

Doctoral Dissertation
Doctoral Program in Population Health Sciences

**AN ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH TO
RELATIONSHIPS AND SEX EDUCATION
(RSE) IN THE DIGITAL ERA.**

By

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Declaration

I hereby declare that, the contents and organisation of this dissertation constitute my own original work and does not compromise in any way the rights of third parties, including those relating to the security of personal data.

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2025

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Abstract

Young people increasingly rely on digital technologies to communicate with peers, and explore their sexuality, much to the concern of adults. However, adults' anxieties over young peoples' technology use often results from morals and technopanics, failing to consider the opportunities that technology can offer. Morals and technopanics often translates into education, with Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) focussing on harms and at times even victim blaming young people for harms experienced through technology. This research utilised an Action Research (AR) methodology to understand, and respond to, the impact of digital technology, namely TikTok, on relationships among young people. The first AR cycle involved semi-structured interviews with 12 young people. Findings include opportunities that TikTok offers to marginalised young people including LGBTQ+ communities, and potential harms including addiction and what I termed 'algorithmic segregation' whereby those who do not fit the platforms' ideals gain less visibility as content creators. In response to these findings, I developed an algorithmic awareness intervention designed for the RSE curriculum. Feedback on the intervention was sought through an online survey involving RSE teachers. The survey's findings revealed that there is no 'one size fits all' as each school delivers RSE differently. The intervention could not be employed within schools due to the Covid pandemic. It was instead employed within a youth group context in a deprived area of the North East of England as the final AR cycle. The findings of this AR cycle highlight the need for tailoring inclusive learning resources to the diverse needs of learners specifically accounting for the needs of SEN learners and boys who are often forgotten within RSE, which typically focuses on, and at times pathologises, girls and their behaviour. I discuss the findings from this research and provide recommendations for policy, education, healthcare, and future research.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the research

Young people increasingly rely on digital platforms which are made available to them through personal devices such as smartphones, computers and gaming devices (boyd, 2014; Anderson et al., 2022). Of particular interest to researchers, policymakers and parents is young people's use of social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube and Facebook. While this interest is typically framed negatively, such as concerns relating to mental health including body image concerns, social media can also have a positive impact on young people's lives whereby gender, sex and sexuality are mediated as well as providing opportunities for relationship formation and continuation (Wang & Edwards, 2016). This is particularly poignant in the current climate whereby Covid restrictions have limited opportunities for intimacy and forced young people to utilise platforms as a source of mediated intimacy more so than ever before (Lisista et al., 2020; Pink, Ferguson & Kelly, 2020; Simpson, 2020).

While it can be argued that intimacies have always been mediated given they "require a medium through which intimate relations can be established between the subject and the other" (Attwood, Hakim & Winch, 2017), the digital mediation of intimacies is a relatively new concept that requires better understanding. The pace at which technology develops as well as the speed that young people adopt such technologies is arguably too rapid for policy and practice to keep up with. This creates significant difficulties for teachers of RSE who may not be aware of the ways digital intimacies as well as the digital mediation of sex, gender, and sexuality might affect the everyday lives of young people. Examples may include how social media is particularly valuable for LGBTQ+ young people who can educate and be

educated about issues relating to queer identities as well as being an important space for community building (Bates, Hobman & Bell, 2020; Craig et al., 2021). Despite this there is little acknowledgement in mainstream public discourse of the importance of digital technologies to those who identify as LGBTQ+ (Albury & Byron, 2016; McGeeney & Hanson, 2017).

However, digital exclusion limits users' ability to fully participate on social media platforms thus limiting their opportunities and its potential benefits as Thompson (2016) argues that:

“full and democratic participation in the information society depends upon digital inclusion, which must extend even to the most disadvantaged segments of society” (p. 38).

It has been suggested that certain groups, such as those minoritised due to gender/sex, sexuality, and race, have limited participation in digital spaces. This can take a number of forms, from a lack of technology access to the architecture of platforms whereby data input often provides a limited set of options that may not encompass an individual's identity and often require a forced choice. Ramler (2021) refers to this as 'digital inhospitality' and argues that too often platforms ignore the needs of minoritised users. It is also thought that social media may create opportunities for extremist communities to form which further limits those who are minoritised due to gender/sex, sexuality, and/or race to participate in digital spaces (Galpin, 2022).

It is thought that the meaning of digital inclusion/exclusion is ever evolving, particularly as algorithms become more prominent in digital spaces, which is exacerbating existing inequalities (Gran, Booth & Bucher, 2020). However, while algorithms govern information access and agency, recommendations, and advertising many scholars have suggested that platform users are unaware of the gatekeeping role of algorithms (Eslami et al., 2015; Gillespie, 2014). They are also

thought to lack the understanding that algorithms are created by people, typically people who are not marginalised and as such they may embed biases within algorithms whether intentionally or unintentionally (Kuhlman, Jackson & Chunara, 2020). Despite this more recent qualitative research studying users' perceptions of algorithms suggests an increasing awareness of the censorship of marginalised identities (Scalvini, 2020; Simpson & Semaan, 2021).

Furthermore, a range of concerns have been raised regarding the algorithmic curation of platforms while used to improve user experiences are thought to lead to 'echo-chambers' (Sunstein, 2014) and 'filter bubbles' (Pariser, 2011) in which users experience a form of censorship in that they only see content that the platform determines as appealing to them and their pre-existing beliefs. There is also a serious risk of misinformation, the term 'infodemic' has been applied to the period of the pandemic whereby mass misinformation circulates and has had a significant impact on health (Cinelli et al., 2020), including following information such as drinking bleach to protect oneself from Covid and the anti-vaxx movement (Puri et al., 2020). Wider concerns consider misinformation a threat to democracy (Valenzuela et al., 2019) and public health (Carrieri, Madio & Principe, 2019; Sahni & Sharma, 2020). Some academics believe young people are particularly at risk of consuming misinformation given that their ability to assess credibility is low (Breakstone et al., 2019). However, this fails to acknowledge the contested nature of misinformation and what constitutes legitimate knowledge. Additionally, it can be argued that young people are more equipped than adults to identify misinformation given their greater familiarity and understanding of digital platforms and they employ techniques, such as fact checking, to identify misinformation (Selnes, 2024). In this sense, adults may instead be imposing their own limitations regarding identifying misinformation onto young people who in reality may be more aware and skilled.

Given the role of technology in young people's lives, as discussed, it is essential that they have spaces to learn about the harms of such spaces and how to navigate them safely. As they impact young people's relationships, and involve complex power dynamics, RSE is the most appropriate setting as it considers lived realities in this context (Allen, 2013).

1.2 Thesis structure

This thesis consists of 9 main chapters; this, the first chapter is the introduction which aims to inform readers of the research problem, structure and research questions. As well as these are the chapters entitled; Contemporary RSE in the digital era, Theoretical Framework, Methodology, Cycle 1, Cycle 2, Cycle 3, Discussion, and Conclusion.

Within Chapter 2 I consider the origins of RSE back to the 20th Century continuing till the current day. I discuss how attitudes towards RSE are impacted by the moral discourses, social, and political landscape at the time. I explore the impact of technology on young people's lives and its relevance to RSE before discussing the introduction of statutory RSE and its limitations.

The Theoretical Framework introduces relevant literature and theories regarding two overarching topics; Identity and The impact of digital transformation on society. The section Identity (3.2) provides an understanding of the terms used throughout this thesis and provides my own rationale and understanding of these terms. Many are highly politicised and I make my stance apparent regarding current issues including the need of inclusive language within research as well as society. Then in 3.3 I go on to discuss the impact of digital transformation on society as a whole as well as discussing the impact this has on individual identities. I utilise current theories to explore, in particular, the impact of social media in the lives of young people through a lens of identity particularly focusing on marginalised groups such as women and the LGBTQ+ community.

In the Methodology chapter I introduce Action Research, the methodology that underpins this research. I discuss the ways in which this methodology was chosen due to its alignment with the critical paradigm adopted by the researcher. Furthermore, I discuss how Action Research consists of a series of cycles of planning, acting and observing, and reflecting. This chapter informs the following 3 chapters, each named after their respective cycles of research.

Cycle 1 introduces the first research cycle, the foundation for this research. Within this chapter I discuss the 12 interviews undertaken with young people regarding their experiences on the platform TikTok. The data from these interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and revealed five themes; Coping (in Covid), Learning, Algorithmic harms, FYP=IRL, and Authenticity. From the findings I coin the term ‘algorithmic segregation’, discussed in this chapter, which is one of the most notable contributions from this research.

In Cycle 2 I discuss the development of an algorithmic literacy intervention designed to be delivered within RSE that is a result of the findings of Cycle 1. I also outline the findings of a preliminary online survey with secondary school RSE teachers that aimed to understand any barriers to implementation. In this chapter I concluded that ‘one size does not fit all’ regarding both the mode of RSE delivery in schools as well as the needs and abilities of learners.

Cycle 3 outlines the implementation of the intervention designed within a youth group setting. This chapter describes the ethnographic methods used consisting of observations made by the researcher as well as interviews with the youth worker who was leading the sessions. The findings revealed the importance of considering two themes; Learning skills and prior knowledge, and gender/sex differences. Much like Cycle 2 I concluded that ‘one size does not fit all’ and as such an adaptable approach is required particularly to consider and include SEN learners.

Within the discussion chapter I discuss the implications of this interdisciplinary research regarding 5 key areas: education, healthcare, social media platforms, policy, and future research as well as discussing the limitations of the project. Whilst the thesis is written in an academic style, I have purposely structured the discussion chapter in particular in a way that appeals to stakeholders including those who may not be accustomed to reading theses/academic research. To assist laypeople in comprehending this thesis I provide an overview of the main findings at the beginning of this chapter.

Finally, within the conclusion I summarise the project as a whole. The findings are related to the aims highlighting the key contributions of the research. I also provide recommendations for future research as well as discussing the limitations of the project.

1.3 Research questions

The initial research questions that arose as a result of the literature review were as follows:

What are the issues affecting young people regarding digital spaces and their digital lives?

How are gender/sex and sexuality enacted in digital spaces?

Are digital spaces equitable regarding gender/sex and sexuality?

Further research questions arose over the course of the project including:

How/can young people's concerns over the issues they face in digital spaces be translated into meaningful RSE resources?

What are the practical concerns regarding the implementation of algorithmic literacy resources in an education setting?

1.4 The impact of Covid

The Covid-19 pandemic had a huge impact on the world, many countries, including England, implemented 'lockdowns' in an attempt to slow the spread of the virus. This meant that many workers were required to work from home or where that was not possible they were furloughed (with the exception of essential workers). Researchers were left in a difficult position given that the state of research was very uncertain with traditional face-to-face research unable to be conducted. Furthermore, the lockdowns that were initially intended to be short-term then became long-term restrictions which made it difficult for researchers to plan research activities, a crucial process that requires time and energy.

Furthermore as Santana et al. (2021) state, researchers:

“are not exempt from the psychological toll of the pandemic or the secondary stressors that may compound personal and professional trauma” (p.1064).

Personally, I found the pandemic incredibly difficult. Whilst I initially took an interruption, like many researchers, the ongoing situation and uncertainty of how long it would last, meant I felt I had to return. However, the research I had planned pre-pandemic was no longer possible. While I adapted to the situation as best as possible this meant that the project was subject to delays. These delays were compounded by the delays at a university level due to staff shortages and sickness.

My initial research cycle was conducted on the video platform Zoom, and while I was glad that this meant my research could still continue, it does not replicate face-to-face research. Additionally, Covid seeped into the research (see 5.3.1) which made the topic impossible for me to avoid in a professional and personal capacity which was at times overwhelming. However, I do believe many participants, and myself, really enjoyed taking part in the initial interviews at a time of isolation.

While restrictions were eventually lifted, I still found my project to be impacted by the long lasting effects of Covid. For example, I found it difficult to recruit and work closely with teachers/schools, which I had initially intended, likely due to the struggles and burnout teachers were facing. As such the project presented in this thesis does not reflect my dream PhD project however I did my best to make it as similar as possible. Throughout this project I discuss the challenges I have faced and the choices that were made as a result and while I acknowledge the limitations of this project I am proud of the work that I was able to complete during a pandemic.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an introduction to this thesis. I began by introducing the research where I explained the rationale for this research project. Within the next section I explained the thesis structure, describing each of the 9 main chapters, to assist readers to navigate this thesis as well as providing an overview. Next I introduced the research questions that arose and guided the project. Finally, I discussed the impact of Covid, something that affected the project throughout causing many challenges and delays and had to be addressed and the project adapted.

Chapter 2: Contemporary RSE in the digital era

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the evolution of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in the UK, with particular attention to how it has been shaped by historical, political, and technological forces. I explore RSE from its early 20th-century origins to its current statutory form, this chapter highlights the moral, social, and institutional frameworks that have continually governed how sex, relationships, and sexuality are taught in schools. Although early approaches to sex education were rooted in public health concerns and moral regulation, contemporary RSE remains embedded in similar discourses—especially those that seek to regulate youth behaviour through frameworks of risk, protection, and normative morality.

This chapter considers how digital technology has transformed the landscape in which young people come to understand and experience gender, sexuality, and intimacy. Concepts including mediated intimacy, the post-digital, and post-digital intimacies are examined to illustrate how RSE must adapt to the realities of young people's lives.

The chapter concludes with an analysis of the current statutory RSE guidance introduced in England in 2020. While this marks a key development in formalising RSE provision, the chapter argues that significant gaps remain in terms of inclusivity, critical engagement, and digital relevance. As such, this chapter lays the groundwork for understanding both the possibilities and limitations of contemporary RSE, particularly in preparing young people for the complexities of intimacy, identity, and sexuality in the digital age.

2.2 The history of RSE

2.2.1 20th Century

The earliest notion of sex education came during World War 1 (1914-1918) due to soaring STI rates in soldiers leading to sexual health being considered a public health issue for the first time. However, the focus at the time centred around issues of morality and hygiene, rather than empowerment or wellbeing (Lloyd, 2008).

During the war the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) was passed by the War Office under temporary powers. The act was controversial, particularly regulations 40D and 13A. Regulation 40D made it a criminal offense for any woman with venereal disease to invite and/or have sex with any member of His Majesty's forces. However, this regulation was flawed as it did not apply to male soldiers themselves who would knowingly transmit venereal disease with no real repercussions (Lammasniemi, 2017). Regulation 13A prohibited women who had a conviction for prostitution or a similar offense from being in the vicinity of His Majesty's troops. Wilson (1919) discussed how these laws viewed woman at the time as it reflected a triple standard whereby there were multiple standards of conduct; that of the man who had little/no judgements or regulations placed on them, the 'good woman' who is considered respectable and the 'bad woman' who had a reputation that was unshakeable. Again, sexual health and sexual practises were tied with morality and it was expected that women would display their loyalty to their country by avoiding venereal disease, which was considered a threat to His Majesty's troops and therefore the country, whereas a man's loyalty was in his willingness to fight for his country (Levine, 1994).

Later, towards the latter end of the 20th century saw the emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. At this time sex education continued to emphasise morality and hygiene, as well as fear. The United Kingdom at the time was still a largely Christian country and as such morality and Christian values played an important

role in the understanding and treatment towards those with HIV/AIDS. AIDS was referred to as a gay disease, cancer and plague, with assumptions that only gay men were affected by AIDS. Albeit these were incorrect and only served to increase stigma and antigay attitudes (Epstein, 1996). Many religious groups believed that homosexuals deserved AIDS as divine retribution and used the fear associated with the epidemic to recruit followers and discourage homosexuality (Cameron, 1991; Rothenberg & Newport, 1984). Such attitudes were not limited to religious figures/bodies with many health care professionals also believe that homosexuals deserved AIDS and as such were unwilling to care for AIDS patients (Crawford et al., 1991; Douglas, Kaplan & Kalman, 1985; Kelly et al., 1987). However, data from surveys suggested that attitudes towards homosexuality had not significantly changed as a result of the AIDS epidemic (Herek, 1997; Schnieder, 1987) instead it reinforced and justified pre-existing prejudice.

During this time, debates around sex education became highly politicised. In England, the introduction of Section 28 of the Local Government Act prohibited the promotion of homosexuality in schools, and thus reinforced heteronormative approaches to RSE (Epstein & Johnson, 2000). At this time RSE was often criticised for being inconsistent, teacher-dependent, and insufficiently responsive to young people's needs (Health Education Authority, 1994).

2.2.2 21st Century

The start of the 21st century marked a turning point for RSE with the Labour government taking a greater interest in such issues. They implemented their Teenage Pregnancy Reduction Strategy with great success, repealed Section 28 of the Local Government Act, and showed a commitment to statutory PHSE and RSE thanks to the influence of the work of the Sex Education Forum (Department for Children, Schools & Families, 2008). However, their efforts were stunted when the Coalition government came into power. The Coalition government instead focused on 'sexualisation' with a key piece of work being The Bailey Review (Bailey, 2011)

entitled *Letting Children Be Children* was commissioned by the Department for Education although Bailey himself was the Chief Executive of the British Christian charity, the Mother's Union. Here we saw political attitudes regress to those previously discussed that focus on morality. As a result, sex education was still criticised in 2015 for being inconsistent, teacher-dependent, and insufficiently responsive to young people's needs (Sex Education Forum, 2015).

2.3 The current landscape for young people

Young people increasingly utilise digital platforms to the extent that some are labelling them "chronically online" (Brook, 2025). Their use of such technology shapes how they experience intimacy, sexuality, and relationships, which is referred to as mediated intimacy (Jamieson, 2011; Attwood et al., 2017).

2.3.1 Mediated intimacy

The term intimacy is thought to have first appeared in a Western dictionary in 1932 defined as "inmost or innermost thoughts and feelings" (Plummer, 2003, p.11). Since then discourses around intimacy shifted to refer to physical contact, sex, romance and the love that one has for a spouse. However, contemporary attitudes argue intimacy is not limited to romantic relationships but friendships and familial relationships (Chambers, 2013).

Mediated intimacies therefore refer to the ways in which relationships are created and/or maintained through a medium. Early conceptualisations of mediated intimacies include the work of Rosalind Gill (2009) who explored how women's magazines practise intimacy through their sharing of sex and relationships advice. An alternative, but overlapping, conceptualisation, considers how the social media platform Facebook allowed personal connections to flourish (Chambers, 2013).

2.3.2 Post-digital

While in the past the online and offline had distinct boundaries, the prevalence and reliance on technology such as smartphones, which often act as an extension of the physical body, has interwoven the two. This interaction has been referred to as “post-digital”, an emerging field of study that seeks to understand how people exist in the modern world which is both shaped by and shaping technology. Hodgson (2019) eloquently writes “what emerges is not simply a digital/real mixed reality but altogether different modes of embodiment” (p. 69).

Young people value the post-digital world in which they inhabit with them able to maintain friendships and romantic relationships digitally, which was of particular importance during periods of lockdown during the Covid pandemic (Beyens et al. 2020; Di Donato, 2023).

2.3.3 Post-digital intimacies

Evans and Ringrose (2025) work brings together the post-digital and different understandings of intimacies to give us post-digital intimacies. They build upon prior understandings of intimacy as being between humans (Berlant, 2008) to depict the role of technology in this dynamic. Evans and Riley’s (2023) earlier work states that the digital “connects, reaches out and is entangled across a range of events, people, objects, feelings, data, algorithms and technologies” (Evans & Riley, 2023, p. 146). For Evans and Ringrose post-digital intimacies refer to the ways in which

“subjectivities are shaped by particular intimacies and relationalities between humans and non-human actors, which can include smartphones, apps, and other machines, while also attending to the power of intimacy as both a regulatory force and radical potential. However, what is added to this account of intimacy by the prefix of “post” is the folding of and amalgamation of digital and non-digital within our notion of the intimate” (p.3).

However, these post-digital intimacies are the subject of great worry for many parents and adults as moral panics circulate regarding the sexualisation of girls, rise of sexting, and availability of pornography online (Dobson, 2015; Hasinoff, 2015, 2017). Buckingham (2005) refers to the history of concern surrounding new technologies whereby childhood innocence is thought to be lost due to these technological advances. Whilst their concern focuses on new technology it replicates previous patterns of fear surrounding the introduction of new technologies from cinema to television and now to the internet and digital realm (Taylor, 2010). While such concerns are justified often adults fail to take into account the agency of young people, girls and women included, who may use technology as a means of expressing their gender and sexuality, for example by the sharing of 'sexy selfies' (Naezer, 2020). Such acts could even be seen as a political statement, a bold act of feminism whereby young women share images of themselves and get to control how they are seen even if critics argue that women doing so are simply victims of the 'male gaze' (Phillips, 2022). Despite the opportunities that the post-digital may offer to women and girls they still remain vulnerable with women and girls at greatest risk of many digital harms such as image-based sexual violence which may include non-consensual sharing of sexual images or videos (revenge porn). Those who are victims of such acts often experience victim blaming and negative consequences for themselves such as reputational damage while perpetrators are rarely punished (Flynn et al., 2023; McGlynn & Rackley, 2017).

Other concerns from scholars include the ways in which post-digital intimacies are impacted by algorithms. The platforms that young people use, from social media to search engines, are not neutral. They rely on algorithms to curate personalised content for the user rendering some content as hyper visible and some as invisible (Gillespie, 2014). This can mean that some forms of sexual expression are promoted, namely sexualised portrayals of heterosexual young women, while those that relate to LGBTQ+ issues, sex education, and body

diversity are given little visibility thus shaping how young people understand and experience sexuality and gender (Duffy & Chan, 2019; Noble, 2018).

2.4 Statutory RSE (in England)

September 2020 saw the introduction of an updated sexual health curriculum within schools in England. This RSE is a component of the broader subject PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education) which has elements that are not currently statutory. The biggest update was that this was now a compulsory requirement as prior to this the Sex Relationship Education Guidance (2000) only required a minimal amount of sex education, focusing on human growth, reproduction and sexually transmitted infections to local-authority-run secondary schools only, despite decades of evidence suggesting that sex education has positive outcomes on health and wellbeing (e.g. Bourke et al., 2014). This was considered a big win for those who had campaigned for statutory RSE for decades before this, as mentioned in the previous section, such as the Sex Education Forum and the Labour government at the time.

However, the response was not entirely positive, for some it was considered controversial and resulted in protests from parents who disagreed with some of the statutory requirements surrounding LGBTQ+ diversity and inclusion (BBC News, 2025). Additionally, the group Stop RSE lobby against statutory RSE via a petition that argued for the need to “protect childhood innocence” citing “grave concerns about the physical, psychological and spiritual implications of teaching children about certain sexual and relational concepts” which led to parents having the write to withdraw their children from lessons. The founder of the petition is a well known figure in the field who delivers lectures of her view that sex education is an indoctrination by the government of highly dangerous ideologies that redefine traditional families (Godfrey-Fausset, 2019). Such discourses mirror attitudes towards RSE discussed in the previous section which create moral panics based on

ideas around morality, religion, and society that stem from adults rather than young people.

Other updates include the addition of topics such as porn, sexting and online/social media which is a response to the criticism from academics and practitioners that RSE is not up to date with the realities of young people's lives which increasingly rely on digital media (Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018; Quinlivan, 2018). Even the Education Secretary at the time acknowledged that the former guidance "fails to address risks to children that have grown in prevalence over the last 17 years, including cyber bullying, 'sexting' and staying safe online" (Greening, 2017). It is also important to note that the publication of the statutory guidance came just a few months after the Online Harms White Paper was published (followed by the Online Safety Act) and appeared heavily influenced by its contents despite it having not yet gone through public consultation. However, the statutory RSE guidance, whilst limited, appears to promote these topics in relation to their legality, risk and need for regulation/protection which fails to acknowledge that young people need spaces to express their sexuality and therefore may continue to promote victim blaming discourses regarding sexting and/or revenge porn (Lee et al., 2013; Moran-Ellis, 2012). Furthermore, such protection discourses that dominate RSE center middle-class, white, heterosexual, able-bodied cis-girls as innocent and potential victims at risk of corruption in the form of sexuality (Alldred & David, 2007; Egan & Hawkes, 2009). This is problematic for numerous reasons; its reliance on supremacist ideals excludes those who do not conform to this meaning that many young people, including those who identify as LGBTQIA+, are disabled and ethnic minorities remain ignored and their needs unmet (Formby, 2011; Natzler & Evans, 2021). These categories may represent important elements of an individual's identity that are often neglected (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2014) and potentially serve to teach inequality to new generations (Connell & Elliot, 2009). Unsurprisingly this facilitates schools as sites of immense bullying and violence (Formby, 2013; Saunston, 2018).

Additionally, the emphasis on girls, whilst not noted in the guidance but evident in practice, is rooted in misogyny where the control of women and their sexuality masquerades as protection. In doing so it promotes victim blaming in that it considers an appropriate femininity whereby girls who behave appropriately avoid negative consequences. This can be evidenced by the guidance regarding ‘sexting’ in which girls suffer harsher social consequences than boys despite many young boys being guilty of non-consensual image sharing often referred to as ‘revenge porn’ (Hasinoff, 2017). This victim blaming, where girls are condemned for taking pictures, but boys suffer no consequences for their actions, is one of the key tenets of rape culture alongside everyday heterosexuality that promote ideas around male aggression and female passivity (Gavey, 2005).

While the implementation of statutory RSE was delayed due to Covid, schools were expected to prepare for its delivery. However, this raises practical issues regarding training for teachers on a subject matter which is not their specialty and is ever evolving potentially past their knowledge base (Javadnoori et al., 2012; Ofsted, 2013).

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has traced the complex and often contentious development of RSE in the UK, highlighting how it has been shaped by broader social, political, and technological forces. From its early roots in public health concerns during World War I to the moral panic of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the restrictive legislation of Section 28, RSE has long been entangled with ideologies regarding morality, gender, and sexuality. Even as recent decades have seen shifts toward more inclusive and comprehensive frameworks, these efforts have remained vulnerable to political reversal and moral anxieties, particularly around LGBTQ+ inclusion and the perceived “sexualisation” of childhood.

It considers the current landscape, showing that digital technologies are transforming how young people understand, construct, and experience intimacy, identity, and sexuality. The concepts of mediated intimacy, post-digital, and post-digital intimacies show that digital life cannot be separated from "real life" but instead the two are deeply intertwined, shaping young people's subjectivities in ways that statutory RSE has yet to fully address. While the 2020 introduction of compulsory RSE in England represents a significant policy milestone, its implementation reveals ongoing limitations, particularly its reliance on risk-based, regulatory frameworks.

This chapter argued that contemporary RSE must not only respond to the realities of a digital era but must also move beyond protectionist and moralistic discourses. Instead, RSE should engage critically with the cultural, technological, and structural conditions that shape young people's experiences and identities and can assist them in navigating the complex socio-digital dimensions of intimacy and unpick the impacts of algorithms.

From this chapter the following aims emerge:

What are the issues affecting young people regarding digital spaces and their digital lives?

Within this research question we hope to explore how/if RSE can be a space to educate young people regarding online harms and how young voices can be embedded within RSE.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

3.1 Introduction

Within this chapter I will discuss the academic literature and theories that have underpinned my work. This cross-discipline work has been influenced by a range of theories from different fields which I aim to draw on and to bring together to allow me to address the aims of the project. At the same time, I will also begin to discuss my own beliefs and positionality as understanding these as a reader are vital to follow my work but also to be aware of the thoughts behind the decision-making processes in implementing the research described in this thesis and my interpretation of the data I generated.

This chapter is divided into two main sections; Identity (3.2) and The impact of digital transformation on society (3.3). Section 3.2 begins by comparing different theories of both personal and social identities. The section then goes on to discuss categories of identity. Within 3.2.2 I challenge the traditional, and perhaps outdated, definitions of sex and gender that are binary and fixed instead adopting the terminology gender/sex which considers these constructs as complicated and multifaceted. I then discuss sexuality, which is typically defined within the narrow confines of the sex gender binary and discuss how limiting this can be for individuals, especially those who fall outside the norm. I then introduce Queer Theory, explaining how it challenges these heteronormative assumptions and allows for sexual diversity. Next, I discuss feminism and its complicated nature where typically only cis-woman are considered as those in need of feminism. This exclusionary nature and its contradictions against the values of equality and inclusion within feminism are discussed. In 3.2.7 I discuss the concept of intersectionality, credited to Kimberlé Crenshaw, before outlining Patricia Hill Collins contributions. I finish this section by discussing embodiment, referring to

the lived experience of the body within society, and how this is intertwined with gender/sex and sexuality.

Section 3.3 then discusses the impact of the proliferation of digital technology on society, in particular considering its impact on the lives of young people and their identities. I begin by outlining Floridi's (2015) *The onlife manifesto: Being human in a hyperconnected era* which explains the intertwining of online and offline worlds. I then discuss the concept of platform societies, societies that increasingly rely on digital infrastructure provided by platforms. Next I explain the attention economy which considers attention a new form of currency which can be accumulated on social media platforms. I then discuss networked publics to explain how audiences are connected via technology, then going on to discuss counterpublics which may contradict typical publics. Within the subsection data doubles I describe how individuals nowadays have an additional self, their data double, created and sold for profit. I then discuss how on platforms algorithmic identities are formed in which algorithms infer categories of identity regarding a user to provide personalised content/features. Next I discuss digital inclusion and exclusion, referencing the digital divide and the inequalities that continue to persist relating to access to digital technology as well as digital skills. Finally, I discuss how identities may be suppressed online in line with platforms values and ideals often as a means of making money from those with the most 'marketable' identities.

3.2 Identity

3.2.1 What is identity?

Identity can be defined as:

“who you are...The identity of a person or place is the characteristics they have that distinguish them from others” (Collins Dictionary, 2023, n.p.).

While academics from different backgrounds/fields have varying or even conflicting views on how identity is formed many believe that identity is constructed as a result of social interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). More recently, Gray (2009) explained that identity formation is impacted by

“technosocial processes that entangle multiple sites and fields of power beyond the location of a solitary person” (p.4).

Kotliar (2020) wrote that:

“identity categories have been created through processes of symbolic representation, scientific deliberation, and institutionalization” (p. 1153).

They discuss how people are ‘put’ into categories via census and surveys and nowadays via data mining algorithms (Lyon, 2003; Zarsky, 2002).

Erikson (1968) developed a theory of identity that identified eight various stages of identity development in which conflicts must be resolved. The stages relevant to young people, as the focus of this project, include ‘identity vs role confusion’ (ages 12 to 18) and ‘intimacy vs isolation’ (ages 18 to 40). ‘Identity vs role confusion’ posits that young people are attempting to ‘find’ their place within society as they transition from childhood to adolescence and at this time in a young person’s life social relationships are of significance. Erikson notes that this stage is characterised by the importance of behaving according to appropriate sex roles and developing one’s own sexual identity. Vaughan and Rodriguez (2014) applied Erikson’s theory to minoritised individuals highlighting the need for positive identity for wellbeing which can be difficult for young people who may feel excluded and unrepresented. The successful resolution of this stage leads to the virtue of fidelity.

During the ‘intimacy vs isolation’ stage the conflict arises due to the desire for intimate, loving relationships with others which some do not achieve. Those

who do not achieve intimate, loving relationships run the risk of isolation and loneliness, a consequence perhaps more likely for LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly historically. The successful resolution of this stage leads to the virtue of love.

Many academics believe that identity is comprised of two components: personal identity and social identity. Personal identity has been explained by Hogg, Abrams and Brewer (2017) as being:

“self-defined and evaluated in terms of idiosyncratic personal attributes and close personal relationships with specific other people” (p. 2).

Whereas Tajfel and Turner’s (1986) Social Identity Theory (SIT) defines social identity as:

“that part of the individual’s self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance of that membership” (p. 63).

Unlike many other works regarding identity, SIT produces testable hypotheses for study. Their theory is based upon their early experiments such as Tajfel’s (1970) study where students were assigned to one of two groups, ‘Klee’ or ‘Kandinsky’, and were then given money to allocate between other members of both groups. Participants typically favoured those within their own group allocating the money to their group members rather than those in the other group. Tajfel concluded that participants had adopted their group membership. Klee or Kandinsky, as part of their identity. As such SIT is believed to comprise of three processes; social categorization whereby we categories ourselves and others into groups; social comparison in which individuals obtain a positive social identity via positive intergroup social comparisons; and social identity which if positive creates self-esteem. In order to achieve positive social identity many will assume

negative characteristics of outgroup members leading to discrimination and stereotyping (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Such discrimination and stereotyping of out group members may be related to characteristics such as sexual orientation (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998) and race (Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999). However, critics argue that SIT does not adequately address the multidimensionality of identity and the conflicts which may arise as a result.

The model of multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI) (Jones & McEwen, 2000) is considered to be the first model of identity to address socially constructed and multiple identities as well as the influence of context. This model differentiates between social identity (including characteristics such as race, class, gender, and sexuality) and a core sense of self. This core sense of self is characterised by:

“valued personal attributes and characteristics” (Jones, 1997, p. 383).

This model has similarities with the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), discussed later in this chapter, as it considers the way in which categories of identity overlap:

“no one dimension may be understood singularly; it can be understood only in relation to other dimensions” (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 409-410).

3.2.2 Gender/sex

Here I will discuss the categories of sex and gender, it is important to mention the duplicity of the word sex which could refer to ones' sex or sexual intercourse, within this section references to sex relate to the former. Definitions of sex and gender vary considerably, both between academics and laypeople, and over time. Many believe sex and gender to be binary and oppositional, with sex (male/female) predetermining gender (man/woman) reflecting essentialist views

that sex and gender are fixed and largely unchangeable (Gülgöz et al., 2021). Others have explained the difference between the two terms as biological versus cultural:

“‘Sex’ is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. ‘Gender’ however is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’” (Oakley, 1972, p. 21–22).

Within Western cultures it is considered that males occupy a privileged position, with De Beauvoir (1997) arguing that as a result of this sex binary women are the ‘second sex’. This status of males as superior not only continues to be perpetuated but also influences knowledge given that men were at one time the only subject for research and as a result our understandings of human beings typically refer to males and as such are gender-blind and andocentric (Eriksen, 2015). Recent scholarship has indicated how these biases have shaped society and institutions such as healthcare whereby women are often misdiagnosed as having anxiety when in reality, they are experiencing heart attacks due to them presenting different in females than in males.

However, over time such definitions have been challenged, particularly their binary nature. Whilst many have, and still do, consider sex a binary where one is either biologically male or biologically female, we must then contemplate what ‘makes’ someone male or female. As Richardson (2015) explains:

“Chromosomes, hormones, gonads (ovaries/testes), internal reproductive structures and genitalia have variously been seen as the basis for defining a person’s sex. For instance, studies of medical responses to ‘doubtful sex’ – people who in the past were often referred to as third sex or hermaphrodites or more commonly nowadays intersex – suggest that definitions of what constitutes the male and the female body have changed” (p. 210).

While estimates of the prevalence of intersex conditions vary, with some believing that it is less than 1% of the population (Sax, 2002) while others predict it could be 10% of the population (Arboleda, Sandberg, & Vilain, 2014), Amnesty International report that around 1.7% of the population are born with intersex traits which they compare to the prevalence of those with red hair. Such a comparison is interesting given that we would consider red a category for hair colour and yet intersex is not routinely considered a category for sex, even on official medical forms and documentation. While the inclusion of intersex on such medical forms and documents may be beneficial for those who define in such a way its addition would still serve as a category in which sex must be defined within rigid frameworks which could still leave many individuals feeling excluded and unrepresented.

Similarly, the binary nature of gender has also been questioned and the possibilities of gender have and are being explored in the real world as well as academia. Cover (2019) referred to ‘emergent identities’ explaining:

“what emerges differs from the dominant not in the sense of being something alien and wholly incompatible, but as something that draws on the dominant to produce new configurations, meanings, values, and practices” (p. 2).

Cover argued that the term non-binary emerged as a challenge to traditional notions of binary gender that follows from binary sex therefore disrupting the cisgenderism present in Western societies. The term non-binary is an umbrella term that encompasses a range of different gender identities including gender fluid (not having a fixed gender), multigender (having more than one gender), or agender (having no gender; LGBT Foundation, 2022). Some consider being transgender to fall under this umbrella term whilst others consider it a distinct category. In the 2021 Census in the United Kingdom 262,000 respondents said their gender identity and sex registered at birth were different. Of these,

around 48,000 identified as a trans man while the same number identified as a trans woman. Approximately 30,000 respondents identified as non-binary while 18,000 wrote another gender identity and 118,000 did not leave a written response. Such data reflects a positive step forward from the 2011 Census in which 225,000 respondents did not answer the 'sex question' which offered only the binary categories of male and female; thus the changes gave those with diverse gender identities the opportunity to openly express themselves.

Despite this, the sex/gender binary continues to be perpetuated even in public spaces including schools and workplaces whereby men and women are separated into gendered toilets and/or changing rooms (Jones et al., 2016; McGuire et al., 2010). Particularly worrisome is that this is occurring within schools, institutions that exist to educate and shape young minds and instead these binary categories of gender/sex are taught, enforced, and learned (O'Flynn, 2016). These cisnormative ideologies result in harm for those who challenge traditional binary sex/gender roles (Stonewall, 2017) but also serves to reinforce power imbalances that oppress women and other marginalised groups. In doing so, it encourages harmful behaviours such as high suicide rates in men, which increase during times of economic instability and high unemployment rates, likely due to stereotypes as the 'man as provider' (Reeves, 2022).

Butler (1988) believes that gender is socially constructed and enacted in a way that resembles a theatrical performance, where performances are shaped by culture and time and performances are bound with expectation and risk of punishment. Around a similar time, West and Zimmerman (1987) coined the term 'doing gender' which referred to the way individuals construct their gender identities alongside others who hold each other accountable according to the gender norms at the time and as part of the particular culture and context. They argued that in 'doing gender' one was conforming to norms and therefore reinforcing them:

“if we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, empower, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category” (p. 146).

In this sense it mirrors Butler’s notions of performativity which Deutsch (2007) highlighted that if gender can be constructed then there must also be potential for it to be deconstructed stating that:

“we reserve the phrase ‘doing gender’ to refer to social interactions that reproduce gender difference and use the phrase ‘undoing gender’ to refer to social interactions that reduce gender difference” (p. 122).

Butler (1990) goes on to reject the notion of sex as biological, believing that it is as culturally formed as gender, and thus questions whether they are separate constructs at all:

“perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (p. 9).

Since then, a number of academics have advocated for the use of gender/sex (Hyde et al., 2019; Morgenroth & Ryan, 2021) to refer to the way the two terms are cultural constructs that are interconnected and almost impossible to separate despite having different meanings and connotations. It is also important to note here that I have discussed the terms gender/sex in a Western context, this varies considerably from other cultures in which binaries are not necessarily the norm, for example Indigenous North Americans use the term ‘two-spirit’ while Samoans use the term ‘fa’afafine’ (United Nations, 2018; Young, 2019).

Following from this, I will utilise Morgenroth and Ryan’s (2021) assumptions that underpin their use of the term gender/sex:

“(a) that gender is not binary, (b) that sex is not binary, (c) that gender does not follow from sex, (d) that the distinction between sex and gender is not always useful, and (e) that the gender/sex binary is harmful” (p. 1114).

However, I also contribute another assumption, (f) that definitions of gender and sex vary from person to person and the imposition of rigid categories of sex and gender are exclusionary and outdated and as such the term gender/sex is open to interpretation to account for varying understandings and conceptualisations of both terms.

3.2.3 Sexuality

Sexuality, sometimes referred to as sexual orientation, refers to:

“an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes” (American Psychological Association, 2019).

Following on from the work in the previous section, Butler (1990) suggests that these binary ways of thinking about gender/sex upholds a patriarchal system of compulsory heterosexuality. Butler explained the ‘heterosexual matrix’ which assumes that an individual's binary sex is thought to form the basis for binary gender which leads to heterosexual sexual attraction as it is an expected norm to feel desire for the ‘opposite’ sex. Others refer to this as ‘compulsory heterosexuality’, a term coined in the 1960/70s, was born from the recognition that normative heterosexuality was institutionalised and lesbian activists at the time argued that such norms forced women into marriages with men to play the roles of wives and mothers, subordinate to their husbands who maintained economic control (Mannay, 2016) which was often seen as ‘natural’ gender roles (Jackson, 2006).

According to the 2021 Census over 3% of respondents identified as members of the LGB+ community with the majority of that (2.8%) made up of those who identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual. A further 0.3% identified as ‘other’ with common responses including pansexual, asexual and queer. Such identities are

made invisible by the narrow definition of sexuality provided by the APA yet are becoming increasingly common, especially in young people who are more likely than ever to self define as having sexual minority identities that are much more fluid than in previous generations such as queer and pansexual (Temkin et al., 2017; Stewart et al., 2019).

While Butler's notion of a sexuality hierarchy, with heterosexuality both more common and also considered more appropriate, is still upheld, Duggan (2002) introduces the idea of homonormativity to describe a growing LGBTQ+ movement whereby those who define that way are more visible than ever without upsetting the status quo (Shaw & Sender, 2016).

3.2.4 Queer Theory

The term queer has been reappropriated, as it was previously used as a slur, and has been used to refer to identities that are not binary and encompasses both sexuality (including but not limited to: lesbian, bisexual, gay, and pansexual) and gender/sex (including but not limited to: intersex, transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, and gender fluid).

The origins of queer theory date back to 1975 (Turner, 2000) however, the coining of the term has been attributed to an academic conference in the early 1990s at the University of California. Teresa de Lauretis, a film theorist who organized the event, used it to differentiate the field from gay and lesbian theory due to its reliance on the gender/sex binary which they rejected (Turner, 2000). Queer theorists discuss the ways in which gender/sex intertwine with sexuality resulting in heteronormativity, the normalisation and enforcement of heterosexuality, that ensures:

“if you deviate at any point from this program, you do so at your own cost”
(Warner, 2000, p. 38).

Allen and Rasmussen (2015) state:

“queer theorists have also mounted critiques of essentialism (the belief in a true or authentic self) within scholarship on gender, sex, and sexuality. Consequently, binaries such as man–woman, feminine–masculine, heterosexual–homosexual are perceived as powerful regulatory fictions that have been troubled in order to highlight the incoherence in sex/gender/desire. A critique of antidemocratic lesbian and gay political movements, drawing on notions of homonormativity and homonationalism, has also been attempted by queer theorists in order to draw attention to the failure of research on sex, sexuality, and gender to attend to disability, class, race and gender, and nationalism” (p. 1043).

