YouTube, TikTok and her Amazon Firestick) until about 5pm, when her mum finished work and the two of them would go for a walk. On Netflix she especially liked watching the reality competition series Ru Pauls' Drag Race, and the horror series American Horror Story – two shows she had also been enjoying in previous waves of this study.

Looking at viewing habits, some of the children reported consuming old favourites as opposed to watching anything new. For example, Josie said she preferred going back to watch older videos she had seen before, rather than the latest vlogs:

> *"'I'm happy with the old content people make. The newer stuff I'm just not into so much"*

Josie, 15

She also said she was not particularly interested in following any new YouTubers:

> *"I'm not really following any online personalities. I just live in the past."*

Josie, 15

Alice, 15, also talked about 'binge-watching' content on Netflix, which she said was a new habit she had developed in lockdown, and added that she was choosing to re-watch series she had already seen – prompted by the release of a new season. She had recently watched three seasons of the teenage drama series *13 Reasons Why* in four days – and calculated that this would have been 39 hours of viewing. Alice also said she had become 'obsessed' with the Netflix thriller series *You* and had watched four seasons of that, as well as the teen drama series *The Next Step*. She knew this show was aimed at younger children but enjoyed the fact it was about dance, which was something she used to do when she was younger.

Jack and William (15 and 16 respectively) were both spending a large amount of time online, primarily alone in their rooms. Jack had unfortunately broken his leg shortly before lockdown, so was unable to go out cycling as he would normally. Instead, he was spending long hours in his room gaming – and was in the middle of a nine-hour relay race on the racing game Forza at the time of the interview.

He was playing to such an extent that his grandmother offered him £500 as an incentive to leave his room for mealtimes. His mother reported that he didn't do this, so he didn't get the money. She was initially worried

about how long he was spending gaming but relaxed after talking to other parents and realising their children were behaving similarly. She insisted he leave the house once every three days as a compromise.

William was also spending a lot of time upstairs in his room gaming and on his phone. He claimed he had spent about 20 hours online in a single 24-hour period shortly before the interview, stopping only for four hours when he "fell asleep while on FaceTime". He said he was mainly watching YouTube during lockdown but estimated that in this same 24-hour period he had also spent about seven hours on TikTok:

"They [my family] watch TV together downstairs, but I'm in my room a lot of the time. That's where the Xbox is, that's where I'm going to speak to people"

William, 16

He also reported some of the binge-watching habits shared by other children in the sample and said he was re-watching the Netflix drama series *Orange is the New Black* for the fourth time:

"Series don't last long when I start watching them… they just instantly get watched"

William, 16

Sarah, 16, estimated that she spent two to three hours a day on FaceTime to various people – mainly three close friends, her sister and her grandparents. Her mum said they recently compared their phone usage statistics and were 'horrified' – she had spent about 40 hours that week on her phone, and Sarah over 50. They've since been trying to be more mindful of their phone use.

Parents talked about relaxing some of their normal rules around routines and online activities, given this was a 'hard time' for their children

For example, 12-year-old Ben's mum explained feeling as if she had to 'pick her battles' when monitoring and maintaining Ben's routine. She said that as a single parent, she was struggling to help him with schoolwork and finding it difficult to get him to bed at a reasonable time.

"If my child does their five pieces of schoolwork each day, then do you know what? If they stay up a bit late and eat a bit of crap, and they watch a bit of TV and they do a bit more gaming, then we're not going to kill ourselves."

Ben's (12) mum

15-year-old Shriya's mum was worried she would affect her daughter's wellbeing negatively if she imposed too many rules, as she knew her children were not maintaining the social contact they would usually have with their friends.

"I am giving them more space because I don't know how else to deal with it without her feeling agitated or upset."

Shriya's (15) mum

Similarly, 15-year-old Josie's mum, who has historically been quite strict about her daughter's time online and on social media, reported feeling as if there was no real reason to push her daughter to get up early or adhere to strict routines:

"If she didn't come down at 12pm or 1pm, I was just like 'whatever.' She's got nothing to get up for at the moment…"

Josie's (15) mum

Some children had modified their habits over time, and started to build up more of a structured routine, including getting up earlier and exercising, as lockdown went on

A few weeks into lockdown, a number of the children had modified their routine to include some more usual and perhaps healthier behaviours, such as getting up earlier and exercising. For instance, Josie, 15, said she had changed her routine after going to stay with her dad for a few weeks. The fact that there were more people to interact with there, and a different environment, had helped her to start getting up earlier and going to bed at a reasonable time:

"The change of scenery [at my dad's] helped"

Josie, 15

Similarly, Shriya and Shaniqua (15) both reported getting up earlier and doing things to feel more energised during the day, such as exercising.

