EXPLORING HIGH MEDIA LITERACY AMONG CHILDREN AGED 8-12

A report for Ofcom by Magenta

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OFCOM FOREWORD

This research report explores how highly media literate children navigate their online worlds. Our aim was to understand the way in which highly media literate children behave in a real-world context and how and why these real-life behaviours might differ from the theoretical 'ideal' [1]. This research also gives us valuable insight into the extent to which high media literacy plays a role in reducing aspects of online harm.

Ofcom has statutory duties to promote and research media literacy. One of the ways we fulfil this duty is through our Making Sense of Media programme, which aims to help improve the online skills, knowledge and understanding of children and adults in the UK.

The research conducted via our Making Sense of Media programme provides Ofcom and its stakeholders with a robust and innovative evidence base across the many facets of media literacy. Our tracker studies – our Adults' and Children's Media Lives qualitative projects, and our Media Use and Attitudes quantitative surveys – are long established and provide rich insights into the ways in which people's media use and literacy has changed over time. To complement this work, we also commission stand-alone research projects, such as the Exploring High Media Literacy Among Children and Adults 13+ research, as well as this one, which deepen our knowledge in specific areas.

The research in this project uses digital ethnography, in-depth and triad interviews, and in-home observational visits to provide 'in-the moment' insights alongside more considered and reflective participant responses, building a realistic picture of what high media literacy looks like in practice. It examines the main drivers of high media literacy and how online gaming, search and social media platforms can support, and at times, hinder this, according to our participants. While the benefits of being highly media literate are discussed throughout, the report also examines the inconsistencies and the impact of age and gender on highly media literate behaviours.

The report highlights the situations and activities on online platforms that even those children who are identified as being highly media literate can find challenging. This reminds us that optimal media literacy across all communications media and at all times is not a realistic objective. Nevertheless, the identification of such pressure points enables us to consider where resource might be channelled, both in terms of platform design and in media literacy support interventions.

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[1] The parameters of an 'ideally' media literate individual were set by an internal mapping exercise, conducted by Ofcom drawing upon our own and external sources. This work is ongoing, but the latest thinking informed the areas of media literacy that were explored in this research.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Ofcom commissioned Magenta to research how children aged 8-12 who are identified as highly media literate navigate their online worlds. Ofcom defines media literacy as 'the ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts'[2], reflecting the wide-ranging nature of media literacy.

For the purposes of this research, a highly media literate child will have the skills, knowledge and understanding to be safe and savvy, as well as the confidence to flourish, online. This need not apply across all technologies or situations – a highly media literate individual will have these attributes in the contexts that are most applicable to them. Throughout this report, we have used the terms 'highly media literate', 'high media literacy' and 'proficiency in media literacy' as shorthand for this appropriate set of skills, knowledge, understanding and confidence.

The research study comprised diary tasks, in-depth interviews, triad interviews and in-home observations with participants identified as being highly media literate[3]. We conducted 14 in-depth interviews and eight sets of triad interviews, each comprising a group of three children in a friendship group, to explore the real-world ways in which peers discuss and engage with online platforms. We also carried out four in-home observational visits, with a spotlight on gaming, to understand in-home set ups and familial interactions. In total we spoke to 42 children, in addition to siblings and parents.[4] Participants ranged in age from 8 to 12 years, were spread across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, from a spread of economic class, and included people from minority ethnic backgrounds. Participants were recruited based on being highly media literate in at least one of online search, social media[5] or online gaming.

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[2] Making Sense of Media - Ofcom

[3] The screening process was conducted in two stages. Participants were first asked a series of attitudinal and behavioural questions, including their interpretation of social media posts, search engine results and scenarios in online gaming, depending on the area being recruited for (social media, online search or online gaming). Participants were then asked to submit a short video response to allow us to further assess true media literacy levels.

[4] Parents were informally interviewed as part of the in-home visits, predominantly discussing their children's gaming habits, but also any other areas discussed with the children. In some interviews parents briefly discussed their children's online behaviour, or added context to some events discussed by the children. It should be noted that speaking with parents of highly media literate children played only a small part of the data collection; parents were spoken to after the in-home observations and in a handful of online interviews, in front of their children. Therefore, these findings should be considered indicative only.