Queer theory has also informed the development of queer pedagogy with Britzman’s (1995) work considered pivotal. Britzman indicated that the key tenets of queer pedagogy are questioning norms, limits, boundaries, and reading practices.

Despite many attributing the roots of Queer theory to feminists, feminist scholars sometimes oppose Queer theory as:

“It could be argued that by undermining gender as a stable category, queer theory undermines feminism, which depends on the concept of women” (Marcus, 2005, p. 200).

This argument will be elaborated within the next subheading of this chapter.

3.2.5 Feminism

According to Britanica (2023) feminism is:

“the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes” (n.p.),

however, despite this common belief there are multiple schools of thought within feminism. Feminism is thought to have originated in the mid-1800s, referred to as first wave feminism, and is associated with the suffragette movement. This movement aimed to increase the rights of women, namely the right to vote. While most prominent in the UK and USA it led to worldwide law changes regarding women's right to vote. However, it is important to note that in some countries initially only privileged white women were allowed to vote. Some refer to first wave feminism as 'white feminism' which Da Costa (2021) defines as:

“feminist discourses that hinge on hegemonic notions of gender, sex, and sexuality and therefore help to maintain and extend the privileges of women of a particular racial, sexual, bodily, national, and class orientation” (p. 317).

Next came second wave feminism, following the Second World War, and was heavily influenced by the works of Simone de Beauvoir. The emphasis at this time focussed on women's roles in society and within the workplace. A key outcome of this was the Equal Pay Act of 1963 which ensured fair pay for women that was equal to that of men in similar roles. Other issues of interest at the time included reproductive rights, sexuality, and divorce law.

Third wave feminism, also referred to as postmodern feminism, followed circa 1990. This period was heavily influenced by the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw regarding intersectionality, discussed later in this chapter. Other prominent figures include Judith Butler and Angela Davis. The achievements of this time include growing awareness and support for LGBTQ+ rights and a growing awareness and recognition of intersectionality.

It is argued that there is now a fourth wave feminism which commenced around 2012. The rise of technology made it possible for women and girls to share their experiences regarding sexual abuse and harassment with examples being the Everyday Sexism Project and the #MeToo movement.

However even recent waves of feminism have been critiqued for excluding trans people, especially women, based upon ‘biological determinism’ (see Oyěwùmí, 1997) in a similar way to how Black women were previously excluded. Those who do so use their status and power, as white, cisgender women to marginalise those who do not meet their ideals of what it means to be a woman.

Lewis (2019) argues that transphobic attitudes are upheld in the UK due to the lack of discussion of:

“the effects of globalization and police brutality...on race, gender and class, and how they all interact...As a result, middle- and upper-class white feminists have not received the pummeling from black and indigenous feminists that their American counterparts have, and thus, their perspectives retain a credibility and a level of influence in Britain that the Michigan Womyn’s Festival could have only dreamed of” (p.6).

This results in the categorisation as people as oppressors or the oppressed, such categories are oversimplistic and don’t consider factors such as power dynamics, and intersecting identities. This results in conflict between groups, including what has been termed gender wars, where different groups are pitted against each other in society and the media such as trans women against cisgender women. Neither are free from oppression which demonstrates why we must move beyond oversimplistic binary categories that encourage polarization and instead recognise shared struggles, such as rigid gender norms, whilst acknowledging different lived experiences.

3.2.6 Race

Hall’s (1981) *The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media* discusses the way in which the media both produce and disseminate representations of the social world that provides consumers with an understanding of:

“how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work” (p.11).

In doing so, representations, including those of race, are ideologically driven and become naturalised like the naturalisation of dominant white ideologies in the Western World that are then rendered an invisible omnipresent force. White supremacy- the belief of a superior race (white people) and therefore the subordination of other races- occurs as a result of this omnipresent whiteness to ensure that white people continue to benefit from their privileged position (Patel, 2022). In 1998 Gandy argued that the mass media are the most important shaper of contemporary society, and therefore have the power to portray race according to dominant ideological and economic imperatives rather than the lived experiences of those groups. As such, where white British identities are the invisible, unspoken reality, ethnic minorities, especially Black people, have been framed by the mass media as a problem or threat to the values of British society. Recently we have seen the media portrayals and press coverage surrounding migrants travelling to the United Kingdom via small boats whereby migrants are labelled criminals and are being detained as such. Academics have argued that overt racism has nowadays been replaced by a ‘woke’ society yet instances of microaggressions, and bias are still rife (Dovidio, Pearson & Penner, 2018; Fernando, 2017). The previous example of refugees could be considered an example whereby Black refugees receive negative press portrayals whereas those fleeing Ukraine as a result of the war were welcomed into the UK.

Woodward (1997) states that:

“identities are produced, consumed and regulated within culture - creating meanings through symbolic systems of representation about the identity positions which we might adopt” (p. 2).

However, the proliferation of new media disrupts traditional media production, with individuals being able to produce their own content with basic

technology. As such, those who have been misrepresented in mainstream media are seeing an increase of self-produced media on social media allowing them to create their own representations of themselves and their identities.

3.2.7 Intersectionality

The theory of intersectionality is typically credited to Crenshaw (1989), a Black feminist critical legal theorist, who initially introduced the concept of intersectionality as a metaphor:

“Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination...But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm” (p. 149).

Later, her 1991 paper elaborated upon this, and the metaphor was evolved into a concept that highlighted the inadequacy of feminist work at the time which separated systems of oppression, just focusing on one at a time, which did not reflect the lived experiences of those facing multiple systems of oppression. In doing so, experiences of race and class were made invisible to highlight women’s experiences of oppression, ultimately colonising feminism and focusing on white feminism. Crenshaw uses intersectionality to highlight the interaction of race and gender, in an attempt to validate Black women’s experiences:

“because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated.” (p. 140).

Despite its widespread use, intersectionality is not without its criticisms. A major criticism relates to the origins of intersectionality, which while credited to Crenshaw (1989, 1991), its true conception may be long before Crenshaw's work. Working-class and lesbian black women alongside other women of colour as part of the Combahee River Collective who referred to ‘interlocking oppressions’ and ‘simultaneity’ (Combahee River Collective, 1986; Collins & Bilge, 2016) as well as by other academics such as Beale (1970) who introduced the term ‘double jeopardy’. In miscrediting its origins, we could consider this another example of historical whitewashing, whereby the efforts of people of colour are ignored and instead white feminism is considered to be the foundation of the feminist movement. Prominent feminist scholars such as Smith (2014) argued that such exclusionary feminism is not truly feminism at all as all women should be served by feminism:

“Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. 61).

Other criticisms include that the emphasis on race and gender in intersectionality may render other categories of oppression, such as sexuality and class, as marginal (Okolosie, 2014). Furthermore, in recent times intersectionality has gained popularity, both within academia as well as popular culture, and as such some have argued it has become a buzzword (Davis, 2008), devoid of any real meaning (Collins, 2015).

Collins built on intersectionality, addressing many of these criticisms, most notably through the addition of the ‘matrix of dominations’. This refers to the way intersecting oppressions are organized rather than overemphasising the categories of oppression themselves. Collins argued that all categories of oppression are based upon structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power. The structural domain includes social structures such as laws and policies, religion and the economy which enforce oppression. The disciplinary domain manages oppression in the sense that social institutions manage power relations and have control over those who utilise it. The hegemonic domain upholds oppression through the upholding of dominant (often traditional) values and ideologies. The interpersonal domain refers to the way in which individuals are situated in relation to others and thus uphold the subordination of others.

Collins’ additions to intersectionality force us to think more critically about power and privilege:

“Oppression is filled with such contradictions because these approaches fail to recognize that a matrix of domination contains few pure victims or oppressors” (Collins, 2000, p. 287).

As such, intersectionality can be used as a tool to understand the complexities of power (Collins & Bilge, 2016) whereby the oppressed may also be oppressors. To limit the extent to which individuals oppress others they must be willing to identify their own privilege, however McIntosh (1989) discussed the ‘invisibility’ of privilege which dominant groups, such as white men, may take for granted and instead credit their successes to their own hard work whilst also misattributing a lack of hard work as the reason for others (particularly those from other groups, such as black women) lack of success, not taking into barriers discussed in Collins’ matrix of dominations.

3.2.8 Embodiment

“Embodiment is central to being a person. The body is the vehicle for the exercise of skills, for communicating and relating to others. It is on the body that our existence as a person depends” (Stevens, 1996, p. 17).

The construct of embodiment is typically credited to the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1962) who believed the mind and body to be one entity and coined the term body-subject to refer to the way the body experiences but also is experienced. This has been clarified as the:

“lived experience of engagement of the body with the world” (Piran & Teall, 2012, p. 171).

As such, embodiment relates not only to how we experience our bodies (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Tomkins & Eatough, 2013) but also how we understand our bodies to be perceived by others.

Foucault (1979) built on the concept of embodiment by including the dimension of power. He wrote about the way in which we interact within society by complying with, often restrictive, norms, producing “subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile bodies’” (Foucault, 1977, p. 138). Foucault’s understanding of power was influential as it did not only acknowledge power as a repressive force but also as productive, existing in everyday practise, knowledge, and discourse. However, Foucault’s work has not been without criticism, some of these relate to an overemphasis on discourse that doesn’t adequately acknowledge underlying structural systems such as capitalism and racism (Fraser, 1989). Additionally, McNay (1992) argued that his theories were deterministic and did not recognise the agency or resistance performed by individuals. Both Fraser and McNay argue that Foucault’s work does not consider gender within his conceptualisations of power nor intersectional experiences.

Academics have used Foucault's ideas around embodiment and 'docile bodies' as a foundation to understand how individuals inhabit their bodies, such as women and, black people. As Lee (1997) explained:

"...women do experience gender in an embodied way: they live in and through their bodies that are marked and framed through discourses and practices of society" (p. 455).

Women experience their own bodies through the male gaze, a term coined by Mulvey (1975) in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, which explains how women are depicted according to men's conceptualisations and expectations. Women's bodies as a result are viewed as sexual objects that exist purely for the pleasure of men. Women's breasts become fetishized, distinguished from that of men's which exist for no purpose, women's are symbolic of their sexuality and the pleasure that they can give a man. Women with large breasts have come to be associated with promiscuity, lacking morals as well as intelligence (Kleinke & Staneski, 1980; Furnham, Dias & McClland, 1998). As Brownmiller (1984) writes:

"Although they are housed on her person, from the moment they begin to show, a female discovers that her breasts are claimed by others. Parents and relatives mark their appearance as a landmark event, schoolmates take notice, girlfriends compare, boys zero in; later a husband, a lover, a baby take propriety share. No other part of the human anatomy has such semi-public, intensely private status, and no other part of the body has such vaguely defined custodial rights" (p.24).

Studies investigating the lived experiences of large breasted women repeatedly find that women receive unwanted attention regarding their breasts with comments and ogling typical (Sarwer et al., 1998; Shakespeare & Postle, 1999). This contributes to poor mental health including low self-esteem and confidence

which combined with physical discomfort leads many large breasted women to seek breast reduction surgery (Guthrie et al., 1998).

Scholars have explained embodiment as central to sexuality, particularly women's sexuality, which remains heavily regulated (Tolman, Bowman & Fahs, 2014). Young (1992) explored the range of experiences that women had in embodying their sexuality which for some was positive including:

“pleasures, sensations and comforts of human embodiment” whereas for others it involved “dis-embodiment, involving: dissociation, disconnection from the body, and self mutilation.” (p. 92).

3.3 The impact of digital transformation on society

3.3.1 Onlife

Floridi (2015) coins the term onlife which he discusses in *The onlife manifesto: Being human in a hyperconnected era* as well as in documents related to the ONLIFE initiative of which Floridi is the chair, to refer to the way in which reality and virtuality have become intertwined, indicated by his intertwining of the words online and offline, as a result of the proliferation of digital technologies. Floridi (2015) discusses the transformations that have taken place as a result of technologies:

- “a. blurring the distinction between reality and virtuality;
- b. by blurring the distinctions between human, machine and nature;
- c. by reversing from scarcity to abundance, when it comes to information;
- d. by shifting from the primacy of entities over interactions to the primacy of interactions over entities” (p. 7).

From these transformations we can acknowledge that Floridi, and other ONLIFE contributors, are neither describing a technological utopia or dystopia like many other authors but instead discussing the possibilities and realities of technology as Russo (2018) writes regarding onlife:

“We are not “victims” of technology, but we create technology, in the first place” (p. 663).

Instead, the aims of the manifesto are that its:

“insights and recommendations will continue to flourish and expand their influence in the real world of ICT design, implementation and governance” (Simon & Ess, 2015, p. 162).

One of their key contributions was the need for digital literacy that is capable of:

“endorsing responsibility in a hyperconnected reality requires acknowledging how our actions, perceptions, intentions, morality, even corporality are interwoven with technologies in general, and ICTs in particular” (Floridi, 2015, p. 12).

3.3.2 Platform society

Van Dijck, Poell and De Waal (2018) define platforms in *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World* as:

“a programmable digital architecture designed to organize interactions between users—not just end users but also corporate entities and public bodies. It is geared toward the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, circulation, and monetization of user data” (p.4).

They argue that platforms do not exist in isolation, instead they are part of a ‘platform ecosystem’:

“an assemblage of networked platforms has evolved that puts lots of power in the hands of a few corporations that nestled themselves at the gateways of online sociality where they control crucial nodes of information services” (p. 12).

Of this assemblage of networked platforms, they discuss the Big Five; Alphabet-Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft, who dominate this ecosystem. They further distinguish platforms as infrastructural or sectoral with infrastructural deemed most influential. These platforms are typically owned by one of the Big Five, such as Apple’s Apple Store or Facebook’s Messenger, they:

“serve as online gatekeepers through which data flows are managed, processed, stored, and channeled” (p.13).

Many of these platforms thus reinforce each other as they explain:

“Alphabet, the corporate umbrella for all Google services, offers a number of key facilities in the ecosystem: a search engine (Google Search), a mobile operating system (Android), a web browser (Chrome), a social network service (Google+), an app store (Google Play), pay services (Google Wallet, Android Pay), an advertising service program (AdSense), a video-sharing site (YouTube), and a geospatial information system (Google Maps, Google Earth). Perhaps just as important but much less visible are crucial services such as Google Cloud Platform, which encompasses fifty-three services, including Google Compute (Hardy 2016). Verily Life Sciences (formerly Google Life Sciences) became an independent subsidiary of Alphabet in 2015” (p. 13).

Their enormous infrastructure makes it difficult for tech newcomers to enter this ecosystem, those that are able to penetrate it are often reliant on the infrastructure

created by the Big Five (such as Netflix that relies upon Amazon Web Services). As such, the Big Five are an incredibly powerful force:

“because they are uniquely able to connect and combine data streams and fuse information and intelligence” (p.16),

that have become inescapable in the 21st century which have led to them being referred to as “superplatforms” (Andersson-Schwarz, 2017).

Alternatively, sectoral platforms, as the name suggests, offer digital services related to one particular sector. Examples of such include Airbnb and Deliveroo, both of which connect service users with service providers. They discuss the ethical issues that arise from sectoral platforms including the way in which they impact public services as well as the precarious labour and highly publicised poor working conditions of those who facilitate the services offered by such platforms.

While I have distinguished between infrastructural and sectoral platforms, this distinction is much more complex in reality which van Dijck et al. attribute to:

“the volatile dynamics of this system: the status of platforms is subject to continuous change, a process we call “platformization.” The terms “infrastructural” and “sectoral” platforms...should therefore best be understood as roles and relationships that particular actors take on, rather than as fixed categories. These roles also shift over time and through context” (p. 19).

Together, these platforms contribute to a ‘platform society’:

“a term that emphasizes the inextricable relation between online platforms and societal structures...the term also refers to a profound dispute about private gain versus public benefit in a society where most interactions are carried out via the Internet. While platforms allegedly enhance personalized

benefits and economic gain, they simultaneously put pressure on collective means and public services” (p. 2).

They argue that while platforms have increasing power due to the platform society in which we exist, platforms often shirk their responsibilities to users and society, regarding their impact in favour of their own economic interests. They conclude that:

“Governing the platform society cannot simply be left to markets, if only because its infrastructure has come to penetrate all sectors, private and public” (p. 21).

3.3.3 Attention economy

Prior to the popularization of the term ‘attention economy’, Castells (1996) introduced the notion of an ‘information economy’ which was explained as:

“a new economy has emerged in the last two decades on a worldwide scale. I call it informational and global to identify its fundamental distinctive features and to emphasize their intertwining. I call it informational because the productivity and competitiveness of units or agents in this economy fundamentally depend upon their capacity to generate, process and apply efficiently knowledge-based information...it is informational and global because, under the new historical conditions, productivity is generated through and competition is played out in a global network of interaction. And it has emerged in the last quarter of the 20th century because the Information technology Revolution provides the indispensable, material basis for such a new economy. It is the historical linkage between the knowledge information base of the economy, its global reach, and, the Information Technology Revolution that gives birth to a new, distinctive economic system” (p. 77).

However, critics argued that it is not information that acts as currency within this new economy, due to the abundance of information which creates an information overload and therefore it must be attention, and its scarcity, which informs this economy. Simon (1971) summarises this with clarity:

“...in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious. It consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it” (p. 40-41).

Goldhaber (1997) expands on this to explain the way in which attention is accumulated:

“getting attention is not a momentary thing; you build on the stock you have every time you get any and the larger your audience at one time, the larger your potential audience in the future. Thus obtaining attention is obtaining a kind of enduring wealth, a form of wealth that puts you in a preferred position to get anything this new economy offers” (n.p.).

In Wu’s (2017) *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Struggle To Get Inside Our Heads*, Wu discusses how a platforms’ design can encourage users to spend more time on the platform thus resulting in greater attention, or data, that can be harvested. He references Skinner’s experiments in the 1960s and 1970s of operant conditioning on pigeons. These experiments discovered that random, rather than consistent, rewards yielded greater investment from the pigeons, a tactic which was later incorporated into the design of digital platforms.

However, it is not only platforms that benefit in the attention economy; Abidin (2016, 2018) discusses how internet celebrities and Influencers deploy acts

of visibility labour to accrue and retain visibility, and therefore attention, online. Influencers are then able to convert this attention into profit through the process of monetisation in numerous ways, through sponsored posts as well as compensation from platforms themselves, such as TikTok's 'Creator Fund', which Abidin (2021) highlighted the need for research considering its impact. In Sumpter's (2018) *Outnumbered: From Facebook and Google to fake news and filter bubbles-the algorithms that control our lives*, there is a discussion of a potential negative impact of this as it may lead to internet celebrities/Influencers posting extreme content:

“As they get more ‘likes’ and more ‘dislikes’, more advertising revenue and more sales on iTunes, they gain more attention and even more success. They are a product of an algorithm that rewards attention-seeking and shock value” (p. 120).

3.3.4 Networked Publics

A ‘public’ is defined as a group of people who have:

“a common understanding of the world, a shared identity, a claim to inclusiveness, a consensus regarding the collective interest” (Livingstone, 2005, p. 9).

There is no singular public but instead many publics which coexist and provide opportunities for discourse as well as identity expression (Fraser, 1992). The concept of the ‘public sphere’ introduced by Habermas (1989) explained how bourgeois public sphere shapes public opinion as the bourgeois owned the means of production, and therefore the means of opinion dissemination within the media. The advent of new technologies, notably Web 2.0, allowed for online democracy whereby anyone could share their opinion online, and as such they could use their lived experiences to challenge dominant discourses (Barassi, 2015, 2020).

In response to this boyd (2008) introduced the term ‘networked publics’ to describe:

“the spaces and audiences that are bound together through technological networks” (p. 125).

As such, an:

“imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice ... [T]hey allow people to gather for social, cultural and civic purposes, and they help people connect with a world beyond their close friends and family” (p. 39).

boyd discusses the ways in which young people utilise social media platforms to connect with others, sharing the information that they feel relevant to their networks, and remaining private to others.

Alongside networked publics are networked counterpublics (Renninger, 2015). As marginalised individuals are typically excluded from public spheres they respond by forming their own smaller public spheres known as subaltern counterpublics (Fraser, 1990). Similarly, counterpublics:

“are constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public. They are structured by different dispositions or protocols from those that obtain elsewhere in the culture, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying” (Warner, 2002, p. 423).

Renningers paper explores how asexual individuals create networked counterpublics online using Tumblrs affordances such as hashtagging which are then easily located and possible to ‘reblog’.

Zulli and Zulli (2022) have built upon the notion of networked publics and developed the concept of ‘imitation publics’ which they define as:

“a collection of people whose digital connectivity is constituted through the shared ritual of content imitation and replication” (p. 882).

Here imitation is acknowledged as a vital mode of engagement as well as a means of community building. In their paper, *Extending the Internet meme: Conceptualizing technological mimesis and imitation publics on the TikTok platform*, Zulli and Zulli focus on the platform TikTok where they describe how the sound feature is one of the platforms main means of imitation as it creates a template that is easily replicated. They also state that:

“imitation publics can form through the more general memetic processes that TikTok encourages, such as selecting, liking, and spreading content” (p. 882).

The algorithm that underpins the ‘For You Page’, the platforms main interface, is personalised tailoring content to users based on their previous engagements. They believe that ‘memetic behaviour’ leads to content curation as well as categorization of users and their identities with imitation publics including ‘straight TikTok’ for heterosexual users, being formed.

While publics can bring together individuals who may have never met, there is a risk that connecting likeminded people leads to the formation of ‘echo chambers’ (Sunstein, 2014) whereby individuals are rarely exposed to content online that is contrary to their pre-existing beliefs. These beliefs may then be reinforced and strengthened via a feedback loop. Furthermore, the use of algorithms may create filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011) that filter out content contrary to their pre-existing beliefs. It is important to note the distinction between these two terms, which are often conflated, while they have similar meanings echo chambers may be the result of self-selection (such as following hashtags that relate to them and their identities) whereas filter bubbles are the result of algorithmic personalization (such as being on ‘straight TikTok’). Another criticism is that such publics and

counterpublics are that they reduce individuals into homogenous groups brought together by one common factor rendering intersectional identities invisible (Crenshaw, 1991), functioning via exclusion rather than inclusion (Jones, 2023).

3.3.5 Data doubles

Haggerty and Ericson (2000) discuss in their paper what they refer to as the ‘surveillant assemblage’:

“drawing from the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to suggest that we are witnessing a convergence of what were once discrete surveillance systems to the point that we can now speak of an emerging ‘surveillant assemblage’. This assemblage operates by abstracting human bodies from their territorial settings and separating them into a series of discrete flows. These flows are then reassembled into distinct ‘data doubles’ which can be scrutinized and targeted for intervention. In the process, we are witnessing a rhizomatic leveling of the hierarchy of surveillance, such that groups which were previously exempt from routine surveillance are now increasingly being monitored” (p. 606).

Haggerty and Ericson write about the author George Orwell (1949) who they believe predicted this dystopia, however even he could not have predicted the extent to which emerging technologies could facilitate this. They continue to discuss how Foucault (1979) shared Orwells concerns, and discussed the panopticon, a concept developed by Bentham (1995) of prison design which increased the visibility of prisoners to the guards who may or not be watching at any given moment. Foucault believed that this type of surveillance, which could be used in settings other than prisons, essentially turns people into modern slaves who must conform to the norms set by those in power. While Foucault did not predict such a meteoric rise of technology, Haggerty and Ericson extend on this metaphor to explain the ways in which digital surveillance represents a legitimate threat in the modern world

whereby 'data doubles', a form of additional self, are sold to the highest bidder who makes profit from these decoporealised bodies.

Karaian (2016) applied data doubles to the practice of taking 'headless selfies', 'nudes' from which their head/face is excluded, which they argue show that young people, typically women, are more surveillance-savvy than adults give them credit for. In posting headless images these young women could express themselves, and their sexuality, whilst maintaining privacy and plausible deniability to the identity of the body which they considered 'safe sexting'.

3.3.6 Algorithmic identity

Cheney-Lippold (2011) discusses algorithmic identities:

“an identity formation that works through mathematical algorithms to infer categories of identity on otherwise anonymous beings. It uses statistical commonality models to determine one's gender, class, or race in an automatic manner at the same time as it defines the actual meaning of gender, class, or race themselves. Ultimately, it moves the practice of identification into an entirely digital, and thus measurable, plane.” (p. 165).

Algorithmic identities are an additional identity that an individual has that exists only in virtual spaces. These algorithmic identities are created as a result of datafication:

“the transformation of the social actions of their users to quantified data”
(Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013, p. 78).

Datafication is governed by code, which determines what categories of identity are meaningful and how they are defined:

“are cultural objects embedded and integrated within a social system whose logic, rules, and explicit functioning work to determine the new conditions

of possibilities of users' lives. How a variable like X comes to be defined, then, is not the result of objective fact but is rather a technologically-mediated and culturally-situated consequence of statistics and computer science" (Cheney-Lippold, 2011, p. 167).

This then results in categorisation, whereby algorithms infer categories of identity for a user.

These algorithmic identities have real life consequences for users, as the categorisation upon which it relies not only impact the advertisements that a user may see online but they may also

“structure users' conditions of possibilities, be it their access to privacy rights, social relations, or knowledge itself” (Cheney-Lippold, 2017, p. 169).

While users are becoming increasingly aware of the data tracking that results from their online activities, likely due to the increase in popular discourse in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica Scandal, and the way that it impacts digital marketing, many feel they must tolerate this in order to exist in online spaces (Ofcom, 2020; Kant, 2020; Kennedy, 2020). Other users enjoy being profiled, finding validation when they are 'seen' (Kant, 2020) however these users may not truly realise platforms intentions in doing so, as while it does create a better experience for the user the ultimate goal for the platform is to generate profit from users' data.

Furthermore, such processes rely on data which is often assumed to be bias free and reliable. However, in reality this is never the case because the data we collect is subject to our biases as researchers as well as biases within a specific context. For example, within the US there is a higher rate of Black men in prisons compared to white men, whereby black men make up 35% of the prison population but only 13% of the US population (Hinton, Henderson & Reed, 2018). This

suggests that this is not due to there being more Black criminals but other factors, such as racial biases and lack of resources to afford legal counsel, that make Black people more likely to go to prison (Kamalu, Coulson-Clark & Kamalu, 2010; Liberman & Fontaine, 2015). This bias is then replicated by algorithms, such as predictive policing algorithms which identify Black criminals as future reoffenders at a much higher rate than other ethnicities (Angwin et al., 2022; Flores, Bechtel & Lowenkamp, 2016) highlighting that algorithms are not the objective entities they are assumed to be. This is unsurprising given that algorithms rely on humans, for their creation and for the biased data they provide (as discussed). Typically, those who create algorithms are white men, since the exclusion of women in the computer industry in the 1960/70s (see Hicks, 2017) and as such holds Silicon Valley values (Marwick, 2013).

3.3.7 Digital Inclusion and Exclusion

Thompson (2016) argues that:

“full and democratic participation in the information society depends upon digital inclusion, which must extend even to the most disadvantaged segments of society” (p.38).

When digital exclusion occurs certain individuals are not able to access the opportunities and benefits that result from digital technologies (Mervyn, Simon & Allen, 2014; Williams, Philip, Farrington & Fairhurst, 2016; Andrade & Doolin, 2016).

“digital inclusion is about having the right access, skills, motivation and trust to confidently go online” (Government Digital Strategy, 2014, n.p).

Within debates regarding digital inclusion and exclusion the term ‘digital divide’ is commonly referred to to explain the unequal access to digital technologies that exists, also known as the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ (Campos-Castillo, 2015;

Mubarak, 2015; Mariën & Prodnik, 2014; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019). However, we have now entered the second wave of the ‘digital divide’ whereby internet/technology access is not enough to be digitally included but instead literacies, skills, and usage constitute digital inclusion (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste & Shafer, 2004; Thompson, 2016).

There is a breadth of literature relating to the term digital inclusion with no overarching consensus on a definition. Whilst this research does not seek to define the term itself, I utilise the framework provided by Bradbrook and Fisher (2004) regarding the 5 C’s of digital inclusion: connectivity, capability, content, confidence, and continuity.

Research suggests a number of barriers that prevent digital inclusion thus leading to exclusion, ranging from lack of access, purchase costs, poor digital skills, and lack of trust in digital platforms/services (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2019; Borg, Boulet, Smith & Bragge 2018; Mahmood, Weerakkody & Chen, 2018; Al-Muwil, Weerakkody, El-Haddadeh & Dwivedi, 2019). Robinson et al. (2020) take on a somewhat intersectional approach to this digital exclusion which they term the ‘digital inequality stack’. They argue that this comprises ‘legacy’ and ‘emerging’ digital inequalities, the former includes identity characteristics as discussed in the first section of this chapter whilst the latter comprises:

“the platform economy, digital labour, automation, big data, the use of algorithms in the criminal justice system, cybersafety, civic engagement, mobility, gaming, well-being and the life course, and assistive technologies” (Robinson et al., 2020, p.2).

3.3.8 Suppression of identities online

Research has suggested that not all identities are made visible online and as such prevents true democratic participation online. Citron and Solove (2021) describe how algorithms enact discriminatory harm that significantly affects

marginalized communities. Such communities face consequences such as demonetisation (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020; Ma & Kou, 2021) or shadowbanning with groups such as women (Cook, 2019), sex workers (Are, 2020, 2021, 2022; Blunt et al., 2020), LGBTQ+ individuals (Salty, 2019; Rauchberg, 2022), and people of colour at greater risk (Salty, 2019).

Shadowbanning has been defined by influencers as:

“Instagram’s attempt at filtering out accounts that aren’t complying with their terms. The Shadowban renders your account practically invisible and inhibits your ability to reach new people. More specifically, your images will no longer appear in the hashtags you’ve used which can result in a huge hit on your engagement. Your photos are reported to still be seen by your current followers, but to anyone else, they don’t exist.” (Tooby, 2017, n.p.).

Influencers are impacted by shadowbanning as it reduces the visibility of their posts to their audiences therefore limiting their ability to earn money from their labour. However platforms, including Instagram, initially denied shadowbanning content. This practise has been referred to as ‘platform gaslighting’, defined as:

“the structural gaslighting that occurs when platforms deny a set of practices which certain users know to be true...When platforms deny something like shadowbanning and users feel the impact of it, it creates an environment in which the shadowbanned user is made to feel crazy, as their reality is being denied publicly and repetitively by the platform. (Blunt et al., 2020, p. 79).

Instead users were made to believe that their lack of success on the platform was due to poor content or ‘glitches’ (Cotter, 2023). Later, Instagram admitted to such practises however were careful to avoid using the word shadowbanning instead stating that:

“will filter that account’s content from appearing in Explore and hashtag pages’ (Cook, 2020, n.p.).

Social media users and influencers have developed tactics to overcome such shadowbans including the use of algospeak, defined by Klug, Steen and Yurechko (2023) as:

“the practice of intentionally shortening, misspelling, or substituting specific words as part of creating and sharing content on social media platforms” (p. 234).

Participants in their study use algospeak to make visible those as previously mentioned that platforms are attempting to render invisible. Examples include ‘accountant’, referring to sex workers; le\$bean, referring to lesbians; and blk and yt referring to race, black and white. However, those who engaged in the practice also felt they shouldn’t need to with one participant stating:

“I would like to be in a situation where I don’t have to use algospeak to avoid suppression” (p. 237).

Similarly, van der Nagel (2018) discussed the practise of Voldemorting:

“not mentioning words or names in order to avoid a forced connection” (p. 82).

They discuss the term as coming from the popular Harry Potter franchise, in which the villain Voldemort’s name is used in a spell to make people ‘findable’. They compare this to online searches:

“web pages containing particular words or phrases are returned when someone enters them into a search engine. Voldemorting has become a key tactic of making things invisible while discussing them online” (p. 87).

3.4 Conclusion

Within this chapter I have explored relevant theories regarding identity and digital identity. Within the section ‘Identity’ I have defined relevant key terms to give the reader a deeper understanding of relevant debates concerning aspects of identity. I have highlighted the bias that exists regarding identity and the need for greater inclusion, including through the use of inclusive language, in research as well as within wider society. Within the section ‘The impact of digital transformation on society’ I have discussed theories related to the proliferation of digital technologies and their impact on society as well as identity. It has been made apparent the opportunities that digital technologies provide for society as one’s as expressing one’s identity but also the challenges some may face in a digital world which reflects the biases of creators and therefore the world. These biases, and the exclusion and/or erasure of certain identities, are of particular interest in this research and warrants further study.

Alongside the research question raised in the previous chapter I raise these questions as a result of this chapter:

How are gender/sex and sexuality enacted in digital spaces?

Are digital spaces equitable regarding gender/sex and sexuality?

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will identify and explain the methodology used in terms of its appropriateness for the research questions already iterated. The term paradigm is attributed to Kuhn (1962), who used it to describe a philosophical way of thinking. Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue that the paradigm comprises three distinct components; the epistemology, ontology, and methodology. This chapter identifies four main paradigms: positivism, social constructionism, critical, and postmodernism. This chapter discusses these paradigms and explains the rationale for the critical paradigm adopted by the researcher.

Regarding the epistemological aspect, I explore the branch of philosophy concerned with defining knowledge. Critical researchers question existing knowledge's biases, recognising the historical exclusion of marginalised groups, such as young people, women, and minorities, from research. As such, this project adopts a non-traditional approach to knowledge production, emphasising that stakeholders, in this case young people and teachers, rather than the researcher, are experts.

This chapter also addresses ontology, which studies the assumptions researchers make about the reality of the social phenomena they investigate. Within the critical paradigm, reality is seen as historically constituted, shaped by power relations and reproduced by individuals within society. This project focuses on examining the inequalities related to sex, gender, and sexuality, heavily influenced by feminism and queer theory, while also considering the impact of race, class, and ability.

The methodology section explains the research design and methods chosen to address the research questions. The critical paradigm, being flexible, allows the adoption of various methods, here Action Research is deemed suitable given its ability to encourage sustainable change and addressing unequal power relations and oppression. The chapter also introduces the three research cycles informed by Kemmis and McTaggart's (2000) approach, highlighting the interplay between planning, acting, observing, and reflecting throughout the research.

Moreover, this chapter outlines the overview of methods used in each cycle, and how these were impacted by the Covid pandemic which forced adaptations to be made. This chapter also explores ethical considerations, particularly regarding young people's participation in research and those associated with Action Research. Finally, the researcher's reflexivity is discussed, acknowledging the power dynamics at play and considering their own positionality.

4.2 The research paradigm

Kuhn (1962) was the first to use the term paradigm to refer to a philosophical way of thinking. The term has its etiology in the Greek word *paradeigma*, meaning pattern, in reference to the patterns of thinking and doing in research. Researchers use the term to refer to their own assumptions/worldview and how these views affect how we understand reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) (Schwandt, 2001) which then typically informs the methodology/ies used (Creswell, 2014).

While some researchers would contest this, there are typically considered to be four main paradigms: positivism, social constructionism, critical and postmodernism (DeCarlo, 2018). The positivist paradigm was initially defined by French philosophers, the likes of Comte and Durkheim, and is often considered the foundation of the scientific method. This paradigm assumes that knowledge and reality are objective, impartial of the human mind. While positivism to this day has its place in research, acting as the foundation for experiments, it does not

align with the aims and values of the current project. Instead, this project is informed by the critical paradigm which was established post World War II at the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer, a main figure at the institute, felt that the positivist paradigm, and its related methods, were inappropriate for the study of social sciences as its emphasis on logic and quantifiability was oversimplistic and could not be used to understand nor explain human behaviour. Horkheimer (1972) stated that “science and its interpretation are two different things” (p. 135), something typically not considered in the positivist approach. Additionally, those at the Frankfurt school criticised the concept of empiricism arguing that rather than being objective knowledge it is simply a popular opinion of scientists (Adorno, 2000). Marx supported this view, highlighting that positivism benefited those who were already wealthy and powerful within a society and thus such research often represented the interests of the bourgeoisie with the proletariat often unable to provide any recourse due to their lower status and fewer resources (Travers, 2009). These concerns are valid still today with marginalized groups such as the working class (Wakeling & Savage, 2015) and women (Higher Education Staff Statistics, 2019) making up the minority within academia thus traditionally powerful voices still remain so.

The core tenets of the critical paradigm are power, inequality, and social change (Barros, 2010). The aim of critical research is often to gain a deeper understanding of preexisting power relations and inequality and to achieve meaningful social change. As Horkheimer (1982, p. 244) stated, a critical paradigm seeks:

“human emancipation to liberate human being from the circumstances that enslave them”.

And whilst the critical paradigm relies upon critical theory, Gibson (1986) notes that:

“it is vital to grasp at the outset that there is no such thing as unified critical theory. Rather there are critical *theories*” (p. 3).

4.3 Epistemology

Epistemology, from the Greek word *episteme*, meaning knowledge, refers to the branch of philosophy concerned with what constitutes knowledge (Cooksey & McDonald, 2019). Critical researchers assume that existing knowledge is fraught with bias given that traditionally research only included white men as participants. This has had significant impacts in many fields including public health, for example the most well-known symptoms of heart attack relate to the way in which heart attacks present in men thus leading to negative consequences for women who may go undiagnosed and untreated (see Lorber & Moore, 2002). In contrast, critical theorists argue:

“that in human affairs all ‘facts; are socially constructed, humanly determined and interpreted, and hence subject to change through human means...Critical theory questions orthodox scientific assumptions that facts are value free, and that these facts can be described and examined as language that is neutral and objective. In contrast, assert critical theorists, no social fact is value-free, language is always loaded, and objectivity depends on where you happen to be standing (or, rather, placed) in the social world” (Gibson, 1986, p. 4).

As such the current project, like much contemporary research, takes a non-traditional approach to knowledge production aiming to avoid basing the work on prior assumptions and rather than considering the researcher an expert they instead act as an inquisitor, curious to learn from the participants about their experiences and beliefs regarding their digital lives and selves. Given that there is an emerging body of work highlighting the power dynamics that exist on social media platforms (see Simpson & Semaan, 2021) the critical paradigm explores these power relations

and aims to challenge, if not abolish, them. However, it must be noted that the researcher themselves upon beginning the research fit the inclusion criteria of the initial research cycle and therefore their own experiences and beliefs ought to be acknowledged within the research process and production of findings. The researcher often attempted to use this to minimize any potential power imbalances between themselves and the participants. Simple steps were taken to do this including dressing in casual clothing reflecting their age, and joining in on discussions using their own experiences from immersing themselves on digital platforms that are popular with young people.

As such, the knowledge generated from this project, in every sense will come from young people who are all too often have their voices go unheard on the issues concerning them. Here, young people are considered experts of the issues that they face and therefore the knowledge generated is immediately more valuable than traditional research which projects concerns/issues onto young people. Overall, the project intends to extend beyond simply adding to the academic knowledge base but instead create, or begin to create the circumstances for, social change that would benefit young people who increasingly grow up on technologies and in ways that adults do not truly understand. This would hopefully create the conditions that young people, all young people from all backgrounds, would require to flourish and participate in the digital world that are meaningful and positive (Reason & Torbert, 2001).

4.4 Ontology

The term ontology again has Greek origins, on refers to being while logia means study. Therefore, ontology is essentially the study of being. Scotland (2012) elaborated on this simple principle explaining that ontology is concerned with the assumptions we make regarding the reality of the social phenomena we are studying.

Those informed by the critical paradigm assume that reality is historically constituted, taking into account power relations, and is produced and reproduced by individuals within a society (Myers, 2009). The project focussed on the inequalities that have persisted over time relating to sex, gender and sexuality and as such was heavily influenced by feminism and queer theory. Over the course of the project it became apparent that other dimensions of oppression were relevant, and often could not be separated from sex, gender and sexuality. As such the project considers the impact of race, class and ability. Please refer to Chapter 2: Theoretical framework for a discussion of relevant theories that informed the project. Specifically, this project is interested in youth cultures, or more aptly youth subcultures (Gibson, 1986).

“Youth culture is interpreted as a specific form of challenge and resistance to dominant adult culture and thus a potential source of social change” (Gibson, 1986, p. 9).

Critical theorists argue that youth subcultures afford young people with self-esteem as well as a collective identity, an interest of this study which aims to understand the formation of youth subcultures in digital spaces.

4.5 Methodology

The term methodology is used to refer to the research design, methods, approaches and procedures used in an attempt to address a specific set of research questions/aims (Keeves, 1997).

Unlike other research paradigms, the critical paradigm does not prescribe methodologies (such as the way positivism prescribes scientific experiments) and is much more flexible in adopting different methods providing they have the ability to produce positive social change which Stringer (2007) elaborates that it should be democratic, equitable, liberating and life enhancing. An Action Research methodology is deemed appropriate as its aim is to encourage

sustainable change in response to a social problem (Hayes, 2011; Madaya, 2006; Meyer, 2000). Its ability to address unequal power relations and oppression makes it well suited as a methodology within the critical paradigm adopted here. Action Research has been defined as:

“a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 4).

Action Research was initially developed as a methodology by Lewin (1946) in response to the over reliance of experimental methods that were deemed inadequate to study the complexities of social issues therefore Action Research typically relies on qualitative methods of inquiry. Lewin proposed a research cycle which comprised of planning, action and fact finding where reflection is encouraged throughout. Action Research is often utilised within the fields of public health (Baum, 2016; Cusack et al., 2018) and education (Burns, 2000; Morales, 2016) making it ideal for this multidisciplinary project that considers both public health and education. Carr and Kemmis (1983) are well known Action Researchers, particularly within the field of education and pedagogy, that advocate for the ‘socially critical school’ whereby educators research their own practice, whilst giving pupils more powers relating to the curriculum and learning experience. However, Gibson (1986), while advocating for Action Research in education:

“given the fact of evident inequalities in education” (p. 45),

highlight the complexities of teachers doing so, given that they are often in a contradictory position of being in a position of authority and at the same time encouraging young people to challenge those in positions of authority.

Regarding digital lives, a number of studies have successfully employed Participatory Action Research, such as Bruinenberg et al.'s (2021) exploration of young migrants' critical media literacies. Such studies have been praised for their ability to situate youth voices and challenge hegemonic ideas leading to change (Burke & Greene, 2015).