"Recently I've been getting up earlier and exercising more."

Shriya, 15

"At the beginning of lockdown, I'd get up at 12 or 1pm… Now it's more like 9am."

Shaniqua, 15

Which social media platforms were most popular?

TikTok was hugely popular, rivalling other media activities

Summary

- Most were using the TikTok app for several hours each day and reported that it was a good way to 'kill time'.
- A majority were posting their own content on TikTok.
- In some cases, children were copycatting content they had seen posted by others on the platform.

Most were using the TikTok app for several hours each day and reported that it was a good way to 'kill time'

TikTok is a video-sharing platform which hosts a stream of short-form videos (around 15 seconds long), made and shared by users of the platform[6]. The platform has been growng in popularity over the last two years, but in this study it was notable just how widely adopted it had become by the children – both boys and girls – the majority of whom used it for several hours each day.

Of the sample of 14, only two children were not using TikTok – Peter and Arjun (14 and 9 respectively). The other children had started to scroll through TikTok regularly and said they often spent a long time doing so. For example, William, 16, (who had an account on TikTok but claimed not to post any of his own videos) said he could spend hours on the app:

> *"You go on it for five minutes, and then you end scrolling for two hours. It's just addicting [sic] – once you get scrolling you just keep on doing it – I don't know what it is about it"*

> *William, 16*

Similarly, Alice, 15, described TikTok as a 'bit of an addiction' and Ben, 12, estimated he watched about three hours a day on TikTok. Ahmed, 13, who had downloaded the app recently, after seeing it 'pop up' in the app store, said he liked it because it 'killed time'.

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[6] Further details about TikTok can be found in Annex 4.

Shaniqua, 15, who watched TikTok without posting any of her own videos, struggled to describe what it was she liked about the videos, but suggested it was something entertaining she could find to do during lockdown:

> *"It's just entertaining. There's nothing really to do so you have to find something to entertain you"*
>
> *Shaniqua, 15*

She said she especially liked watching TikTok videos containing 'facts', in which 'posters' used their videos to share trivia or stories, sometimes posting content with the hashtag #facts.

A majority were posting their own content on TikTok

Of the 12 children who used TikTok, eight were also making and sharing their own videos. In most cases, these were videos of dances or lip-syncing popular on the app. Alice, 15, said she liked posting videos on TikTok for 'jokes' and because 'it takes up time.' She indicated that it could take at least 30 minutes to learn a dance, after which 'you have to film it to get it right'. She didn't choose to post every video she made, instead keeping some in her private 'drafts' folder. She reflected that she felt it was a 'weird concept' to dance alone in front of a camera, but that 'it's fun to me.'

Ben, 12, had been sharing videos in a slightly different format on TikTok. He revealed that he had three TikTok accounts: a private one for friends; a public one; and one about basketball (also public). Previously, he had shared some videos of himself dancing on his personal account but had lately deleted these and replaced them with videos about basketball, and a video of his dog.

On his basketball account he posted videos predicting what awards he thought different basketball players would win during the year. This account had 80 followers at the time of the interview, and he was very proud to report that some of the videos posted there had had around 1000 views.
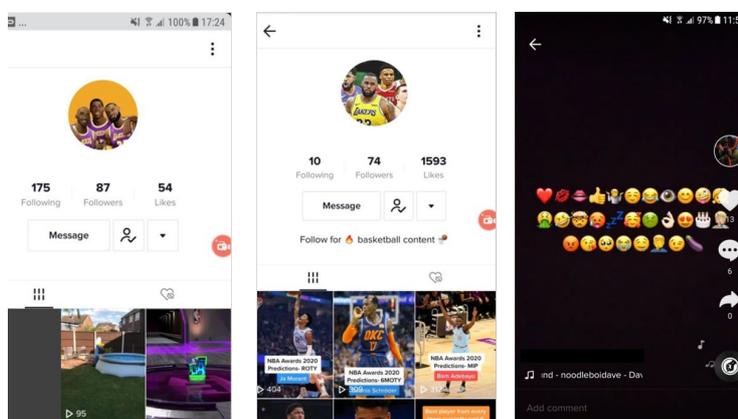
In some cases, children were copycatting content they had seen posted by others on the platform

At the younger end of the group, Suzy, 9, was also filming TikTok videos – primarily recreating some of the dances she had seen others doing on the platform. Her mum encouraged her to keep her account set to private, although she said that Suzy occasionally switched it to public without telling her. During the interview, Suzy explained that there were some 'really famous' people on TikTok who could make 'a lot of money' – an idea which appealed to her.