[5] Many social media platforms have age requirements for accounts that our children did not meet but some still held. For the purposes of the research, social media use was still discussed with these children, including discussions on age requirements. Ofcom's Online Nation report estimates that a third (33%) of children aged 8-15 with a social media profile on at least one of the platforms included in their research, have a user/profile age of at least 16. Due to this prevalence, children in our sample were not excluded on the basis of holding a social media account under the age requirement. However, it should be recognised that these children were not likely to be having an age-appropriate experience and the findings should be considered in that context.

How do children become highly media literate?

This study identified three main drivers of high media literacy in children: learning at school; learning from family; and a trigger moment caused by a negative event.

Learning at school
For our participants, learnings from school were primarily focused on online safety, arming children with the knowledge to identify risk and who to get help from in the case that a negative event occurs. However, our children did not always learn the reasons why the behaviours are important, nor were they aware of the full consequences of such actions should they demonstrate unsafe behaviours. Any learnings around flourishing online, or developing resilience online, were not mentioned by participants in discussions around what they learnt from school.

Learning from family
Family played a key role in the development of high media literacy skills. For most of the children, parents, caregivers, and older siblings were the main sources of media literacy knowledge. Children demonstrated highly media literate behaviour through their understanding of why parents or older siblings implement restrictions and monitor their online use, and by emulating positive experiences their family had demonstrated.

Trigger caused by a negative event online
Negative experiences online served as learning moments for some children. These one-off experiences encouraged them to improve their media literacy and change their behaviour to ensure the same did not happen to them again.

Children cited examples of how platforms both supported and hindered high media literacy. Some social media and gaming platforms allowed children to customise their experiences by limiting unwanted interactions. Similarly, many children used on-platform moderation tools when gaming and using social media, which allowed them to control what content they saw and who from. Participants also reported some ways that gaming platforms in particular incorporate features that promote safer and more informed use.

However, some children felt platforms should do more to tailor content and recommendations for young users, better filter inappropriate material, facilitate safe interactions with strangers, and limit emphasis on monetisation that has the potential to exploit the user.

What does high media literacy in children look like?

Children in this research study all demonstrated highly media literate behaviours in at least one area. However, their highly media literate behaviours were not consistently applied.

Data sharing strategies
Following advice and learnings from school and parents or other family members, most children in our research chose to take steps to minimise personal data being shared online; typically they used 'made up' usernames and either did not share personal content publicly or took steps to reduce personal information shared. Some of the children found it difficult to express exactly why they felt these actions were important, and not all were aware of potential consequences or risks of sharing personal data online.

Managing online relationships
Across both gaming and social media platforms, children were aware that people online may not be who they say they are and provided many examples of ways to ensure they were either communicating with people they know or checking that a request comes from someone who is who

they say there are. Most did not want to communicate with strangers, but some were more open to it and used the style of username and their voice to assess whether they were of a similar age.

Some children noted it was harder to maintain positive online relationships when gaming, as blocking was felt to be harder when compared to social media, and children were not sure of the outcome if they reported other players. Most children reported a highly intuitive and familiar blocking system across social media platforms; they always looked for 'the three dots' or similar in the top corner of their screen and felt confident they would be able to carry out blocking from there in all social media platforms. This created a sense of control and confidence in comparison to gaming, where some felt they were likely to experience less consistency and ability to quickly understand blocking protocols. This meant that some children were more likely to avoid any contact whatsoever when gaming, therefore did not have positive or negative relationships, compared to social media where they could block easily and so have mostly positive interactions. They were also more wary of engaging in conversations with others when gaming because they were unsure of what would happen if they did report them, again compared to social media where they were confident that they could stop someone interacting with them. Additionally, the nature of some games, namely 'Battle Royale'[6] style games, made it more difficult for some children to go through with blocking a player who was making their experience negative. This would require exiting the game and potentially have a negative impact on their ability to maintain positive relationships with other players in the game, as they would leave their team without a player.

Assessing reliability of online information
In relation to social media platforms, children thoughtfully assessed the reliability and objectivity of online information. Children in the study felt in control of the information they consumed and discussed the difference between what is shared online versus reality. This allowed them to navigate the social media space safely, efficiently and positively. However, children exhibited fewer media literate behaviours when using search engines. They had limited awareness of data sources and were less able to mitigate against the risks of accessing inappropriate content.