Hussain, Elyas and Nasseef (2013) state that a critical paradigm can utilise quantitative, qualitative and mixed-method approaches; afterall, Thomas (2017, p.154) stated that "the emphasis is on problem-solving in whatever way is appropriate". However critical researchers typically adopt a qualitative approach, this is likely due to its ability to empower participants by sharing their voices and being heard regarding the oppression that they themselves have faced. Hence throughout this thesis I use the term participants rather than subjects due to the individuals participating in research, conducting research with them rather than on them, an important facet of Action Research (McNiff, 2013; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Additionally, Action Research challenges the typical heirarchical nature of researchers and participants whereby the notion of researcher as expert is challenged, instead participants here act as experts and the researcher takes on the role of inquisitor (Kinson, Pain & Kesby, 2007). However, at times the project utilises quantitative methods when they are deemed appropriate for addressing the research aims (Mills, 2011). Action Research can also utilise a range of methods, which this project does, and as such the methods of each cycle will be discussed in their respective chapters.

4.5.1 The Action Research cycles

While there are many theories of Action Research typically the key stages involve planning acting and reflecting. This project was inspired by Kemmis and McTaggart's (2000) approach which involves a spiral of cycles comprised of 3 key stages: plan, act and observe, and reflect. Their approach is flexible in that they acknowledge that Action Research is messy and often cycles overlap and

encourage researchers to be willing to change their initial plans to suit the needs of the project from the reflections they have made.

The graphic below shows the 3 research cycles of this project:

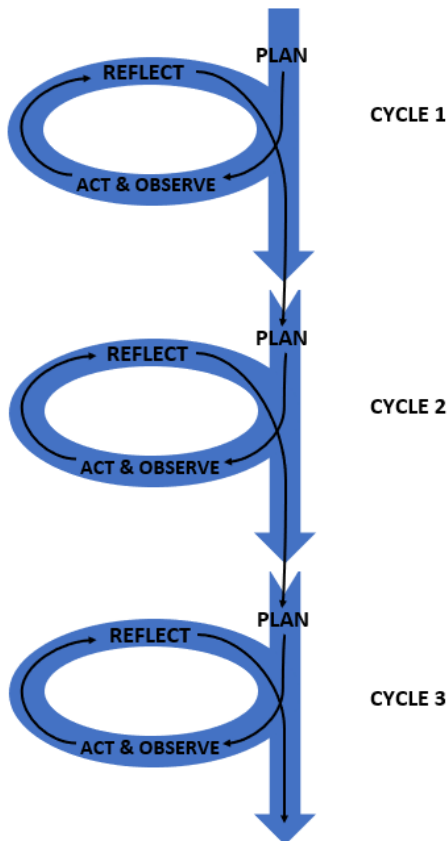


Figure 1: The Action Research spiral

Cycle 1 depicts the beginning of the project with the planning stage involving creating an interview schedule based upon existing literature. Act and observe involved conducting interviews with young people regarding their TikTok use. The researcher reflected on the findings of these interviews to inform the next cycle.

During the planning stage of Cycle 2 the researcher designed a digital literacy intervention informed by the findings of Cycle 1. The act and observe

stage involved asking current teachers their thoughts on the intervention. Reflecting on these findings informed the next cycle.

The planning stage of Cycle 3 involved tweaking the intervention and finding a host to trial the intervention. The act and observe stage involved the conducting of workshops to trial the intervention. The reflection stage informed the write up of the project and the key areas which still need to be addressed.

4.5.2 Overview of methods used

Whilst the specific methods used for each research cycle will be discussed in their relevant chapters (5, 6, and 7) here I will provide a brief overview of the methods used and their relation to the methodology.

Cycle 1 utilises an interview method, typical of a qualitative approach. The interviews are conducted with 12 young people to hear their views and act as a starting point for this research project. Given the constraints of the Covid 19 pandemic these interviews were digitally facilitated via the platform Zoom. These interviews are transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The method used in Cycle 2 is an online survey completed by 6 secondary school RSE teachers. The survey collected demographic data as well as data pertaining to the perceived positives and negatives of the intervention. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and were analysed using content analysis.

Cycle 3 utilises a case study approach with an ethnographic method, common in Action Research given its ability to understand preexisting power dynamics. The setting for the ethnography is a youth group in a highly deprived area within the North East of England. The methods used include interviews with the youth worker who led the sessions as well as observations and reflections that

were reported by the researcher who assisted at the sessions. Both the interview transcripts and the fieldnotes were analysed using thematic analysis which revealed 2 themes; assumed learning skills and prior knowledge, and gender/sex differences.

4.5.3 The impact of Covid

Ideally, a participatory Action Research approach would have been adopted due to its ability to enact positive change for and by those affected by an issue. While some academics use the terms Action Research and participatory Action Research interchangeably, it can be argued that Action Research is inherently participatory. However, the current project was unable to facilitate the type of collaboration that makes Action Research truly Participatory Action Research. McIntyre (2008) defined PAR as:

“an approach characterized by the active participation of researchers and participants in the co-construction of knowledge; the promotion of self-and critical awareness that leads to individual, collective, and or social change; and an emphasis in a co-learning process where researcher and participants plan, implement, and establish a process for disseminating information gathered in research-a recursive process that involves a spiral adaptable system that include questioning a particular issue, reflecting upon and investigating the issue, developing an action plan, and implementing and refining the said plan” (p.5).

This fundamental principle of PAR, the inclusion of participants in all aspects of the research process, was not possible during the Covid pandemic.

The initial cycle of research was conducted between October 2020 and March 2021, during a lockdown in the UK, technology was invaluable in enabling the research process to begin. However, this also created issues in that participants were required to participate from their own homes with one potential participant being unable to do so as they had not ‘come out’ to their parents, who they were

residing with due to lockdown. This highlights the unequal participation of certain individuals and therefore an exclusion of their experiences. Additionally, while the use of technology allowed participants from multiple areas of the UK to participate, it made it implausible to attempt to continue the process with these initial participants who were unknown to each other and did not necessarily live within the vicinity of the researcher.

4.6 Ethical considerations

Sieber (1993) defined ethics as a:

“set of moral principles and rules of conduct” which in research refers to “the application of a system of moral principles to prevent harming or wronging others, to promote the good, to be respectful, and to be fair” (p. 14).

All academic research is subject to ethical scrutiny and for this project the ethical approach adopted was subject to scrutiny and approval by Newcastle University’s Faculty of Medical Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

4.6.1 Ethical considerations in AR

When discussing the ethical considerations raised in Action Research, much of the albeit limited literature stems from the fields of organisational research or pedagogical research. While the current project is not truly situated within either of these fields, while acknowledging the role of education within the project the researcher does not work in education, this literature provides a basis for situating ethical considerations relevant to this project. Particularly useful are the contributions from pedagogical research which explicitly consider the ethical considerations associated with research involving young people, further discussed below.

Many researchers who utilise AR note the challenges they face when attempting to communicate with ethics committees and the ethics policies that universities impose given that AR is undefined at the beginning, always having the potential to change which can make it difficult to anticipate all ethical issues that could arise over the research period (Morton, 1999; Walker & Haslett, 2002). Gelling and Munn-Giddings (2011) note:

“As part of the application for ethical approval, the REC needs a clear description of the individual roles of all those involved in the project and as clear as possible a description of the research methods being used. Action researchers should not try to guess how the research will proceed and RECs need to demonstrate greater flexibility in reviewing AR projects” (p. 106).

Specifically relating to AR, ethical concerns have been raised relating to the duality of researchers who are bound to two, potentially conflicting groups; the academic institutions which they represent and the ‘client’ or communities they serve (McKay & Marshall, 2001; Rapport, 1970). This creates a dilemma for researchers who may be required to make an academic contribution, in the form of publications, as well as a practical contribution. This can be difficult for researchers given that these tasks do not always align and they may face pressure from either group to focus on one of these duties. I highlight that the value in Action Research does not necessarily come from publications but the potential change that can occur as a result however I acknowledge the pressure that researchers face from their academic institutions, either explicitly or implicitly, to publish and how this may affect funding decisions, future job roles, and the value assigned to their work.

However, as Denzin (1989) states:

“our primary obligation is always to the people we study, not to our project or to a larger discipline. The lives and stories that we hear and study are

given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared them with us” (p. 83).

As such, researchers should attempt to focus on their duties towards the communities in which they work alongside. They must ensure that those who participate/collaborate on the project are subject to confidentiality and anonymity. These constructs can be understood as:

“not having identifying characteristics such as name or description of physical appearance disclosed so that the participants remain unidentifiable to anyone outside the permitted people promised at the time of informed consent. Anonymity is only one aspect of ensuring confidentiality. It involves using a fictional or no name at all rather than the participant’s real name” (Doyle, 2007, p. 81-82).

4.6.2 Ethical considerations when working with young people

As previously mentioned confidentiality and anonymity should always be taken seriously, however even more so when working with young people. While I will discuss the ethical considerations for each stage of the research in their relevant data chapters I note here that confidentiality and anonymity was maintained at all times, no names of individuals or institutions are shared within this work so as to protect those who were involved in the research from disclosure. That said, I fully acknowledge their contribution to the research, which would not have been possible without them, but feel it important that their personal details are not in any way linked to this thesis.

Other concerns relate explicitly to the involvement of young people in research. Pinter’s (2014) review of young peoples participation in research found three constructions; children as objects, children as subjects, and children as co-researchers. While I do not consider any of those who were involved in this research

as children, instead young people, I highlight how in this Action Research project they were considered co-researchers. In particular, young peoples involvement in Cycle 1 guided the entire project as well as shaping the implications of the research based upon young peoples priorities.

Futhermore, informed consent is essential in all research however some ethical considerations are raised regarding young people and their ability to provide informed consent. Alderson and Morrow (2020) note that within English law those under 16 can give valid consent so long as they are consideres competent to do so. This competence is seen as an understanding of what is being proposed. However, this is often contested particularly by ethics committees who are often overly cautious and conservative denying the value of research with young people as well as the value they may recieve from participating. Research by Chabot et al. (2012) regarding young peoples sexual health faced interference from public bodies who required consent forms from the young peoples parents which the researchers believed to be a:

“violation of the youth’s right to personhood” (p. 26).

I experienced similar difficulties regarding the involvement of young people over the research period which will be discussed in their relevant chapters.

While these concerns have been rasied, the importance of young people in research, particularly in topics regarding them, is vital. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 (UNCRC) emphasises young people’s right to freedom of expression (Article 13.1), particularly in matters concerning them and their lives (Article 12.1). Furthermore, young peoples involvement in this research is crucial given that young people are:

“experts at being young, and they can offer solutions adults would not necessarily think of” (Nesbitt, 2001, p. 331).

4.7 Reflexivity

Reflexivity can be defined as:

“turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognize and take responsibility for one’s own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation” (Berger, 2015, p. 220).

Reflexivity is a practise utilised by qualitative researchers to ensure the quality and rigour of their research, allowing trustworthiness to be established (Teh & Lek, 2018). In doing so they combat the limitations assumed of qualitative research by positivists by acknowledging their role in the research and therefore their role in the knowledge that is produced as a result (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Kosygina, 2005). Berger (2015) highlighted the importance of reflexivity by researchers:

“Researchers need to increasingly focus on self-knowledge and sensitivity; better understand the role of the self in the creation of knowledge; carefully self-monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on their research; and maintain the balance between the personal and the universal” (p. 220).

A fundamental part of reflexivity is consideration of the power relations at play between the researcher and those involved in the research. Particularly in the case of this project with its critical paradigm it is important to consider the power that the researcher holds and to reflect on this throughout the research. Mitchell et al. (2018) argued:

“critically oriented reflexivity has become a tool for scholars to identify the threads of their own complicity” (p. 674).

Although, it is also important to note that methodologies such as Action Research can help to reduce such power imbalances as stated by Dodgson (2019):

“Participatory research methods, when conducted appropriately, minimize these power differences, as all who participate in the research are seen as equal partners in developing, creating, analyzing, and disseminating research products” (p. 221).

As such, here it seems appropriate to provide a description of the researchers positionality so that it can be considered within the context of this research. I am a young white woman from a working class background who has spent my lifetime living in deprived areas of the North East of England. However, my education is perhaps not reflective of this background and I have been grateful to receive opportunities that have led me here today to be a PhD researcher. While I acknowledge my inherent biases, given that I lack the life experiences associated with being a member of the LGBTQ+ community or ethnic minority, I consider my own experiences and as such employ empathy and a desire to hear others' voices.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the methodology of the project including the paradigm, epistemology, ontology, methodology, ethical considerations, and reflexivity. I explain the critical paradigm adopted due to its ability to address power imbalances, aiming to challenge if not abolish them. Within the ontology section, I discuss how these power imbalances are historically produced, and now reproduced within contemporary society. The methodology is informed by the paradigm, epistemology, and ontology discussed. The overall research approach adopted is Action Research given its alignment with the critical paradigm and its ability to challenge existing power relations and facilitate social change. I discuss the three research cycles involved in this project and how they align with Kemmis and McTaggart's (2000) approach, involving planning, acting, observing, and

reflecting. The research takes an overall qualitative approach although at times involves quantitative elements. I discuss the ethical considerations involved in this project, notably those that are concerned with the involvement of young people in research as well as those associated with Action Research. At this stage I discuss the difficulties of researchers who must contend with ethical approval boards who may not consider the value of Action Research and/or the involvement of young people in research. Finally, I provided a discussion of reflexivity as well as my own positionality as a researcher discussing the potential power dynamics at play.

Chapter 5: Cycle 1

5.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the first research cycle, of three, presented in this thesis. I begin by explaining the rationale for the focus on the novel platform TikTok, how TikTok is situated within the preexisting literature discussed in the Theoretical Framework (Chapter 3) and describe what this study adds to the literature. I then go on to discuss the method where I describe the use of qualitative interviews with 12 young people that are facilitated by Zoom. I also discuss the ethical considerations of conducting research that is digitally mediated as well as those that arise when working with young people.

The data collected are analysed using thematic analysis to reveal five themes: coping (in Covid), learning, algorithmic harms, FYP=IRL, and authenticity. Within the subsection coping in (Covid) I discuss how the young people in the study typically used TikTok to cope with the boredom and isolation associated with lockdowns. It was noted that belonging could be found on TikTok, and this was particularly beneficial for members of the LGBTQ+ community. Within the subsection learning I discuss the opportunities for learning on TikTok but also the existence of misinformation and the difficulties that young people experience in attempting to discern the two. Within algorithmic harms I identify the harms that young people identified as well as the resistance tactics they employed to avoid these harms. In FYP=IRL I discuss how discrimination is reproduced in digital spaces, which were once envisioned to be fair and equitable spaces. In authenticity I discuss the importance of authenticity online but the challenges that women, in particular influencers, have in being considered authentic. Within this chapter I introduce the term ‘algorithmic segregation’ which was coined to describe what many of the young people who participated experienced whereby the

unpersonalised FYP was filled with content from white, middle class, heterosexual, able bodied women and to diversify this required substantial effort from users. Alongside this I discuss the repercussions this may have for the monetisation of content which may result in marginalized creators not being fairly compensated for their labour.

5.1.1 Why TikTok?

The Covid-19 pandemic saw many countries issue ‘lockdowns’ to control the spread of the infection. TikTok, the social media newcomer that originated in China as Douyin, is a short-form video platform that allows users to create and consume content on the app, boomed in popularity over the Covid-19 pandemic (Mohsin, 2021; Parivudhiphongs, 2020) and in 2020 was the most downloaded app (Bellan 2020). Data suggests that users on average spend 89 minutes on the app per day, opening the app on average 19 times per day (Ingham, 2021). TikTok is particularly popular with young people with an estimated 60% of users belonging to Gen Z (Doyle, 2021) which raises concerns given that young people are typically considered to be at greater risk of online harms (O’Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

TikTok has received attention from academics and the press alike since its boom in popularity with studies highlighting how TikTok can prevent loneliness during a time of enforced isolation (Lisitsa et al., 2020). Additionally, TikTok appears to be a site of ‘virtual sex education’ (DeBianchi, 2020; Mooney, 2020) making it an interesting platform to study given the aims of this project. Furthermore, the majority of users are girls/women (Dekhil & Sarnou, 2021; Statista, 2023), which is unsurprising given women are typically the greatest users of social media (Brenner, 2012; Kimbrough, Guadagno, Muscanell & Dill, 2013; Park, Ging, Murphy & McGrath, 2023). While Kennedy (2020, p.1) has noted, “teenage girls rule the internet right now”, women are often considered more vulnerable online and are typically situated as “young impressionable girls” (Young, Kananovich & Johnson, 2023, p. 32). Women face the harshest

punishment online in terms of the ‘threat of invisibility’ from platforms themselves (Bucher, 2012; Roberts, 2018;) and from trolling and hate comments (Ging & Siapera, 2018; Morahan-Martin, 2000). As such the way in which gender/sex is enacted on TikTok is of interest in this study.

5.1.2 Situating TikTok within the literature

Different academics have attributed TikToks popularity to different factors; Anderson (2020) believed there is a growing trend towards

“video creation and sharing, from short looping videos to live-streaming” (p.7),

while others believe it’s due to its innovative algorithms (Chan, 2018) which are reported to comprise of 3 separate algorithms: a recommendation algorithm, a content-classification algorithm, and a user profiling algorithm (Wang, 2020). Abidin (2021) argued that it is the ‘templatability’ of user generated content that has made TikTok so popular, they explain templatability to:

“describe how a combination of vernacular norms by elite users on a platform and algorithmic recommendation systems that value and promote these norms result in...specific aesthetic choices, ways of crafting content, and strategies of attention grabbing on social (media) that then become ‘templates’” (p. 59).

Zulli and Zulli (2022) use the term ‘memesis’ to refer to the templatability and replication of TikTok content. Their work builds upon that of Shiffman (2013) who defines Internet memes as:

“units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience...groups of content items that were created with an awareness of each other and share common characteristics” (p. 367).

They go on to discuss what they consider imitation publics:

“wherein networks form through processes of imitation and replication, not interpersonal connections, expressions of sentiment, or lived experiences” (p. 873).

They compare imitation publics to networked publics, mentioned in Chapter 3, that form on other popular social media sites (see boyd, 2011). The shift away from ‘friends’ is replaced by the ‘For You Page’ (FYP) which compromises an algorithmically curated feed of content personalised to each individual user through their engagement (likes, comments, and sharing) with content (Marr, 2018).

In a similar vein, Vijay and Gekker (2021) believe that it is TikToks ‘spreadability’ that has users hooked as any video has the potential to go viral as the platform shares videos on the For You Page (FYP) without requiring you to have a pre-existing audience, as they stated:

“What makes the platform distinct is that replication and virality, or ‘spreadability’, are encoded as features of the platform; every TikTok video has the potential to spur the creation of another” (p.4).

As a result, ‘normal’ people have shot to fame with the two best examples being Addison Rae and Charli D’Amelio, both who have amassed millions of followers and have had opportunities including reality TV, film roles etc which has made TikTok exciting for young people themselves as they could reach these levels of success (Omar & Dequan, 2020).

However, TikToks popularity with young people has also raised an array of concerns including those related to the impact on young people and their wellbeing, as well as concerns regarding privacy and security given its Chinese ownership.

Critics argue that social media, and TikTok specifically, may lead to addiction in young people and such concerns seem warranted given the increased

reliance on technology during the pandemic. Given that social media apps utilise insights from behavioural psychology to increase the time a user spends on the platform which results in revenue for them via advertising. An example of such an insight is the absence of a stop sign (Ertemel & Aydın, 2018), specifically TikTok has an infinite scrolling feature on its main interface the 'For You Page' (Eskelinen, 2021; Petrillo, 2021). While the app introduced a 'screen time breaks' function within the Digital Wellbeing section of the settings, this must be opted in to rather than opted out which requires users to know about the feature to implement it (TikTok, 2019). Alternative strategies were outlined in Schellewald's (2022) study whereby users, rather than the platform itself, created videos considered 'TikTok rest areas' that encouraged viewers to take a break from TikTok. Both strategies lead to the self-responsibilisation of health and wellbeing (Kristensen & Ruckenstein, 2018) as the tools exist and so platforms shift the responsibility to users to show the restraint needed to avoid the harms associated with addictive design.

Studies have considered the existence of filter bubbles on TikTok, with Boeker and Urman (2022) believing that their experimental sock puppet audit methodology provides evidence of a filter bubble on the platform while Rach and Peter (2021) concluded that TikTok users may be at less risk of filter bubbles than Facebook users potentially due to less of a focus on social networks. To date there is inconclusive evidence to support the notion of echo chambers and filter bubbles on TikTok and social media more broadly, regardless we should be wary of the potential consequences of their existence including possible recruitment to extremist groups. Weimann and Masri's (2023) content analysis on TikTok highlights the alarming prevalence of Far-Right content on TikTok which they emphasised was a platform used by children as well as a platform in its infancy and therefore ill-equipped to deal with extremism. While Lewis (2018) argues that it may instead be Far Right influencers that have this impact rather than algorithms themselves both possibilities require further investigation and intervention given

that there is a correlation between online and ‘real world’ hate crimes (Siegel, 2020), specifically during Covid there has been an increase in hate towards Chinese communities both online and offline (Devakumar et al. 2020; Ng, 2020).

TikTok has been accused of censoring content of LGBT, disabled, ugly, poor and people of colour (Biddle, Ribeiro & Dias, 2020; Ryan, Fritz & Impiombato, 2020). In addition, academics have described how some users therefore have ‘algorithmic privilege’ (Karizat et al., 2021) likely because their identities are more marketable (Bishop, 2018) whereas others, such as those with the characteristics listed above do not, and as a result are vulnerable to further oppression and suffer ‘algorithmic exclusion’ (Noble, 2018). Additionally, topics like Black Lives Matter (BLM) are reportedly censored on TikTok (Columbo, 2021; Pomerantz & Field, 2021) under the guise of violating the ‘Community Guidelines’.

5.1.3 What this study adds to the evidence base

Upon the time of data collection there was relatively little academic research concerning TikTok (in comparison to social media giants like Facebook and Instagram). While since then a growing body of literature has been published, this work adds to this evidence base as well as expanding upon it. Unlike much of the literature this study focusses on everyday users rather than influencers (see Jaramillo-Dent, Contreras-Pulido & Pérez-Rodríguez, 2022; Zeng & Kaye, 2022) as influencers may have greater algorithmic awareness than a typical user. Additionally, few studies are conducted within the UK as similar studies are typically conducted in the United States of America (e.g. Simpson & Semaan, 2021) and often have specific samples such as only LGBTQ+ users (e.g. Reje Franzén, 2022; Simpson & Semaan, 2021) and therefore experiences may differ. Finally, during data collection the Creator Fund was introduced in the UK, which academics such as Abidin (2021) highlighted as an area for study, and this study is one of few to consider the impact of the Creator Fund.

5.2 Method

5.2.1 Design

As already discussed in the Methodology chapter, this thesis relies upon the critical paradigm and while this paradigm can utilise quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method approaches given its flexibility (Hussain et al., 2013), a qualitative approach is deemed most appropriate for this project given its aims of understanding young people's TikTok use rather than attempting to measure it. A semi-structured, open-ended interview methodology was chosen as it is considered the 'gold standard' in qualitative research (Haines-Saah & Oliffe, 2012) and has the potential to elicit in-depth information regarding a participant's experience or view of a given topic (Turner, 2010). Furthermore, it is particularly useful for novel topics such as this that are largely unstudied in everyday users, and this type of qualitative inquiry allows us to explore what people do and why they do it (Beeson, 1997).

5.2.2 Participants

Participants were recruited as volunteers using snowball sampling whereby the research opportunity was advertised and 'shared' on social networks and within participants' existing networks. The inclusion criteria for the study were that participants were 'young people' (aged between 16 and 25) and had used TikTok. The rationale for this was that those within this age range had finished, or were finishing, school and therefore it allowed establishment of to what extent young people learned about algorithms and their impact in their education, and at different educational levels. A total of fourteen people enquired about the study however one did not meet the inclusion criteria, and another lacked privacy due to Covid-19 restrictions and could not participate. The resulting twelve participants all resided in the United Kingdom and were aged between 16 and 25 with a mean age of 17.5. Of these, 7 were in full-time education (1 in secondary school, 2 in sixth form and

4 in university), the remaining 5 participants were employed and held degree-level qualifications. Two of these participants were working in education at the time, one as a primary school teacher and another as a secondary school teacher in training. These participants were able to provide a unique viewpoint of being young people themselves but also being educators of the next generation.

While most participants chose not to disclose their ethnicity/race, some chose to either in the demographic questionnaire or during interviews. One participant disclosed that they had immigrated from Asia as a child and another shared that they were an international student from the Caribbean and identified as black. For those that chose to share their race and/or ethnicity, it was clear that they felt this an important facet of their identity and impacted their experience on TikTok. A total of 6 participants self-identified as heterosexual (2 male and 4 female), 3 as bisexual (all female, and with one participant further specifying sapphic), 1 as homosexual (male), and 2 opted not to disclose this information. The samples bias towards females is considered by the researcher to have two potential causes; firstly, men are more difficult to recruit than women (see Oliffe & Thorne, 2007), and this may reflect TikTok's user base which is predominantly girls/women (Kennedy, 2020; Dekhil & Sarnou, 2021; Statista, 2023). Participants in this study were considered everyday users given that most did not create content on the app, those that did, did so casually and did not consider themselves influencers/TikTokers nor were they attempting to achieve virality. Instead, I considered participants prosumers (Toffler, 1980), given that they all preferred consuming content over producing it, and many reported attempting to curate their feed, the FYP.

5.2.3 Data collection

Prior to the interview potential participants were provided with materials appropriate to the study including a Participant Information Sheet, a consent form and a demographic questionnaire. The questionnaire asked participants their date

of birth, gender/sex (to adhere to our stance on gender/sex mentioned in Chapter 3), sexuality, and highest educational qualification completed. The questionnaire provided no pre-determined options for participants, instead allowing them to self-define responses and was not compulsory (although at the start of interviews it was checked that participants met the minimum age requirement). The questionnaire also stated:

“Before the study you may also wish to save some TikToks to share as part of the research however this is not a requirement.” (Appendix B).

However, in practise I found that this hindered interviews as it interrupted the flow of conversation and often participants struggled to locate TikToks that they were describing anyway.

Data was elicited through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between October 2020 and March 2021 via Zoom by the lead author. Research has shown that online interviews, such as those using Zoom, overcome barriers to participation relating to geographic location and financial ability to attend in person interviews (Gray, Wong-Wylie, Rempel & Cook, 2020). A semi-structured approach was chosen due to its use of open-ended questions that allow for a flow of conversation between participants and the researcher whereby the researcher can ask for clarification and elaboration meanwhile building rapport with participants through this back-and-forth dialogue (Brennan, 2017; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Furthermore, it's thought that semi-structured interviews facilitate discussion between equals (Sandelowski, 2002), and important consideration given that at the time of study the researcher met the study's inclusion criteria. The interview guide (appendix C) gives an overview of the typical structure of the interviews; despite having received consent prior to the study each interview began with the researcher clarifying the topic of the interviews, asking participants if they had any questions and receiving verbal confirmation of their consent to take part. They then began with some questions to build rapport and get to know participants

including asking about them, their lives and how they had been affected by Covid. Participants were then asked about their internet and social media initiation and how their internet and social media use had changed over the years. Interviews then narrowed down to their experiences on the platform TikTok, often comparing it to other platforms that they used, discussing the content that they liked to watch. Participants were also asked specifically about the algorithm that underpins the main interface, the For You Page, including their understanding of it as well as experiences with it. This often was the substantive element of interviews. However, the researcher allowed participants to somewhat guide the interviews by spending their time discussing the elements that were most interesting to them. In doing so, participants ‘owned’ the interview in that:

“the image is one of a respondent who owns his or her experience, who on his or her own, can narrate the story that is uniquely the respondent’s in that only his or her own voice can articulate it authentically” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p.36).

Interviews typically lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, however some were shorter, and some were longer.

5.2.4 Data analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data following transcription of the recordings verbatim as soon as possible after the interviews. The next step involved initial inductive coding by the lead author, firstly by hand and then utilising NVivo and consolidation with co-authors at regular intervals. Once it was deemed saturation had been reached, recruitment to interviews ceased and the focus was on the generation, review, defining and writing up of themes. Please see Appendix D for a visual representation of this process. During the write-up quotes from the interviews were used to illustrate both shared and differing viewpoints between participants.

5.2.5 Ethical considerations

The Covid-19 pandemic, and the lockdowns that were enforced to prevent the spread of the virus, made face-to-face research impossible. As such this research project was forced to change and as such interviews were conducted via Zoom which made research possible while also safeguarding researchers and participants (Lobe, Morgan & Hoffman, 2020). Some academics argue that the synchronous nature of Zoom replicates that of traditional in-person interviews (Marhefka, Lockhart & Turner, 2020) with Lobe et al. (2020) stating:

“most of the fundamental ethical issues in online interviewing are the same as in face-to-face contexts” (p. 7).

However, others believe that additional ethical considerations must be considered including participants privacy given that connecting via Zoom may intrude on a participant’s personal space (see Sy et al., 2020). While this can be mitigated by the use of virtual backgrounds and/or not having their camera on, I decided to not impose conditions regarding having the camera on/off for participants and instead left that for them to decide given that their comfort was of the utmost importance. I found that most participants preferred to have their camera on and this also benefitted the researcher as it made it possible to respond to body language.

The most serious ethical consideration I had was regarding a potential participant who was a member of the LGBTQ+ community but was not ‘out’ to their family, who they were staying with due to the pandemic. I felt the only way to ensure the safety of this individual was to have them not participate in the study given that accidentally ‘outing’ this individual if the interview was overheard could have serious repercussions. I feel this was the only appropriate choice given that:

“our primary obligation is always to the people we study, not to our project or to a larger discipline” (Denzin, 1989, p. 83).

However, this also means that this individuals' thoughts and feelings could not be shared as part of the study thus denying them the opportunity to participate in research that would benefit from their experiences.

Other ethical considerations relate to the storage of Zoom recordings and auto-generated transcripts. In this study, Zoom recordings were deleted immediately after transcription which occurred as soon as possible after the interviews. While I was told of the benefits of auto-generated transcripts by other researchers I found that they struggled to understand my Northern accent, and that of participants. As such it often had errors with one quite serious example being that it indicated I had told a participant that I loved them. As a result, I chose to discard the auto-generated transcripts and transcribed manually.

Furthermore, I initially intended to work with younger people during this research cycle. However ethical concerns were raised by the ethics committee regarding 'meeting' young people via Zoom. The ethics committee's requirement for the inclusion of young people (under 16) was that parents were present for the interviews. Given that having parents present would have impacted the interviews, as it would have prevented the young people from speaking openly about their experiences online as well as topics such as sexuality, it was decided that only those aged 16-25 were able to participate. While I support Chabot et al. (2012) notion that this is a:

“violation of the youth's right to personhood” (p. 26),

however, I also felt bound to the ethics committee as well as adhering to a timeframe which meant I had to continue with the research without the voices of those under 16.

5.3 Findings

5.3.1 Coping (in Covid)

The theme coping expressed the ways in which participants felt TikTok had helped them cope during the pandemic and had two subthemes: ‘belonging’ and ‘nostalgia’ as further discussed below.

Belonging

Participants described TikTok as a vital coping strategy providing them with a sense of belonging at a time when they desperately needed it. This desire for a sense of belonging was often the initial reason for downloading the app as many displayed FOMO (fear of missing out) often accompanied by a desire to cure the boredom that ensued during periods of lockdown. While many participants reported missing seeing friends and/or family because of restrictions and school/university closures;

“I just miss a lot of like I’m very like I need the social interaction... we just like thrive off social energy” (16, female),

TikTok acted as a diversion and as such participants reported spending more time on social media, including TikTok than pre-pandemic. As well as feeling that they could belong to a digital space in which other young people were investing, it provided a space for expression in which young people felt that they could belong to digital communities through memes which were easily recognisable and replicable. One participant, a teacher, noted that a social media presence was essential for young people to be accepted by their peers highlighting how young people’s online lives impact their offline lives:

“if you’re not online then it’s you’re a bit isolated and you’re seen as like a bit of a leper a like a social pariah if you don’t keep up with the social medias” (23, female).

This quote seems to replicate the earlier findings of boyd (2007) who quoted a teenager: “if you’re not on MySpace you don’t exist”. While platforms have changed over the years it’s clear that young people’s desire to exist on them has not. What is new is that while participants in boyd’s work discussed the need for their own profile, and thus individual identity (as well as collective by the networks they had with others), while here the participants discuss how important being on TikTok is for their sense of belonging within their community of peers with few posting online and therefore showing their individuality.

While TikTok mostly connects strangers according to common interests, participants felt that there was an immediate, shared connection given the shared reality of the pandemic that previous generations had not experienced. Strangers online were often brought together, in the form of youth subcultures, over shared interests including TV shows (those cited included, *Euphoria*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Bridgerton* and *WandaVision*), sport such as football, national and regional identities, and hobbies including those that participants described as ‘nerdy’ including gaming and cos play. Such subcommunities are felt to be valuable spaces of belonging especially when physical spaces are no longer available. As well as engagement over interests it also allowed communities to form, and the LGBTQIA+ community on TikTok is ever expanding with many, as this interviewee said, favouring the opportunities TikTok provides for ‘pseudonymity’ (Hanckel et al., 2019) in comparison to other social media platforms:

“on some platforms like Facebook for example I feel like it would be difficult to kind of express your sexuality the way that you can TikTok” (21, female).

Existing literature has emphasised the importance of social media as spaces for belonging and exploration for LGBTQIA+ youth (Lucero, 2017; Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021) and this research asserts that the platform TikTok can facilitate LGBTQIA+ belonging. While Zulli and Zulli (2022) believed that on

TikTok imitation publics would have greater significance than networked publics given the difference between TikTok and other social media sites here we see that publics, and counterpublics in the case of LGBTQ+ communities, have formed on TikTok. Additionally, TikTok provides ‘pseudonymity’ (Hanckel et al., 2019) given that, unlike many other social media platforms, it does not rely on existing social networks such as peers and relatives, whom may be unaware or unsupportive of an individual’s sexual/gender identity, but instead connects like-minded individuals. This was looked at favourably in comparison to platforms such as Facebook that have been known to ‘out’ someone by publicly sharing their ‘likes’ relating to LGBTQIA+ content. Additionally, over the pandemic many young people found themselves moving back to their family home or spending more time than ever with unsupportive families (Salerno, Williams & Gattamorta, 2020) and isolated from physical LGBTQ+ communities, both of which likely lead to an even greater reliance on these digital spaces (Cerezo et al., 2021). While LGBTQIA+ youth are typically considered to be at greater risk of mental health issues and suicide, scholars have suggested that the Covid-19 pandemic, and lockdowns, may have exacerbated these issues (Silliman Cohen & Bosk, 2020) highlighting the significance that online communities may have.

While most participants felt that TikTok was able to connect people and form communities, one participant had a different experience:

“to start with I thought oh yeah this is great but I think like just saw before I deleted it I think I was realising like this isn't I'm not I'm not using it to really message my friends and it's not really like I'm getting much it's not it's not really social media it's just like thing that I'm doing on my own so it's not like I know you might send the odd one to your friends but it's quite it's quite it's quite lonely when you think about it because you're sort of just scrolling on your own” (17, male).

However, he did go on to discuss how he would see others scrolling on TikTok together but chose to not participate:

“sometimes see people in the common room like sat next to each other and yeah like my friends did it and I just think you know they’re sort of just sat next to each other just scrolling through and I don't know I do find it a bit weird yeah so no not not really I don't really like to do that with my friends” (17, male).

Here the participant identifies how for some TikTok engendered connection while for him seemed to create or exacerbate isolation. The work of the scholar Lupinacci (2021) explores a similar concept whereby the ‘liveness’ of social media, which refers to the way in which immediate connection can be experienced via media, can create feelings of excitement, anxiety, reassurance, fatigue, and responsibility with at times the same individuals being affected by multiple and potentially paradoxical feelings. As such, we must consider that while many participants utilised TikTok to cope with the reality of a pandemic, feelings towards the platform and its use are more complex.

Nostalgia

Feeling and revealing in nostalgia, defined as a longing for and pleasure from remembering the past, was also reported as a significant contributor to coping. Given the impact of the pandemic, which hindered ‘normal’ life, in particular social activities, it is unsurprising that participants seemed to miss the past. Millennial participants went so far as to say that the past (90/00s) were a simpler time due to the lack of internet/social media and appreciated that they had grown up without what they clearly felt as the pressures of constant online connectivity that younger participants did. As such it seems somewhat ironic that 90s and 00s trends are viral, from Y2K fashion to the Friends Reunion, with both seeming to bring joy to those who engage with them. Others expressed ‘future nostalgia’, an excitement for when things can resume to the normalcy of the past in the post-Covid era, especially the restored freedom to travel. This desire to travel was linked with struggling with the

constraints of lockdown and respondents would watch travel related content on social media saying that they were dreaming of ‘better times’ where they could travel, make new memories and experience different cultures. A study by Zhou et al. (2022) found that loneliness was associated with nostalgia which in turn increased happiness. Given that many will have struggled during the pandemic, and continue to do so, nostalgia should be considered a viable coping strategy that can help people cope and ‘future nostalgia’ can provide a sense of hope for the future.

Arguably, TikTok’s recent success can be credited both to this future nostalgia and with many unable to experience live music and/or dancing, ways that young people can continue to do in the here and now what they have done in the past and want to enjoy in the future. TikTok creates a virtual space for the communal activities of song and dance. One participant, a teacher, discussed the joy that TikTok trends brought to their students and the way it united them:

“I thought isn’t that so funny that every single year seven knew what it was and were like loved it they were obsessed with it like they got so excited and every single one of them started singing it which is really unusual because at that age kids tend to be dead shy and don't want to sing along with stuff and don't want to do things so clearly it's something that they like love and really excites them it must for them to be so willing to like do it so easily and to like sing along and participate in it” (23, female).

Here we see the way in which an internet meme, in the form of an audio snippet, is imitated, extending the meme and this imitation public (Zulli & Zulli, 2022) from the app into the real world and unites young people thus facilitating coping. Given that imitation publics typically refer to achieving virality, here we see the way in which this ‘virus’ has mutated beyond its typical reach and can exist off the platform, highlighting its success.

Song and dance have been recognised as important for coping in crisis and songs such as Vera Lynn's 'We'll meet again' (closely associated with British life during 1939-1945), during crisis as they offer comfort and solidarity (Reed, 2021). This was evidenced by multiple participants who believed that older songs were making a comeback on the app and felt this brought back memories of past times:

“there's like old songs that are coming back and made into like TikTok trends” (16, female),

“like bringing back old songs making them popular again “ (21, female).

Music is embedded with ideologies and values, and respondents' felt that the most common music genre on the app was pop, which is considered to promote left-wing values of equality and acceptance of minority and disadvantaged groups (Hubbs, 2007). Participants noted that the music popularised on TikTok spreads off the app onto the radio and TikTok specific Spotify playlists which were popular showing how these platforms converge. This convergence of culture potentially results in a homogenisation of culture whereby we miss out on diverse content due to the need to 'fit in' to be heard or seen. Additionally, participants noted that songs that they had noticed were popular on the app were exclusively English speaking which reflects an ongoing critique of media and technology that it is Westernised to suit Western audiences therefore holding the values of such cultures and denying other values.

5.3.2 Learning

Within this theme participants discussed the opportunities for learning that they encountered on the app as well as the possibility for misinformation discussing how, or rather if, they can identify misinformation.

The participants' account of their TikTok use clearly display how they use the platform as a source of information and learning. The topics that they reported

learning about varied but include those related to their studies, politics, Covid, cooking, careers, activism, LGBTQIA+ issues, and health including sexual health and information. Female participants cited numerous sexual/women's health topics, typically considered taboo to discuss publicly, that they viewed on TikTok that were helpful where they perceive that their sex education is currently inadequate, the below example around breast self-examination:

“a sexual health teacher as well who was like that I think I think I got I got taught how to test for breast cancer on TikTok as well and how to test for your bra size erm but then one thing is like I think for a long period of time was literally like what PSHE didn't teach you and like what erm what sex ed didn't teach you erm things like that that were just like so interesting like stuff that like teachers don't want to talk about because it's awkward... and you're like oh my God like why didn't I get taught this” (16, female).

These findings suggest that TikTok overcomes typical barriers such as awkwardness and embarrassment often felt in face-to-face, educational settings and is a valuable space to discuss topics typically considered taboo such as sexual and women's health, confirming the findings of Fowler et al. (2022). As such, academics, practitioners, and teachers can utilise TikTok as a means of both learning about young people's lives and the issues that are important to them, as well as an considering it a platform with opportunity to educate. However, they do acknowledge the difficulties of doing so as assessing the credibility of sources may be difficult, although they may attempt to verify the information they find:

“but like it is like it's a stranger posting stuff on TikTok so fair enough you can't always like believe it and stuff but then you look through the comments and you're like oh my God like why didn't I get taught this and then there's like other professionals in the comments and like preach it and I'm like yes why this should be taught in schools more so like okay so you know that it's

genuine erm and it's just something that you never knew before” (16, female).

Similar findings were found by Milton et al. (2023) in their study of young peoples TikTok use relating to mental health. They highlight young people desire to find this information, and feel ‘seen’ however they displayed concerns about whether creators are credible sources of mental health information or ‘clout-chasers’, those trying to achieve social media fame or noteriety.

The same participant also went on to discuss how their technology use differs to previous generations with young people no longer relying on search engines but instead utilising the search (or in TikToks case ‘explore’) function to acquire information,

“typing into TikTok is just like typing into Google now it’s literally the same” (16, female).

Participants also reported how they learned about TikTok and the algorithms that underpin the platform, the main way was through their experience on the platform. In their descriptions of TikTok’s algorithms they often compared it to other platforms and saw TikTok as more effective at curating content that they would want to watch.

“I think it’s like a mixture of erm the popular content that’s like trending at the time that they suggest for you to watch and just like the algorithm of the type of stuff that you’ve watched before because I don’t think I actually follow anyone on TikTok so it’s like based on just probably who I’ve like interacted with most in the past and then just that same song or like same dance yeah for you is like your yeah like discover page but just like the same stuff that you already engage with” (22, female)

Here the participant identified key concepts such as popularity bias in the form of trends, and the impact of your previous interactions in future recommendations.