Both younger girls, Bryony, 12, and Suzy, 9, talked about the 'really famous' TikTokkers: Addison Rae (49.6 million followers) and Charli D'Amelio (referred to by Bryony as the 'dancing TikTok queen', with 69.8 million followers). Both these personalities were posting primarily dance content online for other users to copy.

Bryony said she likes using the app to 'occupy herself'. She added that when she scrolls through TikTok she sees dances she wants to try, and although she sometimes worries that her own videos won't be as good, she often has a go at creating them. She also said that sometimes posting videos enabled her to 'chat' to her friends via the comments they leave under her videos.

In previous waves, Bryony had used a free app, 'Zoomerang', which is designed to help users edit short-form video content that they can then post on TikTok or Instagram. However, she said this app is not as popular this year, so she had stopped using it.

Zak, 10, had also shared dances on his TikTok account, and used the 'Duet' function, which allowed him to post his own video side-by-side with the original, posted by Addison Rae.

Charlie D'Amelio, 69.8M followers
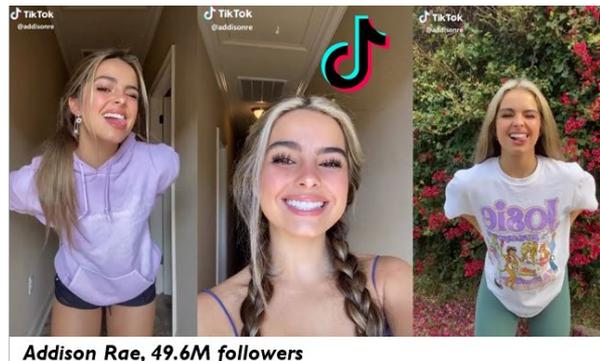
Addison Rae, 49.6M followers

How were children socialising?

Socialisation had moved online, but was often done in conjunction with other activities such as gaming, and while multi-screening

Summary

- As face-to-face socialisation was limited during lockdown, children had developed new routines and behaviours around socialising online, including regular check-ins on certain apps.
- Some were using gaming as a way to catch up with friends.
- Most were regularly 'multi-screening', either while gaming or when using social media.
- Some cited examples of people coming under pressure on social media because they had broken the 'rules' around lockdown.
- We saw a continuation of some trends spotted in previous waves around the curation of profile images, attention-seeking behaviours and use of mirror shots.
- As in previous waves, some children in the study had an understanding that online attention could be monetised or used to develop careers.

As face-to-face socialisation was limited during lockdown, children had developed new routines and behaviours around socialising online, including regular check-ins on certain apps

During life before lockdown, Shriya, 15, would ordinarily have sleepovers with friends and cousins. As she was no longer able to do this, she had picked up some online substitutes: her group of friends had started having 'Netflix parties' in which they could stream content together remotely. The platform included a chat function, but Shriya and her friends tended to use FaceTime alongside this instead.

Similarly, Josie, 15, who had recently started going out to local restaurants with a group of friends, said they were keen to stay in touch with one another, so they had deliberately set up regular group calls to 'check in on each other'. She was using the video platform Zoom to check in with her school friends each Wednesday, and was using the video platform Skype to video-call her boyfriend every day. Alongside and in between these calls, the groups chatted on Snapchat and via the messaging app Discord[7].

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[7] Discord is a platform known for being popular with gamers, and often used alongside gaming: https://discord.com/new

Some of the children reported that social media was 'boring' at the moment, as none of their friends were getting up to anything interesting:

> *"People's Snapchat stories are boring as no one is doing anything interesting – I haven't posted on stories in a while..."*

Alice, 15

> *"Life is a bit boring at the moment – no one is putting anything interesting on Snapchat."*

Jack, 15

Some were using gaming as a way to catch up with friends

Gaming was a way for some of the children to stay in touch with friends - and we saw a range of behaviours around this. For example, Jack, 15, who estimated he was gaming for around eight to nine hours each day, said that gaming was his main form of communication with friends. He had switched his primary console from a PS4 to an Xbox because all of his friends were using Xbox. It was on this gaming device that he started playing the racing game Forza.

Jack's mum was initially very worried about the amount of time he spent online, but after talking to his friends' parents, she learned that they were all spending a similar amount of time gaming, which reassured her, and she decided to let him continue.