Recognised the need for balancing time spent online
Most children felt that there was a need to balance time spent online with other activities and that there could be downsides to spending too much time online. Despite this, most children still felt they spent a lot of time online, which sometimes impacted upon their overall wellbeing; and parents/carers were important in helping their children restrict their time online. Experiencing anger and rage when gaming was not uncommon, and while some children had coping strategies, others did not.

Children demonstrated limited awareness of data security, with some creating strong passwords to protect their data. However, many prioritised the memorability of a password over its strength. There was no real awareness of the function of cookies.

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[6] A style of gameplay where large numbers of players compete against each other, eliminating players or teams throughout the gameplay.

What are the benefits of high media literacy?

Being highly media literate leads to a wide range of positive experiences for children, many of which extended beyond the online world. Participants developed and acquired practical skills such as learning to code and to bake; were able to access information quickly and easily, allowing them to feel informed; used their online skills to foster closer connections with friends; were able to relax and focus the mind through gaming; and enhanced a range of life skills from resilience to teamwork.

Where are the inconsistencies in highly media literate children's behaviours?

While there was variation across children's levels of media literacy (high media literacy in one area did not equate to consistently high media literacy across all areas), the study found some differences between girls and boys and, to a lesser extent, age. Older (aged 11-12) girls demonstrated some higher media literacy knowledge and skills than both younger girls (aged 8-10) and boys, irrespective of their age.

Areas where the research found **higher levels of consistency** across children in highly media literate behaviours included:

- Having information sharing strategies which followed the advice of school and parents, whether in profiles or in content posted;
- restricting communication with adult strangers;
- recognising real or fake social media accounts;
- assessing the likely legitimacy of search results on social media; and
- accessing the content they want to find.

Areas where the research found **lower levels of consistency** across children in highly media literate behaviours included:

- blocking, reporting and limiting interaction with strangers, specifically when online gaming;
- assessing the likely legitimacy and credibility of search results when using search engines;
- coping mechanisms when time online leads to anger and/or frustration;
- strategies to manage time online; and
- creation and use of secure passwords.

1.   INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

1.1   Introduction

Ofcom commissioned Magenta to undertake research to understand how children who are identified as highly media literate navigate their online worlds. The purpose of the research was to:

- gain an understanding of awareness of media literate behaviours, and how these might translate to practice;
- consider real-life online media literate behaviours in context, and understand why these are engaged in;
- explore the motivations and drivers of high media literacy and understand how children aged 8-12 develop such awareness and practices; and
- explore how behaviours and awareness might differ according to the different age groups.

This report provides a summary of the key findings.

1.2   Approach summary

The research study comprised a literature review, diary tasks and in-depth individual interviews with 14 participants identified as being highly media literate. In addition, we undertook eight sets of triad interviews to explore the real-world ways in which peers discuss and engage with online platforms, and four in-home observational visits, with a spotlight on gaming, to understand in-home set-ups and familial interactions. Prior to the interviews, children were asked to complete a range of tasks over the course of the week linked to internet searching, use of social media or online gaming.

Participants ranged in age from 8 to 12 years, were spread across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and included those from minority ethnic backgrounds. Fieldwork took place between 14th October 2023 and 3rd November 2023. A full methodology and sample breakdown can be found in the appendix of this report.

1.3   What do we mean by 'highly media literate'?

Ofcom define media literacy as 'the ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts[7]'. Strong media literacy capabilities depend on users having the right mix of knowledge and skills, and the ability to apply them independently to their online environment[8].

A key component of *high* media literacy is that it should include higher order thinking skills such as analysis and evaluation. This means taking a critical perspective towards technology and media, including print media and social media platforms. High media literacy capabilities depend on users having the right mix of knowledge and skills, and the ability to independently apply them to their online environment. This report focuses on demonstrating these skills through real-life examples of what being highly media literate looks like in practice for this age group, and without expectations that high media literacy in children could look the same as in adults[9].

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[7] Making Sense of Media, Ofcom

[8] The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (2021). *Online media literacy strategy*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-media-literacy-strategy

[9] Ofcom (2023) Exploring high media literacy among adults and children

Throughout this report, we have used the terms 'highly media literate' and 'high media literacy' as shorthand for this appropriate set of skills, knowledge, understanding and confidence. Conversely, 'less media literate behaviour' is used to refer to online behaviour which isn't appropriate for the circumstances, which is at odds with the participant's own goals, or which introduces risk.