Another method was through what I termed ‘algorithm experiments’, young people’s attempts to test hypotheses regarding the way the algorithm operates by manipulating specific variables, conducted by other users:

“I saw this thing ages ago and it was like this girl and she was saying she was talking about the algorithm before like kind of people started people started like really talking about it and she posted two dance videos and one of them she was wearing a hoodie and the other one she’s wearing a crop top and then one where she was wearing the crop top got like way more views because it was like put up to the top than the other one and so she is basically saying like the algorithm puts forward things that the kind of think of that people will like or they think will get more likes” (16, female)

Participants also compared their FYP with their friends’:

“when I ring my friends and stuff we’ll say oh let’s have a look at each other’s like for you pages... it’s really interesting seeing like different like yeah different algorithms because like obviously just like it bases off what you like and what you interact with erm like just like It just shows how like different ours like my friend group is” (16, female)

And via social media:

“Snapchat I like underneath it in the BuzzFeed stuff there’s a girl that does kind of like a breakdown of all the stuff that’s gone on on social media in a week and sometimes I watch that... and a lot of them are going on about TikToks algorithm” (16, female)

Finally, one participant reported watching documentaries including Netflix's "The Social Dilemma" to learn about algorithms:

"so basically what they did is took everyone's data and used it to persuade people to vote for Trump and created lies about Clinton so yeah I do realise it's a really really really sinister thing that could potentially create like wars" (17, male).

Participants made it clear that when learning about digital platforms and their algorithms, adults were not part of this rhetoric. They positioned adults, whether that was parents, teachers or even politicians, as out of the loop: "there's a lot like all the politicians and adults don't really know about it" (17, male). They saw themselves and their peers as the most informed on the topic and did not rely on teachers for such information. Even those participants that were teachers felt that they lacked understanding of technology. This is unsurprising given that research consistently finds that teachers lack confidence and knowledge on such topics and therefore significant training and support is required to ensure that they can adequately address these issues with students (Ofsted, 2013).

While young people discussed the opportunities for information seeking and acquisition that TikTok provided they also noted that the app could be a platform for the provision and promotion of misinformation:

"I think there's a lot about erm I see not a lot but a fair amount about like Covid stats and there's probably a lot of misinformation around Covid a lot about politics Brexit you know kind of the election in America" (25, male).

Participants felt that misinformation could impact health and voting choices citing as examples incorrect Covid related information and political messages. Young people are often considered particularly vulnerable to misinformation given their youth and their potential lack of critical thinking skills however there were

mixed feelings amongst interviewees about whether they could detect misinformation:

“I think it would be hard to like distinguish between what is fact and what is not because anyone can say anything really” (25, female).

Whilst evidently this participant was aware of the existence of misinformation, they, like many other participants, felt that it was difficult to discern given the unfalsifiable nature of information when presented as fact online. They struggle to identify credible sources and potentially experience an information overload that leaves them overwhelmed by getting more and more information without any additional clarification. This was particularly noted in reference to Covid and while many participants stated that TikTok was a useful way to get timely, accurate information, others avoided Covid news altogether due to finding it confusing and distressing.

In contrast, participant 1 felt that young people had more critical awareness than older people and were better able to identify ‘jokes’ which some other people might mistake as facts:

“...someone probably like erm my age you know I have like a lad that I went to uni with maybe a few years older he shares a lot of erm satirical erm pages that you’d associate with being kind of not correct information just for jokes and then you know you might see someone who’s a mam or something a bit older 50 or 60 sharing something and you can probably tell by might be a bit ageist but you can probably tell by the age of who the person is if they believe it or not” (25, male).

Here, the participant spoke according to what Davison (1983) referred to as the third person effect whereby they felt that they were able to discern misinformation

but believed that other people may not be able to and acknowledged this was a realistic threat to others.

5.3.3 Algorithmic harms

This theme had subthemes of ‘identifying harms’ whereby participants were able to identify algorithmic harms such as personalisation, polarisation, echo chambers, addictive design, and data security/privacy issues whilst also discussing how these benefitted the user and in ‘resisting harms’ they discussed their resistance tactics related to avoiding a TikTok addiction.

Identifying harms

Participants experiences on TikTok shaped their beliefs about the way the app operates using algorithms. Participants were able to recognise personalisation, even if they did not explicitly use this term, which is unsurprising given the name of the main interface- the ‘For You Page’ (FYP) and noted in other studies (Swart, 2021). Whilst many felt that this personalisation created a better user experience which they compared favourably to other platforms which relied on social networks rather than the users’ interests to curate content, others found this intrusive and ‘creepy’. This ‘creepiness’ was often related to concerns that TikTok is ‘listening’ to users through their microphones, dubbed the ‘microphone conspiracy’ and is corroborated by other research (Head, Fister & MacMillan, 2020). Whilst there is no evidence to support this, this claim has found its way into popular discourse many times and may stem from the British phone hacking scandal of 2011 which fuelled distrust in technology, institutions, and news. Whilst many of the participants in this study are likely too young to recall this it has become so well engrained that young people will try to avoid being a victim even without this knowledge:

“I think like a lot of it is just me being paranoid like sometimes we’ll be talking about something or searching for something and you’ll see TikToks of it in the

next hour and your like is that a coincidence or are they actually listening but I think it's just like me being paranoid" (24, female).

Some participants were able to recognise some of the harms of algorithmic systems particularly those that arise because of personalisation including polarisation. Participants that discussed polarisation typically did so in relation to political polarisation and how they believe that personalisation leads to an ideological separation along traditionally right and left wings. They noted how these opposing views could become extreme and argued that the attention economy encouraged this as more extreme content will result in greater interaction and therefore algorithmic platforms will assume these high levels of engagement indicate that this is content that users will want to see:

"there's no room for centrists on TikTok I think because centrists' opinions don't really get as much either angry reactions or love reactions" (19, male).

They also argued that personalisation algorithms cause a filter bubble that leads to an individual only seeing opinions that reinforce their pre-existing beliefs without challenge and how they thought this has potential to damage democracy:

"it can get quite a bit like echo chamber-ey at times when all you're exposed to are people with the same ideas as you... people start not understanding each other especially when it comes to quite big debate-y topics and people tend to not actually listen to what the other people have to say well what the other side has to say and when they get into a debate they don't always take the other side's argument with good faith and that can just lead to a lot of negativity and misunderstanding between them the sides and can also get a bit like hive mind-ey where everyone just thinks the same and that's quite scary" (19, male).

Whilst here the participant spoke of the risks of filter bubbles (described here as an echo chamber) they then go on to discuss a potential advantage of echo chambers:

“the algorithm’s quite good at it keeps you in spaces where you do feel supported rather than spaces where you’ll be like attacked or hated on” (19, male).

Here the participant described how filter bubbles, first coined by Pariser (2011), keep individuals in ‘safe spaces’ digitally in reference to ‘gay TikTok’ and preventing homophobia by keeping separate ‘sides’ of TikTok. In doing so the participant describes what academics have termed digital placemaking, defined as:

“the use of digital media in cultivating a sense of place for oneself and others” (Halegoua, 2020, p.16).

Given that LGBTQIA+ individuals use the internet and social media to explore their identities in ‘safe’, anonymous spaces (Haimson et al., 2021; Kosenko, Bond & Hurley, 2018; Liu, 2020) this seems like a rarely considered positive of filter bubbles, with the only similar discussion that I am aware of is by Zhao (2023) who discusses gay Chinese mens experiences on the platform Zhihu. In their theme ‘the algorithm as protector’ they discuss two benefits of filter bubbles; firstly, they shield gay users from others, which is of particular significance given that homosexuality is not widely accepted within China, and it can bring together gay men to form communities online (as mentioned in 5.3.1).

However paradoxically the implication is that there are unsafe spaces online, with ‘straight TikTok’ an example. Here the participant struggled to acknowledge that in everyday life there is rarely a separation between LGBTQIA+ individuals and heterosexual, cis-gender individuals. There is a worrying possibility that the

shielding of LGBTQIA+ individuals on the platform from those with homophobic beliefs could equally allow homophobic communities to form and represent a serious threat (see Weimann & Masri, 2023). Whilst arguably it should be those with homophobic attitudes that are ‘evicted’, Zhao (2023) argued that platforms act as ‘evictors’ of LGBTQ+ which only serves to further marginalise the community. Instead we should consider these safe(ish) spaces much like traditional ‘gay villages’ (see Gorman-Murray & Nash, 2016) or ‘gayborhoods’ (see Ghaziani, 2016, 2021) which while providing a sense of safety to those inside them are carefully monitored and at risk of negative outcomes mirroring the way in which those suspected of being gay in the mid-20th century were monitored at public bathrooms (Golbach, 2023).

Whilst the naming of the ‘For You Page’ alerts users to the personalisation on the platform, few participants recognised that this personalisation and the resulting positive user experience encourages users to spend more time on the app and therefore generates greater financial gain for platforms via the exploitation of user data. Those who did demonstrated a level of critical awareness that is ultimately required to make an informed choice when using such platforms. This is particularly concerning given that participants admitted to knowing little to nothing about data usage and privacy despite it being a concern to many:

“I don't know much about like data and collection to be honest I'd find it like difficult to speak on because I don't know what type of data is being collected and what type of data is being shared and well you know like repercussions of that” (23, female).

Females in the study had greater concerns regarding privacy and security online than males; their concerns around privacy typically related to perceived risk to physical safety posed by disclosure online such as not sharing addresses online with few participants mentioning digital safety, such as the use of VPNs (virtual private networks). Whilst some female participants recognised the importance of

privacy whereas the males were typically more nonchalant, they felt that they would be safe because they did not think anyone would be interested in them. Both male and female participants reported having not read the Terms and Conditions/Privacy Policy and therefore were unaware of how data are used and exploited which is unsurprising given that users rarely do read T&Cs (Cakebread, 2017; Beutell, 2020). Although it is unlikely that reading the T&Cs alone would clarify this given its complexity for a young, lay audience (Nissenbaum, 2011), as such I support the inclusion in the Online Safety Act (2023) recommendation that such documents are considerate of the audience and should be ‘child friendly’ with the regulator, Ofcom, publishing codes of practise to support platforms to do so. However, while doing so could allow young people to better understand what they’re agreeing to on platforms, in reality implementation could be difficult. Given that understandings can vary hugely in children just a few years apart in age it will be difficult to provide comprehensive summaries appropriate for all ages. Another criticism that is common of many platforms is that they require users to ‘agree’ to access content without any checking of their understanding.

Many participants also expressed concern over TikTok’s potential addictiveness and often attributed this to the impact of personalisation and the endless scrolling;

“it’s just so easy to go on TikTok and because you’re only watching a couple of second long videos there’s no there doesn’t seem to be a stop and start and you can quite easily spend like an hour without noticing” (25, male).

Participants framed TikTok’s addictiveness as about its ability to consume or waste their time rather than as a compulsion to be on the app. They felt that TikTok’s algorithms were superior to that of other social media platforms, in that it catered directly to their interests rather than showing them content relevant to their friends, which increased its addictive potential.

Resisting harms

Whilst the platform was likely designed with addictiveness in mind as a measure of its success, for participants this was a concern and as such they developed tactics to resist becoming feeling as though they had become addicted. Such tactics were only noted by Gen Z participants which suggests that their familiarity and understanding of technology provides them with opportunities to manage their online use/behaviour. These tactics include a social media detox:

“I did a social media detox erm and that was it made me feel really good and like I didn't use any of my social media for the whole week I deleted everything...the thing was that after the week I didn't like I wasn't like desperate to download all my social media back” (16, female).

Here the participant equated a social media detox to an act of self-care which was prompted by the stressors of the pandemic, notably remote learning, as a means of protecting and promoting one's own health. While only this participant referred to a social media detox, multiple participants discussed limiting their own social media use.

Another participant reported that they deleted the TikTok app from their phone and would occasionally redownload it to post their own content:

“I actually deleted it kind of recently I only really get it now to like if I'm going to post” (16, female).

Another participant had never downloaded the app themselves but would instead view TikTok videos through other people's accounts on their phones or by watching those cross posted on other platforms such as Instagram. This participant explained this in the sense that they thought TikTok was designed to be more addictive than other social media platforms:

“one of the reasons why I don’t have it because I think the people that make the apps and design the algorithms make them to be addictive and make them so that people want to spend as long as possible on the app because that’s what makes the app successful” (23, female).

5.3.4 FYP=IRL

Participants described how they thought that the For You Page mirrors inequalities in real life. While this is a theme in its own right, you will also see it permeate into other themes. For example, in the theme ‘Algorithmic harms’ women had greater privacy concerns than men reflecting the way in which women’s safety IRL is precarious with women enacting protective behaviours such as carrying mace or identifying others of their whereabouts.

The subthemes within this theme are algorithmic privilege, (in)visibility and subversion.

Algorithmic privilege

All participants preferred TikTok’s main interface the FYP to the following or explore pages, however they agreed that the default FYP (before personalisation) reflects ‘straight TikTok’ (a colloquial term given to the ‘sides’ of TikTok) that was characterised by (seemingly) white, middle class, heterosexual, attractive, able-bodied women reflected in the most popular creators on the app, such as Charli D’Amelio and Addison Rae (with 140 million and 87 million followers respectively). Both were mentioned countless times during the interviews. Participants often displayed annoyance at this and characterised ‘straight TikTok’ as a negative space:

“I think straight TikTok just tends to be negative stereotypes of like the basic white girl” (24, female).

While the ‘basic girl’ or more commonly referred to ‘basic bitch’ exists within popular culture, its presence in academic literature is almost non-existent.

Being ‘basic’ is characterised as 15-25 years old, middle to upper class females

who conform, much of this conformity lies in consumer choices including fashion such as UGG boots and North Face jackets (Malone, 2014). Such a critique is interesting given that in the past typically only the white underclasses would be mocked as ‘chavs’ (Little, 2020). However, it appears that ‘basic’ is an insult reflecting the subordinate status of females even with the privilege of wealth and status.

(in)visibility

Within this subtheme participants considered (in)visibility in relation to dimensions of oppression. Participants spoke about how they perceived that censorship operated on the app and that the platform lacked clear rules with people being held to different standards particularly regarding women and their bodies resulting in different levels of visibility. Participants noted that invisibility/shadow banning was aimed especially at those who lacked algorithmic privilege, as discussed above and was used by the platform as a punishment for videos that broke the Community Guidelines. Their experiences on the app highlighted for them the biases within the platform, notably regarding gender/sex, race and sexuality, and how these were censored on the platform. An example of this was regarding ‘appropriate dress’:

“it flags up all kinds of stuff just like of like girls dancing in like crop tops and things like that so it's yeah it has like this intent of protecting people from like seeing nudity and things like that but it's not” (20, female).

Many participants discussed crop tops in the interviews, and it was regarded, like the mini skirt in the 1960's, a political statement. The crop top was considered an expression of female sexuality, and an act of rebellion against the policing of women's bodies. Such an argument gains traction when we consider that there is no equivalent for male bodies, a perfect example of the double standard that exists within society:

“I think on social media apps like it's reflective of like the real world you know where men can post videos with them like topless where women can't” (20, female).

This statement shows how ‘nudity’ is only seen as an issue when discussing female nudity, despite wearing a crop top being clear evidence of the contrary. There also appears to be exceptions to standards of appropriate dress where it was thought that crop tops led to views and would be therefore boosted by the platform. Participants understood this as connected to the notion that those with algorithmic privilege and those without are held to different standard depending on characteristics of the creator such as body shape or attractiveness:

“she posted two dance videos and one of them she was wearing a hoodie and the other one she's wearing a crop top and then one where she was wearing the crop top got like way more views because it was like put up to the top than the other one and so she is basically saying like the algorithm puts forward things that the kind of think of that people will like or they think will get more likes” (16, female).

However, while participants acknowledge this inequality regarding expressions of gender/sex, they were unable to see how this was a product of the platform and their Community Guidelines instead believing that the platforms algorithms operate as autonomous adjudicators to remove content thought to be breaking these guidelines. This censorship is facilitated by human and AI moderators who act as gatekeepers determining the visibility of content (Gillespie, 2014). While there is an assumption of fairness in AI this is not the case (Gillespie, 2014; Bucher, 2018). The institutions and designers which create them, often consisting of privileged individuals and lacking diversity, embed their ideologies, and therefore their biases, within them (Beer, 2013; Crawford, 2016; Gillespie, 2014; Kitchin, 2017; Noble, 2018). In this sense algorithms, and therefore the institutions producing them, have the power to change or reinforce certain beliefs, values and behaviours (Eubanks, 2017; Lessig, 2009; Reidenberg,

1997; Nissenbaum, 2011). Whilst academics have raised concerns over the ‘black box’ (Pasquale, 2015) that is algorithms, the platforms Community Guidelines (TikTok, 2021) offer a glimpse inside. At a glance TikToks guidelines cover:

“violent extremism, hateful behaviour, illegal activities and regulated goods, violent and graphic content, suicide, self-harm, and dangerous acts, harassment and bullying, adult nudity and sexual activities, minor safety, integrity and authenticity and platform security” (n.p.).

Whilst they prohibit hate speech based on protected attributes (race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender, gender identity, serious disease, disability and immigration status) they provide further details around nudity which includes female nipples and areolas,

“sexually explicit dancing of a minor” (n.p.),

including twerking and content of minors in

“minimal clothing that is not situationally relevant to the location” (n.p.).

Despite their apparent stance on equality these policies are blatantly sexist, with racist undertones, and require subjectivity.

A participant went on to discuss her experience as a black woman and how she felt racial discrimination occurs online, something she believed was a collective experience for black people evidenced by her use of we:

“I don’t have as much of a voice as other people do and like other people you know popular creators like can really get away with posting anything they have a lot of followers and a lot of influence erm but like other people yeah we don’t have as much influence they’re like monitored quite closely they don’t get to post whatever they want it’s not a level playing field you know people will treat us differently even online” (20, female).

Participants in Zeng and Kaye’s (2022) study support this notion claiming that black creators who used a racial slur aimed towards black people had their videos removed while white creators’ videos remained on the app highlighting an obvious bias and lack of understanding of how language can be reclaimed and

used to empower marginalised groups. This participant, and many others, went on to discuss how they felt that Black Lives Matter content was censored in the wake of George Floyd's murder with only white creators seen on the FYP:

“it does censor a lot of people even with like the Black Lives Matter movement it was mainly white people on my For You Page being like oh yeah Black Lives Matter and I'm like why are the black creators' content not getting on my For You Page with the hashtag but yours is” (21, female).

Participants in Zeng and Kaye's (2022) study also believed that white creators would use BLM and related hashtags even if unrelated to the content of the video, in what they considered hashtag hijacking.

In a similar vein another interviewee noted how hashtags relating to queer culture were hijacked by straight creators:

“a lot of like lesbian songs and stuff like that sort of gay anthems have then became like the straights have kind of took it like I find it infuriating like when I see Hayley Kiyoko being used for like a straight POV or something like that and then it starts getting reused and it's like it's not about a guy and a girl” (21, female).

As well as:

“just respecting the hashtag system of what people are like when we're LGBT we don't want to go on that hashtag and see a bunch of straight people on that hashtag for no reason erm it's like Girl In Red became one that was overtaken by straight people as well erm because there's that joke of do you listen to Girl In Red which they're part of the LGBT community but then like loads of straight people just overtook that because they like the song erm the singer so then that just got overtaken so I guess it's the same sort of way it wasn't deliberate of the creators of the art it was just the people on the app who sort of censored it” (21, female).

The above was described as an appropriation of queer culture and thus a silencing of their voices and identities. Participants reported how this is reflective of their everyday experiences of being a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Women who identified as lesbian and/or bisexual described how their sexuality was regularly invalidated, while seeking male attention and viewed through the male gaze. Additionally, I have already discussed (in 5.3.1) the importance of music in community building and here we see how queer community building is sidelined. There is currently discussion specifically regarding ‘Girl in Red’ and how valuable it is for lesbians to find community online given that they have historically been excluded from both academic research and the queer community (Curry, 2022; Vaynshteyn, 2020).

While race, gender and sexuality were discussed consistently during interviews, disability and class were seldom discussed except for one participant’s (21, female) commentary regarding British TikToker ThisTrippyHippie who posts about her life with Tourette’s and sees many of her videos removed from the platform:

“she’s like one of the first who she used to do like sign language ones, but she has Tourette’s and she’s become like a big sort of speaker about having Tourette’s and living with Tourette’s and she puts them on TikTok but because obviously her Tourette’s makes her swear or do something wrong it gets taken down” (21, female).

While TikTok could be an inclusive space, as evidenced by creators’ use of closed captions to enable participation by those who are deaf or have impaired hearing, the platform itself does little to enable this type of inclusion. The above quote shows how the creator mentioned is censored due to her disability and as such is unable to share her experience widely and is therefore bound by the same ableism within the real world.

Another participant went on to discuss the notion that the platform is:

more likely to boost videos of like, you know, rich white creators. (20, female).

It's also important to consider the invisibility of intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1989) on TikTok. One participant, who identified as black and bisexual, discussed her struggles:

“I haven't seen anybody that looks like me... it makes me feel like someone like me to like would never be like successful on social media because I don't have anyone to look up I guess” (20, female).

This invisibility prevents participation in digital spaces whilst also perpetuating that black bisexual women do not exist. While studies have considered black experiences on TikTok, and queer experiences on TikTok, such intersectional experiences of individuals who face multiple dimensions of oppression are unique yet rarely if ever studied and deserve further study.

Subversion

Despite perceived over-censorship and social exclusion exercised by the platform, many felt that there was a range of harmful content which was not monitored on the app. Repeatedly participants mentioned how content on eating disorders and self-harm were highly visible, causing concern given the young viewership of the app. Participants noted that creators responded to the platform's apparent absence of appropriate regulation by including 'trigger warnings', a means of alerting users that content may be 'triggering', provoking negative feelings or memories of traumatic experiences;

“when people post like sensitive content and when they don't say trigger warning the people in like the comments are always like you should have a trigger warning” (20, female).

This participant also went on to explain that while she felt that younger generations are perceived as 'snowflakes', this is not the case, instead:

“people are like oh like Vine or like in the past people were never that sensitive but I think that doesn't mean it was better you know you

shouldn't think that way like people now are more like self-aware more accepting of certain things and less accepting of certain things which is good in a way like we don't tolerate bullying as much that doesn't make people snowflakes it just means you know like as a society like we're just changing" (20, female).

Participants also noted subversion tactics related to, what they felt was, unjust censorship on the app. These include:

Reuploading, a tactic also noted by Karizat et al. (2021) and Simpson and Semaan (2021):

"you see videos all the time that have a caption of TikTok took this down reuploaded" (25, male).

Algospeak, as discussed in Chapter 3, algospeak is a tactic employed on TikTok to overcome what is considered harsh or unfair censorship regarding specific topics:

"like say it was sex and they'll put like S E G G S" (25, female).

Participants provided another example to emphasise how topics such as sex education are under greater scrutiny on the platform and cannot speak freely:

"there was a like a sex ed thing came up on mine the other day or I think it was just a doctor that was talking about it but she couldn't even like erm it was like she wasn't talking it was just words on the screen but she couldn't even say some of the words like put the words down because like she got in trouble so she's having to put like instead of boobs she's putting zeroes and stuff like that I suppose in that sense its hard because for people like that to get their point across" (25, female).

The difficulties that sex educators face with censorship prevent them from being able to discuss important topics that may be relevant to TikTok users. While they have adapted to this censorship by utilising algospeak I would like to echo the sentiment of participants in Klug et al.'s (2023) study that they should not have to. Instead, platforms should adapt their practises and policies regarding censorship

to take into account the context in which it occurs. Furthermore, this tactic is not only used to share content that is unjustly censored but other studies have found it used to share offensive content such as misspelling Jews as juice (Weimann & Masri, 2021) highlighting the need for greater regulation.

Diversification- many participants noted that the FYP was not necessarily an inclusive space, thus they described tactics to positively impact the algorithmic content curation through differentiating the FYP:

“my for you page it might be a bit more diverse just because some of the TikToks and the creators I follow are part of the LGBT community so I feel like the more I get on my own for you page is probably more relevant to that sort of side if you get me” (21, female).

These tactics can be seen as means of rebelling against the perceived power exercised by the platform over users and sharing of content. However, others reported that such tactics were in vain:

“but then now that I’m following them I don’t see it on my for your page anymore so I think that’s kind of like a lose lose situation so if I want to see that then I’ll have to unfollow them which kind of defeats the object” (16, female).

Another concern that participants had was that many viewers’ comments on content seemed to go uncensored despite it being recognised as harmful and hateful. They noted how the relative anonymity of the platform allowed users to say things they typically wouldn’t in real life:

“they say far worse things than what they do in real life” (21, female).

Academics attribute this to disinhibition effects that are displayed online given the anonymity and therefore lack of consequences they experience on social media platforms which reduces their inhibitions and causes them to behave in a way they would not typically behave (Suler, 2004):

“in person people aren’t likely to say the same type of things as they generally would from behind a screen and like from like the anonymity or

just that they don't have to face the repercussions in that they're not going to get that instant confrontation they're not in person they don't have to worry about" (23, female).

Trolling, writing offensive comments about people online, was often based on; race:

"she must have had some like Japanese heritage but she was white in herself...and then getting so much hate for it because that comment section was absolutely horrible to her" (16, female),

gender/sex:

"I do think women get a lot more hate" (20, female),

gendered notions of beauty:

"I did watch Charli I don't watch her anymore but there was loads of stuff saying about like her body shape and her and saying that she was like really fat" (16, female),

as well as sexuality:

"the bigger the creator obviously the more susceptible they are to it like as I say with Jojo Siwa recently obviously she's had loads of hate for it and because she's such like an icon especially to young children then obviously all the parents have been going being like oh you shouldn't have done that our kids are really impressionable like they might want to be gay" (21, female).

While previous studies have corroborated this existence of hate comments and their links to protected characteristics as mentioned above (see Fichman & McClelland, 2021; Weimann & Masri, 2023), Zeng and Kaye (2022) note that as comments aren't immediately visible and instead must be clicked on participants would avoid reading them. However, participants in this study felt a desire to read the comments, much like how one would slow down to look at a car crash:

“I do look at comments quite a lot like I’m nose looking at the comments on quite a lot of them there is a lot of like negative comments” (25, female).

Participants described how hate comments could be internalised by themselves and other viewers who were not the intended recipients of comments, leading to feel negatively about themselves and prevent them from posting on TikTok for fear of becoming the subject of hateful comments. One participant even stated that the fear of hate comments could prescribe behaviour in ways such as deciding what to wear to appeal to the audience:

“you see a video of like someone with like like an edgy style or like something like weird like a weird kind of style they get lot of hate comments so you think even if like you liked the weirder style you’d like never want to dress like that because you know people would hate on you” (20, female).

Participants noted that while videos appear to be somewhat monitored by the platform, the comments are not:

“obviously the comments boxes aren’t policed” (22, female),

Instead, participants felt it was the responsibility of users to ‘police’ comments. Participants who described having reported videos/comments in the past felt that it had no impact, leaving them feeling powerless:

“I try and click like not interested because there’s a like a not interested button... but usually like I don’t feel like I can do anything I just try not to let it upset me it’s one of the reasons why I wouldn’t make my own content because people are like so mean” (20, female).

One participant described how they tried to foster a more positive space on TikTok by attempting to ‘upvote’ positivity rather than hate:

“if I saw like a positive comment I would like that cos you know when you like something it’ll like move to the top like I try and support yeah I just try and be supportive in whatever way I can but usually like I don’t

feel like I can do anything I just try not to let it upset me it's one of the reasons why I wouldn't make my own content because people are like so mean" (20, female).

However, this participant noted that conflict on TikTok was not always dealt with in this way, and spoke of the 'cancel culture' in the platform which dictates behaviour and language, providing the example:

"I think Addison like swore in a video something or she did or she did something or she kissed a TikToker it's just ridiculous and everyone's like oh my God you can't do that and so she's like a lot more careful now even though like it's just a normal thing that teenagers do like it's not even a big deal...nobody is held to the same standards like if you're going to cancel one person who does something then you've got to cancel that other person like it doesn't make any sense and then also people are so like nit-picky about what they cancel about" (20, female).

Cancel culture, which here the participant condemns as having gone too far, Nakamura (2015) argues originated with marginalised groups highlighting discrimination/abuse seeking public redress on social media. Beiner (2020) believes that cancel culture is an example of 'wokeism':

"an ideology that views reality as socially constructed and defined by power, oppression and group identity" (n.p.).

Interestingly, this participant has grown up in the generation of wokeism, and like most other participants expressed liberal political views however here they highlight how 'cancel culture' is being misused to punish and provide judgement over others, in this example a teenage girl.

Despite detecting obvious biases, most participants displayed a certain level of trust in the platform, assuming that censorship was an accident or an attempt to remain non-political rather than an attempt to use the App to silence

others. A minority of participants considered whether it was TikToks Chinese ownership that influenced its censorship policies and promotion of traditional values:

“with TikTok being it’s made in like China isn’t it maybe I don’t know if that’s the thing of like the censorship thing because obviously that’s a big issue in China with like their social media being censored and only having like certain creators and stuff like this I’m not sure if it’s the way the app is designed it might censor like quite big issues” (21, female),

however, most seemed unaware of the platform’s ownership. Critics argue that the platforms Chinese ownership is irrelevant, given that social media giants based in Silicon Valley, are also biased, for example Instagram has been accused of shadowbanning content from sex workers and pole dancers/fitness (Are, 2020, 2021, 2022).

5.3.5 Authenticity

The theme authenticity explores the difficulties users reported facing when attempting to express their authentic selves online. It comprises subthemes of ‘influencers V ‘real people’, ‘talent/less’ and ‘sex sells’.

Influencers V ‘real people’

Authenticity can be considered a real portrayal of one’s true self (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Bayer, Trieu & Ellison, 2020). Whilst research has shown that perceived authenticity is central to the success of an influencer/TikToker (Abidin, 2021; Barta & Andalibi, 2021), participants felt that influencers/TikTokers lacked authenticity. While it was difficult to distinguish influencers/TikTokers from regular creators and ‘real people’, it appeared that monetisation was considered a key indicator of the identity of a platform user. Participants felt that those who posted sponsored advertisements were untrustworthy, for instance:

“I know she hasn’t been paid for that so I can actually trust her on what she says” (16, female)

Whilst they were sceptical or avoided sponsored adverts by TikTokers, some respondents reported feeling influenced to purchase products through creators:

“if I was to buy anything from TikTok it would more be like just a creator doing it...and saying like okay so this is something that I bought off like of Amazon and I think you should get it...because I know that that's not paid for” (16, female)

They also saw the Creator Fund, which pays creators who regularly post and get engagement in the form of views, likes, and comments, as a potential issue as it may lead them to post content that is less authentic but that they expect to be popular:

“the type of variety of videos I think has now been streamlined more towards the trends so every time there’s a trending song or a trending dance like it has to be replicated all the time and the people who are already established on it such as erm like Addison Rae she’ll just like bash out videos that are like including the trending song or the trending dance or whatever just to kind of like keep that relevance...I think that’s potentially dangerous to its like creativity and to its freedom the monetisation of it” (22, female).

They also felt that the platform used the Creator Fund to encourage people to post only to ‘shadow ban’ them (limiting or altogether denying visibility by making their videos only visible to followers rather than on the FYP), thus avoiding the need to financially compensate them:

“everybody would say okay I just got on the Creator Fund and now I’m shadow banned” (16, female).

Similar findings have been reported by Matsakis (2020), highlighting that platforms take advantage of the significant labour that goes into creating content

and achieving visibility (Abidin, 2021) and instead prioritise their profits. This seems particularly important given that many of the creators who were shadow banned were perceived not to be fitting the ideal identities as exemplified by TikTokers with more followers, thus preventing such creators reaping any financial gain from their creative labour and increasing inequality with those who did.

‘Relatability’ was important, with one participant describing how creators transition from being ‘real people’ to influencers. Again, this was perceived to be associated with financial motivations and success which detached the creator from a presumed understanding of and relevance to participants’ lives:

“a lot of the content creators are still being just normal people so there is like that level of relatability because they just talk about like normal things and they’ve still got that strand of amateurish whereas like YouTube can sometimes branch into like very professional in like videos that have got like erm a lot of investment behind them and or like it’s like Emma Chamberlain who’s just like YouTuber but she’s got this mansion of a house at like seventeen so it’s not relatable anymore because the day in the life of her is nothing like so well its nothing like us so” (22, female).

Similar findings were found by Barta and Andalibi (2021) where participants felt that self-presentation varied on different platforms and felt that on TikTok there was a perceived openness which they found authentic. Participants in this study echoed that stating that they felt TikTok was the most authentic of the social media platforms that they used:

“I think it's a lot more real and like just kind of genuine and more down to earth than like Instagram for example it's very like the perfect view of people's lives” (21, female).

When talking about influencers there was disagreement as to whether influencers were role models, however there was a consensus that influencers

promoted aspirations of fame, wealth and attractiveness which participants considered not necessarily attainable or something young people should aspire to.

Some even went on to describe TikTokers as bad role models because they flouted Coronavirus lockdown rules:

“when you see like influencers that there’s a girl called Katie Franklin who is from the UK and she did a video being like it’s absolutely ridiculous like coronavirus like people not social distancing going out and stuff like this and ruining the rules and regulations and then she’s posting videos recently of her in Dubai” (21, female).

This participant expressed a sense of injustice that influencers felt ‘above the rules’ displaying hypocrisy for judging and publicly shaming others on how well they followed the rules but not appearing to adhere to them themselves. This shows that influencers are expected to always remain authentic and genuine if they want to be seen as ‘real people’.

Talent(less)

The issue of ‘talent’ also came up for many respondents and it appeared to be an issue interwoven with gender. There were mixed views, but in general they agreed that females on the app often lack talent but are attractive which results in attention:

“they’re just like these teenagers who look pretty and dance and that to me isn’t impressive” (21, female).

A similar study by Zolides (2020) explored the way in which women were unfairly treated on the streaming platform Twitch. Much like in this study they were considered less talented than men and instead achieved success as a result of their appearance often termed “titty streamers” who lack “quality”. Interestingly Twitch has a mostly male audience and as such this critique is somewhat unsurprising but with TikTok’s majority female audience I had expected a more positive response to the female creators.

Other arguments were related to ‘cheating’ their way to fame and wealth through dancing judged as mediocre:

“people who are actual dancers and have actual talent and I’ve seen that my friends who do dancing go to university and put all that hard work in to doing all their dancing and then there’s these girls who are just like sixteen years old getting absolute millions for doing like little dances that require absolutely no effort” (21, female).

However, these views were not shared by all participants, one of whom is a dance teacher, and had some professional appreciation of the performances. They noted that TikTok dances are difficult to learn and acknowledged the time and effort it took to do so. Others argued that talent was evident in the creation of content. While TikTok was perceived as enabling easier video content creation than other platforms through its quick and professional looking transitions that could be made with a smartphone, it still required substantial effort and skill to do this which increased a creator’s chance of popularity and TikTok fame.

This critique was typically reserved for the female influencer. While this may seem unsurprising given that females dominate the influencer industry, there were some male influencers that they excluded from their general distaste and reported being a fan of. These include Dr Alex, a doctor working for the NHS who appeared on Love Island and is now the Ambassador for Mental Health;

“influencers like Alex from Love Island the ones who’s like down to earth and works for the NHS and stuff if they’re like actual examples or like normal human beings I like them” (21, female),

as well as David Dobrik, a popular YouTuber. This seems to be an instance of internalised misogyny in which the expectations for women are higher than for men and as such women are commonly mocked:

“I do like the ones as well where boys will be taking the piss out of girls in like a maid’s outfit and stuff I think that is quite amusing” (21, female).

This also shows the expectations for males on the app who are expected to conform to notions of hegemonic masculinity; to be funny at the expense of women and to create light-hearted videos devoid of more vulnerable emotions. All participants were aware of the societal presence of toxic masculinity and discussed it throughout the interviews even indicating that young men avoid posting content for fear of not appearing appropriately masculine or being called gay. However, female participants argued that males can and should participate and that women do not share the same expectations of masculinity as young men claiming that the embodiment of the ideal man for heterosexual women is Harry Styles, former One Direction bandmember, who regularly rejects stereotypical masculine norms in favour of a more fluid gender expression.

While participants were annoyed at the ‘superficiality’ shown by influencers, many female participants report enjoying content that could be considered superficial, however they failed to recognise this; including ‘what I eat in a days’, hauls and makeover/transformation videos:

“loads of clothing hauls come up ‘cause like I watch them all the time and loads of like erm I’ve wanted to start doing my nails so there’s loads of like nails things so it’s quite mine’s quite like fashion-ey and like beauty I watch loads of makeup ones” (25, female).

These types of videos have been criticised for being rooted in patriarchal discourses that categorise women by their appearance ultimately commodifying femininity online whilst reaping economic benefits for others (Genz, 2011; Wolf, 1991).

One participant explicitly discusses how they believe ‘what I eat in a day’ videos could be harmful for young people and their body image:

“what I eat in a day type TikToks stuff like that can be so damaging especially to younger children erm you know like growing up you know we were really exposed to the whole thing of needing to be thin whilst it

was more like on Instagram or on Facebook erm that was more for us I think TikTok especially at the minute” (21, female).

Whilst they acknowledge this is not a new issue, they do seem concerned about this content on TikTok. Given that the algorithms that underpin TikTok focus on personalising content to a user’s ‘interests’ it’s possible that users can be dragged into a WIEIAD wormhole that they may find difficult to escape. Hobbs, Barry and Koh (2021) discuss how such content, especially on repeat, can promote anorexia and encourage what they term “the corpse bride diet” (n.p.).

Sex sells

Participants discussed the difficulties of being authentic when attempting to get attention on the app given that sexualised content attracts more engagement. Hereby they identify the impact of attention economies (Wu, 2017) and the ways in which users change their behaviour in an attempt to receive more attention in the form of views, likes and comments. They were of the view that selling sex was often selling out. Regarding the music that accompanies popular trends, participants acknowledged that music walked a fine line between objectifying and empowering:

“quite a few of them are sort of like empowering women songs but then I do think a lot of them especially with like the dances and stuff they do get oversexualised” (25, female).

With some participants providing specific examples:

“I think like the lyrics tend to be and then it's stuff that like the, the dances will sort of like do a bit more like explicit...Doja Cat and Saweetie in that video are like dressed in like tiny little tops and like thong bikinis and stuff and twerking” (23, female).

The reference to two mixed-race performers seems relevant given the origins of the dance ‘twerk’ from the New Orleans bounce dance movement in the 1980/1990s in the black projects. Another song frequently cited was Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallions’ WAP (an acronym for ‘wet ass pussy’) that received

widespread public backlash in what Higginbotham (1992) refers to as respectability politics, which is when marginalised groups police their own members to avoid challenging mainstream values. However, participants failed to acknowledge that twerking was rooted in Black culture and critiques often serve to stigmatise and to limit Black female sexuality (Duthley, 2017). Mass media reinforce such discourses regarding the ‘sexualisation of culture’ (Gill, 2012) in the form of moral panics that emphasise the need to protect women and children from such media products/public expressions. Such protection discourses centre middle-class, white girls as innocent and potential victims at risk of moral corruption through the ways that they see, experience and express sexuality. As such the aforementioned artists, Doja Cat and Saweetie, alongside other artists mentioned in the interviews including Cardi B and Nicki Minaj, are considered modern day Jezebels (see White, 2013).

Participants in the study engaged in such respectability politics:

“especially the WAP I suppose if children listen to that they probably will want to find out what some of the terms mean and the dance is totally inappropriate in itself for a child anyway” (24, female).

It appeared that these participants felt uncomfortable with the ‘sexy’ displays of young people:

“I don’t appreciate seeing videos of people who look under the age of consent doing it I don’t want to see that” (24, female).

However, younger participants did not share this attitude and considered it a bit of harmless fun even discussing the benefits of ‘thirst traps’ which they believed:

“allow a lot of people to reclaim their sexuality” (19, male).

Yet, they were cautious of the risks of sharing such materials particularly to young people.

5.4 Conclusion

This study has shown that for many young people TikTok provided a vital space of coping during the Covid pandemic and associated lockdowns. However, many participants worried that young people developed an overreliance or even addiction to TikTok during the pandemic. Participants framed this ‘addiction’ as an ability to waste time on the platform rather than as a compulsion to use the app, much like participants in a study by Siles and Meléndez-Moran (2021). While gen Z participants were able to develop tactics to resist this potential addiction, highlighting their familiarity and skills regarding new technology, it is still a concern. Given that both studies were conducted during the pandemic, where individuals seemed to have time to ‘waste’, research should be conducted post-Covid to consider the impact of TikTok when normalcy resumes. This stance is supported by Singh, Dixit and Joshi (2020) who question whether excessive social media consumption during a pandemic is indicative of addiction or rather a coping mechanism, as this study explores. However, boyd (2014) believes that:

“most teens aren’t addicted to social media; if anything, they’re addicted to each other” (p. 80),

highlighting once again the role that TikTok fulfilled for young people during the pandemic. It could instead be possible that young people are reproducing the discourses presented to them by adults, often in the form of technopancis, that they are addicted to social media (Walsh, 2025). In doing so they pathologise their social media use with the ‘symptom’ of addiction being time spent on the app and finding ‘cures’ with their resistance tactics.

During the pandemic LGBTQ+ youth were considered at greater risk, many were forced to live with either unsupportive or unknowing parents and therefore lost a sense of community. TikTok was considered by participants a great place for community building for members of the LGBTQ+ community and was believed to

be facilitated via filter bubbles. Participants in our study, like those in Zhao's (2023) believed that this provided them protection from homophobia however I highlight that by shielding the LGBTQ+ community they also reduce their visibility and potentially allow hate groups including homophobic communities to form and represent a serious threat (see Weimann & Masri, 2023). While some participants considered TikTok a safe space I take a more cautious approach instead considering it a safe(ish) space.

TikTok was also considered a space for learning, and therefore educating, about a range of topics. The topics that they highlighted included sexual health and particularly women's health, which they felt was excluded from the curriculum. However, while they appreciated being able to learn about it on TikTok they noted the difficulties that such educators face given TikTok's harsh censorship over such topics. They indicated that these educators used algospeak to overcome this censorship, similar findings were found by Klug et al. (2023) whose participants felt that they should not need to resort to algospeak. I suggest that platforms reconsider their moderation processes to take into account the context in which 'controversial' terms appear and use censorship on a case by case basis to allow for the spreading of factual and useful information on the app. Building on this, participants felt that there was definitely misinformation being spread on the app however many felt they lacked the skills to discern it. I suggest that platforms also reconsider the way in which users become verified, considering their expertise or reliability as a source of information rather than their follower count.

