

Children's Media Lives: A Qualitative Study Year 2 Findings: Social Media and Identity

Aims

Ofcom's 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. It is a three-year study, tracking, as far as possible, the same 18 children, aged 8-15 in wave 1. The study provides an in-depth understanding of how this illustrative sample of children think about and use digital media, and how this differs and is influenced by age, life-stage, family circumstances, peers and wider society. This Research Highlight presents the results relating to social media and identity.

Key Findings

Social media and identity

- **Social media is used as an extension of offline friendships**

The vast majority of the children used some form of social media or instant messaging service. Similar kinds of conversations and interactions took place on social media as in the playground, and the children faced similar social conventions and pressures. However, some of the attributes of social media distorted or magnified the effects of these pressures.

- **Girls face an intensification of the 'image-focused' pressures that exist in the offline world**

The girls were subject to intense physical and social scrutiny on social media. Getting an acceptable number of 'likes' and positive comments was very important and they put a lot of effort into curating their online image. 'Selfies' and other images were an important way of portraying their identity, but putting stuff up about their interests, hobbies or passions was less usual, as they did not want to mark themselves out as different, or push the boundaries of social norms.

- **The pressures on boys are more about acting 'tough' or being 'laddish'**

While some boys did post selfies, this was less common than with girls. Boys appeared to be subject to pressures around testing boundaries, and social media seemed to provide a space where male friendship groups might act more 'tough' and rude than they would in real life. This was enhanced by the fact that many of them participated in large group-chat functions on social media, through services like Facebook messenger and WhatsApp.

- **Some children had indirect experience of sexting and other risky online social behaviour**

Many children acknowledged the pressure in their social circles for girls to send nude or revealing pictures via social media, with several citing examples of this at their schools. Others had been bullied online, or had witnessed this among their peers.

- **Children often over-estimate the privacy afforded by social media**

Children tended to overestimate the privacy afforded to them through social media, especially in relation to their parents. For example, posting things to social media that they wouldn't feel comfortable showing to their parents, despite never having checked their privacy settings.

Policy context

The Children's Media Lives research project enhances the substantive body of quantitative research Ofcom conducts into the trends in the media usage patterns of children and young people. This research helps policymakers understand how children are using and engaging with media, and to identify which elements of media literacy to develop and promote.

Methodology

Researchers spent 3-4 hours with each child and young person in their home, interviewing and learning about their behaviours, attitudes and understanding of digital media. The interviews were based on a topic guide, but the child determined the general flow of the conversations. Stimulus material was used to prompt discussion in areas of the topic guide that were less top-of-mind for children, such as the role of online advertising. The ethnographic interviews were supplemented with short interviews with parents and siblings to better understand the household dynamics and access to digital media.

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