Participants were recruited on the basis of currently being highly media literate in one of three areas (search, social media or gaming). Participants could have any type of media literacy in the areas they were not recruited for. To identify suitable children, a series of attitudinal and behavioural questions were asked, including their interpretation of social media posts, search engine results and scenarios in online gaming, depending on the area for which they were being recruited.

1.4   Interpreting findings

Quotes from children are used throughout to exemplify the points made. These have been anonymised to protect participant identity, and an indicative age range and geographic location are provided. Whether the participant was recruited on the basis of high media literacy in search, social media or online gaming is also included, but this may not be what the children are referring to in the quote. Pseudonymised case studies are also included, with the consent of the children and their parents or guardians.

While useful for recruitment, during the research it became clear that search, social media and gaming are not clearly defined categories from the children's perspective, for instance children use both social media and search engines for searching, and social media crosses over with gaming in a number of instances. Therefore, the report only distinguishes between search, social media and gaming where appropriate.

Many social media platforms have minimum age requirements for accounts that our children did not meet but some still held accounts on these services. For the purposes of the research, social media use was still discussed with these children, including discussions on age requirements. Ofcom's Online Nation report 'estimates that a third (33%) of children aged 8-15 with a social media profile on at least one of the platforms listed, have a user/profile age of at least 16[10]'. Due to this prevalence, children in our sample were not excluded on the basis of holding a social media account under the age requirement. However, it should be recognised that these children were not likely to be having an age-appropriate experience and the findings should be considered in that context.

The views expressed throughout the report are those of the children and not of Ofcom[11].

The study found some limited differences in age and gender; where appropriate these differences are pulled and discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

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[10] Online Nation 2023 Report, Ofcom

[11] This may include participant perceptions as to how various functionalities work across platforms, such as content recommender systems. While comments may technically be feasible in some cases, these findings are based on participants' own perceptions, which may or may not be true. It is also worth noting that certain online platforms may be referenced more frequently in the report. This will likely reflect participants' frequency of use of these platforms.

2. POSITIVE EXPERIENCES AS A RESULT OF HIGH MEDIA LITERACY

High media literacy enables children to have positive experiences online. The research identified a broad range of positive experiences that were enabled or enhanced as a result of the child being highly media literate.

Being highly media literate allowed children to independently support their education, learn new skills, develop existing skills and support their wider interests and hobbies.

Across all ages and genders, social media was a key source of learning new skills or improving existing ones: many children were inspired by content they came across on social media platforms or specifically searched for desired content.

'I think I've become a better baker from TikTok. It shows step-by-step how to do it in real life so, because you can see exactly how they do it, I feel like it's a bit easier for me. You can get it done within 10 minutes and most of the time it works out well.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, England

'I do Irish dancing, so I searched Irish dancing stretches to become more flexible.'
Girl, Online Gaming, 11-12 yrs, Scotland

'On YouTube you can have short videos, long videos, funny videos or educational videos. Or you could have two different topics joined together, like funny but also educational. I used to watch educational videos on Lego since Lego is one of my favourite things.'
Boy, Social Media and Online Gaming, 8-10yrs, England

One participant learnt how to code from playing an online coding game; he then used his newly acquired coding skills to create his own online games, as well as create virtual art and animations. Others spoke of video editing capabilities built from creating content to share on social media. Several children learnt by 'doing', and others used their search skills to read and watch videos, to learn new skills or improve existing ones.

'Scratch is a coding game I play on my laptop. It teaches you how to code and you can then create games yourself. When I'm playing games, coding helps me understand everything.'
Boy, Social Media, 8-10 yrs, England

'From YouTubers I've learnt new things like how to make your own games by coding. Sometimes they actually become really popular, and say for example if you make a game on Roblox and people like it then you can get paid for it. I got like 3,000 likes on my game because I watch different YouTubers so I put their different ideas into my game'
Boy, Search, 8-10 yrs, England

'We were doing silly TikToks together and dancing around. We were just posting funny dances. Most people post dances and CapCuts, it's an editing app where you can get a few pictures of your friends and make it into a cool video'
Girl, Search, 8-10 yrs, England

Proficiency in media literacy ensured children could quickly and easily access information, helping them feel more informed.