The theme FYP=IRL demonstrates how participants believed offline discrimination is reproduced in online spaces, making it clear that the internet is not the raceless, genderless space it was anticipated to be by the likes of Haraway (1991). Such a statement is supported by the likes of Roberts (2018) who argued that disadvantaged groups, namely women of colour, face social media's harshest rules. Given that social norms 'leak across' (Cheney-Lippold, 2017) into digital

platforms, and their moderation processes, but are also then shaped by such platforms and processes it is becoming increasingly worrying that platform can both reinforce and deepen inequalities.

This discrimination potentially results in profit for platforms that rely on advertising promote normative white femininity as it is considered more marketable (Bishop, 2018). Others support this claim arguing that this reliance on normative identity expressions has the potential to marginalise those who do not conform to such ideals (Bivens & Haimson, 2016; Haimson & Hoffman, 2016). This data demonstrates that some individuals are perceived to receive ‘algorithmic privilege’ (Karizat et al., 2021). This is rooted in patriarchal values of sexism, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, classism, ableism and racism, with Kennedy (2020) arguing that the most followed creator Charli D’Amelio is the living embodiment of this algorithmic privilege. Whilst others have argued that this results in ‘symbolic annihilation’ and/or ‘algorithmic exclusion’, here I argue that this platform has been careful to avoid this in a tokenistic attempt to appear inclusive through the use of shadow banning and providing less visibility rather than de-platforming. I suggest that it instead leads to ‘algorithmic segregation’ in which those who do not conform to this ideal are rarely, if ever, seen on the un-personalised FYP, further facilitated by filter bubbles, and introduced only to those who seek it out, enabling a platform that simultaneously excludes and includes minorities but only when their inclusion results in profit through exploitative means. The use of the word segregation has clear historical connotations associated with race, an issue that emerged in the study, but this segregation is also applied to the other categories as mentioned with special considerations for those with identities with intersecting dimensions of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989) particularly those that intersect with the currently under researched categories of disability and class. The harmful effects of this segregation may include targeted hate largely expressed though comments on posts that seems to be ‘un-policed’. Such hate is problematic in that the filter bubbles on the platform may be mis-used for

encouraging extremism and radicalisation (Weimann & Masri, 2023) that could result in real life harm (Siegel, 2020) and should be considered a public health issue. Additionally, these findings suggest that wider consequences of online hate impacting the target and also anyone who identifies with that person who may internalise that hate.

Young peoples' concerns highlight the need for critical media literacies to be taught in schools, in concordance with the OHWP and OSA. However, I suggest the need for the inclusion of algorithmic literacies within this given that algorithms underpin the social media platforms and digital technologies that young people use. Koenig (2020) believe that algorithmic literacy builds upon:

“a long tradition of examining how our current technological literacy practices require constant iterations and reinterpretations. Similar to other computer literacies, algorithmic literacy focuses on the role that technology plays within a society: economically, politically, and socially” (p. 2).

Whilst it may seem logical that such lessons would be part of an ICT curriculum these power relations suggest the importance of the RSE curriculum in addressing this given that this research has highlighted the impact of discrimination and oppression and may be best equipped to teach about these unbalanced power relations in relation to algorithms and gender/sex, sexuality, and race. Despite their skillsets many of these teachers will likely lack confidence and knowledge on such topics and therefore significant training and support is required to ensure that teachers can adequately address these issues with students (Javadnoori et al., 2012; Ofsted, 2013; Sex Education Forum, 2018). Even the participants were able to identify the challenges that teachers face in delivering such lessons given that they are ‘digital immigrants’ (Kupiainen, 2013) especially with regard to the novel platform TikTok. Teachers must also be supported by adequate guidance in the form of policy. Young people’s notion that “politicians and adults don't really know about it” (17, male) seems substantiated given the recent introduction of the

Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education (2019) as well as the Draft Online Safety Bill (2021) that whilst a positive step forward both only address the tip of the iceberg. Furthermore, critics argue that children's voices are often missing in policy (Creswick et al., 2019) and I note that this research sets out the issues that are important to young people, many coinciding with those set out in the OHWP and later the OSA, but also acknowledges the benefits that young people receive from their use. Future interventions and policy should be considerate of participant voices rather than applying a paternalistic lens to digital safety that is incapable of meeting young people's digital needs. Furthermore, this paper notes different experiences for males and females on the app and those who identify as LGBTQ+, something that requires more research. While this was an issue not considered in the OHWP, the proceeding consultation ensured the inclusion of references to protecting those who may fall under the umbrella of LGBTQ+ in the OSA. This recognition is valuable and must be implemented by Ofcom to ensure digital spaces are safe for all, particularly those who may benefit from them most including those who define as LGBTQ+.

Similarly, while gendered harms were not truly considered in the OHWP this has since been ammended in the OSA after consultation with many charities and organisations that aim to end violence against women. Again, the implementation of this by Ofcom must ensure that gendered harms are truly considered, for example by; issueing codes of practise that prohibit harms that disproportionately affect women and girls, ensure transparent reporting of such harms, and fine platforms that do not adhere to measures that ensure the safety of users. More research is needed to explore how mainstream or typically female online spaces, such as TikTok, are being shaped by the manosphere given that negative attitudes towards women and their talent is no longer reserved to male spaces such as Twitch (Zolides, 2021).

RSE should equip young people with the skills and knowledge to identify and avoid gendered harms. Emphasis should be put on the impact of these harms on individuals and on how to report these. Young people's familiarity with social media enables them to subvert the unfair policies and practises on social media. As such educators should acknowledge Illich's (1970) distinction between teaching and learning and position students as experts in these topics, that will likely learn more from their peers when facilitated by teachers. Such an approach would enable young people to develop skills to critically access the benefits of, and safely navigate, the digital world. Examples where young people have taken accountability online, as part of a collective, include the use and enforcement of trigger warnings to alert vulnerable users of potentially distressing content. This shows that young people can find ways to respond to problems that directly affect them, showing empathy and tolerance towards others online, as well as stepping in when they feel TikTok does not protect their users. Educators should work with young people to help them formulate workable solutions to other serious concerns such as online hate and platforms should notice the ways in which young people are using TikTok and the concerns that they have.

While this study has been responsive to the changes on TikTok which may affect its use, including the introduction of the Creator Fund, a number of changes were implemented since data collection ceased. The introduction of the TikTok shop in the UK blurs the lines between sponsored and unsponsored content. While those who share links to products in the TikTok shop will automatically have their post labelled #ad, content creators do not receive a direct fee but instead will receive commission based on sales via their link. Research should consider whether users consider this fair and unbiased or if they are cautious of such posts and product recommendations. Additionally, TikTok has been linking profiles to phone contacts, which may pose a threat to LGBTQ+ users who I found particularly enjoy the anonymity of the platform and find community there. Research must consider

whether in doing so TikTok are ‘outing’ their users to friends/family/employers and what harm this may result in.

Chapter 6: Cycle 2

6.1 Introduction

Merriam-Webster (2023) define the term intervention as “the act or an instance of intervening...as to prevent harm or improve functioning”. Interventions are often used in research in an attempt to address an issue and improve said issue thus making them appropriate within Action Research such as this. Interventions can vary significantly, as can the development processes behind them. In this chapter I will consider different approaches to intervention development from different fields. While this intervention does not directly adhere to any one approach it is informed by approaches from public health and pedagogy. The design of the intervention will then be described in detail explaining how decisions were made and the rationale for each of the 6 lessons. I then describe the online survey that was completed by RSE teachers to share their thoughts regarding the intervention, in particular its utility, accessibility and appropriateness. The data elicited were analysed using content analysis and the findings are discussed in relation to each lesson. The findings of the survey were then further used to refine the intervention in preparation for the final cycle of research.

6.2 Intervention Development

Developing an intervention can be an overwhelming process particularly given that there are so many different approaches to intervention development. O’Cathain et al. (2019) describe 8 main approaches to intervention development in a public health context: partnership, target population-centered, theory and evidence-based, implementation based, efficiency based, stepped or phased based, intervention-specific, and combination. Partnership approaches include co-

creation whereby those who will benefit from the intervention have equal decision-making powers to the research team in the intervention development process. Target population-centered approaches include user-centered and human-centered design, both of which are created with an emphasis on the views and actions of the target population. Alongside its appropriateness for public health interventions (see Bartlett, 2021; Bazzano, Martin, Hicks, Faughnan & Murphy, 2017), Garreta-Domingo, Sloep and Hernández-Leo (2018) highlight how educators should incorporate human-centered design into their practice given that they are ultimately the designers of learning (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013; Bennett, Agostinho, & Lockyer, 2016). Theory and evidence-based interventions utilise published research evidence and theories to shape an intervention. Implementation based approaches are developed to be utilised in the real world if they are deemed effective. Efficiency based approaches employ quantitative methods to increase the efficiency of an intervention. Stepped or phased based approaches rely on a systematic overview of the processes involved in the development of the intervention. Intervention-specific approach is used to develop interventions with specific characteristics or goals such as digital or group interventions. Finally, a combination approach combines some of the aforementioned approaches, examples include Participatory Action Research. This combination approach will be utilised in the development of the current intervention utilising aspects of target population-centered, theory and evidence-based, implementation based, and intervention-specific approaches, given that by combining these approaches you effectively combine the strengths of other approaches as well as its suitability within the critical paradigm as mentioned in Chapter 4.

O’Cathain et al. (2019) go on to explain what they believe to be the 7 domains of intervention development: conception, planning, designing, creating, refining, documentation, and planning for future evaluation which they group as per the following graphic to depict the intervention development process. In many ways, this process of intervention development shares similarities to the Action

Research cycle already outlined in 4.5 making them a suitable pairing. An array of research highlights how interventions can be an output of Action Research (and variations such as PAR) including Smith, Davis and Bhowmik's (2010) development of a school counselling intervention as part of Youth Participatory Action Research as well as McVicar, Munn-Giddings and Seebohm's (2013) intervention to reduce workplace stress developed from PAR.



Figure 2: Intervention development process

The conception stage involves identifying the problem that requires intervention, this can be through practice or theory. The planning stage then

involves identifying relevant stakeholders to participate and understanding the problem to be addressed. I consider the earlier chapters of the thesis part of this stage including chapters 2, 3, and 5.

The design stage involves considering potential solutions to the problem identified as well as who will benefit from it, how it should be delivered, and who should deliver it. The creating stage involves the creation of the intervention, although at a pre-delivery stage, much like a prototype. This chapter describes this stage which flows into the next stage given the iterative cycles of intervention development that consist of multiple stages of refining, documenting, and planning for future evaluation.

The refining stage consists of testing the intervention, initially with a small sample to assess its feasibility and acceptability, then with a more diverse sample whereby it is considered whether the intervention is achieving what it set out to do, and then the intervention should be optimised for large scale delivery. The documenting stage involves creating literature that facilitates the delivery of the intervention by others. The final stage, planning for future evaluation, involves considering how the intervention could be evaluated such as what measures could be used.

However, it is important to note that while this approach has distinct stages these are not linear, stages often overlap and are repeated, in many ways reflecting the Action Research spiral. This makes the methodology of Action Research well suited to the development of interventions, what is considered here to be an output of the research.

With regard to pedagogical approaches to intervention development, these are often less structured in terms of their development, instead pedagogical interventions typically are informed by theoretical frameworks, which in regard to RSE interventions may include critical pedagogy, social justice education, queer

pedagogy and anti-oppressive education (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008; Rodriguez & Pinar, 2007). As such, the development of the current intervention will be described in accordance with O’Cathain et al’s domains however I utilise these relevant theoretical frameworks which are evident within the design.

6.3 Intervention Design

As mentioned, the current intervention takes what O’Cathain et al’s domains termed a combined approach to intervention development. As such a combination of themes elicited in Cycle 1 (Chapter 5) and academic literature will be utilised to explain the choices made in relation to the intervention. Given the significant number of findings that resulted from Cycle 1, including a vast array of themes and subthemes, it was impossible to have each represented in a lesson. Instead, ideas that were most common in Cycle 1, and were deemed most important by the young people in Cycle 1 and could be discussed in enough depth for a lesson were turned into beta lesson plans and supporting materials. Some of the themes/findings from Cycle 1 represented genuine learning points but were not deemed substantial enough for an entire lesson and as such some lessons contain many elements from the findings while others focus on one main finding.

The lessons were initially developed for pupils in Key Stage 3 (ages 11-14). The rationale for this is that research has shown that most young people between this age range have access to technology such as smartphones, tablets etc where they can access social media platforms. Ofcoms (2025) Children’s Media Literacy Report states that 82% of 10-12 year olds own a mobile phone with this number increasing to 97% for 13-15 year olds. All these young people report having access to a device on which they can go online. As such it is important that such lessons come at a timely manner as RSE is often criticised as coming too late (Brook, 2023). While the understanding and ability of learners must be considered for complex topics such as these the sooner the better, and so early KS3 was the aim.

6.3.1 Lesson 1: Information Online

Cycle 1 revealed that TikTok was a space of informal learning about a range of topics. However, participants revealed that they sometimes struggled to identify misinformation:

“I think it would be hard to like distinguish between what is fact and what is not because anyone can say anything really” (25, female).

They highlight the difficulties they have in identifying reliable sources. Research has shown that this is a common problem and internet users devise a range of fallacies in an attempt to find reliable sources; for example, when using a search engine users consider results at the top of the page more credible with many only looking at the first result and almost never going as far as to look at the second page of search results and ignoring any links labelled as ads (Mendes, Abreu, Vilar-Correia & Borlido-Santos, 2017; Starling & Cheshire, 2016; Ghenai, Smucker & Clarke, 2019). Such findings were mirrored in the findings of Cycle 1 (5.3) with users avoiding buying products labelled ads:

“if I was to buy anything from TikTok it would more be like just a creator doing it...and saying like okay so this is something that I bought off like of Amazon and I think you should get it...because I know that that's not paid for” (16, female).

Based on these insights I decided to devise a lesson dedicated to information online and equipping young people with the skills to identify information versus misinformation.

There were two main activities for this lesson, the first involved a game of pairs that matched keywords with their definitions. The words included: clickbait, source, credible, fake news, fact, misinformation, (#)ad, and opinion. The second activity involved identifying whether the examples provided were fact or opinion using the keywords from the first activity. The examples were picked

in an attempt to utilise as many of the keywords as possible and as such examples included: a TripAdvisor restaurant review to highlight opinion; a BBC News article to highlight fact and credible (this outlet was chosen given that many other news outlets such as The Sun may not be considered reputable and many of their online articles include clickbait); a sponsored article from Jasper's Market highlighting clickbait; and a sponsored ad on Kim Kardashians Instagram highlighting #ad.

6.3.2 Lesson 2: Online Hate

Throughout Cycle 1 participants acknowledged that hate comments are rife on TikTok and gave examples where hate speech was targeted towards people of colour, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and women. While other researchers have stated that hate comments are easy to avoid on TikTok as they do not instantly appear and instead must be clicked on (Zeng & Kaye, 2022), participants in Cycle 1 explained an urge that compelled them to read the comments:

“I do look at comments quite a lot like I'm nosey looking at the comments on quite a lot of them there is a lot of like negative comments” (25, female),

which they felt:

“aren't policed” (22, female).

As such, I felt it vital to address online hate within the intervention given the importance that the young people placed on it in Cycle 1 with it being mentioned repeatedly and with genuine concern.

To address online hate it was decided that the main activity for this lesson would include real life examples of celebrities receiving hate. Real examples were chosen rather than vignettes, the typical approach for this type of activity. Vignettes can be defined as “concrete examples of people and their behaviours on which participants can offer comment or opinion” (Hazel, 1995, p.2) and are

considered particularly useful when discussing sensitive topics (Barter & Renold, 1999; Slead, Durkeim, Kriel, Solomon & Baxter, 2002). However, this methodology is highly flawed as participants responses to vignettes often do not reflect behaviour in real life situations (Hughes, 1998). Furthermore, I thought back to my own experiences of sex education and the repeated use of vignettes which I felt at the time depicted situations with an ‘appropriate’ response. They seemed black and white with a right and wrong which I felt at the time forced to ‘say the right thing’. However, designing these materials I felt it important to acknowledge different responses to hate comments, as young people may have both recieved and sent such comments. As such, villifying those who leave such comments would likely have a negative impact leaving these young people unable to speak up for fear of negative consequences. Instead I wanted young people to consider the impact of hate comments therefore discouraging the behaviour and increasing their empathy.

Celebrities, and specific situations, were chosen carefully to appeal to young people. One scenario involved England footballers Bukayo Saka, Marcus Rashford and Jadon Sancho who all recieved online hate based on their race following the 2020 Euros. Race was consistently mentioned throughout the interviews in Cycle 1 as a dimension for discrimination and so it felt important that it is represented in this activity. The inclusion of footballers was chosen to appeal to young men who are consistenly forgotten about in RSE and one young man from Cycle 1 referenced that he followed footballers/clubs on TikTok:

“I follow the football clubs are quite good on TikTok like they'll play some quite funny things” (17, male).

Another scenario involved Addison Rae and the body shaming she recieves online. While countless women report body shaming/harrassment online Addison Rae was chosen as an example as she was mentioned countless times

during the interviews in Cycle 1 and was also considered by participants to be attractive:

“like Addison Rae like she’s ultimately like visually a very gorgeous person” (23, female).

While the intention was to provoke discussion around body shaming it was assumed that by having an example of someone considered attractive would hopefully prevent any body shaming when implemented with young people.

Another situation involved the YouTuber Nikki De Jager who was forced to come out as Trans after being blackmailed. This situation was chosen because during the Cycle 1 interviews young people made many references to the LGBTQ+ community and the discrimination they faced online however only a small number of participants referenced Trans individuals. As such, the aim was to raise awareness in young people the discrimination Trans people face online as well as highlighting the inappropriateness of ‘outing’ someone. Another interesting facet was that Nikki received overwhelming support after coming out which was a way to include young people from Cycle 1’s view that while TikTok is saturated with hate there are still opportunities to be part of communities online as your authentic self and be accepted. As such it is anticipated that this could create a positive conversation in young people who may be experiencing identity struggles themselves.

The final scenario involved Rosie Jones, a comedian and actress, living with Cerebral Palsy. After playing a pregnant woman on the UK TV show *Casualty* she was subject to hate comments suggesting that disabled people should not have children. This situation was chosen as despite disability rarely being mentioned in Cycle 1, those that did felt strongly about it and that its invisibility, unlike that that results from race and sexuality, goes unnoticed. As such the activity would hopefully raise awareness of the discrimination of disabled people

online and would hopefully challenge the negative stereotypes associated with disability including that a person with a disability would not be a fit parent.

6.3.3 Lesson 3: Algorithms

During the interviews in Cycle 1 it became apparent that young peoples' knowledge of algorithms, and how they operate, varied significantly. Understanding how algorithms operate is vital to navigate the digital world safely. This lesson took the longest to design and underwent many rounds of refinement through discussions between the research design. During the refinement process I referred to the literature and other projects with similar objectives to consider different approaches and set up multiple meetings between myself and my supervisors to discuss updates/changes to the lesson plan until I felt it met the desired objectives. It was decided to not follow typical lesson designs regarding algorithms such as recipes as they felt too simplistic and not able to reflect the sophistication of the algorithms employed on social media platforms. I decided that the main task for this activity would involve gamifying the topic, something which is increasingly being utilised in education given its ability to improve learning outcomes (de Sousa Borges et al., 2014; Codish & Ravid, 2015; Caporarello, Magni & Pennarola, 2019). The activity involves students playing the role of a user and as the algorithm behind a high-tech vending machine. A vending machine was chosen given it is an instantly recognisable machine that young people would be familiar with. They were given different scenarios to depict personalisation, the way the algorithm learns user preferences, and bias through sponsorship. Such concepts were important to participants in Cycle 1 who were able to identify positives and negatives of both.

6.3.4 Lesson 4: Algorithmic Bias

The young people who participated in Cycle 1 very clearly noted that algorithmic bias impacted their experiences on the platform TikTok. They were

able to identify in the theme FYP=IRL that creators who made their way onto the FYP, therefore achieving greater visibility and the potential to profit from the platform (either through the creator fund or through brand deals) were seemingly white, heterosexual, middle class, able bodied, cis-gender women which one participant exemplified as “the basic white girl” (female, 24).

Repeatedly, participants noted that in the protests, and promotion of Black Lives Matter (BLM), that followed the murder of George Floyd TikTok appeared to be censoring BLM content, at least BLM content posted by black individuals:

“it does censor a lot of people even with like the Black Lives Matter movement it was mainly white people on my For You Page being like oh yeah Black Lives Matter and I’m like why are the black creators’ content not getting on my For You Page with the hashtag but yours is” (21, female).

As such it was apparent that young people in Cycle 1 felt that algorithmic bias is a topic that warrants discussion between them and their peers. In designing this lesson, I was heavily influenced by Noble’s (2018) *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. In the book Noble discusses the way in which Google searches privilege whiteness while people of colour, notably black women, experience discrimination. She writes about the search terms that appear when typing ‘black women’, which emphasise negative tropes of black womanhood such as anger and promiscuity providing links to porn websites.

To design the main activity, I incorporated the work of Noble into the format of Wired’s Autocomplete Interviews found on YouTube which involve celebrities peeling back paper to reveal the autocomplete suggestions provided by Google when typing their name in the search bar. After some trials on the Google search bar, I settled on the search terms ‘men should’ and ‘women should’; ‘why are black people’ and ‘why are white people’; and ‘can gay’ and ‘can straight people’. These pairs of search terms were chosen to highlight the differences in

the suggestions that appear for different groups and therefore the bias that is perpetuated every time someone utilizes the search engine. I noticed that Google has a feature that allows users to report inappropriate searches and so the activity involved the young people acting as ‘bias detectors’ considering if the suggestions are helpful, biased (differ from group to group), and should be reported.

6.3.5 Lesson 5: Values of Platforms

During the interviews in Cycle 1, few of the participants were able to recognise that platform owners/creators embed their own values within the platform. Many attributed the censorship of LGBTQ+, people of colour, and disabled people as a mistake made by the algorithm however this seems unlikely given that the platform also employs human moderators. This lesson sought to explore the values embedded into platforms and in doing so could address other issues raised by participants that did not warrant their own lesson. This includes nudity, and the gendered notion of nudity raised by participants whereby men could pose topless whereas women were held to much stricter ‘rules’ around appropriate dress:

“on social media apps like it's reflective of like the real world you know where men can post videos with them like topless where women can't”
(20, female),

“it flags up all kinds of stuff just like of like girls dancing in like crop tops” (20, female).

There has been significant scholarship on this topic on other platforms, notably Tumblr, which in 2018 announced a ‘porn ban’ despite being considered an open space for sexual expression for over a decade (Byron, 2019; Ward, 2019). The ban included ‘female presenting nipples’ to which users expressed outrage at such transphobic language as well as sexism and shaming of expressions of sexuality/the body (Byron, 2019).

Twerking was another topic discussed repeatedly with some thinking it was inappropriate for the young users:

“the dance is totally inappropriate in itself for a child anyway. (24, female)
I don’t appreciate seeing videos of people who look under the age of
consent doing it I don’t want to see that” (24, female).

while others felt it was harmless. The way in which twerking is intertwined with black culture, originating in New Orleans in the black projects, was unbeknownst to participants. The dance is common in people of all ages and is not necessarily sexual (Casey & Eberhardt, 2018; Pérez, 2016, 2021) however it is seen this way in the Western world after being popularized by Miley Cyrus at the 2013 VMAs. Banning twerking stifles aspects of black culture and tells those individuals that their culture, and even their bodies, is/are inappropriate.

Pro-eating disorder content was of concern to participants who noted that content often focuses on appearance and body ideals of thinness including ‘body checks’ and ‘what I eat in a day’s’. While explicit eating disorder content typically receives a blanket ban, many argue that such content can also be used to aid recovery (Eikey & Booth, 2017; Herrick, Hallward & Duncan, 2021) meanwhile the aforementioned ‘body checks’ and ‘WIEIADs’ are rampant on the platform without user created ‘trigger warnings’.

The issue of ownership and crediting other creators who put significant labour into their content was also raised by participants. A popular dance, ‘Renegade’, created by Jalaiah Harmon however most associated with Addison Rae and Charli D’Amelio (Lorenz, 2020). Jalaiah, a teenage black girl from Atlanta was not initially credited for her choreography while others achieved fame doing the dance she created. Whilst Jalaiah was eventually credited, and ‘dc’ (dance credit) was born on the app to acknowledge the creative labour of others this again highlights the privilege that some creators have, and others do not.

Similarly, transparent pay was a concern raised by participants who felt that creators who did not fit the ideals of TikTok may not receive fair compensation as they may be ‘shadow banned’ by the platform.

The main activity for this lesson was a class debate inspired by participants discussing the way in which filter bubbles may prevent you from being exposed to those with different opinions to yourself:

“it can get quite a bit like echo chamber-ey at times when all you're exposed to are people with the same ideas as you... people start not understanding each other especially when it comes to quite big debate-y topics and people tend to not actually listen to what the other people have to say” (19, male).

The activity involves the young people being presented with a number of statements regarding the values embedded within platforms which they can then ‘agree’ or ‘disagree’ with by moving around the room to share their position. While I provide alternatives for this movement if this is not possible within the classroom set up I advocate the use of movement as it can help to visualise the way in which opinions can change especially when presented with new information/attitudes. As well as encouraging the young people to consider their stance regarding the values of platforms that they may or may not be aware of, it’s though that the activity will allow young people to develop valuable communication skills as well as being encouraged to respect others opinions even if they do not agree.

6.3.6 Lesson 6: Assessment Lesson Overall Harms and Opportunities

The final lesson of the intervention was designed as an assessment to show evidence of learning over the previous five lessons. The main activity involved designing their own episode of Black Mirror, a popular Netflix series theorizing hypothetical dystopian realities regarding the potential harms of new and emerging technology. However, in this activity young people could design either

a dystopian or utopian reality that results from technology to reflect the positive impacts of technology as well as negative identified during Cycle 1.

It was brought to my attention by a member of the research team that Klassen and Fiesler (2022) conducted a study with university level educators using a similar activity with students to speculate on the future harms/consequences of current technologies. While overall the educators' feedback was positive, some concerns were raised including the need "to avoid traumatizing somebody" (p.4) and tread carefully. As such it seems justified to allow young people to consider utopias as well as dystopias particularly because the young people intended for the intervention will be younger than those described in Klassen and Fieslers' study.

The activity involved providing young people with a template replicating Black Mirrors page on the Netflix app. Young people would be required to provide a title for their episode, a brief synopsis, and an image that described the episode. This activity was designed so that it could be done using a computer if the technology was available or by hand. It was also designed so that it would make a good display piece.

6.4 Methodology

6.4.1 Design

Given the ongoing constraints of the Covid pandemic, this cycle of research adopted an online survey method. Online surveys have been used since the 1990s although the format at the time was email surveys (Schonlau et al., 2001). Much research has considered the advantages of online research suggesting many benefits in comparison to face to face and postal surveys and as such it has now become the preferred mode of delivery for qualitative surveys (Toepoel, 2017); first it is an inexpensive and efficient method of data collection given that the researcher does not need to be present (McPeake, Bateson & O'Neill, 2014;

Hlatshwako et al., 2021). Furthermore, its thought that online surveys facilitate participation from those who may not typically participate in research therefore it:

“gives voice to people who might not otherwise be able to participate in qualitative research” (Davey, Clarke & Jenkinson, 2019, p. 12).

Additionally, online surveys are beneficial when studying topics or including samples whereby anonymity is important (Braun, Clarke & Gray, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Terry & Braun, 2017). This is a consideration here as teachers may wish to remain anonymous as to protect themselves as well as their students, also taking into consideration that they may require anonymity to discuss their school practices openly without fear of repercussions.

However, it is important to note that these advantages of online surveys rely on careful survey design that facilitates participation. It is suggested that questions should be short to enable comprehension (Foddy, 1993; Dillman, 2000; Fink, 2003; Holbrook, Cho & Johnson, 2006). While there is some disagreement in specifically how long questions should be it is suggested that they should be no longer than 16-20 words (Brislin, 1986; Oppenheim, 1992). Others highlight that questions must be clear and unambiguous in order to illicit the intended responses (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Whilst qualitative surveys consist of both demographic and topic-based questions, Treharne (2011) argue that clarity is particularly important for demographic questions where terminology must be chosen carefully and deliberately. Regarding topic-based questions it is suggested to limit the amount to 4-6 being considered an appropriate amount for qualitative online surveys (Barrett, 2007; Frith & Gleeson, 2004, 2008; Clarke, 2019).

Whilst the overall research project takes an overall qualitative approach, the current online survey utilised a mixed methods approach (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017), collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. Researchers often

cite the strengths of mixed-methods approaches for combining the strengths of quantitative and qualitative research (Jick, 1979) as well as providing:

“breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration” (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, 2007, p. 123).

I felt this would assist the researcher in truly understanding the data provided given that, unlike methods such as interviews, there is no opportunity to clarify or ask follow up questions.

The survey was created using Google Forms, a popular online survey platform. Participants were initially asked a set of demographic questions, as mentioned the terminology used in these is important and was considered regarding the researchers’ beliefs as explained in Chapter 3. For example, respondents were asked to provide their gender/sex (see 3.2.2 and Morgenroth & Ryan, 2021) and the study did not provide a drop-down list as I feared this imposed labels onto individuals, instead they provided their own description of their gender/sex. Other data collected at this stage included their age, the number of years’ experience they had, whether RSE was their main role, if they had received RSE training, how RSE is delivered at their school, the typical RSE lesson length, and finally whether they enjoy delivering RSE.

Participants were then provided the relevant materials for the first lesson and asked a series of four qualitative topic-based questions, the recommended amount (Barrett, 2007; Frith & Gleeson, 2004, 2008; Clarke, 2019), and an additional question to rate each lesson on a scale of 1(terrible)-5(incredible). This was repeated six times to account for the six lesson plans. There were then a final six questions about the intervention as a whole as well as its utility and appropriateness.

6.4.2 Participants

Many scholars have argued that collaboration with teachers is essential for educational improvement and inclusion (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Messiou, 2018). As such the survey recruited RSE teachers as volunteers utilising existing networks of RSE teachers within social media ‘support’ groups. Research by Beam (2023) highlights that social media recruitment is an appropriate method when attempting to recruit teachers and can provide responses from teachers across a much larger region than other methods could. A total of six secondary school teachers volunteered, all of whom were female. Their ages ranged from 36-47 with a mean of 41.17.

6.4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected between June 2022 and August 2022, a relatively short time period highlighting the speed at which this cycle had to be ‘turned around’ to allow for implementation in an in-person setting. Data were collected via the online platform Google Forms although they were then translated into a Microsoft Excel file for the ease of the researcher.

This cycle utilises content analysis as the method of analysis the data. Content analysis can be defined as:

"any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages" (Holsti, 1969, p. 14).

While content analysis is not limited to textual data and can be used to analyse visual and videographic data for example, this cycle utilises textual data and therefore will be the focus of this section.

Weber (1990) suggested that content analysis strengths lie in its ability to describe the attitudes of individuals/groups/institutions, making it suitable for this research given its focus on secondary school RSE teachers. The purpose of content

analysis is to condense data into an easily readable/usable format (Cavanagh, 1997), in this research making it possible for the researcher to consider the practical application of the designed intervention in an education setting.

While nowadays content analysis can be quantitative or qualitative, its earliest applications were purely quantitative. The quantitative approach to content analysis seeks to apply a numerical statistic to the incidence of a word or phrase within the text. In comparison the qualitative approach to content analysis aims to identify a concept/construct within the text being studied, and to provide more organisation to, what can be, large amounts of data.

Within both quantitative and qualitative approaches to content analysis it is typically agreed that researchers can take one of two approaches to the analysis; manifest or latent. Manifest content analysis refers to a data analysis approach which is easily observable even for novice researchers with little training. This approach is the approach typically used in quantitative content analysis but can also be used in qualitative content analysis. Latent content analysis, unlike manifest content analysis, involves interpreting what may be hidden within a text. While the role of the researcher in manifest content analysis is to identify observable codes, during latent content analysis their role is to uncover meaning. Furthermore, Potter and Levine-Donnerstein (1999) argue that latent content analysis can be subdivided into latent pattern and latent projective. Latent pattern, as suggested, seeks to find patterns within the text whilst latent projective considers the role of the researcher and their interpretations of the text as part of the analysis. It is important to note that whilst these are the most commonly used terms, terminology within content analysis can differ. Other terms common in this approach include conventional, directed, and summative which roughly translate into the terms latent projective, latent pattern, and manifest content analyses respectively (see Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). However, Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017) argue that rather than content analysis fitting into such distinct categories it is instead a continuum. I take

Erlingsson and Brysiewicz's (2017) approach believing that content analysis is a continuum and as such do not define the project as fitting into one of these distinct categories but instead has elements of all three content analysis approaches.

The data analysis process first begins with familiarising oneself with the data itself. For this research that involved the researcher compiling the data and reading and re-reading the data thoroughly. Then the process of coding begins whereby codes are identified.

“Codes are the currency of content analysis. Researchers use codes to organize and understand their data” (Kleinheksel et al., 2020, p. 129).

Codes may be words or short phrases that are used as descriptive labels given to each unit of meaning to organise the data. The process of coding itself can take the form of emergent coding or priori coding. For emergent coding codes are developed after some preliminary data analysis whereas priori coding has preestablished codes based on existing literature or theories. While these are often considered distinct coding strategies even priori coding can utilise emergent coding given that data may reveal codes not accounted for by existing literature or theories. In this project I utilised a combination of priori and emergent coding. The priori coding considered codes relating to each lesson as this assisted in meeting the aims of the project, and emergent codes appeared through analysis. As the coding process continues revisions are made to codes so that they are mutually exclusive and exhaustive (Weber, 1990).

6.4.4 Ethical Considerations

The primary ethical considerations relating to this cycle were related to the participants profession, RSE teachers. It was imperative that teachers identities and their responses were anonymous and confidential. Teachers were required to provide their email address in order to receive the resources as described earlier in

this chapter which they were free to use in their teaching practise. Teachers typically provided their work based email address to do so which provided what could be potentially interesting data, such as their location and specific characteristics of their school/community. However the decision was made that email addresses (or any inferences that could be made from them) were not recorded or stored by the researcher in order to protect participants anonymity and confidentiality.

Furthermore, while participants did not receive any financial incentives, they were incentivised by the receiving of all of the materials free of charge for them to use as part of their RSE lessons. However, I do not consider this to pose ethical issues and instead consider it to reflect the reciprocal nature of research in which participants as well as researchers should benefit from their participation.

6.5 Findings

The results of the online survey indicate that the RSE teachers experience varied massively ranging from 1-19 years and some chose not to answer this question. Such a vast array of experiential levels provides an assortment of viewpoints and a consideration that teachers at different stages of their teaching journey will have different knowledge and confidence levels. Some participants had RSE as their main role or one of them, some defined their role as Citizenship, another as a PHSE head and another chose not to answer the question. Rather concerningly, multiple participants reported having no training despite some having senior roles within their schools such as PHSE leader and another stating they do not receive training they deliver it. This supports the findings of the Sex Education Forum (2018) who reported that 29% of their respondents received no training, along with our research this highlights this is a consistent issue that is not improving in the wake of statutory RSE. The mode of delivery also differed significantly with some schools providing weekly or fortnightly lessons as well as delivering it during tutor/form time and drop-down days. Participants reported that typical lesson length varied from 35-90 minutes, a significant difference given that the lesson plans were

designed to be 60 minutes (although half of participants reported lessons of this length). All participants reported enjoying delivering such lessons often because it pertains to young people and their “real” lives.

Lesson	P1 rating	P2 rating	P3 rating	P4 rating	P5 rating	P6 rating	Average rating
1	4	3	4	4	4	4	3.83
2	3	4	4	4	4	3	3.66
3	4	2	4	3	3	4	3.33
4	3	4	3	5	4	4	3.83
5	4	4	4	5	5	4	4.33
6	3	1	4	5	4	4	3.50

Table 1: Teachers ratings of lessons

6.5.1 Lesson 1: Information Online

Overall, teachers were quite fond of this lesson plan with one stating “I have some similar work on reliability of sources”. They believed that students would find it engaging but one participant highlighted that when students use the internet, they can become distracted and go off task. In contrast, other teachers felt more technology could be used, including the integration of videos as well as an online voting system. However, concerns were raised around the timings with some thinking the time allotted for snap was too much and would lead to boredom. Another issue was that some felt that students may struggle to write a paragraph:

“writing a paragraph isn’t always realistic”,
with another teacher suggesting providing more guidelines to assist them.

6.5.2 Lesson 2: Online Hate

Responses to this lesson varied; while some felt the lesson plan was engaging and that the examples included were relevant to young people, others felt that some were unrecognisable and noted that the lesson plan and other materials would age quickly and therefore need to be updated regularly. Another contradiction between participants is that some felt that students would enjoy the discussion element while another explained “it really depends on the children in the class - some don’t like discussing”. Other recommendations from the teachers included making it less text heavy, with more videos and activities, and using whiteboards or post-it notes to share thoughts.

6.5.3 Lesson 3: Algorithms

This was the lowest rated lesson by the teachers and was the first lesson that teachers reported they would not feel confident delivering however, again this was split with half of the teachers reporting that they would not feel confident delivering this while the remaining teachers would feel confident delivering this. Some teachers were confused by this lesson plan and felt that it required clearer instructions, however, others described it as having “clear and enjoyable activities”. Participants provided lots of feedback on timings for this lesson plan with multiple participants stating that the feedback and task times were too long, some suggested the addition of a starter and one participant felt that this lesson was longer than others.

6.5.4 Lesson 4: Algorithmic Bias

Teachers were typically fond of this lesson with participants labelling it “straight forward”, “interesting” and “relevant”. They felt it would be engaging for

young people as “they love discussion and controversial topics such as sexuality, stereotypes, prejudice”. Of the participants one rated it 5 indicating a fondness for the lesson plan, this teacher had the lowest reported years of experience as well as being one of the youngest participants which could suggest a greater understanding of algorithms, their bias, and therefore this lesson. However, another participant seemed confused by the lesson plan stating “maybe need a little longer if on internet” despite the lesson not requiring internet use and another felt it required more talking points.

6.5.5 Lesson 5: Values of Platforms

This was the highest rated lesson with participants referring to it as “interesting”, “contemporary” and “relatable” and in response participants had little feedback. Their few comments included that “30 minutes is too long for an activity, it needs to be broken down further” and that a debate can be difficult for the teacher to manage and requires supervision from the teacher.

6.5.6 Lesson 6: Assessment Lesson Overall Harms and Opportunities

This lesson was rated the second lowest out of all the lessons however this is due to it receiving ratings at the very bottom of the scale, as well as the top. Some participants reported that they felt the activity was inappropriate as it featured the show, and clips, from Black Mirror. Those who raised concerns felt it was not age appropriate and worried that they “may go home and watch it all”. Interestingly these respondents, who also rated the lesson the lowest of all participants were the most experienced RSE teachers with 35 years of experience between them. However, another participant felt that the activity would be engaging for students as “anything Netflix the students in KS4 love”. Another concern that was raised by a participant was that students may struggle to come up with their own ideas. These different perspectives from participants could be related to years of

experience with the participant with the lowest reported years of experience rating the lesson highest, possibly suggesting openness to new ideas.

6.5.7 Overall thoughts

Most participants thought that these lessons would be best suited to pupils in Key Stage 4 (aged 14 and above), while one participant thought they were best suited to those in Key Stage 3 (aged 11-14) and another felt some lessons were best suited to Key Stage 3 pupils while others were best suited to Key Stage 4 pupils.

Most participants reported that they would use these lessons with students, while one said they may use them with students, and another said they would not. The participant who would not use the lessons was the oldest and most experienced in delivering RSE in number of years. Given the openness of other participants compared to this participant it could suggest that they are not open to new ideas and/or comfortable delivering these types of lessons. This supports the findings of previous research that suggests despite the recognition of its importance, some teachers do not feel comfortable in delivering such lessons due to their own lack of understanding (Head, Fister & MacMillan, 2020; Kupiainen, 2013).

6.6 Conclusion

The findings of the online survey indicated that one size doesn't fit all, in terms of accessibility, utility and appropriateness. This finding supports the notion from Schools North East (2020) that:

"education policy has taken a 'one-size-fits-all' approach too often" (n.p.),

and such an approach is not useful in achieving the success that educators are aiming for. In terms of teaching, it was apparent that every teachers' situation was different. All had varied levels of experience, with some dedicated RSE teachers and others not. The way in which they delivered RSE also differed significantly with the duration and frequency varying teacher to teacher. While the lesson plans

had been designed based upon one-hour lessons, which was fairly common within the sample, lessons varied from 35-90 minutes. While the researcher believes that one-hour lessons should be the standard in order to standardise the RSE that young people receive, this is not currently required and as such the intervention must be adaptable to the time restraints that teachers face.

Additionally, it was apparent that there was no one size fits all when it came to students. One teacher stated “it really depends on the children in the class - some don’t like discussing” highlighting that the needs of each group can differ significantly. Chasty (1985) stated “if they don’t learn the way we teach them, we must teach them the way they learn”. Some teachers in the survey appeared to share this attitude explaining and provided alternative options, as such I highlight that teachers must consider the needs of the young people within their class when delivering such lessons (and I expect many already do). Therefore, resources that are developed should be adaptable, taking into account the age and ability of learners providing different tasks for students with higher and lower ability; as well as the education setting such as lesson length and delivery type.

Some teachers also felt that Lesson 6 was inappropriate given that it involved the showing of Black Mirror clips which they felt was not appropriate for students and that they “may go home and watch it all”. While the researcher disagrees with this sentiment, it is a common concern, with similar discussions being had about using 13 Reasons Why in RSE lessons given its depiction of youth suicide. While many believe that discussing suicide may encourage it, researchers have concluded that this is a myth and that discussing suicide can be preventative in those contemplating suicide (Krebs, 2020; Scalvini, 2020; Miller, 2021). Despite this, teachers must always feel comfortable delivering the content of lessons and as such changes will be made.

Chapter 7: Cycle 3

7.1 Introduction

The previous cycle considered the practical limitations and opportunities regarding implementation of the intervention. Utilising these findings this chapter describes the iterations made to the intervention as well as its implementation.

I begin by presenting the methodology adopted for this research cycle, wherein a case study approach was chosen due to the contextualised nature of the study and its ability to answer 'how' and 'why' questions relevant to the study's objectives. This approach allowed for collaboration between participants and the researcher, fostering a deeper understanding of their actions within the youth group. The case study utilised qualitative methods, including ethnographic observations and interviews with the youth worker, to provide rich and holistic insights into the youth group dynamics.