12-year-old Ben's main form of contact with his friends was also via his Xbox, and he said this meant that he had stopped speaking to those who did not have an Xbox. He estimated he spent around three to four hours a day gaming – more than he normally would pre-lockdown. His favourite game was NBA 2K20, a basketball game. However, not all his friends played this game, so he also played games like FIFA and Fortnite to keep in contact with them. He said he was no longer really a fan of Fortnite and played it primarily so he could talk to his friends.

Girls too were playing games to keep up to date with their friends. Josie, 15, had recently picked up Forza and the first-person shooter game 'Counter Strike' (CS). She said she liked talking to her friends on Discord while playing CS, and that she hoped to get better at the game in the coming weeks so she could play with them more often.

Alice, 15, had also started plying Fortnite with a girl she knew from drama classes, whom she referred to as her 'gamer friend'. She said they tended to play on her phone on occasional weekday evenings on 'duos' mode (which enables two players to compete against one another), while simultaneously FaceTiming on her iPad. She argued they had become better friends as a result:

> *"It [playing Fortnite with a friend] has made us closer."*

Alice, 15

Like Alice, most were regularly 'multi-screening' while talking to others, gaming or using social media

There was a trend towards using multiple devices simultaneously, so they could chat to friends while gaming, or scrolling through social media. For example, Josie, 15, who every evening used her laptop to chat to her boyfriend via Skype, said she would typically be scrolling through her phone at the same time, looking at Instagram, Discord or TikTok. She was also likely to use her phone to keep up with the chat on Discord while she played games on her Xbox with friends.

Similarly, Peter, 14, was spending a few hours each night playing FIFA with friends on his Xbox. He said he would FaceTime them simultaneously, using his phone to chat to them. He acknowledged it was nice to have something to do 'in the background' and didn't think they would otherwise chat 'face to face'. He also FaceTimed his girlfriend most evenings, and said he tended to play FIFA whilst he chatted to her too, although he explained that she would also be doing other things on her own device, like scrolling through social media, while they chatted.

Some cited examples of people coming under pressure on social media because they had broken the 'rules' around lockdown

The children had different ideas about what the lockdown 'rules' were, and had seen different levels of compliance with these among their peers. At one end of the spectrum, Sarah, Shriya and Alice (16 and 15 respectively) were very cautious about following the rules and advice around social distancing. Sarah and Shriya were particularly concerned with germs getting into their houses, with Shriya encouraging her family to sanitise the post and Sarah applying hand-sanitiser to her face when she went out to the supermarket. However, some of the children were more casual: Ahmed, 14, was going out and about to local parks in Birmingham with his cousins and brothers and did not appear to be able to fully articulate the restrictions in place around lockdown:

> *"There's not much of a lockdown in Birmingham"*
>
> *Ahmed, 14*

Some of these differences were reflected on social media, and some of the children in the study reported seeing their peers coming under pressure for breaking the rules. For example, Shaniqua said she had seen some of the boys at her school post videos on their Snapchat stories about themselves in which they were not socially distancing. As a result, she felt that lockdown wasn't going to work:

> *"Some boys at my school, they go out all the time, they never follow the rules."*
>
> *Shaniqua, 15*

William, 16, echoed this; he said he had seen others post comments on Snapchat reprimanding those who were not following the rules:

"I've seen people breaking it [lockdown] all the time over Snapchat… There's a lot of passive aggressive things on other people's stories – 'why are people still going out', 'they're just being stupid' and stuff like that."

William, 16

Sarah, 16, was also very concerned by seeing people breaking the rules on social media. She had seen some people calling each other out and giving each other 'hate' for breaking rules online, which she thought was a good thing as she wanted people to obey the rules.

We saw a continuation of some trends spotted in previous waves around the curation of profile images, attention-seeking behaviours and the use of mirror shots

In previous years, we have seen a trend towards children curating their online profiles carefully, often posting only one or two images of themselves that they believe show them in a positive way. This wave, we saw similar behaviours. Sarah, 16, had only one image posted on her Instagram, which featured her in make-up and with her hair dyed. Alice, 15, also shared only a few images of herself, dressed up on a holiday. These photos had received 206 likes and many comments, the majority of which were from other teenage girls telling her she looked good. Example of comments left on her profile included 'prettiest', 'peng' and 'ur stunning bro'.

In recent years we have also seen an increase in the posting of 'mirror pictures', in which children take a self-portrait in a mirror, obscuring their face using the flash or phone. In this wave, almost all of the images posted on 15-year-old Jack's profile were mirror pictures, as was Sarah's profile picture on Instagram.