Support with homework was a frequently cited use of online searches, but children also used it for information on other topics they were interested in, or whenever they felt curious about something. One participant was learning about the Tudors at school and found that watching videos of songs about the Tudors supported her learning by teaching her information in a fun and memorable way. Another participant used search and social media to find answers to questions on topics she was curious about.

'For example, some videos give you information on the Tudors. One song was about 'divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived' so it gave you the order and helps you remember. If ever in school I need to put them in order of which wives he had first and last I know now.'
Girl, Search, 8-10 yrs, England

'If I'm watching something it might spark a question in my head and then I might need to know the answer so I'll Google it. Google is quite easy to use and it's just right there on my screen [tablet].'
Girl, Search, 8-10 yrs, Wales

'Searching online is really easy to do whenever I've got something on my mind. It's just easy to type if I have a question in my head.'
Girl, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

Most children would use different platforms depending on the information they sought, and what they wanted to get out of it.

'It depends whether I want it to give me the answer straight away or whether I want to learn it and process it in my mind. I search up facts, like Black history or facts about animals when I'm struggling to do homework. I use Google when I want a straight answer and I want to get it over and done with quickly. I use YouTube when I want to understand it and want it explained to me.'
Boy, Search, 8-10 yrs, England

For many, high media literacy supported the development of life skills, benefitting children's everyday lives.

One participant described how he learnt resilience from gaming. Persisting and accomplishing something in a game taught him to never give up in real life. A few of our children also enhanced their teamworking skills through the interactive and collaborative nature of gaming. Other children enjoyed constantly having new challenges and feeling a sense of accomplishment from gaming.

'Gaming taught me to never give up. If you want something in a game, then you don't just quit. So if you're doing something in real life and you find it hard, don't just quit, pretend it is like a game and put the same amount of effort into it.'
Boy, Search, 8-10 yrs, England

'Fortnite is all about making new friends, connection and teamwork. So, if there was like two people left in the match and I had my partner to help me we would join together so we can beat them both and win.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

'I like how on gaming you can interact with other people, even though you've got to be safe on it. I can interact with my friends and there's always new challenges and it really gets me out of my comfort zone.'
Girl, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

For many children, gaming was used to focus the mind and relax.

Gaming helped children to forget other things and concentrate on the activity at hand. For one participant, the music and aesthetics of the game she played contributed to a sense of calm.

'The one that's really relaxing with gaming is Minecraft because there's not much you'll get hurt from in that.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, Northern Ireland

'If I've had a sad morning or something then after dinner (which is when I normally get to play games) it [gaming] makes me feel all calm.'
Girl, Social Media, 8-10 yrs, Scotland

'I know a lot of games on Roblox are really easy, some are hard but most are really easy and they're quite fun and relaxing. It isn't very hard or stressful.'
Girl, Search, 8-10 yrs, Wales

Summary

Being highly media literate leads to a wide range of positive experiences for children, many of which extend beyond the online world. Participants developed and acquired practical skills such as learning to code and to bake; were able to access information quickly and easily, judging which platform best suited their needs, allowing them to feel informed; used their online skills to foster closer connections with friends; were able to relax and focus the mind through gaming; and enhanced a range of life skills from resilience to teamwork.

3. FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS HIGH MEDIA LITERACY

3.1 Main drivers of high media literacy

This study identified three main drivers of high media literacy in children:

1. Learning at school.
2. Learning from family.
3. A trigger moment caused by a negative event.

1. LEARNING FROM SCHOOL

All children had acquired at least some of their media literacy skills through learning at school. These skills were primarily related to online safety.

Participants recalled being taught about online safety in PSHCE[12] lessons throughout the school year. In addition, some had attended school-held events focused on online safety. For example, several children recalled annual 'online safety days/weeks' in which the school would bring in external experts such as police officers to talk during assemblies and lead sessions on topics such as social media dangers, cyberbullying, and the dangers of talking to strangers online.

There were four consistent behaviours that children learnt at school.
1. Considering whether to share personal information online and being aware of the potential risks.
2. Being wary of interacting with strangers, namely adults, online.
3. Assessing safety and security of links.
4. Reporting any issues they faced to parents or trusted adults.

The children in our sample understood the potential risks of sharing their full name, address, phone number, or photographs which may allow someone to identify them or their home address. For the children, the risk related to potential real-life harm; they reported worries of bullying and being tracked down in real life by dangerous individuals.