Next, I will discuss the context in which the intervention was implemented. Originally planned for a school setting, the Covid pandemic necessitated the adaptation of the intervention to a youth group based in a deprived area in the North East of England. The youth group served youngsters living within this deprived area, including catering to those who attended who had additional learning and/or behavioural needs.

Next, the data collection and analysis procedures are explained. Field notes were taken during ethnographic observations, and interviews with the youth worker were conducted after each session. The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing for the identification of themes.

I then discuss the ethical considerations during this fieldwork where I begin by discussing my role within the youth group as an assistant to the youth worker who delivered the sessions. The consent of young people to participate in the sessions was considered, even though they were not formally defined as participants. Their privacy and anonymity were protected, and no data was collected directly from them.

Subsequently, the findings of the study are presented in two sections, firstly, Assumed Learning Skills & Prior Knowledge, highlights how the intervention encountered challenges due to the researchers' assumptions regarding young people's prior knowledge and learning skills which did not reflect their actual knowledge and learning skills. Many participants were unfamiliar with essential concepts and terminologies, and some struggled with literacy issues or learning difficulties are concern that was highlighted as needing further consideration within RSE.

The second theme, Gender/Sex Differences, explores how the young people exhibited distinct gender/sex roles within the youth group. The girls and boys displayed differing attitudes and behaviors, with the boys often displaying challenging behaviour which impacted the implementation of the intervention. Gender/sex dynamics impacted discussions, with boys sometimes dominating and limiting the girls' opportunities to express themselves. However, the study also revealed the potential for meaningful conversations and empathy-building among young people, especially when facilitated appropriately and with consideration.

7.2 Methodology

7.2.1 Design

A case study design was adopted due to the heavily contextualised nature of the study (Yin, 2009) as well as the approaches ability to answer 'how' and 'why'

questions (Yin, 2003) as they relate to the aims of the study. This approach allows collaboration between participants and the researcher whereby participants are able to discuss their realities so that the researcher can understand their actions (Lather, 1992; Robottom & Hart, 1993). Case studies typically rely on qualitative methods with this study utilising multiple qualitative methods, ethnographic observations within the youth group as well as interviews with the youth worker. Ethnography is a common methodology within case studies due to its capacity to provide rich, holistic insights into peoples' views and actions (Hughes, 1992). Such observational data is particularly useful in settings such as these where the social phenomena and the context in which it occurs are difficult to separate (Heck, 2011; Yin, 2003). Wilson (1977) argues that the main characteristics of ethnography are that it takes place in a natural setting and that the researcher must understand/perceive how those within the setting interpret an event/behaviour. The first characteristic, observing within a natural setting, is known as the characteristic of contextualisation (Wiersma, 1986) which means that observations are only valid within this specific context. Observations are typically considered essential within ethnographic studies as it allows the researcher to study a practice/phenomenon as it happens (Delamont, 2004). The ethnography involved participant observation, whereby the research was involved in the youth group sessions rather than non-participant observations where the researcher simply observes. Additionally, the ethnography involved interviews with the youth worker after each session. The interviews were brief, acting as a debrief post session, they were largely unstructured instead reflecting on the events of the session shortly after they had taken place. The use of triangulation of data was used to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the intervention worked within the youth group (Patton, 1999) whilst also increasing the internal validity of the study (Stake, 1995; Mason, 2002; Yin, 2003).

Prior to beginning the research, I first met with the main youth worker to understand the youth group set up, as well as their interests (where they expressed

an interest in discussing online harms/digital safety) and to assess whether this was a suitable setting for the intervention. It was decided that the setting was appropriate although its set up meant adaptations had to be made to the intervention given it was designed for use in secondary schools with the assumption of one-hour lessons. Instead, the youth group sessions lasted 2 hours and had limited technology. As such PowerPoints were not presented and instead topics were introduced briefly, and activities were completed. While the initial intervention comprised 6 lessons one was discarded (Lesson 3: Algorithms) due to poor feedback from some teachers in Cycle 2 highlighting the lesson was too complex combined with observations of the young people over the course of the ethnography which indicated that I had higher expectations of their learning skills and prior knowledge. This left a total of 5 “lessons” delivered over 3 youth group sessions. Additional changes included swapping Black Mirror for The Simpsons in the final assessment lesson (previously lesson 6) given the age and ability of the young people attending the youth group.

7.2.2 Context

The struggles of the Covid pandemic meant that engaging with a school was not possible like initially planned and so instead the intervention was employed within a youth group setting. While this is not directly comparable to formal educational settings, which would have much larger class sizes and fewer staff, a youth group setting allowed a closer look at how the intervention works in practise due to the smaller group size. Other differences include the session length, 2 hours although generally not all of the session was used for these activities. In comparison, survey responses from Cycle 2 revealed lesson lengths of between 35 and 90 minutes which are all less than the youth group session. As well as less time, this could translate into greater pressure for a teacher in a school setting who must usher children into the classroom, complete administrative tasks like taking the register before being able to even begin such activities. These pressures are not present for the youth workers who are not assessed or reliant on

young people completing tasks as part of their work performance due to the informality of the setting. Additionally, the youth worker is likely to have very different relationships with the young people who attend than a teacher with a student due to a more strict hierarchy within a school setting.

The youth group is part of a wider group of youth services in the locality and is based in a highly deprived area in the North East of England. The North East of England is an area that is well known to be deprived and has been disproportionately affected by the Covid pandemic which has deepened these existing inequalities (Bambra et al., 2020) and has been further exacerbated by the cost of living crisis (McGuinness, 2023). Specifically, young people in the North Easts education have been impacted with poorer academic attainment (Bambra et al., 2020, Schools North East, 2020). However, Zarraga, the Director of Schools North East insists that:

“While there is a growing North-South divide in educational attainment, it is wrong to suggest that this is due to a divide in school performance. The truth is that our current measurements of school performance are not fit for purpose, and that too often economic and geographical factors are mistakenly presented as educational ones. And that leads us to perpetuating ineffectual policy. Schools in areas of high-impact, long-term deprivation require much greater support to ensure that their students can achieve their full potential. It is vital that schools have a comprehensive education recovery plan, with the right resources targeted to where they are needed” (n.p.).

The youth group has been operating for over 20 years providing crucial services and support to young people in the area. While the youth group is partnered with many organisations which provide funding support, funding is lower post-Covid which means that sessions run fortnightly rather than weekly with each session lasting two hours. The youth group is accessed by young people aged up to 17 and has high rates of young people with additional learning needs.

The youth group building had three main spaces for the young people to congregate; the “computer room” which had a games console, and I was told is very popular with the young people; in the hallway stood a well-loved ping pong table; and “the classroom”, which was used to deliver the sessions, a large room with an oval, boardroom style table surrounded by chairs. The room was bright and had a mural on the wall although it was slightly dated and had gaps where a whiteboard used to be.

The staff included one main youth worker and 2/3 more youth workers per session. Each session was led by the youth worker, a young woman, whom I accompanied. She was responsible for leading the sessions and managing behaviour throughout. Her familiarity with young people was a strong asset as she was able to connect with the young people on a deeper level and encourage them to think deeper in many ways reflecting the role of a typical RSE teacher. Due to funding constraints the youth worker had no real preparation time before the sessions to familiarise herself with the resources and as such I attended sessions to provide any assistance needed relating to the topic or to further explain activities.

The sessions were accessed by different numbers of young people each fortnight. Many of the young people who attended the session were regulars and as such took part in multiple sessions, somewhat reflecting a classroom setting of which the intervention was initially intended. The young people who attended the youth group were not required to be part of the sessions and could choose to come and go as they pleased. At most, within the ‘classroom’ there were around ten young people, although exact numbers are difficult to ascertain given that young people were free to come and go, and at the least there was one young person. This ability to come and go differed from typical RSE lessons especially as they are now statutory unlike attendance at the youth group and activity which is voluntary. However, this may be reflective of the nature of engagement with young people choosing to engage at times and others not.

7.2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected includes field notes resulting from ethnographic observations taken by the researcher as soon as possible after each session with thick description reflecting “a commitment to the exploration of the multiple forms through which social life is enacted” (Atkinson, 2015, p.67). Additionally, transcripts from interviews with the youth worker were collected. The ethnography involved around 5 hours of observation spread over 3 sessions, and 3 interviews with the same youth worker after each session. The interviews acted as a debrief between the researcher and the youth worker and as such were short, around 5 minutes in length focusing on the positives and negatives of the session. These interviews were transcribed verbatim.

The data, both fieldnotes and interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved line by line coding of outputs (fieldnotes and transcripts) which were then translated into themes. Quotes from the transcripts and descriptions from the fieldnotes are presented in the findings to show the rich data collected during this cycle. Unlike much of this thesis, this chapter will use the first person to articulate the researcher’s positionality and experience within the youth group.

7.2.4 Ethical considerations

While the initial plan for this cycle was for the youth worker to deliver the intervention independently the main youth worker felt this was not possible. The funding limitations already mentioned in 7.2.2 meant that the youth worker had no time to familiarise themselves with the intervention or receive any training/advice from the researcher. Instead, the youth worker acted as the facilitator, delivering each session with the researcher also in attendance to assist where needed. Arguably what I provided as researcher was expert knowledge of the topic and resources while the youth worker provided facilitation skills such as behaviour management

and significant experience and familiarity with the young people who attended the session making her the expert regarding the young people. Although I had not initially planned to attend sessions it became clear that my presence was beneficial in understanding how resources may be utilised in practise, for example at times the youth worker took on a traditional ‘teaching’ style albeit she was not a teacher. She insinuated right and wrong answers whereas oftentimes my intention was to open up a discussion and allow different viewpoints to be shared. In practise this often appeared as myself trying to invite the young people into conversations allowing those who may not be as confident to take part to ensure different opinions were shared. While the youth worker acted as the facilitator she was also the participant, taking part in debrief interviews after each session.

While the young people who took part in each session were not considered participants, given that the intervention was not outside the scope of the youth groups typical activities, we still felt it important that they could consent, or not consent to take part. In 7.2.2 I discussed the layout of the youth group with 3 distinct zones. The intervention took place within the ‘classroom’ and young people could come and go as they pleased, taking part in any activities that interested them and leaving if they did not. Furthermore, in line with the young people not being considered participants no data were collected from them and their details are not mentioned anywhere within this thesis or any other documents as to protect their anonymity and confidentiality given that the researcher was privvy to private, and sometimes deeply personal, conversations. As such, any conversations of this nature, regardless of how they could benefit this thesis, have been omitted as a decision made to protect these young people.

7.3 Findings

7.3.1 Assumed learning skills & prior knowledge

Upon beginning the first session it quickly became apparent that I had overestimated the learning skills and prior knowledge of the young people taking part. The boys really struggled with the first activity (from lesson one which involved matching keywords and their definitions). They were unfamiliar with many of the words, with one of the boys stating that they had never heard of or seen #ad, denoting sponsored advertisements on social media platforms, and they were very confused by it. Of the words that they were familiar with they often incorrectly matched the definitions with similar words such as misinformation and fake news. However, their mistakes prompted discussion between themselves and the youth worker and with some assistance managed to pair the words with the definitions. They took longer than anticipated to match up the words and they didn't know how to play card games, so we moved onto the next activity to prevent the sessions losing momentum and the young people disengaging. Once the session had ended, I spent some time with the young people showing them how to play basic card games like snap and pairs with a deck of cards.

My assumptions of the young people's prior knowledge was a consistent problem throughout the intervention; most of the young people were unfamiliar with the term 'algorithm' with only a couple reporting that they had learned about them in school. It is important to note that the initial design of the intervention had developed a lesson to address this and provide young people with the knowledge of algorithms as well as how they operate regarding personalisation and the existence of bias. However, I decided not to include this lesson within the youth group given the feedback from teachers in Cycle 2 who rated it the lowest combined with what I considered low learning skills from the young people who attended the youth group. While I do not regret the decision to exclude this lesson as I believe it would have been too difficult for most that attended and the

disruption that the boys caused would have made it almost impossible to explain the activity to those who did want to participate (discussed in greater detail in 7.3.2). Given the time constraints of my work with the youth group, as well as the consecutive nature of the lessons which build upon each other, I was unable to develop an alternative lesson within the timeframe regarding algorithms.

Then when completing the Google activity, the young people were unfamiliar with the term ‘ejaculation’ which was used in the men/women example. I initially explained it as what happens when a man masturbates however some were still confused by the word masturbation and so the youth worker explained it as when a boy plays with his sausage. Typically, it is considered important to use anatomically correct language when discussing sex and sexuality however here the youth worker utilised indirect language in an attempt to aid in understanding while maintaining an environment in which all of the young people still felt comfortable when discussing what is often considered a taboo subject. Additionally, this may have helped young people feel less stigma surrounding masturbation and ejaculation given the use of casual language without judgement. While the young people laughed and found this funny some still did not understand the term. This example highlights how the youth workers familiarity with the young people, and her ability to be informal and jovial which is appropriate for the setting assisted young people in their understanding, however it is unclear whether teachers in a school setting would do this due to the more formal setting.

Those who completed the gay/straight example at first misunderstood the activity assuming that they were supposed to identify which statements were true and which were false, assuming that they were all true another issue given that many of the statements were false or outdated statements. One of the young people was unfamiliar with the term AIDs and asked what it was, while some other members of the group were aware of the term it appeared that that was the extent of their knowledge of the condition. This activity therefore required prior

knowledge of the discrimination that gay people face that the young people lacked. While this provided opportunities to open up discussions regarding important health topics, some of which felt necessary- such as defining the term ejaculation which I believe young within this group should have been familiar given its importance in discussions around pregnancy and therefore preventing pregnancy- the consistent need to explain terms seemed to sometimes stall the activity and made it difficult to keep the young people engaged and interested in the task. When we moved onto the debate activity, I again had to further explain some terms, such as nudity, which I had assumed they would be familiar with, but most were not. Using simplified terms such as ‘naked’ and ‘not wearing much’ ensured that they all understood what was being asked of them. While I was often surprised by the young people’s lack of knowledge of topics, I had assumed they would be familiar with and/or learning skills the youth worker often was not simply stating that many of those who attended the group were “young minded”. Her comments suggested that the young people who attended the youth group lacked maturity and as such terms like ejaculation and nudity were not a part of their vocabulary. Her familiarity with the young people who attended the youth group, and their knowledge and vocabulary, was helpful when explaining unknown terms to the young people since she was able to communicate in a way that they would understand however this still raises concerns around what young people are receiving in formal education regarding RSE when terms such as ejaculation are unfamiliar to them.

Many of the young people over the course of the intervention had low literacy levels with some revealing that they had dyslexia. Specifically, this led to difficulties when reading the materials and made tasks take longer than expected. Estimates suggest that around 10% of the population are dyslexic (British Dyslexia Association, 2018; NHS, 2022), although rates of those who attended the youth group and disclosed their dyslexia were higher. This made some of the activities difficult for them as it meant they had to spend a considerable amount of

time just reading the materials. While this was a concern raised in Cycle 2 by one RSE teacher:

“writing a paragraph isn’t always realistic”,

while they did not explicitly discuss dyslexia or SEN they highlight that writing can be difficult for some pupils which makes the intervention inaccessible for some. To overcome this during the online hate activity I read the scenarios aloud to assist the young people who were struggling. Even with this assistance they found the layout of this activity confusing and misattributed situations to people, for example some asked if Addison Rae was disabled as they had read a different example. Research suggests that young people with dyslexia and/or other learning difficulties are ‘left out’ in the classroom, suitable accommodations are often not made, and instead young people will try to disguise their struggles often leading to them being labelled lazy or naughty (see Anderson, 2007), something that was a possibility within the youth group.

Their lack of learning skills extended to when they were asked to be imaginative where there were several instances where the young people struggled despite my repeated instruction to think of their own ideas. This was an issue for the platform activity where the young people typically just wrote what they believed to be the rules of existing platforms however this could be a possible alteration to the resources as a simplified task given that it still opened up avenues for discussion and consideration of the values embedded into platforms. It was also an issue for the final activity which required the designing of an episode of the Simpsons regarding possible technology harms or opportunities however the only young person who took part in this activity simply replicated the episode we had just watched. While this showed some basic comprehension of what she had watched it was not able to ascertain what she had taken away from the sessions she had attended. However, this young person had revealed that she currently did not attend school and so it was unsurprising that she struggled to complete the

activity given that she was not engaged in education. The youth worker suggested that this activity may have been more successful had more/different young people joined in:

“I just don’t think that she probably give a lot of thought to it” as she
“thought they might’ve got more into the Simpsons episode one”.

I agree with the youth worker and think that it’s possible that this would work better in a school setting, the intended setting for the intervention, as watching TV during a lesson may feel like a treat whereas in the youth club the young people likely come to socialise and could watch The Simpsons at home to their convenience. Given that this activity had already been simplified from its original version from Black Mirror to The Simpsons (“Screenless”: season 31, episode 15) as this was more suitable for those who are younger/lower ability, and the young people may be more familiar with it and it would therefore require less explanation.

7.3.2 Gender/sex differences

In 3.2.2 I discuss the terms sex and gender and justify my choice to instead use the term gender/sex (as noted in the subheading) however within this chapter you will notice a deviation from my aforementioned position. While my position did not change during my time within the youth group those within the youth group and the youth worker clearly divided the group into girls and boys with young people appearing to show a sense of membership to each group. While I still do not wish to reinforce the sex/gender binary I feel it is important to respect those involved and their identities which they quite clearly displayed. Given the additional assumption we add to Morgenroth and Ryan’s (2021) assumptions regarding gender/sex which we define in 3.2.2 as:

(f) that definitions of gender and sex vary from person to person and the imposition of rigid categories of sex and gender are exclusionary and outdated and

as such the term gender/sex is open to interpretation to account for varying understandings and conceptualisations of both terms it is important to allow individuals their own definitions and conceptualisation which must be respected even if they do not match my own.

Within the youth group I observed what West and Zimmerman (1987) referred to as 'doing gender'. The young people in attendance often adhered to gender/sex roles, in particular those gender/sex roles were bound by class. This is unsurprising given that the youth group was situated in a highly deprived area in the North East of England. Typically, in the sessions there was a divide between the boys and girls with each group sitting separately. The boys were often boisterous and at times unmanageable. They rarely focused on what was asked of them and were quickly distracted. Their behaviour impacted on the group as it led to physical fights which required intervention from multiple youth workers and resulted in them sometimes being asked not to attend (a decision made by the youth workers and not myself). While it is important to note that many of the young people attending the youth group had behavioural issues which may not be reflective of a typical education setting, RSE teachers would likely have to deal with similar issues. They may be in an even more difficult position than the youth workers given that they likely have a larger ratio of young people to staff and therefore have to manage more people, oftentimes alone. In comparison, the girls were typically more interested in taking part and took the activities more seriously however this could be because, as the youth worker remarked,

"I think girls generally are more into social media than what men are".

The youth workers choice of language was interesting to refer to girls versus men which seemed antithetical to my experiences within the setting. As mentioned the boys often misbehaved and would, at times, fight which could be considered immature and yet she refers to them as men. In comparison she uses the term girls

instead of women which could highlight that she recognises the need for protection for the girls who may be vulnerable on social media and the physical world.

Despite the boys perceived lack of interest in social media, there were times when the boys were interested in the activities, particularly during the online hate activity they were keen to discuss the example regarding footballers who received racial abuse on social media following the Euros. While the activity was largely dominated by the boys discussing this example, they were largely unsympathetic and suggested that if they were better footballers, they may not have received these comments, essentially condoning the racial abuse that they faced. The boys eventually acknowledged that online hate would have a negative impact on the individual and when reflecting upon this the youth worker felt that the boys require prompting:

“I always think you need to guide them”.

When asked to consider what youngsters who admire the footballers might feel they struggled again and simply stated they should find someone else to look up to, highlighting their lack of empathy and understanding for the feelings of others. The girls were much more sympathetic and were shocked by the scenarios especially the one pertaining to disability and seemed to really understand the impact of online hate not only on the individual but also to others who may see it or who may identify with the victim in some way.

There were other activities that the boys seemed to not take seriously or discuss with much depth or emotion such as the Google activity. One of the boys who was looking at the men/women example felt that men should not cry and so this suggestion should not be reported. It was unclear whether this was truly this boys' opinion or if he was intentionally being controversial and trying to antagonise others. While this led to a discussion about boys showing emotion and needing to cry sometimes, this boy was unrelenting in his position although some of the other young people disagreed with him. Despite this appearing to be an unsuccessful

conversation in addressing the toxic masculine attitudes held by some group members, the youth worker felt that the conversation may have been impactful even if it did not appear so:

“I think like anything that you learn you’re able to take something away from it so even if they learnt just what the heading was on a Google search the fact that they know and even down to the boys should cry I know you weren’t able to have like a proper discussion but that’s something they could’ve learnt so I do think anything any interaction is useful for them”.

Evidence suggests that boys who hold such attitudes are vulnerable to depression and suicide (Jordan & Chandler, 2019; Harris, 2021) and therefore conversations that confront harmful stereotypes of masculinity are vital.

However, there was one instance where the boys’ carefree attitude was beneficial; during the debate activity when I asked if everyone knew what twerking was one boy chose to demonstrate. This elicited laughter from the group and served to break the ice in the group, which opened them up to discussion. The debate activity was a great opportunity for discussion between the young people, however there were moments where the boys dominated the activity, often talking over the girls and limiting their opportunities to express themselves. The youth worker felt this was typical in the youth group as the boys have “got egos to prove”. She further went on to explain how the boys can limit discussion and prevent the conversations that do occur from being meaningful:

“I think the boys make it a lot harder for a conversation to be had like a more meaningful I think you can get more meaningful conversations out of them if the boys weren’t there”.

Nevertheless, the youth worker and I attempted to facilitate the discussions and did find that by directly asking the girls their thoughts we could elicit deeper conversation. Furthermore, during this time the boys were also asked to leave the room because of their behaviour which made it easier for the girls to openly discuss

the topics. When discussing how eating disorder content is often ‘banned’ online most of the girls felt this was appropriate although one girl disagreed which initially led to disapproval from the youth worker. It appeared that the youth worker believed there may be a right and wrong ‘answer’, however one of the aims of this activity was to highlight the importance of democratic debate and that all viewpoints are valid. The young girl disclosed that a relative of hers had an eating disorder and that people can learn about it on social media. This felt like a beneficial discussion and resulted in another girl changing her position to agree with her. Despite the difficulty of keeping the young people on task both myself and the youth worker agreed post-intervention that this activity had been the most successful and the one that the young people appeared to enjoy the most:

“there was definitely more like engagement of them all”.

As the girls were completing the platform activity, they were discussing their thoughts and sharing stories of how they were contacted by older men online sometimes asking for pictures or even wanting to be their ‘sugar daddies’. When I asked how they respond to this they shared that they typically block them, which most felt was an appropriate protection strategy, but some shared that they deactivated their accounts instead sometimes creating new profiles and other times not thus denying them of the opportunity to experience the benefits of what that social media platform may have to offer. Many of the girls wrote that something you cannot do on social media is talk to paedophiles. However, in doing so they seemed to place responsibility on themselves rather than those who chose to contact minors online. This attitude reflects victim blaming discourses of ‘jailbait’, popularised in media such as the novel *Lolita* whereby young girls are considered ‘seducers’ of older men (see Durham, 2009), with the character Humbert proclaimed:

“I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me”
(Nabokov, 1955, p. 132),

that these girls had internalised. While these young people are unlikely to be familiar with Lolita such discourses are prevalent within society with the likes of Donald Trump discussing Jeffrey Epstein reportedly saying, “he likes beautiful women as much as I do, and many of them are on the younger side” (Fahrenthold, Reinhard & Kindy, 2019). This contradicts typical notions of children as “innocent, vulnerable, and in need of protection from adult sexual knowledge and practice” (Thorne & Luria, 1986, p.177). However, the girls attending the youth group fell outside of typical notions of innocence, vulnerability, and protection due to their class (Ferguson, 2000; Fields, 2008). In Hey’s (1997) *The company she keeps* it is highlighted how even teachers dismiss working class girls’ vulnerability instead referencing how young working class girls are preoccupied with their own heterosexuality, particularly appealing to older men, than showing an interest in their education (Willis, 1977).

Sadly, such attitudes are not limited to such situations and in many ways these attitudes reflect gendered notions of responsibility regarding sexting, a hot topic in RSE policy, which considers girls as both vulnerable and responsible for the consequences of such behaviours which ultimately denies any responsibility of their male counterparts (Hasinoff, 2017). As the boys were not in the room at this time it is difficult to ascertain whether they have had similar experiences online, however for the girls this seemed like a universal experience. It also meant that I was unable to ascertain the boy’s stance on such issues and whether or not they held these beliefs regarding responsibility or lack thereof. Regarding such issues, I believe a radical shift is required in RSE that reconceptualises the notion of responsibility, rather than punishing young women, oftentimes for the behaviour of men/boys, and instead highlighting that more needs to be done to protect and empower women and girls both in digital spaces and real-world settings (see Project deShame, 2021; Setty, Ringrose & Hunt, 2024). Academics have begun to do so, considering the appropriateness of teaching ‘safe sexting’ to young people whereby young people are empowered to make their own choices regarding

displays of their own bodies, while also being made aware of the laws and ethics surrounding sexting and the role that consent plays in both sharing and receiving sexual images (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020; Woodley, Green & Jacques, 2024). While the young people in this study were not discussing sexting, much of the safe sexting language could be utilised to empower young people to explore their digital relationship, and sexuality, in safe ways with specific attention paid to the ways in which consent is involved in digital interactions and that this can be withheld or withdrawn whilst still utilising digital platforms.

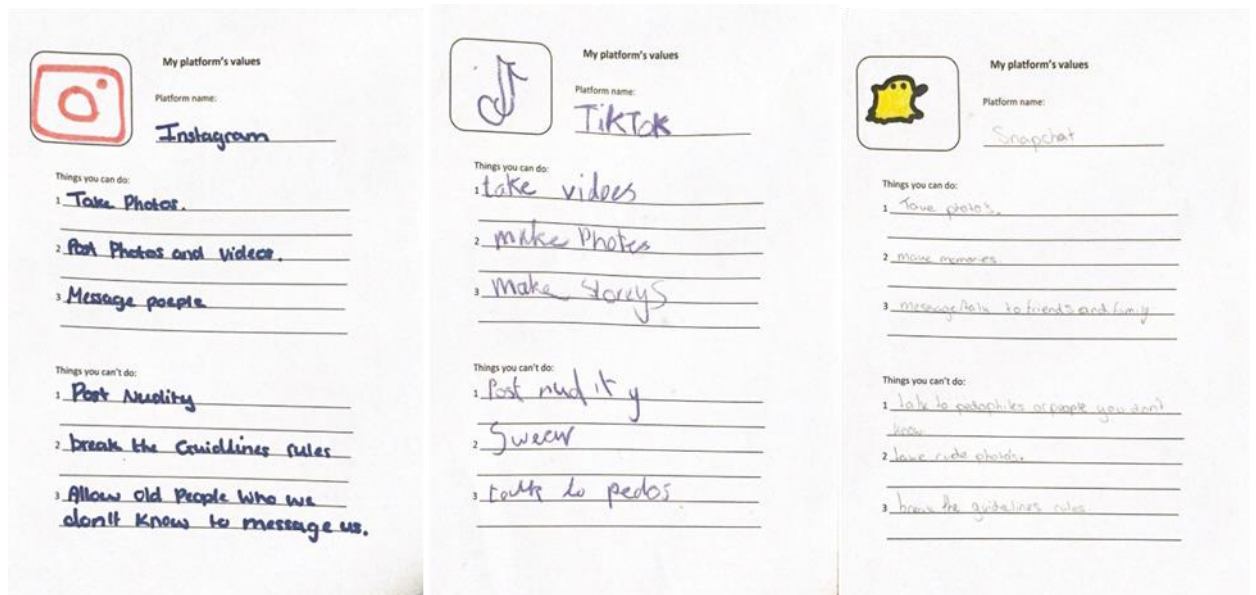


Figure 3: Showing some of the girls' responses to the platform activity

Such education would benefit the girls who attended the youth group as while engaging throughout the intervention, would contradict their own opinions and attitudes as they would regularly take pictures of others without their consent, share videos of fights, and share inappropriate information about each other. This contradiction to the values they discussed of privacy and consent was confusing; while the youth worker felt that it was simply a response to youth club dynamics:

“I think it’s who they’re around and who they’re trying to because the girl in the pink she was new so then it’s the dynamics of the youth club and how they act in it and interact so it was contradictory from what we were talking about”.

Here the youth worker notes the specific context in which this behaviour occurs given the norms and hierarchy of the youth group whereby ‘gossip’ and at times inappropriate information and/or content sharing are seen as acceptable and can be associated with greater social status within certain limits. While myself and the youth worker reiterated that filming and/or sharing fight videos was inappropriate, the young people justified this as occurring in a public place where it was seen by many. As such, while the girls are able to understand the moral issues that arise from online participation when discussed in hypothetical terms, when they are confronted with such issues in their everyday lives, they struggle to stand by their convictions especially when their own privacy is at risk. Such examples include taking videos of others without their permission to be posted on apps including Snapchat and sharing private information about each other in a public setting. While the youth workers would often attempt to prevent such behaviour, often with maternalistic attitudes of care and protection taking on a mothering role rather than that of a youth worker, their attempts were often limited by their understanding of technology highlighting that young people are the experts of the technology they use even if their knowledge is not expert knowledge. As such it is clear that the intervention was not able to address these digital ethics beyond simply identifying such values and instead a means of developing skills and literacy is necessary. The intervention could be adapted utilising a rights-based approach to RSE, although a contested concept (Moore, 2013), a rights-based approach intends to inform and encourage young people to exercise their rights whilst also being mindful of the rights of others. It’s thought that in doing so young people develop skills that prepare them for healthy and safe

participation within a democratic society (Goldman, [2008](#); Levesque, [2000](#)) whilst minimising the knowledge-practise gap that they appear to display.

7.4 Conclusion

Much like in the previous data chapter it was clear that ‘one size doesn’t fit all’. In the theme ‘learning skills and prior knowledge’ it was clear that ability differed significantly from person to person. While teachers in Cycle 2 felt that activities like snap in Lesson 1 would be quick and easy, potentially even boring for some, young people at the youth group really struggled. Those who took part did not know how to play snap and some struggled matching the words to their definitions although others did not. Again, this makes clear that interventions, and lesson plans, should be adaptable to account for the different learning needs and preferences in a class. While the teachers in Cycle 2 had not anticipated this outcome they likely teach children of a higher ability of with experience of similar activities as ultimately RSE teachers will know their students and their capabilities the best.

Teachers in Cycle 2 had not anticipated the gender differences that were apparent in Cycle 3, however they were not explicitly asked to comment on gender. One of the most striking findings was the sexualisation of girls online, and while this is not a new finding and has been documented in many studies, it seemed like a universal experience for the girls in Cycle 2. Their experiences of sexualisation online is a concern, but perhaps even greater is their internalisation of victim blaming attitudes that sometimes result in their limited participation online. While it was hoped that the intervention had been designed with reducing misogyny in mind, given the findings from Cycle 1 and the subtheme ‘talent(less)’, perhaps the intervention did not go far enough given these deeply internalised beliefs. Addressing such belief systems should be of importance given that RSE has previously been criticised of upholding victim blaming

attitudes, especially towards girls and women, for example around the heavily debated topic of sexting.

Interventions also must focus on engaging boys, while the current intervention was designed with boys in mind, during the sessions at the youth group boys were at times unruly which limited the positive conversations that could be had. In practice overcoming this can be difficult, given that during the ethnography girls seemed to prefer more serious, deeper conversations, while boys enjoyed lighthearted ‘banter’. Trying to accommodate both can be difficult but there were elements of this being done well during the activity for ‘Values of Platforms’, where ‘twerking’ was explained.

Finally, I found that while the resources had to be delivered differently within the youth group than initially intended, it allowed young people who are currently excluded from mainstream education to participate. The group size in the youth group also meant that greater attention could be paid to each young person, actively trying to engage them and hear their opinion, which will be difficult in the typical classroom. Despite this I still believe that school is the main setting for such an intervention as the skills it aims to develop are necessary for all young people and schools have a greater ability to reach more children however, I also endorse the adaptability of resources to make them appropriate for all possible learning environments.

Chapter 8: Discussion

8.1 Introduction

The methodological approach within this thesis was Action Research which emphasises recurrent cycles of action, as such the end of this thesis does not signify the end of this work, however the initial research questions have been answered. Instead, within this chapter we discuss the implications of the research, the new avenues for exploration, as well as the strengths and limitations of the project to inform future research, policy, and practice.

While this thesis exemplifies the rigour and academic style associated with a thesis, this chapter aims to provide those who may not be familiar with academic research, such as educators and healthcare practitioners, an opportunity to translate the findings of this research into practice without requiring them to read the entirety of this thesis or have expert knowledge of every aspect of the thesis and as such an overview of the main findings is to follow.

Given that the project is multidisciplinary the implications are differentiated into education, healthcare, social media platforms, policy (OHWP and statutory RSE), and future research. Within the implications for educators, I begin by considering the role of teacher training within the context of RSE in the digital age (8.2.1). I argue the need for LGBTQ+ training for RSE educators, challenging the concept of "age-appropriate" learning in this context. Furthermore, I highlight the need to expand RSE to include algorithmic literacy so that young people can develop an understanding of technology's role in society as well as skills to mitigate any negative effects. I also suggest involving youth workers in informal education settings due to the success of the interventions deployment in a youth group in Cycle 3 and how this allowed vulnerable young people to be reached. I then go on to

discuss the difficulty of engaging boys in RSE (8.2.2), acknowledging that boys are often overlooked in RSE discussions. I discuss the often hard to manage behaviour displayed by boys but also how this could be mitigated by using humor as a tool to engage boys. In 8.2.3, I discuss the importance of adapting RSE resources to meet the diverse needs of learners so that SEN learners still have an opportunity to learn. I encourage teachers to share resources and collaborate with more experienced educators to improve their teaching practices. Finally, in 8.2.4 I discuss the importance of youth voices in RSE which while this may seem obvious, they are often missing instead catering to the anxieties of adults. I discuss that the intervention was developed with young people's voices throughout however educators should understand that these may need to be adapted to suit the needs and interests of their students.

Within implications for healthcare, I discuss the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on young people (8.3.1) who were able to utilise TikTok for coping and a sense of belonging. Lessons from the pandemic highlight the need to consider the well-being of vulnerable youth during crises, ensuring access to support services including ongoing mental health support. I then discuss the opportunities for healthcare practitioners (8.3.2) to disseminate health messages via social media platforms and how this could reach young people. However, I also consider the difficulties they face given social media platforms censorship of topics such as sex which may limit opportunities for sex education.

In 8.4.1 I discuss how social media platforms could learn from their users, not only to appeal to users in a competitive social media landscape, but also to develop a social conscience. I highlight the need for more advanced moderation processes, updated verification systems, targeting algorithmic segregation, ensuring fair and transparent monetisation processes, and considering the impact of new design features such as syncing contacts.

Within implications for policy, I discuss the implications for implementation of the Online Safety Act (8.5.1) and statutory RSE (8.5.2). Within 8.5.1 I discuss how social media platforms can be valuable for marginalised groups, such as women and LGBTQ+ individuals, however it is limited by misogyny both from users and embedded within platforms as well as by filter bubbles which separate LGBTQ+ individuals from others. Furthermore, I reiterate the concerns of the previous section particularly highlighting the need for transparency from platforms that is enshrined in policy to make platforms fairer for users. With regard to statutory RSE (8.5.2) I discuss the need to standardise RSE despite my stance against a typical one size fits all approach. I highlight how the mode of delivery as well as length of RSE should be specified within legislation to ensure all learners receive a standard RSE. I also reiterate the need to remove references to “age-appropriateness” especially when discussing LGBTQ+ identities.

I then discuss the implications for future research, considering research involving TikTok (8.6.1), methodological contributions (8.6.2), and continuing the Action Research cycle (8.6.3). Since Cycle 1 ceased, there have been a number of changes relating to the platform TikTok that warrant exploration that I discuss (8.6.1). These include synching contacts, monetisation processes, and the most followed creators. Alongside the changes to the platform itself, the context has now changed as we are no longer living during Covid lockdowns which warrants fresh investigations over TikTok’s addictive potential. There have also been several new platforms launched since this time which should be investigated. Finally, I encourage researchers to continue exploring the impact of algorithmic segregation both on TikTok and other platforms. Within 8.6.2 I discuss what I have contributed to the field of methodology. I advocate the use of open-ended questioning, particularly when asking an individual their gender/sex and sexuality, to allow individuals to self-define rather than imposing categories on them. I also encourage others within the field of public health to share their decision-making process involved in intervention development which is typically missing. I then discuss

continuing the research cycle (8.6.3) which emphasises that this work still could be continued with the intervention and its resources developed with SEN learners in mind. While I was unable to do this within the time frame, I encourage SEN specialists to finish this work.

Finally, within the limitations of the project (8.7) I discuss the impact of Covid (8.7.1) which meant that Participatory Action Research was not possible, nor was a longer period of fieldwork within Cycle 3. I also discuss how I initially overlooked the importance of race and while I acknowledge this throughout my work, I encourage other researchers to learn from this oversight.

8.2 Overview of the findings

Within this section I will provide a brief overview of the findings of this research project for those who have not read the entire thesis. I suggest those hoping to apply the findings within their field of work read this to familiarise themselves with the main findings. It is important to note that the findings represent experiential data whereby participants share their realities and experiences of using TikTok. In many ways this was essential for understanding how the platform operates due to its 'black box' nature (Pasquale, 2015) whereby its algorithms and code remain hidden. While the participants perceptions of and experiences on the platform may not reflect the 'fact' of how the platform operates they are able to critically engage with their experiences and discuss what they believed to be inequalities on the app.

Most notable of the findings is what this research contributes to the field of digital inclusion/exclusion with what I termed 'algorithmic segregation'. I argue that in digital spaces it is oversimplistic to argue one is included or excluded but instead participation is algorithmically dictated whereby those with identities of intersecting dimensions of oppression are rarely present on the unpersonalised For You Page and therefore segregated from white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, female creators. The experience of a black, bisexual woman who

participated in Cycle 1 highlighted how black bisexuals are rarely present online supporting the notion that publics and counterpublics reduce people into homogenous categories rather than seeing them as a whole, and intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989) person. This participant felt that blackness was least visible of the two characteristics and seemed a harsh reality for this international student who in her home country her sexuality, and that of other LGBTQ+ individuals, is hidden and here in this online context she feels blackness is hidden.

Other important findings from Cycle 1 relate to how the platforms monetisation is impacted by and impacts this algorithmic segregation. The platforms' values and lack of transparency raise serious concerns relating to fair pay of digital creators, particularly those with marginalised identities.

I also highlight the everywhere nature of gender, both in digital and physical spaces, that must be considered within policy, education, and healthcare.

Furthermore, the research resulted in the development of an algorithmic literacy intervention designed to be delivered within a school setting with secondary age pupils. The intervention consists of six lesson plans with associated materials that arose from the findings of Cycle 1 entitled: Information Online, Online Hate, Algorithms, Algorithmic Bias, Values of Platforms, Values of Platforms, and Assessment Lesson Overall Harms and Opportunities.

8.2 Implications for educators

Within this section I will discuss the need for teacher training that is tailored towards the current day, emphasising the need for algorithmic literacy given algorithms growing importance in our lives, as well as the need for inclusive RSE. I will then discuss the challenges of engaging boys in a subject that has historically sought to control the behaviour of girls/women. I highlight how boys face issues such as toxic masculinity and the need to create safe spaces for such discussions,

which can be facilitated through the use of humour. I also state the importance of adapting to learners, particularly those with SEN who may be left behind otherwise. Finally, I discuss the importance of including young voices in the curriculum, especially in a subject such as RSE where the emphasis is on young people's lives.

8.2.1 Teacher training

In 8.5.2 I discuss how I believe that the statutory RSE guidance, while advocating for media literacy, does not go far enough in this ever- and fast-evolving digital landscape. I highlight the need to build upon media literacy and deliver algorithmic literacy. Koenig (2020) believe that algorithmic literacy builds upon:

“a long tradition of examining how our current technological literacy practices require constant iterations and reinterpretations. Similar to other computer literacies, algorithmic literacy focuses on the role that technology plays within a society: economically, politically, and socially” (p. 2).

Glotfelter (2019) suggests that algorithmic literacy would:

“help users be more critical of the experiences they have on social media platforms” (p. 110).

However, Head, Fister and MacMillan (2020) found that whilst educators in US colleges believed it important to discuss algorithmic literacy but felt they were not the appropriate person to teach it. However, I argue that educators need to be able to discuss algorithmic literacies with young people and at a much earlier stage than college/university. I believe that RSE is the appropriate setting for algorithmic literacy, although some may argue IT/Computer Science, given RSE teachers unique skill sets to address power relations which can be translated to those that exist in digital spaces that this research, and others, highlight (Haberland, 2015). Despite their skillsets many of these teachers will likely lack confidence and knowledge on such topics and therefore significant training and support is required

to ensure that teachers can adequately address these issues with students (Javadnoori et al., 2012; Ofsted, 2013; Sex Education Forum, 2018). While teachers in Cycle 2 felt qualified to deliver the resources provided by the researcher, I found that Lesson 3: Algorithms, was rated the lowest of all the lessons. Whilst half reported they would feel confident delivering this lesson the other half did not, highlighting algorithms and algorithmic literacy as a specific area in which educators need greater support. It is important to mention that the majority of those who reported not feeling confident to deliver Lesson 3 had previously stated that they had not received RSE training. Additionally, I advocate youth workers as educators albeit in an informal setting, who would also benefit from this support given their ability to reach young people who may be excluded from mainstream education. I encourage funding to be made available for all such educators to receive specialist training to raise their algorithmic literacy skills in order to equip them to educate students.