Another of the behaviours that emerged last year (2019) was around seeking or valuing attention online. And again, we saw a continuation of this during lockdown. For example, Ben, 12, posted a 'thank you' message on his Instagram account when he reached 50 followers, with the comment '100 next?' He later posted 'Thanks for 100 followers.' when he reached 100. It is likely that this is a behaviour he has seen and emulated from other users on the platform, including celebrities.

An interesting counterpoint to this was offered by Shriya, 15. Last year, she was one of the few children in the study not to use Instagram, as she was deeply concerned about online privacy and worried about content and imagery of herself being 'out there' in the world. But in this wave, she said that she had downloaded Instagram at the beginning of lockdown, partly because she was bored. She said it 'didn't live up to the hype', but she used it to keep up to date with celebrities, music and fashion.

She was still very private online, however, and ensured that her account did not contain any personal details: she used a fake name, a fake image (rather than a picture of herself) and provided no additional details about herself online. Even so, she found that there were still people she did not know following the account, which she thought was a bit strange.

This research took place at the time of the death of George Floyd and the subsequent riots in America relating to the Black Lives Matter movement. Three of the children had posted black squares on their Instagram in support of the movement – Ben, Jack and Sarah. These children talked about how this was in order to show support with the movement. None of them reported feeling 'under pressure' to post these from other users or their friends. They had each received 30-38 likes for their posts.

As in previous waves, some of the children in the study had an understanding that online attention could be monetised or used to develop careers

We have seen in previous waves an awareness that gaining attention or a following online can be turned into wealth or used for career development. In this wave, we saw similar awareness and some initial steps towards trying to achieve this from Bryony,12 and Sarah,16.

Bryony, who has been competing in horse-riding competitions for the Welsh team for a few years, was told by her coach she might have the potential to compete in the FEI international dressage competition. She was very driven to accomplish this, explaining that it would be a 'massive achievement'. However, she knew that in order to qualify she would have to take part in further competitions, including internationally. She also knew that her hobby was expensive. Living with her mum and her grandparents on their farm, she considers herself to be from a 'single-parent family' and understands that it would be difficult for her mum to pay for the training and kit she would need to continue to compete. As a result, she had started looking into getting sponsorship for her riding and was using social media to support this.

She used Facebook and Instagram to look up companies that might be able to sponsor her by taking her on as a 'brand ambassador'. She had approached two companies – a riding kit company 'Vivendi Apparel' and a horse food company. To each she submitted a portfolio, including a written paragraph about her life, a list of her horse-riding achievements and photos of her riding at different events. She had yet to hear back at the time of the interview, but was hoping to find support in this way.

> *"I've been looking into sponsorship so I can compete in the FEI"*
>
> *Bryony, 12*

Similarly, Sarah had been encouraged by her college to set up an online profile specifically to market her hair and beauty work. She called this account 'Hairby [Sarah]' and had posted a few images of hairstyling she had completed. However, she had stopped updating this during lockdown, as the practical activities she was given, and could use her profile to illustrate, were no longer viable.

What were the new habits reported by teenage girls?

Body-conscious exercise content was popular among the teenage girls

Summary

- Some girls reported exercising for the first time under lockdown, and that it had helped them feel healthier and boosted their mood.
- Some of the teenage girls reported consuming body-conscious exercise content.
- In some cases, the girls talked openly about feeling insecure about their own body, and feeling pressure from seeing others exercise on social media.

Some girls reported exercising for the first time under lockdown, and that it had helped them feel healthier and boosted their mood

Shriya, Shaniqua and Josie (15) all reported that exercising was something they'd done for the first time during lockdown. All three talked about the fact that this helped them to feel better, both in mind and body:

"I felt way healthier, mentally and physically."

Shriya, 15

"I feel more energetic."

Shaniqua, 15

Alice, who was already keen on exercise before lockdown, had incorporated some new activities into her fitness routine, and was trying to do some skipping and 20 minutes of HIIT[8] a day, which she did via an app on her phone.

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[8] High-intensity interval training (HIIT) is a type of interval training, a form of cardiovascular exercise, that alternates short periods of intense exercise with less intense recovery periods.