'If they know your school, next thing you know they're going to find out your name. Next thing you know they can find out your address. Next thing you know you're going to find messages through your door that say I know where you live, I know your name and you know all this stuff and one day they could come to your house and do whatever they want.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 years, England

Participants had also been taught to not talk to strangers online, specifically adults that they did not know. Participants felt that by talking to adult strangers online, they were at a higher risk of real-life harm including bullying and being tracked down in real life by dangerous individuals. Interacting with adult strangers online was also associated with seeing/hearing inappropriate or upsetting content such as swearing or racial abuse. To avoid this, children, or their parents, applied privacy settings to

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[12] Personal, Social, Health and Community Education.

their social media and gaming accounts wherever possible, which meant that they could only interact with those they were familiar with[13].

'They [school] told us to be safe, to be careful, to be careful who you trust.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 years, England

'I don't talk to anyone on TikTok because I don't know them. They could be dangerous like tricking me into giving personal information.'
Boy, Social Media, 8-10 yrs, Northern Ireland

[One reason for having a private social media account] 'There are weirdos and creeps. There are a lot of paedophiles.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 years, England

Some children had also been taught skills on how to check if a website was secure. Participants looked for 'https' or 'www' and were able to identify links that did not have these elements, labelling them as potentially risky and reporting that they would not click on such links. Participants thought that visiting websites which did not have these safety and security markers could put their device at risk from hacking, scamming or being victim to a virus. Some children also demonstrated an ability to assess the legitimacy of a website, by checking for high quality pictures, the 'padlock' sign and by choosing to only visit websites of familiar brands. There was no strong evidence for awareness or use of antivirus software.

'They [teachers] say that if you search on the website and at the top of the screen where it says the link, if it has a lock by it, then it's quite a safe website.'
Girl, Search, 8-10 yrs, Wales

Some children had learnt basic skills in evaluating sources from their time in school. For example, one participant explained that she learnt to use BBC Bitesize or KidRex[14] to help her verify search results. However, skill levels here varied, and some struggled to share any learnings from school when it came to critical thinking and evaluating sources online. Older (11-12), girls were slightly more likely to provide examples of critical thinking and evaluating sources. There were also varying perceptions of what can be deemed a valid or trustworthy source based on what they had learnt in school. For example, one girl felt confident that Wikipedia was a valid source, because she thought that this is what universities use, whereas another had originally trusted Wikipedia, but then learnt from school that this was a publicly editable website, so was no longer sure.

[While on Wikipedia] 'Look I can literally edit anything. Look. Oh my God. So that's the one to avoid. Oh, I'm ruining Wikipedia now.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 years, England

'I think Wikipedia is quite trustworthy. They use a lot of long words. Also tonnes of people refer back to it. Like in universities I think sometimes they say go to Wikipedia to search about the Romans or something. They obviously trust Wikipedia enough and school does too to give you the right information.'
Girl, Social Media 11-12 yrs, England

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[13] While these behaviours can be considered media literate, those children accessing services below the minimum age requirements will likely not be receiving an age-appropriate experience. The fact of accessing services underage suggests that they are not following all of the safety advice offered at school.
[14] A visual search engine powered by Google Programmable Search Engine, intended to be child-safe.

'I have used BBC Bitesize for facts and videos because my school says they're a really safe website'
Girl, Search, 8-10 yrs, Wales

If children faced an issue related to safety and security, or technical capability, they had been taught by school that they should seek out support from a trusted adult, such as a parent, caregiver, older sibling, or teacher. Participants shared instances of reaching out to a trusted adult for support for issues such as cyberbullying, helping them to set up an account on social media, verify friend requests and seeking support if they had seen or heard something inappropriate that they found upsetting.

'If you come across anything dodgy, then report it and tell a trusted adult about it so then you feel safe afterwards.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, England

'Sometimes I do ask my parents if I can accept friend requests because they [person requesting friendship] seems quite fine.'
Girl, Search, 8-10 yrs, Wales

The children in this study had been taught at school 'what not to do', but did not seem to have had much explanation as to why, as such, children demonstrated limited critical thinking as part of their media literacy skillset. When asked about what they had learnt from school, few children reported instances of being taught how to evaluate search results beyond assessing the link and look of a website or profile. One example was when one participant was at risk of being scammed after making a purchase. She purchased an item at a low cost that felt too good to be true but went through with the purchase anyway as she was not sure how to confirm if her concerns were valid.