Additionally, I advocate for specific LGBTQ+ training for RSE educators. I believe this could be part of algorithmic literacy training, given the specific experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in digital spaces highlighted in this research and others (see Simpson & Seeman, 2021), or as standalone training. While the statutory RSE guidance refers to teaching about LGBTQ+ identities/relationships in an ‘age-appropriate’ way I believe that both this guidance as well as training should make it clear what this means for educators. Firstly, it means that Section 28, which prevented teaching about/promoting sexuality, has been repealed and is no longer a concern for educators. I also believe that the guidance’s notion of ‘age-appropriate’ learning regarding LGBTQ+ is misleading and should be removed. I argue that there is no inappropriate age to learn about LGBTQ+ individuals, and some students may be part of LGBTQ+ families and as such its discussion and inclusion is vital at all ages, and as such recommend educators to discuss LGBTQ+ identities and issues as early as possible. Furthermore, teachers will be those who know their students best and therefore will be able to provide teaching that is

sensitive and developmentally appropriate, which is arguably more important than age appropriate. Finally, I encourage RSE educators to act as advocates for LGBTQ+ youngsters who may suffer within an education setting from their heteronormative policies and encourage such educators to identify areas for change and to attempt to do so. Finally, the findings suggest that the realities of being an LGBTQ+ person go beyond wanting to learn about homosexual sex and as such this should be a minimum learning. I argue for the inclusion and discussion of LGBTQ+ identities, as well as their struggles, and unfair treatment in digital spaces.

8.2.2 Engaging boys

Whilst during the design of the intervention (in Cycle 2) I made attempts to include boys, who are frequently forgotten about in RSE (Davidson, 1996; Forrest, 2000), Cycle 3 revealed that this is a harder task than initially believed. Throughout Cycle 3 the boy's behaviour was frequently unruly, sometimes leading to physical altercations that lead to them being asked to leave by the youth workers, thus restricting their ability to gain anything from the sessions. Whilst in Lesson 2: Online Hate, an example had been provided regarding the hate that football players for the England squad received in the hopes of appealing to boys. However, while they chose to discuss this example their discussion was not that that I had hoped. Initially, instead of empathising with the footballers they condoned the racial abuse they received. After some prompting from the youth worker, researcher and the girls attending the session the boys acknowledged the harm that online hate could have. Other similar situations occurred when discussing toxic masculinity where one boy seemed insistent that boys shouldn't cry. While this individual seemed reluctant to change their stance it is important that educators encourage such discussions anyway and attempt to guide young people away from these potentially harmful viewpoints, discussing where they come from, why these stereotypes continue to exist, and also the harm that they can cause. In doing so it could reveal opportunities for the young people to discuss their own experiences of being

stereotyped or witnessing it of others, as well as discussing how they themselves can attempt to overcome such ways of thinking. Whilst it was often difficult to engage boys, I found that allowing a sense of humour enabled boys to join in as well as break the ice. During Lesson 5: Values of Platforms, one boy decided to demonstrate twerking during a discussion about its regulation on social media which broke the ice and assisted a meaningful conversation. I would encourage educators to allow space for humour given its value in making, what for some, are uncomfortable topics more comfortable (Gordon & Gere, 2016). It also points towards the inclusion of arts-based teaching methods, including drama, theatre, and art and design, that would allow these types of expressions (Gordon & Gere, 2016; Ringrose, Whitehead, Regehr & Jenkinson, 2019; Taylor, Calzavara, Kontos & Schwartz, 2022).

8.2.3 Adapting to learners

While I have provided resources available for educators to use (appendix E), Cycle 3 revealed that these resources may be too complex for some learners, particularly those with SEN. During this Cycle adaptations were made as I went to enable everyone to be involved, this included reading materials allowed so that those with dyslexia were not excluded. Chasty (1985) stated “if they don’t learn the way we teach them, we must teach them the way they learn”. Some teachers in the survey appeared to share this attitude and provided alternative options, as such I highlight that teachers must consider the needs of the young people within their class when delivering such lessons (and I expect many already do). Therefore, educators must be adaptable, taking into account the age and ability of learners providing different tasks for students with higher and lower ability so that all learners have the opportunity to learn these valuable skills. While I believe that many educators already do this (which I discuss in Cycle 2) there are likely some, particularly those early in their career and therefore lacking experience of encountering and considering SEN, do not. As such I encourage educators to share

their resources with other educators as this collaboration, particularly with those more experienced, can provide practical advice regarding best practise.

8.2.4 Including young voices in the curriculum

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 (UNCRC), was embraced by the United Kingdom in 1991 (Noyes, 2005). It emphasises young people's right to freedom of expression (Article 13.1), particularly in matters concerning them and their lives (Article 12.1). Whilst there have been efforts to include young voices in the policy that relates to them this does not always happen in reality. A call for evidence between December 2017 and February 2018 sought stakeholder perspectives regarding RSE, however of responses only 2% were considered from young people (DfE, 2018). This data was then utilised to advise the development of the draft statutory guidance which is concerning given young people's lack of involvement despite it being aimed towards them. Such a concern, that young people's voices are missing from policy development, is frequently raised by critics who argue that not enough is done to attempt to include young people in matters important to them (Creswick et al., 2019) despite young people being:

“experts at being young, and they can offer solutions adults would not necessarily think of” (Nesbitt, 2001, p. 331).

In this research, I began Cycle 1 by conducting interviews with young people to understand their lives and how they are impacted by technology and the issues they consider important. As a result, I developed an intervention that was built around young people's voices and expressed needs (see appendix E). While I encourage teachers to use these resources, while adapting them to meet the needs of their students as already discussed, consulting their students to understand what their knowledge base consists of as well as what else they would like to learn. Those who do this must be aware that it can be difficult for some young people to speak

up and openly discuss certain topics, and as such topics such as homosexuality should always be considered essential even if not raised by young people. Additionally, educators should attempt to build connections with the young people they work with, which I believe many already do given my interactions in Cycle 3 with youth workers, which will give them an insight into young people's lives, interests, and concerns.

8.3 Implications for healthcare

Within this section I will discuss the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on young people and what healthcare practitioners can learn from this. I highlight how social media was vital for many young people during the pandemic who were unable to connect with their peers in other forums. I also discuss how healthcare practitioners can utilise social media to spread health messages and provide strategies for them to overcome social medias censorship of topics such as sex.

8.3.1 Covid

This research found that young people struggled during the pandemic and used TikTok as a means of coping and finding a sense of belonging. For LGBTQ+ youth this was potentially intensified as supported by (Silliman Cohen & Bosk, 2020; Cerezo et al., 2021) however, this was difficult to ascertain in this study given the limitations of conducting research during Covid. One potential participant was unable to take part due to living with parents who were unaware of their sexuality, a concern also raised by Salerno et al. (2020), this individual would have been especially vulnerable and sadly their voice went unheard in order to protect them. While Covid 19 has been downgraded and “no longer constitutes a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC)” (World Health Organisation, 2023, n.p.), in time pandemics will occur and I suggest that health professionals learn from this. Young people, and especially LGBTQ+ young people, represent vulnerable groups and as such this needs to be taken into account with measures

such as school and university closures that leave young people isolated from their peers. Additionally, accessing services, including in-person services, must be at least considered especially for those who are most vulnerable such as LGBTQ+ individuals living with unknowing/unsupportive families.

Furthermore, I highlight the need for ongoing wellbeing and mental health support for young people including LGBTQ+ youth. Research suggests that during the pandemic and post-pandemic there has been an increase depression symptoms, worry/anxiety, and stress (Evans, Alkan, Bhangoo, Tenenbaum & Ng-Knight, 2021; Owens et al., 2022; Schwartz et al., 2021). I would also like to highlight that during Cycle 1 interviews which were conducted during Covid at various stages of lockdowns and restrictions, I discussed TikTok trends to connect and build rapport with young people given that it created a shared reality to bond over. A teacher in Cycle 1 acknowledged how students bonded over TikTok trending sounds however identified herself as out of the loop and therefore unable to relate to them. Healthcare practitioners should keep this in mind when attempting to connect with young people and appeal to their interests and lives including their digital lives.

8.3.2 Challenges and opportunities for practitioners

I recognise the opportunities that TikTok provides for practitioners to share public health messages with the younger generation. A number of studies support this notion and have suggested TikTok to be potentially useful during the pandemic for spreading Covid 19 related information (Basch, Hillyer & Jaime, 2020; Li, Guan, Hammond & Berrey, 2021; Ostrovsky & Chen, 2020). A study by Basch et al. (2020) found that of a sample of 117 TikTok videos relating to Covid 19 amassed 1,194,081,700 views highlighting the reach that can be achieved on the platform. Of their sample, there was a relatively low prevalence of misinformation (4.3%) albeit their relatively small sample may not truly account for its true prevalence given that participants in this study reported seeing misinformation. Of these videos, 17 were posted by the World Health Organisation, however the authors felt

at the time were not fully taking advantage of this opportunity to ‘myth bust’ and combat any misinformation and spread important health information. Similarly, research by Ostrovsky and Chen (2020) found that of their sample of TikTok videos, those posted by health professionals were the most liked and shared suggesting that TikTok users want this information and consider it valuable. I believe that public health professionals must adapt to the way in which and environments where young people consume health related information given that young people are using TikTok to seek and acquire information as evidenced by one of our participants from Cycle 1 who stated:

“typing into TikTok is just like typing into Google now it’s literally the same” (16, female).

However, during interviews in Cycle 1 young people also report varying degrees of competence regarding being able to identify misinformation and credible sources of information. Given that public health bodies, including but not limited to the WHO, represent credible sources they should be utilising TikTok to provide accurate information. TikTok themselves identify the importance of doing so and provide an information hub to support public health professionals to post content on TikTok including highlighting @who (the World Health Organisation) as a credible source, as well as local health authorities and Team Halo who provide information regarding Covid vaccines (Li et al., 2021; TikTok, 2020). Furthermore, Southwick et al. (2021) provide recommendations for public health professionals to use TikTok as a tool to uncover public views, misinformation and norms regarding Covid 19 to inform the design of public health campaigns, a sentiment I support given the opportunities the platform provides to learn (in this instance about existing health behaviours and attitudes) and to educate.

Young people also identified a range of health topics other than Covid that they were interested in learning about on TikTok. The most notable examples provided by participants were sexual and women’s health topics such as breast self-

examination. They reported having not learned about such topics in school despite their perceived importance but believed that TikTok was an ideal medium for discussing taboo topics in comparison to traditional RSE which has barriers of embarrassment in a face-to-face setting (Fowler et al., 2022). However, while they believed sex education could be delivered on this platform, they noted the difficulties that sex educators face given the censorship imposed on topics considered taboo/inappropriate. Public health practitioners who wish to utilise the opportunities that TikTok provides for communicating health messages must be aware of this potential drawback and should utilise tactics of ‘algospeak’;

“the practice of intentionally shortening, misspelling, or substituting specific words as part of creating and sharing content on social media platforms” (Klug et al., 2023, p. 234),

to overcome it. Participants in this study highlighted how misspelling could allow sex educators to prevent censorship and shadowbanning:

“like say it was sex and they’ll put like S E G G S” (25, female).

This tactic has been reported in other studies such as Klug et al. (2023) can be used for other sensitive topics, and thus has implications for public health practitioners focusing on sexual health as well as other areas. For example young people in Cycle 3 held mixed attitudes towards the censorship of eating disorder content, although some recognized the potential benefits of being able to hear stories. Klug et al. give the example of ED as algospeak for eating disorders, as well as my own experience on the platform show that Ed Sheeran is also used (with Ed signifying eating disorder given that ED is the abbreviation of the term). Furthermore, van der Nagel (2018) describe Voldemorting, omitting certain terms, this could be done simply by not saying a word or by using emojis in their place. For example, sex educators wishing to discuss anal sex could utilise the peach and aubergine emoji rather than using the term which would likely result in censorship. While I, along with

participants in Klug et al.'s study, believe that these tactics should not be required, I advocate their use if they enable public health practitioners to communicate important health messages, especially those which young people may not be exposed to within education. While healthcare professionals cannot control the responses that any content they post receive, they should still aim to empower potential viewers. Those who do engage on social media should make themselves aware of specific features of platforms that can prevent negative discussion, such as disabling comments, and replying to comments in video form to combat misinformation/negative comments.

Young people in Cycle 1 and Cycle 3 highlighted the misogyny that they have experienced online. Particularly worrisome was the experiences of the girls in Cycle 3, who were contacted by older men online sometimes asking for pictures or even wanting to be their 'sugar daddies'. Those in Cycle 1 highlighted what they believed to be gendered harms; sexualization and hate comments which they felt were more commonly used towards women. This represents a public health concern in itself given the potential consequences of hate comments which include low self-esteem and depression (Benier, 2017; Perry & Alvi, 2012). In both Cycle 1 and 3 these women and girls displayed victim blaming attitudes with those in Cycle 3 displaying internalised victim blaming where they themselves believe it is their responsibility to avoid paedophiles online, leading some to cease participation on social media. Healthcare practitioners must therefore be aware that there are young women and girls who may be suffering violence and do not seek help due to these victim blaming attitudes. Given that TikTok, and other social medias, are sites where victim blaming attitudes are fostered, public health campaigns should be deployed in these spaces to target these young women. There is also a concern that incel communities are forming on social media (Weimann & Masri, 2023). Given that the incel community, and the violence that accompanies it, is growing (Hoffman, Ware & Shapiro, 2020), healthcare practitioners should be trained to identify and respond to this threat.

8.4 Implications for social media platforms

Within this section I discuss the tactics that they can employ that users either already utilise or have suggested to mitigate the potential harms of social media. Most of these tactics relate specifically to the platform TikTok however can be adapted by other platforms to adhere to the standards expected by young people.

8.4.1 Learning from users

The overwhelming popularity of social media platforms has implications for society particularly given the concerns that have been raised in this research as well as others. While platforms frame themselves as spaces for equal participation in a fair and just public sphere that is simply not the reality. While Gillespie (2018) argue that platforms have the untenable task of moderating content posted stating that:

“Moderation is hard. This should be obvious, but it is easily forgotten. Policing a major platform turns out to be a resource intensive and relentless undertaking; it requires making difficult and often untenable distinctions between the acceptable and the unacceptable; it is wholly unclear what the standards for moderation should be, especially on a global scale; and one failure can incur enough public outrage to overshadow a million quiet successes. And we as a society are partly to blame for having put platforms in this untenable situation by asking way too much of them” (p. 198).

However, while the young people who participated in Cycle 1 understood the mammoth task that is content moderation, they felt that it was not platforms who were being asked to do too much but users. They felt responsible for policing comments and reporting videos that they felt violated Community Guidelines on TikTok, which they felt was to no avail. They also highlighted how moderation affected individuals differently based upon their identity, something which was termed algorithmic segregation to explain how on TikTok those who do not

conform to the platforms ideals (white, heterosexual, able bodied, middle class women) are rarely, if ever, seen on the un-personalised FYP, further facilitated by filter bubbles, and introduced only to those who seek it out, enabling a platform that simultaneously excludes and includes minorities but only when their inclusion results in profit through exploitative means. While some were naïve in thinking this was a mistake made by the platform others felt disappointed that discrimination that exists in the offline world was reproduced on the For You Page. This was especially apparent for those whose identities were vulnerable to algorithmic segregation such as members of the LGBTQ+ community and ethnic minorities. Particularly vulnerable were those who had identities of intersecting dimensions of oppression given that individuals are reduced to homogenous groups which renders, for example, the Black LGBTQ+ experience invisible.

It is also important to remember that platforms are not neutral, and it was noted by those in Cycle 1 that sexist undertones were evident in the censorship of women's bodies in comparison to men's. Are (2020, 2021, 2022) discusses her own experiences of censorship over her pole dancing content which she argues is a legitimate sport, much like men's bodybuilding that goes uncensored. They noted how women's bodies appeared to be closely monitored on the platform while men seemed to go unnoticed even when topless. Women seemed to rebel against this, wearing crop tops as a political statement. However, they also noted once again that the 'rules' were not applied fairly and women with different body types were held to different standards. In response to this I recommend that platforms, including TikTok, review their Community Guidelines/values in an attempt to align it with their users who desire platforms that are fair and apply their rules to all equally. In doing so they should attempt to remove bias, such as this evident discrimination, and instead of focusing on appealing to advertisers and generating profit they should consider having a positive impact on society as a benefit.

Participants also noted how censorship appeared to affect certain topics, limiting opportunities for users to learn about topics important to them. Topics include racial inequality in the form of Black Lives Matter content which many believed to be shadowbanned and sexual health content. While those in Cycle 1 noted tactics to overcome this, such as algospeak (for example misspelling sex as seggs) they felt that TikTok's methods of censorship were oversimplistic in this sense. They believed nuance needs to be employed, for example sex education content should not be censored/shadowbanned, however they understand why other sexual content may, or should, be. I believe the appropriate response to this would be to develop more sophisticated content flagging algorithms or to employ a greater number of human moderators. A similar strategy is endorsed by Milton et al. (2023) who state:

“platforms and communities should consider more nuanced design and policy strategies around these differences... Automated content detection tools often focus on a binary representation – related to mental illness or not – and this is not precise enough to understand the nuances of content type and intention” (p. 13).

Like Milton et al. (2023) I endorse an updated method of verification that does not only provide verification based on celebrity status but also based on professional credentials. While Milton et al. suggest this for mental health professionals I believe that this could be extended to all health professionals to ensure that health related information more broadly is accurately shared online. Within the previous section I discussed how health practitioners can utilise social media to reach wide audiences and such a modernised verification system could facilitate this.

Throughout Cycle 1, young people displayed that what they sought from the platform, yet failed to receive, was transparency. While many reported having never read important documents such as the Community Guidelines, although I doubt this type of technological jargon would aid their understanding, they believed that

policies were not implemented fairly or with explicit reasoning. They reported that videos were often removed from the platform for violating the Community Guidelines without stating specifically how they violated these guidelines. Furthermore, they felt the application of these guidelines was biased with different creators held to different standards based upon the identities of the creators as well as how many followers they have.

Platforms should also take note of the ways in which young people use the platform to promote inclusivity, fairness, and creating a safe space, an area in which some felt TikTok lacked. Examples of this include their use of ‘trigger warnings’ to alert other users to potentially ‘triggering’ content such as that regarding eating disorders or weight loss. They also coined the term ‘dance credit’ to ensure that the labour that creators put into creating dances which are then imitated on the app is acknowledged. Finally, they use closed captioning to enable those with hearing impairments to participate on the platform. TikTok, and other platforms, should consider these values and practices as inspiration for new features on the app. In doing so they would create a platform that better enables participation and also would retain users. While in the past there have been concerns that the emergence of new platforms is difficult in the wake of the Big Five (see Van Dijck et al., 2018), TikTok is evidence to the contrary and we are already starting to see new platforms emerge. If TikTok does not accommodate its existing users, I predict they may see a loss of users who instead use newcomer platforms.

Furthermore, while it has repeatedly been suggested by those in Cycle 1 and in other studies about TikTok’s addictive potential (see Siles & Meléndez-Moran, 2021), although it is difficult to draw conclusions in a Covid context, while TikTok may see this as a ‘win’ it actually resulted in resistance tactics employed by users to avoid addiction. Such tactics included a digital detox and avoiding the app altogether in favour of using others or watching via Instagram reels. Here Instagram is situated as a competitor and whilst not mentioned in this research the social media

newcomer Lemon8 bears similarities to TikTok but does not immediately play videos upon opening the app allowing for an endless scroll differentiating it from TikTok and what some have been described as addictive design features (Eskelinen, 2021; Petrillo, 2021).

I would also encourage platforms to consider their users when implementing new design features. For example, the introduction of syncing contacts raises significant concerns for the LGBTQ+ community, who are known users of TikTok who believe it to be a site of belonging and a safe(ish) space, as this research and others have found (see Simpson & Semaan, 2021; Reje Franzén, 2022). They report valuing the pseudonymity of the platform which could be compromised given this change and risks potentially ‘outing’ LGBTQ+ users. While TikTok users are not required to use their real name as their username the syncing of phone contacts may expose their true identity. Platforms should reconsider this decision, particularly that it only appears to require consent from one user (those that choose to sync their contacts) and their contacts do not appear to have the option to opt in/out. TikTok should take this concern seriously given that queer communities represent a significant usership of social media and in the past when platforms, such as Tumblr, changed their policies affecting the LGBTQ+ community, they saw a decline in users (Byron, 2019).

Finally, I would encourage platforms to make these changes themselves in order to foster a more inclusive space as well as to adopt a civic conscience, something that appears to be missing from platforms currently. However, I am not overly optimistic that platforms will employ such recommendations solely for their own civic conscience and as such in the next section I will make recommendations for policy changes/implementation to enforce platforms to adhere to higher standards of safety and equality.

8.5 Implications for policy

Within this subsection I will discuss what I feel, are the necessary amendments to policy and implications for implementation of policy, based on the findings of this research. Given that policy varies, even within countries of the United Kingdom, I will make recommendations relating to English policy given that this study was conducted in the UK.

A participant in Cycle 1 stated:

“there’s a lot like all the politicians and adults don’t really know about it” (17, male).

Given the Action Research approach I consider stakeholders, in this case young people and educators, as experts rather than those who may traditionally be considered experts. As such I will utilise young peoples and educators voices respectively to inform my recommendations for policy implications regarding the OSA and statutory RSE. As already mentioned in 8.2.3 young peoples voices are too often missing in policy regarding them and my aim in this section is to encourage politicians and those working in policy to consider these voices and provide examples of how to bring about actionable impacts from the findings of this research. I would also encourage policymakers to follow suit in the future particularly as I found in both Cycle 1 (as evidenced by the quote above) and in Cycle 3, that young people have an interest in politics and democracy, as further evidenced by their enjoyment of a debate activity (see appendix E).

8.5.1 OHWP/OSA

Often attitudes towards young peoples use of technology is paternalistic and promotes moral panics much like was seen in the OHWP. In this research, instead of assuming, I investigated young people’s experiences of technology and the harms that they identified. While some reflected those in the OHWP and OSA, such

as misinformation and filter bubbles, there were some not considered that I will discuss below.

In the OHWP there is some acknowledgement of the gendered harms that women face online, notably the trolling of female public figures such as politicians and yet the word misogyny appears just once in the 102-page document. Where it is used, they acknowledge that:

“The cumulative impact of online misogyny undermines women’s and girls’ digital contributions, silencing their voices and reducing their visibility” (p. 69).

Since consultation with charities and organisations aiming to end violence against women the OSA makes multiple references to the safety of women and girls online and the disproportionate harms they may face. It was noted in Cycle 1 that women, and their bodies, were closely policed unlike men who seemed to have free reign on TikTok. They discussed ‘appropriate dress’ policies which appeared to target solely women accusing them of nudity even when wearing swimwear or crop tops (which they used as a political statement to protest such policies) whilst men could appear topless on the platform. TikTok’s Community Guidelines state:

“We do not allow nudity, including uncovered genitals and buttocks, as well as nipples and areolas of women and girls” (TikTok, 2020, n.p.).

Ofcom should encourage, as a minimum, platforms to rethink such sexist policies, which are also colonialist in that the hiding of women’s nipples is a Western construct. Instead of using resources to identify and remove all traces of the female nipple they should investing their resources in tackling those that users identified as legitimate harms.

Additionally, those in Cycle 3 reported that they were contacted by older men online sometimes asking for pictures or even wanting to be their ‘sugar daddies’. While most responded by blocking those users it led some to cease using

those platforms, thus restricting their participation in digital spaces. Platforms must do more to protect women and girls from this type of harassment and in this case potentially illegal activity by making it easier to report whilst also highlighting to victims that they are not to blame. Given that platforms are not currently doing enough to protect women and girls, despite numerous calls to action (see Dehingia, 2020; Barker & Jurasz, 2019a, 2019b, 2020, 2021), I argue that they will likely not do this without significant pressure from Ofcom.

The OSA while not explicitly using the term LGBTQ+, does make reference to the protection of characteristics such as ‘sexual orientation’ and ‘gender reassignment’ highlighting an attempt to promote safer spaces for those who may define as LGBTQ+. This research concluded that the platform TikTok acted as a safe(ish) space for LGBTQ+ people, where it was considered a valuable space for community building and was believed to be facilitated via filter bubbles, however by shielding the LGBTQ+ community they also reduce their visibility and potentially allow hate groups including homophobic communities to form. Ofcom must implement codes of practise for platforms to ensure that everyone is safe when using social media and take any hate based on sexuality/gender seriously imposing real consequences for those who do. This research also suggested that intersectional identities are missing on the platform, effectively rendered invisible by algorithms, which serves to only promote normative identities, which must be changed. Sadly this is something that is still missing from policy, I urge policymakers and Ofcom to consider intersectionality so that this can be made a priority moving forwards.

The OHWP supports the notion of increasing transparency from platforms, much like the findings from Cycle 1, and highlight the role of a regulator to enforce this transparency:

“Developing a culture of transparency, trust and accountability will be a critical element of the new regulatory framework. The regulator will have the power to require annual transparency reports from companies in scope,

outlining the prevalence of harmful content on their platforms and what measures they are taking to address this. These reports will be published online by the regulator, so that users and parents can make informed decisions about online use. The regulator will also have powers to require additional information, including about the operation of algorithms” (p.41).

Similar to the concerns raised in this consultation response, participants felt that content was removed with little explanation, often times not providing a reason beyond violating the Community Guidelines. For example, Black Lives Matter (BLM) content, which those in Cycle 1 felt was routinely censored/shadowbanned could fall into this category. I support this requirement for greater transparency, and opportunities for appeal, particularly given that they felt not all BLM content was treated equally and sometimes BLM content posted by white creators did not suffer from the platforms harsh moderation. Researchers Shahid and Vashistha (2023) argue in their paper *Decolonizing Content Moderation: Does Uniform Global Community Standard Resemble Utopian Equality or Western Power Hegemony?* that the findings from their research with Bangladeshi Facebook users that:

“Users perceived the underlying human-AI infrastructure to imbibe coloniality in the form of amplifying power relations, centering Western norms, and perpetuating historical injustices and erasure of minoritized expressions. Based on the findings, we establish that the current moderation systems often propagate historical power relations and patterns of oppression, and discuss ways to rethink moderation in a fundamentally decolonial way” (p. 1).

Those in Sahid and Vashistha’s study, like in this research, believed that Community Standards should be accessible by providing them in different languages, free of legalese, and make them easier to access. They also felt there should be transparency in moderation and the posts that are removed regarding content removed from different countries, languages, and those reported by the

government as well as those reported by other users. I believe this is a legitimate suggestion that the OHWP should consider in greater depth to ensure that platforms become spaces of equal participation rather than those where discrimination and bias are reproduced as display in Cycle 1's Findings of FYP=IRL (5.3.4).

I also recommend that the scope be broadened to content moderation more broadly to provide an acknowledgement of the instances where it is appropriate for typical moderation guidelines to be broken. For example, it was highlighted that sex educators are heavily moderated which hinders them from sharing accurate information. Platforms should utilise human moderators who are able to identify where information about topics typically considered inappropriate on platforms is actually beneficial and provides significant value to users. It also must be considered the ways in which users overcome this, including by using 'algospeak':

“the practice of intentionally shortening, misspelling, or substituting specific words as part of creating and sharing content on social media platforms”
(Klug et al., 2023, p. 234).

While those in Cycle 1 noted this as a tactic used by sex educators other research has highlighted how it is also being used in potentially harmful ways. For example, ED can be used to circumvent moderation regarding eating disorder content. However, I, and some of the young people in Cycle 3, argue that not all eating disorder content is harmful and some can be used to educate and share experiences of suffering from an eating disorder. As such, platforms must develop more complex AI moderators that are capable of assessing context, as discussed in the previous section, for example here content that share eating disorder experiences in comparison to pro-eating disorder content that attempts to encourage unhealthy and dangerous attitudes/behaviours or employ a greater number of human moderators who are instructed to consider this context. Similarly, Milton et al. (2023) argue:

“platforms and communities should consider more nuanced design and policy strategies around these differences... Automated content detection tools often focus on a binary representation – related to mental illness or not – and this is not precise enough to understand the nuances of content type and intention” (p. 13).

I believe that these recommendations regarding moderation are supported by the OHWP: Full Government Response to the consultation that states:

“Companies will be required to consider the impact on and safeguards for users’ rights when designing and deploying content moderation systems and processes. This might involve engaging with stakeholders in the development of their content moderation policies, considering the use of appropriate automated tools, and ensuring appropriate training for human moderators. Companies should also take reasonable steps to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their systems, including considering the amount of legitimate content that was incorrectly removed” (p. 31).

Whilst the OHWP refers to the requirement for sponsored posts to be appropriately labeled there is no other reference to monetisation and transparency regarding platforms monetisation processes. However, in Cycle 1 I found that there is a potential impact of the Creator Fund, TikToks monetisation system, that results in shadowbanning of users who do not fit the platforms ideals therefore restricting their ability to receive compensation for their labour. A number of studies have suggested that young people value feeling ‘seen’ (Kant, 2020; Milton et al., 2023) and as such representation matters. Eriksson (2023) describes the commodification of lived experience which they described in the context of marketisation of mental ill health which is assumed to reduce stigma. However, it also raises questions relating to those that share their personal experiences and the potential benefits and risks they face. While Eriksson was considering commodification broadly, for example the sharing of lived experiences on social media sites as well as published

within books but also the job opportunities that may result from these experiences, I will narrow down on the sharing on social media. While those who share their experiences, particularly when perceived as authentic, may receive financial compensation, ultimately it is the platform that benefits from this users' experiences. This may be particularly damaging for those who do not fit the platform's ideals as their ability to successfully commodify their experience will be limited however the negative consequences may persist. I believe that this system should be overhauled and made transparent including providing specific metrics that would impact how much a creator earns, for example based on followers or engagement, to exclude the possibility that it could be based on identity characteristics such as gender/sex, sexuality, race etc. In doing so it would create a fairer digital space with opportunities for anyone to benefit from the opportunities that social media has to offer.

8.5.2 Statutory RSE

Within Cycle 2 and Cycle 3 I highlight that a 'one size fits all' approach to RSE is not appropriate given that ability and knowledge vary considerably between young people. This raises concerns given that the statutory RSE policy (in England) highlights the need for age appropriate teaching which is vague and impossible to define. Furthermore, the term age-appropriate is used to describe when young people should learn about LGBTQ+ identities (also mentioned in 8.2.1) which I condemn given that there is no inappropriate time to learn about LGBTQ+ identities. I recommend that, particularly in this instance, the term age-appropriate is removed from the guidance.

In comparison, in Scotland and Wales they use the term 'developmentally appropriate' instead which is argued:

“will not assume, but attune to and build upon learners' evolving knowledge and experience” (Welsh Government, 2020, p. 40).

While I believe that the aim of statutory RSE is to standardise the quality and content of RSE, I believe there are some significant failings in this regard. The findings from Cycle 2 indicate that of those who deliver RSE there is no standardised approach. The mode of delivery varied considerably with some schools providing weekly or fortnightly lessons as well as delivering it during tutor/form time and drop-down days. Lesson length also varied from 35-90 minutes highlighting an overall inconsistency of the delivery of RSE.

Whilst I advocate against a ‘one size fits all approach’, I believe that RSE should be standardised to be included in all schools and therefore for all pupils. I also argue that the delivery of RSE should be standardised to ensure a high quality of RSE for all pupils. I condemn the ‘drop-down days’ approach as a pupil who misses this day potential misses an entire term, or more, worth of RSE. Instead I believe that the government should enforce standardised RSE of a set frequency and length to ensure that all pupils are able to receive high quality RSE.

Furthermore, I believe that the guidance so far is too vague. While I agree RSE should always be tailored to the needs of those receiving it, I argue that crucial topics, such as algorithmic literacy (discussed in 8.2.1) are essential for young people to live safe, healthy lives. Such topics build upon the already suggested topics regarding media literacies however I feel that the speed of technology (compared to the relative sluggishness of policy) has already surpassed what is covered. Furthermore, the policy seems to overemphasise sexting and porn viewership and downplay the importance of other factors. Within the ‘Online and media’ section of the statutory guidance, 6 of 8 bullet points appear to be about sexting and pornography (although the term sexting is not actually used) whereas only one statement is related to data use:

“how information and data is generated, collected, shared and used online”
(DfE, 2021).

I fear that in doing so little time and attention will be paid to what is actually a mammoth and important topic especially to young people who inhabit digital spaces. As such this guidance should be expanded to be explicit about what and how teachers should educate young people on these topics. Again, I refer to the resources generated as part of this research (appendix E) as a starting point for topics. Finally, I argue that those from the Department of Digital, Media, Sport and Culture should work collaboratively with the Department for Education to strengthen this curriculum making it more holistic than the current curriculum that focuses on the topics of sexting and cyberbullying.

8.6 Implications for future research

While this research has answered the research questions it set out to, it has also provided new opportunities for exploration. I will discuss within this section the opportunities for ongoing research on the platform TikTok, as well as newcomer platforms, and the methodological contributions of this research alongside its limitations.

8.6.1 TikTok

Since the first research cycle was completed, academic research exploring the impact of TikTok has increased with a breadth of studies being published. Despite this, TikTok, like other platforms, constantly evolves and therefore further research is needed to remain relevant.

Changes to the platform since Cycle 1 data collection concluded include:

Syncing contacts

While the literature regarding TikTok repeatedly discusses, and sometimes attributes its success to, its lack of interest in personal networks instead curating content based on each individual user's preferences and interactions on the platform. The addition of syncing contacts on TikTok via phone contacts has the

potential to change everything we know about TikTok; how the platform operates as well as how users interact with it. It also raises significant concerns for the LGBTQ+ community, who are known users of TikTok who believe it to be a site of belonging and a safe(ish) space, as this research and others have found (see Simpson & Semaan, 2021; Reje Franzén, 2022). They report valuing the pseudonymity of the platform which could be compromised given this change and risks potentially ‘outing’ LGBTQ+ users. While TikTok users are not required to use their real name as their username the syncing of phone contacts may expose their true identity. Previously academics have discussed the idea of digital spaces as ‘queer utopias’ (Muñoz, 2009) which are considered to be sites of queer possibilities and flourishing, with the most common example being Tumblr. TikToks changing of its practices regarding privacy and pseudonymity prevent it from being a queer utopia and instead may further marginalise LGBTQ+ users. Cho (2017) termed this ‘default publicness’ referring to the:

“architecture of social media spaces such as Facebook that structures a user’s experience in service of a steroidal version of publicity: hyper-privileging extant offline networks, hewing strictly to state-validated identity, making the communication archive as readable and traversable as possible, and even broadcasting one’s actions to one’s networks without one’s knowledge. A design bias toward default publicness presumes that being-in-public carries little to no risk, that all bodies are legislated by state and social/informal policing equally, ignoring that, at least in the United States, the state of publicness is thickly encrusted with centuries of policy, violence, and cultural mores that conspire to allow white heteromascularity, at the expense of all other embodied inhabitances, the ability to relax and express in public” (p. 3184).

As such, further research is required to truly understand what, if any, harm this poses to LGBTQ+ users and the counterpublics (Renninger, 2015) that have formed on the platform.

TikTok shop

TikTok introduced the TikTok Shop, another monetisation stream, in the UK following its success in other countries. TikTok Shop connects buyers and sellers on the platform allowing users to buy products without leaving the TikTok app. TikTok creators can link products that can be purchased via TikTok Shop and earn commission from the products sold as a result of that post. These posts are automatically labelled #ad by the platform, however they are subtly different from typical social media ads. Firstly, users are not directly paid to promote such products although they may benefit financially. Additionally, this may open up the ‘influencer’ opportunities available to those who do not fit the typical norms of influencers, such as slim, white women. This could make the influencer industry much fairer and more inclusive although more research is needed to see whether this would truly be the case given the algorithmic segregation that I found exists on the platform. As well as this research should consider how users of the app are influenced by those who link products in the TikTok Shop given that those in this study were distrustful of those who received financial incentives to promote products and the TikTok Shop seems to blur the boundaries of monetisation.

Most followed

In Cycle 1 I frequently reference TikTok creators Charli D’Amelio and Addison Rae, the two most followed creators at the time of study. Kennedy (2020, p.1) stated that “teenage girls rule the internet right now”. However, they may no longer rule TikTok given that they were surpassed by Khaby Lame, a Senegalese born man, in 2023 who is now the most followed on the platform with 159 million followers. Research should continue to study TikTok given it’s an ever-changing

landscape and even a small change, such as the most followed creator, could represent a cultural shift on the platform.

Addiction

Participants in Cycle 1 highlighted their concerns regarding the possibility of becoming addicted to TikTok, which for them meant spending prolonged periods of time on the app, much like participants in Siles and Meléndez-Moran's (2021) study. Since data for Cycle 1 was collected between October 2020 and March 2021 in the midst of the Covid pandemic and at various stages of lockdown and/or restrictions (as was data in Siles & Meléndez-Moran, 2021), these have been lifted and Covid "no longer constitutes a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC)" (World Health Organisation, 2023, n.p.). There is not currently a consensus as to whether social media addiction exists or instead represents a technopanic (Marwick, 2008), although this study is interesting that technopanics usually originate in adults and are imposed onto young people however here it is young people who raise such concerns. However, it could be possible that young people are reproducing the discourses presented to them by adults including the media (Walsh, 2025). In doing so they pathologise their social media use with the 'symptom' of addiction being time spent on the app and finding 'cures' with their resistance tactics. Despite this, other academics argue that time spent on social media during that pandemic represents a coping strategy rather than an addiction (Singh et al. 2020), while boyd (2014) argues that even if social media addiction does exist it is not common:

"most teens aren't addicted to social media; if any-thing, they're addicted to each other" (p. 80).

To ascertain whether TikTok, and social media addiction more broadly, represents a legitimate threat research must be undertaken now that we are no longer in the context of a pandemic.

Finally, most notable of the contributions from Cycle 1 is the coining of the term algorithmic segregation which I use to explain the way in which those who do not conform to the platform's ideals (white, middle class, heterosexual, attractive women/girls) are rarely, if ever, seen on the un-personalised FYP, further facilitated by filter bubbles, and introduced only to those who seek it out, enabling a platform that simultaneously excludes and includes minorities but only when their inclusion results in profit through exploitative means. I note that the use of the word segregation has historical connotations associated with race, an issue that emerged in the study, but this segregation is also applied to categories such as race, LGBTQ+ status, class, ability, and attractiveness, with special considerations for those with identities with intersecting dimensions of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Particularly, future research should focus on those that intersect with the currently under-researched categories of disability and class.

While here I have discussed future research in relation to the platform TikTok which I believe should continue, I also wish to draw researchers' attention towards emerging platforms popular with young people, including BeReal and Lemon8. Of particular interest is the way in which BeReal encourages users to 'be real' by sending notifications only once per day whereby users are supposed to take a candid picture with both their front and back camera. Such a concept is unique in the social media landscape and thus deserves a thorough investigation of its impact on authenticity. In comparison, Lemon8 has an interface similar to that of TikTok with a 'Following' and 'For You' interface. However, the platform has some distinct differences including that videos do not initially play upon entering the app and instead must be selected which could reduce the app's addictive potential (as mentioned in 8.4.1), a concern raised in this research. Additionally, upon opening the app users are asked to share their pronouns, providing the options he, she, and they. As such researchers should investigate how/if this impacts the expression of gender/sex and sexuality on the platform or if it is merely a tokenistic attempt to gain a young, liberal audience.

8.6.2 Methodological contributions

While not new, I hope in this research to continue to set a standard for the collection of demographic information. I allowed participants to share as much or as little as they wished (with the exception of age which is often necessary) and allowed them to self-define rather than imposing categories/labels onto individuals. In the Theoretical Framework I discuss the use of the terms sex and gender (3.2.2) and as such I support the notion of asking for gender/sex (see Hyde et al., 2019; Morgenroth & Ryan, 2021) rather than asking for both gender and sex as distinct categories that are tightly defined by the researchers. In doing so it acknowledges that these terms mean different things to different people whilst also rejecting the notion that sex ‘causes’ gender. I encourage more researchers to follow suit, including government research such as censuses. As a bare minimum I expect that researchers avoid providing binary categories of identity such as male/female given that I have previously discussed how this is not only inaccurate but renders intersex identities invisible or unable to participate. In doing so I hope to contribute towards the breaking of preexisting power structures within research and knowledge production that decide what information is valuable and how it is defined and/or measured given that this is then reproduced continuously in both offline and online environments.

Again, like my predecessors, I highlight the difficulties of conducting Action Research within an academic institution (see Brydon-Miller & Greenwood, 2006; Gelling & Munn-Giddings, 2011; Gustafson & Brunger, 2014; Peek et al., 2016). Brydon-Miller and Greenwood (2006) argue that ethics review boards base have been designed around traditional positivist research that has defined hypotheses and methods as well as predictable outcomes (although they state this is not actually the case but that ethical review boards are willing to turn a blind eye) whereas Action Research cannot be pre-determined as it is open-ended with each cycle influencing the next. I found that university processes and ethical committees

often do not align with Action Research which requires a quick pace and is hindered by the slow speed of these regulatory processes and bodies. My experience highlighted that the Covid pandemic and its aftereffects further hindered this and potentially prevented an additional cycle of research from occurring. However, this experience also affirmed the importance of Action Research particularly in this multidisciplinary space which intersects public health, education, and digital technology. As such I encourage researchers to utilise Action Research when attempting to challenge existing practices or facilitate change, in this case the inclusion of youth voices in matters affecting them. Instead, I suggest that universities, and in particular ethics committees, undertake development that allows all staff to better understand the demands of Action Research as well as its value. In doing so I hope there will be a greater leniency towards well equipped researchers who are able to navigate the complexities of research as it occurs. For example, the researcher when dealing with ethical challenges, such as in Cycle 1 where a potential participant disclosed that they were not 'out' to their family but were living at home, the researcher reacted in what I consider the only appropriate way given the circumstances and put the participant and their safety first by not including them as a participant. Furthermore, while interventions are commonly used within both public health and education, their development and design are typically not discussed in detail. I contribute to the field of intervention development in this sense and encourage other researchers to consider doing so. The greater detail not only justifies choices made but also makes clear the researchers thought processes thus acknowledging their subjectivity within the research.

8.6.3 Continuing the Action Research cycle

Action Research consists of what could be a never-ending research spiral. However, due to time constraints as mentioned in 8.6.2 this project reached its conclusion with possibilities for further study. Most notably the research

highlighted the need for further work on the inclusion of SEN in the provision of RSE and its design. The Department for Education (2021) state that:

“Relationships Education, RSE and Health Education must be accessible for all pupils” (p.15).

However, they provide limited guidance on what this may entail for SEN students:

“High quality teaching that is differentiated and personalised will be the starting point to ensure accessibility. Schools should also be mindful of the preparing for adulthood outcomes, as set out in the SEND code of practice, when teaching these subjects to those with SEND” (p.15).

While this recommendation provides a starting point even this may be difficult for teachers as providing personalised learning can be difficult with the increasing pressures teachers face regarding a teacher shortage that leads to existing teachers being overworked (Morris, See & Gorard, 2021).