Some of the teenage girls reported consuming body-conscious exercise content

Some of the teenage girls in the study were exercising via online videos on YouTube. A particularly popular online fitness instructor was 'Chloe Ting' a Bruneian fitness vlogger with 12.3 million subscribers on YouTube. Of the sample, Alice, Shriya and Shaniqua had all tried doing videos from Chloe Ting, and Shaniqua was still tuning into the videos during fieldwork. The content posted on the channel is primarily about body image, with recent videos focusing on working out, weight loss and diet. Some examples of recent titles include: 'Get Abs in 2 weeks' and 'Most inspiring before-after results'. Chloe Ting also posts videos in which she reacts with positive affirmation to people losing or gaining weight as a result of taking part in her challenges.

Shaniqua became aware of Chloe Ting after seeing other girls post content about her on their TikTok feed. At the time of the interview, she was in the middle of a 'Two week shred challenge', and she said that, in all likelihood, she would go on to complete another when she had worked her way through this set of videos.

Reflecting on how the training was going. Shaniqua said:

"I can see a difference, so I know it is working."

Shaniqua, 15

Alice, however, was not a fan of Chloe Ting. She had tried the videos previously, having heard of them before lockdown, and stopped because she felt that Chloe Ting looked too 'flawless' when she exercised. Alice instead preferred the online instructor 'MadFit'.

MadFit, a fitness YouTuber with 4.3 million subscribers, was posting content with a similar (but, according to Alice less focused) emphasis on body shape. Some of her recent videos were entitled: 'Toned thighs' and '10 min booty', although she also has several videos without this emphasis, such as '5 min cool-down' or 'Relieve stress'. Alice said she preferred MadFit's videos, as she liked the trainer and preferred the specific fitness activities she posted.

AMAZING Before After Results from Chloe Ting... — 18:21

Tiny Waist & Round Butt Workout | At Home Hourgla... — 16:28

I tried Face Exercises for 30 days to get a slim face |... — 7:57

Easy Meal Prep Ideas to Lose Weight & Get a Flat Belly — 7:52
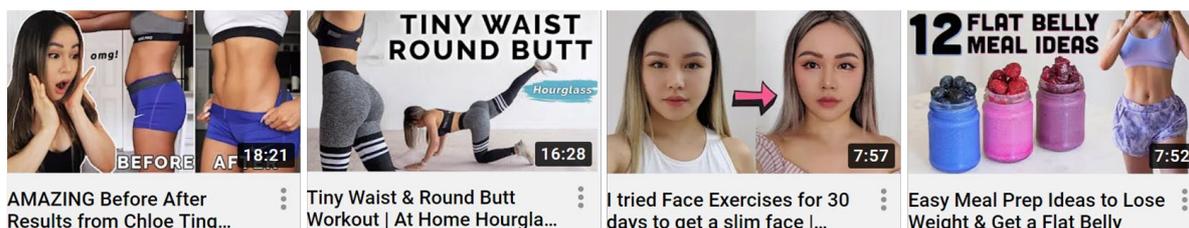
YouTube channel for Chloe Ting, 13.1M subscribers

5 MIN FULL BODY STRETCH & COOL DOWN — 7:21

15 min Full Body STRETCH/YOGA for STRES... — 18:25

10 min RESISTANCE BAND BOOTY At Home Workout... — 12:25

Love Handle Workout (10 MIN OBLIQUE BURN) Abs... — 13:13
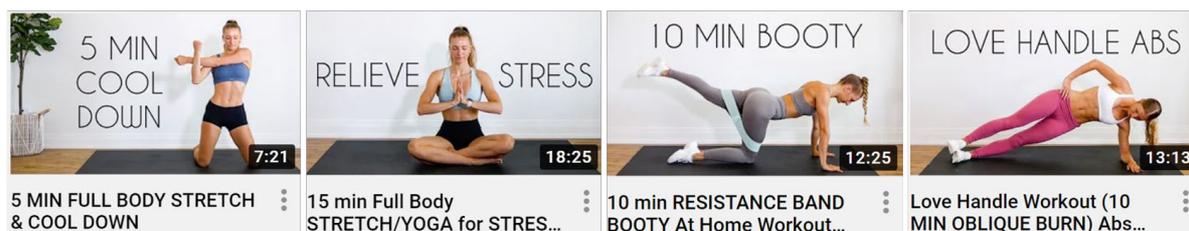
YouTube channel for MadFit, 4.3M subscribers

In some cases, these girls talked openly about feeling insecure about their own bodies, and feeling pressure from seeing others exercise on social media

Both Josie and Shaniqua talked about seeing 'results' after exercising – Shaniqua saw this as a sign that Chloe Ting's videos were working. Josie, who was following some exercise videos from a climbing fitness instructor that her boyfriend followed, said that she had recently started picking up some daily activities. She had not yet seen results, but she hoped to:

"I know in time it will probably be better, show more results, so we'll get there"

Josie, 15

Josie and Alice were both open about the fact that they had some insecurities about their body. For example, when asked why she chose to start exercising, Jose said:

"I hate my body most of the time, so I thought, may as well give it a go"

Josie, 15[9]

Similarly, Alice reported feeling insecure about the content that her peers posted on their social media. She said that one of the worst things about lockdown was seeing how other people were using the time to get healthy and lose weight. She said, 'I know I should feel happy for them, but it makes me feel a bit self-conscious'. She seemed to feel some tensions around fitness and dieting too, and noted:

"Everyone said 'I'm gonna be so healthy', but [during lockdown] it's impossible not to snack."

Alice, 15

Alice was also seeing a lot of content about weight loss coming up on TikTok and on her 'For You' feed on Instagram. She said she tried not to over-focus on these recommended videos, but that sometimes she ended up looking at them. Whilst she did not go into detail during the interview, it is possible she was feeling some pressures around food and diet too, in relation to some of this content.

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[9] In line with Revealing Reality's ethics and safeguarding policy, researchers are careful to ensure that respondents know they are not able to give professional advice or health or mental health assessments, although information sheets signposting to further support from relevant professional bodies are provided at the end of each interview. The ethics and safeguarding policy requires researchers to intervene in the case of immediate or ongoing risky behaviours witnessed during interviews. No action is required for one-off, historic risky behaviours, although any signs of ongoing risky behaviour will be reported to parents for children under the age of 16. The full ethics and safeguarding policy can be found in Annex 5.

How were children engaging with the news?

After an initial surge in interest, the children had disengaged with the news about Covid-19

Summary:

- Some had followed news around the start of lockdown and the development of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- However, most had disengaged over time, some due to feeling anxious and others due to lack of interest.
- After disengaging with news content, some continued to receive news only via their social media networks.
- There were a couple examples of children distrusting the news about Covid-19.

Some had followed the news at the start of lockdown and during the development of the Covid-19 pandemic

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, some of the children in the study had been watching live news broadcasts with their families to keep up with the developments. For example, Josie, 15, said she caught some of the daily 5pm briefings on BBC News with her mum, after which she and her mum would go for a walk together so they could discuss it.

Ben, 12, had started to engage with the news more as a result of the pandemic, and was better informed than many of the children in this sample. At the time of the interview, he was aware of the key facts around Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, citing the death of George Floyd, although he couldn't give precise details as to how he had died. He had overheard a lot of the news content on BBC Radio 2, from which his mum received her news. As a result, he knew about the rationale behind lockdown and some of the changes in the restrictions:

> *"I never used to listen to the news but now you need to keep updated with all the rules of the virus because sometimes Boris Johnson changes them, and then with everything going on - the protests... It is better to know what is going on"*

Ben, 12

He admitted that he didn't always understand what he heard, but regularly asked his mum to explain in more detail:

> *"A lot of the time I don't understand it because it is for adults, so I just ask if I don't understand something and [my mum tells me]"*

<div align="right">

Ben, 12

</div>

His mum was happy he was showing an interest and felt that things like the BLM movement were good to talk through together.

However, most of the children had disengaged with the news over time, some due to feeling anxious and others due to lack of interest

Some of the children were quite anxious, in particular at the beginning of the pandemic. For example, 15-year-old Shriya's mum explained that Shriya had been extremely nervous about going out and had started trying to disinfect the post to ensure the virus didn't get into their home. Sarah, 16, was also very nervous about germs and had started applying hand sanitiser to her face when she went to the shops.

Some of this nervousness affected the children's willingness to engage with the news. For example, Shriya talked about how it began to feel 'overwhelming', and Alice, 15, mentioned that she had turned off the news notifications on her Apple News app after the death toll rose to 700 per day, because she found it 'depressing' to be reminded of it so often. She had, however, overheard some recent news stories when her mum watched the news, and knew that there had been some developments in finding a suspect in the Madeleine McCann case:

> *"You hear it [the news] in the background"*

<div align="right">

Alice, 15

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15-year old Jack's mum explained that he, too, had been quite worried about the news in the early days of the lockdown. He had read a lot of stories on Facebook which had made him extremely nervous about his mum (an admin worker in a healthcare environment) going into work. She had encouraged him to disengage, and pay less attention, and reflected that this had perhaps gone too far the other way, because she suspected that as a result of disengaging with the news, he "thinks it's all quite fake now".