Furthermore, the Sex Education Forum (2020) provide advice for RSE teachers regarding SEN learners including:

“Go at a slow pace... Give extra time” (p.4).

While this is good advice, teachers in Cycle 2 shared how their RSE was delivered and it is clear that schools do not necessarily provide RSE teachers the opportunity to do so given the limited time dedicated to RSE.

While I have attempted to create resources (appendix E) with some options for different learners and that can be easily adapted by teachers, I believe that the next steps of this research involve attempting to tailor the resources towards SEN learners. This should involve direct consultation with SEN educators and testing the materials similar to the actions taken in Cycles 2 and 3. Rather than teachers

being given vague advice they require examples of learning materials that directly cater to SEN learners taking into account the range of SEN that exist.

8.7 Limitations of the project

Within this section I discuss the impact that the Covid 19 pandemic had on the research. Naturally it affected the research project given that face-to-face research was not tenable, and I believe prevented me from conducting participatory Action Research. However, I discuss how I mitigated these impacts to complete a high-quality research project. I also go on to discuss how I initially overlooked race, while I quickly corrected this, I encourage others not to make the same mistake.

8.7.1 The impact of Covid

Within this section I will discuss the impact of Covid on the research methodology. As most researchers will know, research was significantly impacted by the social distancing measures imposed by the UK government. This meant that research had to be adapted in order to continue during the pandemic which meant that this research had to be conducted via Zoom. While many argue the strengths of Zoom as a medium for conducting interviews (Gray et al., 2020; Lobe et al., 2020; Marhefka et al., 2020), I feel that it impacted participation in a number of ways. Firstly, as already mentioned in 5.2.5 one potential participant was unable to participate as they were a member of the LGBTQ+ community but were living in their family home with family members who were unknowing of their sexuality. While ensuring the safety of participants is always the upmost priority, this sadly meant that this individual was unable to participate and share their unique perspective that would have been valuable to the research project. Additionally, I feel that many individuals, such as ethnic and gender/sex minorities, may have been reluctant to meet a researcher online given that they did not know the researchers gender/sex, sexuality, race, and religion. Others have argued the digital divide makes it difficult for certain groups, such as those with limited skills and/or those

with poor access to the Internet and devices may be unable to utilise technologies such as Zoom and therefore participate in digitally mediated research (Hall, Gaved & Sargent, 2021; Kennedy, Holcombe-James & Mannell, 2021). In Action Research the initial cycle sets the foundation for the research and impacts future cycles and as such the exclusion of participants for reasons outside the researchers' control may have impacted the research and meant that certain voices may be missing.

Furthermore, ideally the methodology for this research would have been Participatory Action Research (PAR) rather than Action Research (AR) however I felt this was not possible given that the initial research cycle was conducted online and as already mentioned the first cycle impacts the following cycles. While research facilitated by Zoom has benefits such as overcoming traditional barriers to participation such as geographic location and financial ability to attend in person interviews (Gray et al., 2020) I found this meant those initial participants were not suitable for future cycles given that their location may have been too far away to participate, and their contact details such as email address may have no longer been in use due to them no longer attending the same school/college/university. While some believe that what differentiates PAR from AR is simply the involvement at stakeholders at every stage of the research, including evaluation (Feuerstein, 1986; Garaycochea, 1990), which was the case in this research. However, I believe that this research failed to truly be considered PAR given that those who contributed to Cycle 1 were not consulted in the latter cycles and because involvement from stakeholders was limited compared to the expectations of PAR. Ideally, I would have involved young people in the co-creation of resources, such as in the youth group setting. However, this was not possible as it would have likely required multiple cycles of meeting and refining resources, which unfortunately was not possible due to time constraints. Additionally, it is important to note that at times limited involvement was a conscious choice, particularly in the expectation of educators, given the pressures they faced during the pandemic and asking more of

them would have been unrealistic and potentially unethical as a result. In this sense, I echo the sentiment of Pacheco and Zaimağaoğlu (2020) who argue:

“that we are asking more of our participants than ever before” (n.p.).

Furthermore, while Cycle 3 utilised ethnography, a method valuable when employing a critical paradigm, I highlight how the period of time immersed within the youth group setting was not of the typical length of time that ethnography requires. O’Reilly (2012) notes that ethnography:

“involves direct and sustained contact with human beings, in the context of their daily lives, over a prolonged period of time” (p. 3).

The pandemic and its aftereffects meant that prolonged contact within the youth group was not possible. Whilst I acknowledge the data collected in Cycle 3 is substantive with deep insights found, ideally I would have been able to spend more time within the youth group to develop a deeper understanding of the youth group dynamics as well as the young people’s lives. That said, the young people were often very forthcoming and appeared to value the time and resources that they received as a result of the research project and appeared to gain knowledge and skills from the intervention.

8.7.2 Overlooking race

The initial aims of this project related to gender/sex and sexuality however by initially only collecting this information in Cycle 1 is an oversight that the researcher regrets. In the Theoretical Framework (in 3.2.7) I discuss Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and both its importance but also how it is often missing or not considered in research. Although some participants in Cycle 1 chose to share their race over the course of the interviews I regret not explicitly collecting this demographic information as I acknowledge its value in providing an

Intersectional lens to the analysis. I encourage other researchers investigating gender/sex and sexuality to not omit this crucial information.

8.8 Conclusion

Within this chapter I have discussed the implications of this multidisciplinary research in the context of education, healthcare, social media platforms, policy, and future research as well as discussing the limitations of the project. I advocate Action Research, and Participatory Action Research, as a methodology capable of eliciting change and hope that those working in relevant fields will consider my recommendations based upon the findings from relevant stakeholders including young people and educators. Noted by young people was the assertion that politics does not reflect young people and their lives and as such I call for changes for future policy to include youth voices and concerns rather than reiterating the anxieties of adults, as the youth voices included in Cycle 1 highlighted the issues that were important to them, even if some of these issues were unknown to young people in Cycle 3. As already discussed, I feel the research cycles could continue and I hope that future researchers continue this valuable work and in particular work alongside stakeholders with expertise in the field of SEN learning to adapt the resources for use by all young people.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

This chapter will conclude this thesis by summarising the research project including a brief overview of the research such as the methodological approach, methods used, and data analysis. I also discuss what the research contributed to the evidence base as well as policy and practice recommendations. I provide recommendations for future research including a continuation of this work as well as novel areas to explore. Finally, I share the limitations of the project particularly considering those that resulted from the Covid 19 pandemic and associated lockdowns.

9.2 Overview of the research

This research utilised an Action Research approach and consisted of 3 research cycles. Cycle 1 consisted of interviews with 12 young people regarding their experiences of using the platform TikTok. The data collected were analysed using thematic analysis which revealed 5 themes; Coping (in Covid), Learning, Algorithmic harms, FYP=IRL, and Authenticity. Cycle 2 utilised the data from Cycle 1 to inform the development and design of an intervention aimed at increasing the digital skills and algorithmic literacy of young people. The intervention was designed to be delivered as part of the RSE curriculum and included 6 lessons; Information Online, Online Hate, Algorithms, Algorithmic Bias, Values of Platforms and Assessment Lesson Overall Harms and Opportunities.

An online survey was conducted to illicit RSE teachers attitudes towards the implementation and potential success of the intervention. The data illicited was analysed using content analysis and from this I concluded that one size doesn't fit

all, regarding both the needs of students as well as the approach to RSE and its delivery within schools.

Cycle 3 involved taking into account the data collected in Cycle 2 and implementing the intervention, albeit in a youth group setting rather than a school setting. The data collected included transcripts of brief interviews with the youth worker after each session as well as ethnographic field notes. These data were analysed using content analysis and revealed the themes; assumed learning skills & prior knowledge, and gender/sex differences.

9.3 Contributions of the research

This project successfully utilised an Action Research approach to meet the projects aims. The aims were as follows:

What are the issues affecting young people regarding digital spaces and their digital lives?

Within this research question I aimed to understand whether RSE was an appropriate site for addressing the issues raised.

How are gender/sex and sexuality enacted in digital spaces?

Are digital spaces equitable regarding gender/sex and sexuality?

Arguably the most notable contribution to come from Cycle 1 relates to the field of digital exclusion. I coin the term ‘algorithmic segregation’ to explain the complex and often contradictory experiences of those with minoritised identities, notably LGBTQ+ individuals and ethnic minorities, as well as those with intersecting identities of oppression. I highlight that while these individuals can particularly benefit from the benefits that social media platforms can provide, they are hindered by the algorithms which are inherently biased and reproduce the discrimination these individuals face in real life.

Furthermore, I believe this is the first to study TikTok's Creator Fund and its potential impact. I discuss how it may be oppositional to the authenticity of creators who may be shadowbanned if they do not comply to the Community Guidelines. I also relate this to algorithmic segregation to explain how while the Creator Fund could provide opportunities for a diverse range of people to become influencers it likely does not due to the unfair visibility practises that operate on the platform. I argue that greater transparency is needed in this regard with stricter controls to ensure that creators are rewarded for their labour based on metrics such as likes and shares etc rather than their identities.

Additionally, Cycles 2 and 3 lead to the development of an algorithmic literacy intervention which is intended to be delivered as part of RSE lessons. The intervention comprised six lessons; Information Online, Online Hate, Algorithms, Algorithmic Bias, Values of Platforms, and Assesment Lesson Overall Harms and Opportunities. I discuss how RSE teachers may struggle with the updates to statutory RSE guidance and how to implement these and hope I have provided a foundation from which they can start.

Furthermore the findings of the research have been translated into actionable practise and policy reccomendations within the discussion chapter. I discuss these implications within the fields of education, healthcare, platforms, policy and future recomendations. Most notably I provide recomendations for future policy and guidance utilising youth voices given young peoples insitence that:

“there's a lot like all the politicians and adults don't really know about it”
(17, male).

9.4 Future research

As mentioned in 8.6, the Action Research cycle has infinte possibilities and as such the researchers provide a number of reccomendations for future research.

Firstly, I discuss changes to TikTok's platform since the cessation of Cycle 1 that warrant further study:

- Syncing contacts, and its potential implication particularly for LGBTQ+ users who may be unintentionally 'outed'.
- TikTok shop, and the impact that this new stream of monetisation may have.
- Most followed, and how or if the most followed TikTokers is reflective of wider cultural shifts on and off the platform.
- Consider how/if addiction to TikTok poses a legitimate threat now that Covid restrictions have been lifted.

Additionally, I discuss recommendations to study other platforms:

- BeReal is a photo sharing app that sends a notification for users to post a photo at a set time encouraging them to 'be real', a unique premise for encouraging authenticity on social media.
- Lemon8, a platform with similar features to TikTok such as having a Following and For You page, but distinct in that it does not immediately play videos upon opening the app and encourages users to share their pronouns.
- I also encourage researchers to explore what I termed 'algorithmic segregation' on social media platforms, considering those with identities that intersect with the under researched categories of disability and class.
- Regarding the resources developed during Cycles 2 and 3 I suggest that the resources created are adapted to meet the needs of SEN learners by continuing with this Action Research approach and including stakeholders.

9.5 Limitations of the research

I discuss the limitations of the research, most of which are a result of the Covid pandemic and the ways in which this affected conducting research:

- Limited participation and sample. I believe that the use of Zoom interviews hindered some people from participating, as detailed in 5.2.5 and as such the sample lacked the experience that participant, and others, may have brought.
- Given that Action Research relies on the initial cycle, this limited participation and sample impacted the whole research project.
- Ideally, PAR would have been utilised however I believed that the pandemic made it impossible to do so.
- Another limitation not related to Covid was that demographic data regarding race was not collected in Cycle 1. While some chose to share their race I regret not collecting it as I have argued the importance of intersectional experiences.

9.6 Conclusion

This chapter concludes the thesis after providing an overview of the research project as a whole, followed by a summary of the contributions of the research, outlining avenues for future exploration, and finally discussing the limitations of the project. What has been made clear throughout this project is that RSE must 'catch up' with technology if it wants to be relevant to young peoples lives. To ensure this happens this must be enshrined within policy which itself needs to be brought up to date. Additionally policy must go further to compel platforms to take into account young peoples perceptions of the harms they face including the inherent bias, including misogyny, embedded into platforms. Finally, it has been discussed the unfinished nature of the intervention which should be adapted by those who

wish to use it with a particular emphasis on the need to tailor it to suit the needs of learners with SEN.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Cycle 1 Participant Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Title of Study: Exploring young people's understanding of algorithms, representations and identity on TikTok.

Invitation and Brief Summary

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read this information carefully and discuss it with the researcher. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. However, you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without any penalty or loss of benefits.

What is the purpose of the research?

TikTok is a relatively new social media platform and therefore little is known about the users experience and their knowledge of the algorithms used and how/if this affects the content within.

What does taking part involve?

The research involves a one-time interview that should take no longer than an hour. The researcher will ask the participant questions about TikTok. Prior to the start of the research you may wish to save and/or think about some TikToks to share with the researcher.

What information will be collected and who will have access to the information collected?

Some data will be collected from participants including age, sex, sexual orientation, and education level. The content of the interview will be recorded to allow for transcription; once the interview has been transcribed the interview will be deleted. The research may be published however all data will be anonymised to ensure the confidentiality of participants.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part in the study because you are a young person (aged 16-25) who uses/has previously used the app TikTok and you are willingly volunteering.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Your participation in this study will inform the researchers of young people's knowledge of algorithms, identity and representations of gender, sex and sexuality on the app TikTok. Research in this area currently does not exist so this will provide an invaluable research base for future research.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are not any known risks from taking part. The research is voluntary and requires informed consent from participants. They are made aware the nature of the research and will be allowed to ask the research any questions they wish prior to the study and have the right to withdraw up until 19/03/2021.

**Who is the sponsor and data controller for this research?**

Newcastle University is the sponsor for this study based in the United Kingdom. Newcastle University will be using information from you to undertake this study and will act as the data controller for this study. This means that Newcastle University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

The lawful basis for carrying out this study under GDPR is Task in the Public Interest, (Article 6,1e) as research is cited as part of the University's duties.

Your rights to access, change or move your information are limited, as Newcastle University need to manage your information in specific ways in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. If you withdraw from the study, Newcastle University will keep the information about you that has already been obtained. To safeguard your rights, the minimum personally-identifiable information will be used.

You can find out more about how Newcastle University uses your information at and/or by contacting their Data Protection Officer [Maureen Wilkinson, rec-man@ncl.ac.uk].

Has this study received ethical approval?

This study has received ethical approval from Newcastle University Ethics Committee on 15/9/2020.

Who should I contact for further information relating to the research?

You can contact the researcher by email at A.Alderson3@newcastle.ac.uk

Who should I contact in order to file a complaint?

Young people's knowledge of algorithms on the social media application TikTok and the sexual messages within:
Ashleigh Alderson, A.Alderson3@newcastle.ac.uk

If you wish to raise a complaint on how your personal data is handled, you can contact the Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter: Maureen Wilkinson, rec-man@ncl.ac.uk

If you are not satisfied with their response you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO):
<https://ico.org.uk/>



Demographic Questionnaire

Please fill in the table below prior to the start of the study.

Date of birth	
Sex/gender	
Sexuality	
Highest educational qualification completed	

Before the study you may also wish to save some TikToks to share as part of the research however this is not a requirement.

Appendix C: Cycle 1 Interview Schedule

Getting to know you Qs

Are you a current or previous TikTok user?

When & why did you download it?

Do you like it more or less than other social medias? Why?

When do you use it most?

If/why you like it? Trends/creators/content they like to watch

For you page/following page- where do you spend your time? Why?

What does the For you page mean?

Algorithms on TikTok- straight, gay, elite

How do you know what you know about algorithms?

Do you think TikTok are open about their algorithms?

Do you ever see anything you don't like/doesn't fit the algorithm?

Are there any downsides to the algorithm?

Do you see a lot of sexual content? WAP challenge? Rice purity scores? Gender differences?

Is sexual content appropriate?

More/less sexual content than other platforms?

How does seeing sexual content make you feel?

Misinformation- how do you know its misinformation?

Censorship- is there some? Should there be more?

Data and privacy concerns?

Monetisation- Creator fund

Appendix E: Cycle 2 Intervention Materials

Lesson 1: Information online		
<p>Objectives:</p> <p>Be able to identify and define key terms related to information/misinformation.</p> <p>Be able to discern between fact and opinion and identify when both are useful.</p> <p>Be able to explain what makes a credible source of information and consider the potential impact of monetisation on credibility.</p>		
Timing	Activity	Materials/equipment
5 mins	<p>Welcome class</p> <p>Take register</p> <p>Introduce lesson and objectives</p>	<p>PowerPoint</p>
15 mins	<p>Students can use the cards to play pairs or snap (depending on class setup and Covid restrictions) to match the key words with their definitions</p> <p>Activity to discern fact and opinion, show students examples</p>	<p>Pack of cards per pair/group</p>

15 mins	of online information and have them raise their fact & opinion cards and vote whether it is fact or opinion	PowerPoint Pack of cards
15 mins	<p>Have students find their own example of a fact or opinion write a paragraph explaining how they know whether this is fact or opinion, if it's credible and if it's financially motivated.</p> <p>Extension activity: find another example of fact if previously found opinion and vice versa.</p> <p><i>Teachers note: encourage them to use the keywords from the first activity</i></p>	<p>Paper/exercise books or on computer/laptop</p> <p>(if computers/laptops available have them share the example but if not just describe it)</p>
10 mins	<p>Feedback to class and conclude lesson</p> <p>Tidy up</p>	
Resources		

Information online

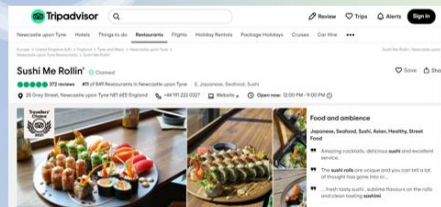
Lesson Objectives:

- Be able to identify and define key terms related to information/misinformation.
- Be able to discern between fact and opinion and identify when both are useful.
- Be able to explain what makes a credible source of information and consider the potential impact of monetisation on credibility.

2

In your pairs or groups read your cards and pair the keywords with their definitions. Now shuffle them and turn them over to play pairs. Person with the most pairs wins!

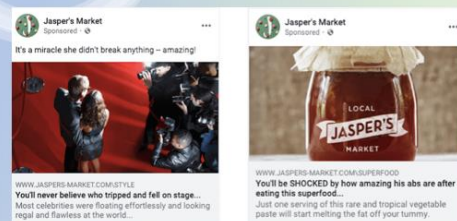
Fact or opinion?



Fact or opinion?



Fact or opinion?



6

Fact or opinion?



Now find your own example and write a paragraph, in your own words, explaining why you think it's fact or opinion. Use our key word cards to help you.

HINT: Try and consider the source and if it is financially motivated.

Extension task: if you found an example of a fact now find an opinion and repeat the activity or vice versa.

clickbait	source	credible	fake news	fact	misinformation	(#)ad	opi
online content designed to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link	the place, person or institution from which we obtain information	worthy of belief; trustworthy	false information that is broadcast or published as news for fraudulent or politically motivated purposes	something that is known or proven to be true	false or inaccurate information	often used on social media to show a product/service is being promoted in return for financial compensation	a v judgm somet may o be inf know
Lesson 2: Online hate							
<p>Objectives:</p> <p>Be able to identify characteristics of those who are often targeted online.</p> <p>Be able to identify the possible consequences of online hate.</p> <p>Be able to identify how to respond to online hate.</p>							
Tim ing	Activity			Materials/equi pment			
5 mins	<p>Welcome class</p> <p>Take register</p> <p>Introduce lesson and objectives</p>			PowerPoint			
15 mins	<p>Online hate activity (slide 3) where students will pick one</p>			PowerPoint			

	<p>scenario to decipher who receives hate online and its impact</p> <p><i>Teachers note: interact with the groups and encourage them to think about the negative outcomes of hate but also the positives that may arise e.g. murals dedicated to the England footballers to show support, acts of kindness which can be online or offline. Also encourage young people to consider that not only the intended victim of hate may suffer as a result as others with similar characteristics may internalise this.</i></p>	<p>Paper/exercise books</p>
<p>10 mins</p>	<p>Feedback from groups to class so that all scenarios have been discussed</p>	
<p>10 mins</p>	<p>From the previous activity now ask what online hate is (slide 4) and allow them to discuss. Then provide the definition on the next slide. See if students missed anything or if they improved/built upon the definition.</p>	<p>PowerPoint</p>

10 mins	<p>Go through slides. On slide 6 ask how we should respond to online hate and allow students to discuss how they already do.</p> <p><i>Teachers note: Encourage them to think about how they can negate online hate by not supporting it (e.g. not liking it) and instead leaving messages of solidarity.</i></p>	PowerPoint
5 mins	<p>Next provide them with the information of who and how to report online hate via platforms and also to a trusted adult and/or the police if we or someone we know are victims</p>	PowerPoint
5 mins	<p>Conclude lesson</p> <p>Tidy up</p>	
Resources		

 <p>Online Hate</p>	<p>Lesson Objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be able to identify characteristics of those who are often targeted online. • Be able to identify the possible consequences of online hate • Be able to identify how to respond to online hate.
<p>1</p>	<p>2</p>
<p>In your groups answer the following questions about the scenario you have chosen: What characteristic(s) of the individual(s) was targeted online? What impact may this have had on the individual? What impact may this have had on others?</p> <div style="display: flex; flex-wrap: wrap;"> <div style="width: 50%;">  <p>Following the Euros 2020 where Bukayo Saka, Marcus Rashford and Jadon Sancho made unsuccessful penalty attempts they were subject to racist hate both online and offline.</p> </div> <div style="width: 50%;">  <p>TikToker Addison Rae revealed she disables certain words within her comments due to the amount of body shaming she receives.</p> </div> <div style="width: 50%;">  <p>Beauty YouTuber Nikkie De Jager (NikkieTutorials) was blackmailed and forced to 'come out' as Trans online. Whilst the response was mostly positive, Nikkie still received many hate comments online.</p> </div> <div style="width: 50%;">  <p>Comedian and actress, Rosie Jones, who lives with cerebral palsy, recently played a pregnant woman in Casualty. Rosie revealed that following this she received hate messages including those that suggest disabled people should not have children.</p> </div> </div>	 <p>What is online hate?</p>
<p>“Online Hate is posting and sharing hateful and prejudiced content against an individual, group or community. It can take the form of derogatory, demonising and dehumanising statements, threats, identity-based insults, pejorative terms and slurs. If a post is hostile towards a person’s race, religion, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity, it could be viewed as Hate Speech. If it is serious enough, it may break the law, whether it is online or offline.”</p> <p>Stop Hate UK</p>	 <p>What should we do if we see or experience online hate?</p>
<p>5</p>	<p>6</p>
<p>We should never suffer in silence! We can report online hate on platforms We can report online hate on all social media sites/apps On TikTok: https://support.tiktok.com/en/safety-hc/report-a-problem On Instagram: https://help.instagram.com/547601325292351 On Twitter: https://help.twitter.com/en/safety-and-security/report-abusive-behavior On Snapchat: https://support.snapchat.com/en-US/a/report-abuse-in-app</p> <p>To a trusted adult such as a caregiver or teacher Sometimes we don't know how to respond when we see/experience online hate and so telling an adult allows them to help us respond and resolve the issue</p> <p>And report to the police If you fear you or someone else is in danger you can call 101 or 999 to report online hate to the police, for more information on how and what to report visit Report hate crime Police.uk (www.police.uk)</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">Lesson 3: Algorithms</p>	

<p>Objectives:</p> <p>Be able to define and explain algorithms.</p> <p>Be able to identify the impact of algorithms.</p> <p>Be able to imagine ways of overcoming the issues associated with algorithms.</p>		
Timing	Activity	Materials/equipment
5 mins	<p>Welcome class</p> <p>Take register</p> <p>Introduce lesson and objectives</p>	PowerPoint
5 mins	<p>Ask students what an algorithm is and then show the definition</p>	PowerPoint
20 mins	<p>Vending machine activity</p> <p><i>Teachers note: consider the concept personalisation, def: Personalisation consists of tailoring a service or a product to</i></p>	<p>Activity pack</p> <p>(consider cutting and laminating these ahead of time to save lesson time and be able to reuse)</p>

<p>20 mins</p>	<p><i>accommodate specific individuals, sometimes tied to groups or segments of individuals. Go around the pairs and try and draw this out of students in the first scenario. For the second identify how monetisation may impact algorithms.</i></p> <p>Reflection activity</p> <p><i>Teachers note: Encourage students to consider the ways in which personalisation can lead to both positive and negative outcomes e.g. improved user experience but can lead to less choices for users.</i></p> <p><i>Also think about the impact of being influenced by money/profit.</i></p>	<p>PowerPoint</p> <p>Exercise books/paper</p>
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Instructions:

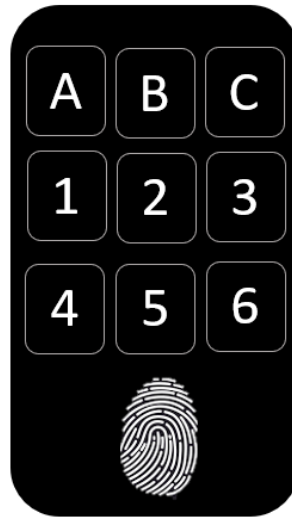
I've designed a prototype for a futuristic new vending machine that is cashless and uses an algorithm to dispense snacks to customers. I'd like you to help me test it out!


- 1) In your pairs assign one person to be the customer and the other to be the algorithm.
- 2) The algorithm should set up the vending machine however they wish.
- 3) The customer should now type into the keypad what snack they would like and use the fingerprint scanner to pay.
- 4) The algorithm should dispense the snack.
- 5) The customer should now repeat step 3 4 times (and the algorithm dispense the snack) to give the algorithm a chance to learn what you like.
- 6) Now the algorithm will adjust the vending machines layout and include offers to cater to the customers likes.
- 7) The customer should now type into the keypad what snack they would like and use the fingerprint scanner to pay.

Now swap roles!

- 1) The algorithm should set up the vending machine but this time the algorithm has been paid to advertise Coca-Cola and should set up the vending machine accordingly.
- 2) The customer should now type into the keypad what snack they would like and use the fingerprint scanner to pay.
- 3) The algorithm should dispense the snack.
- 4) The algorithm may adjust the vending machine if they wish to further persuade the customer to buy Coca-Cola.
- 5) The customer should now type into the keypad what snack they would like and use the fingerprint scanner to pay.






		
<h3>Lesson 4: Algorithmic bias</h3>		
<p>Objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be able to define algorithmic bias. Be able to identify examples of algorithmic bias. Be able to consider ways in which we can overcome algorithmic bias. 		
Timing	Activity	Materials/equipment
5 mins	<p>Welcome class</p> <p>Take register</p>	

15 mins	<p>Introduce lesson and objectives</p> <p>Put students into groups for the next activity. Each group will receive two print outs with corresponding Google searches. Set up the activity like a Wired Google Autocomplete interview, see example here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ijz8npDapKM</p> <p>Use blue tack and paper to cover up the autocomplete searches for them to remove one at a time. They should answer the questions on the PowerPoint.</p> <p><i>Teachers note: for gender encourage discussions about the different expectations for men and women, for men the autocomplete suggestions show toxic masculinity and for women they focus on appearance and being 'prim and proper'</i></p> <p><i>For race highlight how the suggestions for black people focus on the black body and there are much fewer suggestions for white people suggesting it's the default</i></p> <p><i>For sexuality again notice how there are fewer suggestions for</i></p>	PowerPoint Print out
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<p>5 mins</p>	<p><i>straight people. Also take the time to myth bust and highlight that it is an important question as HIV/AIDs can be transmitted via heterosexual sex and is not only spread between homosexual men</i></p> <p>Feedback to class for a class discussion to ensure all topics are covered.</p> <p>Go through PowerPoint slides.</p> <p><i>Teachers note: on slide 7 let students discuss the consequences of algorithmic bias including reduced visibility for some groups e.g. black, LGBTQ+ and how this can be harmful as it further marginalises marginalised groups.</i></p>	
<p>15 mins</p>	<p><i>On slide 8 let students discuss tactics for overcoming algorithmic bias, allow them to share their own tactics but also prompt them to consider the following: unfollowing influencers/brands or any content that doesn't make us feel good and instead follow those that do, diversify feeds by following hashtags relating to topics that are important to us such as body positivity or social justice</i></p>	<p>PowerPoint</p>

<h1>Algorithmic bias</h1>	<p>Lesson Objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be able to define algorithmic bias.• Be able to identify examples of algorithmic bias.• Be able to consider ways in which we can overcome algorithmic bias.
1	2
<h2>What is an algorithm?</h2>	<p>An algorithm is a set of instructions for solving a problem or accomplishing a task.</p>
<p>Now in groups we're going to look at Google autocomplete sections and act as bias detectors. Consider if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">the suggestions are helpful?the suggestions for the two groups of people differ?any of the suggestions should be reported?	<p>Much like the bias found on search engines, algorithmic bias is present on social media. Can anyone think of any examples?</p> 
5	6
<h2>What are the consequences of this bias?</h2>	<h2>How might we overcome this algorithmic bias?</h2>

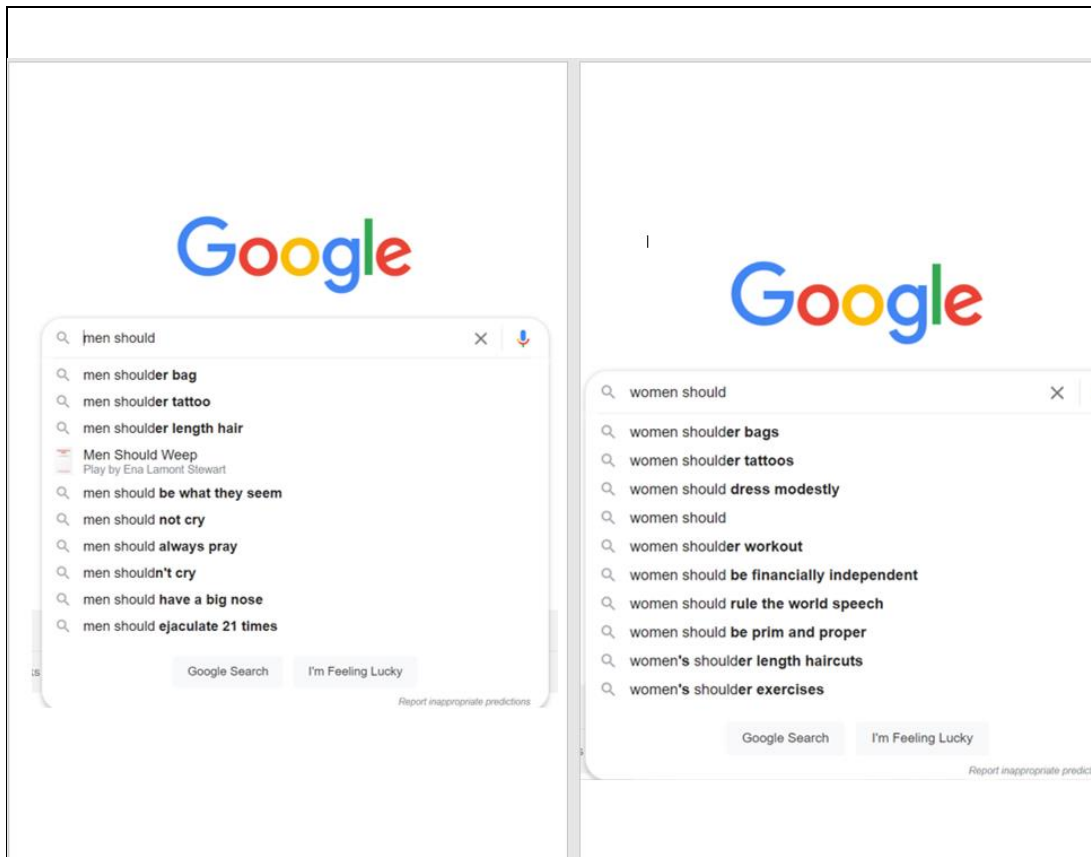
What is
algorithmic
bias?

9

Algorithmic bias describes the biases in algorithms that result in unfair outcomes that may harm or benefit one arbitrary group of users over others.

10

This definition is full of jargon and very confusing. Lets write our own definitions that we could use to explain algorithmic bias to someone else. You can use examples to help explain it.



The image displays four screenshots of the Google search interface, arranged in a 2x2 grid. Each screenshot shows the Google logo at the top, a search bar with a query, a list of search suggestions, and buttons for 'Google Search' and 'I'm Feeling Lucky'. The bottom right of each screenshot contains a small link for 'Report inappropriate predictions'.

- Top Left:** Query: "why are black people". Suggestions include: "why are black people so good at running", "why are black peoples bottom lip pink", "why are black people's hair texture different", "why are black people attacking asians", "why are black people called black", "why are black people's palms white", and "why are black people so tall".
- Top Right:** Query: "why are white people". Suggestions include: "why are white people called caucasian" and "why are white people white".
- Bottom Left:** Query: "can gay". Suggestions include: "can gay men donate blood", "can gay men donate blood uk", "can gay couples travel to turkey", "can gay couples travel to dubai", "can gay couples go to sandals resorts", "can gay couples travel to maldives", "can gay couples holiday in dubai", and "can gay people go to heaven".
- Bottom Right:** Query: "can straight people". Suggestions include: "can straight people get aids".


Lesson 5: Values of platforms		
<p>Objectives:</p> <p>Be able to consider others' opinions/new information that challenges our beliefs</p> <p>Be able to recognise that the T&Cs of platforms reflect their values</p> <p>Be able to consider the impact of these values on different groups of people</p>		
Timing	Activity	Materials/equipment
5 mins	<p>Welcome class</p> <p>Take register</p> <p>Introduce lesson and objectives</p>	PowerPoint
30 mins	<p>First get students to raise their hands if they 'agree' to T&Cs without reading</p> <p>Debate activity-read the statements about platforms T&Cs (on the PowerPoint slides) and get students to move to one side of the room for agree, the</p>	PowerPoint

	<p>opposite side for disagree and in the middle for unsure (if Covid restrictions do not allow this, students could instead do a thumbs up/down). Once students have chosen their position allow them to debate the statements. Then give them the follow up statements and see if their position changes.</p> <p><i>Teachers note: Ask students from different positions why they think this. When conducting the activity ensure that students take turns to speak and do not interrupt each other as hearing other viewpoints is an important aspect of the activity.</i></p> <p><i>Slide 6: most platforms ban nudity altogether</i></p> <p><i>Slide 9: twerking is a dance popularised by</i></p>	
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	<p><i>the likes of Miley Cyrus and Cardi B but has origins in black slaves</i></p> <p><i>Slide 11: some platforms ban eating disorder content however some argue only proED content should be banned as it could help people recover from Eds</i></p> <p><i>Slide 14: when we post content online it is no longer truly ours as the platform now has ownership and as such it may be used without our permission, or others could copy it without acknowledging it</i></p> <p><i>Slide 16: many platforms allow creators to monetise their content, but they lack transparency and may pay some creators more/less</i></p>	
--	--	--

<p>Now we're going to debate some of the statements that can be found on different platforms. If you agree move to the right hand side of the room, disagree go to the left and if you're unsure you can stay in the middle. We will debate why we think this, but make sure to listen to other peoples point of view and not interrupt when someone is speaking!</p>	
5	6
<p>What about specific cases of nudity, such as breastfeeding?</p>	<p>Or what about the censorship of female nipples but not male nipples?</p>
	<p>What if I told you that twerking is a cultural dance performed by slaves to lift spirits and was not seen as sexual?</p>
9	10
	<p>Some think Eating Disorder content may encourage Eds.</p>

<p>However, others think Eating Disorder content may promote recovery.</p>	
<p>13</p>	<p>14</p>
<p>It's our effort and time that go into content creation.</p>	
<p>Some people claim that certain creators, such as those who are Black and/or LGBTQ+, are paid less than other creators</p>	<p>Now we're going to write our own rules for a platform. Complete the worksheet where you can use an existing platform or create your own.</p>

	My platform's values
	Platform name: _____
Things you can do:	
1	_____


2	_____

3	_____

Things you can't do:	
1	_____

2	_____

3	_____

<p>Objectives:</p> <p>Be able to consolidate our learning thus far by identifying online harms and opportunities.</p> <p>Be able to consider the ways in which we could overcome online harms to have more positive online experiences.</p> <p>Be able to consider potential harms/opportunities of social media that we have not yet considered or that do not currently exist.</p>		
Timing	Activity	Materials/equipment
5 mins	<p>Welcome class</p> <p>Take register</p> <p>Introduce lesson and objectives</p>	PowerPoint
20 mins	<p>Watch ‘Black Mirror’ clips:</p> <p>Black Mirror - Hang the DJ Official Trailer [HD] Netflix – YouTube</p> <p>https://youtu.be/WTbbSZg4A3k</p> <p>Class discussion to understand the difference between dystopia/utopia and</p>	PowerPoint with links

<p>25 mins</p> <p>10 mins</p>	<p>the harms/opportunities in the clips. Also encourage them to consider how we can overcome potential harms.</p> <p>Design their own 'Black Mirror' episode based upon their prior learning but let their imagination run wild.</p> <p><i>Teachers note: They must draw a picture like you would see on Netflix, give the episode a title and write a synopsis that has a beginning, middle and (at least hints at) an end.</i></p> <p>Feedback to class and conclude lesson</p> <p>Tidy up</p>	<p>Worksheet</p> <p><i>Teachers note: these could be collated to make a great classroom display</i></p>
<p>Resources</p>		

<p>Overall harm/opportunities of social media</p>	<p>Lesson Objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be able to consolidate our learning thus far by identifying harms and opportunities of social media.• Be able to consider the ways in which we could overcome online harms to have more positive online experiences.• Be able to consider potential harms/opportunities of social media that we have not yet considered or that do not currently exist.
<p>1</p>	<p>2</p>
<p>What are some of the harms and opportunities that we have discussed over the past few lessons?</p>	<p>Raise your hand if you've ever seen the Netflix series Black Mirror.</p> 
<p>Black Mirror depicts fictional dystopias that could arise from technology.</p> <p>A dystopia is an imagined state or society in which there is great suffering or injustice.</p> <p>A utopia is an imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect.</p>	<p>Black Mirror - Hang the DJ Official Trailer HD Netflix - YouTube</p> <p>What about this clip made it a dystopia? Would you want to live in this type of world? How could we turn this dystopia into a utopia?</p>
<p>5</p>	<p>6</p>
<p>https://youtu.be/WTbbSZg4A3k</p> <p>What about this clip made it a dystopia? Would you want to live in this type of world? How could we turn this dystopia into a utopia?</p>	<p>Now we're going to design our own Black Mirror episode using what we've learned as well as our imagination. You can design your episode to be dystopian or utopian but you must consider how we can overcome the issues depicted.</p>

NETFLIX

Episodes
Season 30
Release date: 2030



BLACK MIRROR

Episode Title

Episode synopsis

Appendix F: Cycle 2 Online Survey

Gender/Sex

Age

How many years have you been teaching RSE?

Is RSE your main role?

Have you received RSE training?

How is RSE delivered at your current school?

What is the RSE lesson length at your current school?

Do you enjoy delivering RSE?

Would you feel confident delivering this lesson?

Do you think the timings are realistic for this lesson?

Do you think young people would engage with this lesson?

Would you change anything about this lesson?

Rate this lesson out of 5

(Questions repeated for each lesson plan)

What age group do you think these lessons are suitable for?

Do you think there are enough lessons?

Do you think there is enough information provided for teachers?

Do you think these lessons provide suitable assessment opportunities?

Would you use these lessons?

Appendix G: Cycle 3 Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Participant Information Sheet & Consent Form

Exploring Experiences of delivering/participating in a digital literacy intervention.

Invitation and Brief Summary

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide ~~whether or not~~ you wish to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read this information carefully and discuss it with the researcher. Take time to decide ~~whether or not~~ you wish to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. However, you are free to withdraw at any time, without having any reason and without any penalty or loss of benefits.

What is the purpose of the research?

This study aims to hear opinions regarding the digital literacy intervention that was previously designed ~~as a result of~~ interviews with young people. You are being invited because you either are a participant from those earlier interviews or are a youth worker who is experienced in working with young people.

What does taking part involve?

To take part you will complete a series of interviews based on each 'lesson' of the intervention that you will either have received or delivered.

What information will be collected and who will have access to the information collected?

The interviews will be recorded to allow for transcription and the audio only file will be stored in a password protected file on the researcher's personal laptop; once the interview has been transcribed the interview will be deleted. The anonymised transcripts will be stored both in a password protected file on the researcher's laptop and online on Newcastle University's shared ~~filestore~~ service. The research may be published however all data will be anonymised to ensure the confidentiality of participants. Anonymised data may also be uploaded to Newcastle University's data sharing site to aid other researchers for a period of up to 10 years.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no known risks from taking part. The research is voluntary and requires informed consent from participants. They are made aware of the nature of the research and will be allowed to ask the researcher any questions they wish prior to the study and have the right to withdraw up until 31/12/2022.

Who is the sponsor and data controller for this research?

Newcastle University is the sponsor for this study based in the United Kingdom. Newcastle University will be using information from you to undertake this study and will act as the data controller for this study. This means that Newcastle University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

The lawful basis for carrying out this study under GDPR is Task in the Public Interest, (Article 6,1e) as research is cited as part of the University's duties.

Your rights to access, change or move your information are limited, as Newcastle University need to manage your information in specific ways ~~in order for~~ the research to be reliable and accurate. If you

withdraw from the study, Newcastle University will keep the information about you that has already been obtained. To safeguard your rights, the minimum [personally-identifiable](#) information will be used.

You can find out more about how Newcastle University uses your information at and/or by contacting their Data Protection Officer [Maureen Wilkinson, rec-man@ncl.ac.uk].

Has this study received ethical approval?

This study has received ethical approval from Newcastle University Ethics Committee on [27/07/2022](#)

Who should I contact [in order to file a complaint](#)?

If you wish to raise a complaint on how your personal data is handled, you can contact the Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter: Maureen Wilkinson, rec-man@ncl.ac.uk

If you are not satisfied with their [response](#) you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO): <https://ico.org.uk/>

If you have read all the information above, asked any questions you may have and would like to participate in this research please sign below.

Participant

_____	_____	_____
Name of participant	Signature	Date

Researcher

_____	_____	_____
Name of participant	Signature	Date