Jack himself appeared to be unclear on the details around the lockdown:

> *"I just know that there is a virus going around, there is no real reason [for the lockdown], we haven't been told"*

<div align="right">

Jack, 15

</div>

Similarly, Suzy, 9, said that her mum had stopped watching the news because it was 'too depressing', and her mum said that this was something a lot of her friends had done too.

On a slightly different note, Josie, 15, claimed to have disengaged with the news over time due to lack of interest, as she didn't really find it interesting to keep up to date with the latest developments:

"I don't really keep up with the coronavirus news. This is going to sound rude, but I just don't really care."

Josie, 15

After disengaging with news content, some continued to receive news passively via their social media networks

As we have seen in previous waves, most of the children in the study claimed that they wouldn't ordinarily pay a great deal of attention to the news. For example, Bryony, 12, said she would never choose to watch it, but might catch a bit if it was played on live television in her grandma's room:

"I've never been into the news"

Bryony, 12

Similarly, Jack claimed it wasn't for him:

"I'm not really a news kind of person"

Jack, 15

For some, this meant that they only encountered news stories in a tangential way, through their social media networks. For example, Bryony, 12, had heard about the Black Lives Matter movement after a friend sent her an article on iMessage about protestors throwing items at a horse. As a keen horse rider, she was concerned for the horse's welfare, but had picked up only a small amount of information about the protests themselves. Her concern about this more widely was that people were gathering in big groups and 'not staying apart'.

Josie and Shaniqua, 15, both suggested that social media was the main way in which they were keeping up to date with the latest events. This meant they tended to access information in a passive way, rather than seeking it proactively:

"'I know what's going on because I see stuff on Instagram"

Josie, 15

"'[About the news] You don't really have to search anything up, it's just there on Snapchat and TikTok."

Shaniqua, 15

There were a couple of examples of children distrusting the news about Covid-19

Shaniqua and Ahmed (15 and 14 respectively) were both distrustful of the news about Covid-19. Shaniqua's mum reported that Shaniqua had first assumed that Covid-19 was 'fake' and admitted that she had also had doubts about it. Her mum had heard some ideas going around her friends and social media circles that the virus may have been 'man-made in a lab' and therefore she wasn't sure if it was something to be taken

seriously. However, after someone they knew caught the virus, both changed their minds, and decided to trust more of the mainstream media stories:

"I think there was so much conspiracy at first. Everyone had their own thoughts on it. … After I knew someone who got it, I realised it was serious"

Shaniqua's mum

Ahmed too was not convinced by the mainstream advice that he ought to stay indoors. He explained that he felt that lockdown was 'not needed' after hearing his dad deliver a similar opinion to his older brothers. He himself was going out and about to local parks, so was not experiencing the lockdown in the same way as some of the other children in the sample.

Putting the findings in context

It is clear that during lockdown children have been spending more time than ever before on their screens. Restrictions on normal life have left a space which they are filling with social media, gaming and watching content. The lockdown has, of course, been an unusual time for most children, and one that many say will stand out when they look back on this period.

"You couldn't forget the time you didn't go to school for three months"

Alice, 15

This study has tracked children's media lives since 2014. Over the course of this study, we have seen fashions and fads - like sending 'streaks' on Snapchat - come and go suddenly, alongside longer-lasting changes and the emergence of structural shifts in online behaviours, for example in the way children consume content.

In the context of lockdown, where children are online more than ever before, many of the behaviours we have observed underpin trends we have seen evolving over past waves, including:

- An increasing consumption of **on-demand content** in favour of live content, and now an increasing move towards **short-form content** in the form of video snippets.
- Children moving from watching content with families to increasingly **consuming content alone in their rooms.**
- The rise and development of '**star' YouTubers and now also TikTokkers,** whom children seek to emulate through the content they themselves share. Children are also increasingly aware that this content can be monetised.
- **New trends in social media** show elements of gamification and increased self-consciousness about how children represent themselves online, with the curation of images, use of filters and editing apps, and now a trend towards body-conscious exercise content.
- The development of new **in-app and in-game purchasing mechanisms,** including 'loot boxes[10]', and the sharing of these through videos on social media.

While it is impossible to know whether the new online behaviours of children and young people during the Covid-19 lockdown will continue, they may help to indicate a direction of travel in some of the trends we are observing, and will be worth tracking in waves to come.

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[10] (In-game) A consumable virtual item which can be redeemed to receive a randomized selection of further virtual items, or 'loot'