'I think it was like £5. And I probably didn't really realise, but that was a bit too good to be true. And then I still went and bought it and then it was telling me afterwards it was trying to take more money out of my account.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, England

Another example came from some younger boys, who struggled to recognise a fake social media profile (part of stimulus provided during discussions). They considered the fake profile to be trustworthy because of the high quality of the photographs that had been posted and did not evaluate the rest of the profile in order to successfully identify it as fake.

When it came to frequency of learning about online safety, there were conflicting opinions. Some children felt that they did not learn about online safety regularly enough in school, whereas others felt that they received sufficient learning from school.

'Sometimes I do like online safety lessons at school, but I don't think they teach enough about it really, because at my school we only have, I don't know, two or three lessons a year about it. And I just feel like it should be taught about more because it actually is important to know about.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, England

'I think they told us everything they should have. They showed us how to use an app properly, how to hide your locations and stuff. They were saying especially gaming, that's one of the most popular things for creeps online.'
Boy, Gaming, 8-10 yrs, Scotland

Case study: The influence of school

10-year-old Olivia says she is naturally inquisitive. She uses the internet to search for lots of different things, from answers to homework assignments and information about hobbies and interests, to the answers to 'random questions' that pop into her head. Her teachers taught her to use 'safe' websites when searching online such as BBC Kids, to look out for security markers such as the padlock and about the child-safe search engine KidRex. Police officers have also come into the school to talk about online safety. Through her school she has learnt not to give out any personal information such as her name, address and age and how to spot 'editable' or 'hacker' websites and by looking at the text for any mistakes. The school also has Digital Leaders that educate pupils on how to stay safe and also help with technical issues. She knows she can go to these if she needs support.

For our participants, learnings from school were primarily focused on online safety, arming children with the knowledge to identify risk and who to get help from in the case that a negative event occurs. However, our children did not always learn the reasons *why* the behaviours are important, nor were they aware of the full consequences of such actions should they not demonstrate safe behaviours. Any learning around flourishing online, or developing resilience online were not mentioned by participants in discussions around what they learnt from school.

2. LEARNINGS FROM FAMILY

Family played a key role in the development of high media literacy skills. Parents, caregivers, and older siblings were the main sources of media literacy knowledge.

Children demonstrated highly media literate behaviour through their understanding of why parents or older siblings implement restrictions and monitor their online use. Many children reported that they understood why restricting or monitoring their online use was necessary. They gave their thoughts on the positive impacts of this, such as having more time to spend outside or on other hobbies and feeling safe from any dangerous individuals online. Ongoing monitoring ranged from physical checks of devices and activities to remote monitoring apps that provide visibility into screen time and usage. Restrictions enforced by parents and caregivers included time limits on devices, app shutdown times, restricting access to inappropriate content, and limiting who the child can interact with online. Some children did feel some frustration because of parental monitoring and time management. For example, one 10-year-old boy gamer said that he feels very angry when his game shuts down on a time limit while he is in the middle of a match or gaming battle.

'My mum said I spend too much time on it [TikTok] and I need a break from it. I deleted the app.'
Boy, Gaming, 11-12 yrs, Wales

'I have a time limit of how long I can be on the game 'cause like I said, so that I don't spend the whole day on it'.
Boy, Search, 8-10 yrs, England

'Every Monday to Friday, her phone goes there [points to top of drawer in mum's bedroom] at 9 in the night, she brings her phone in, it's put on charge. Yeah, so there's a limit to it.'
Mother of Girl, Gaming, 10-11 yrs, Wales

'I don't have a time limit on my iPad, but I have a thing when my dad can see how long I've taken on my iPad. He just can see and normally on school nights it's two hours on. On weekends it's three hours.'
Girl, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

Many parents took on the role of setting up social media and gaming accounts for their children or asking an older sibling to do this. This allowed the parent to implement privacy settings at the point of set up. In some cases, this created a gap in media literacy awareness and behaviours, as some children were not sure which settings were applied to their account as a result of not being fully involved in the set-up process.

There was an acceptance among parents that they can only control so much of what their child does online. This was driven by three main factors, including: the parent describing themselves as not being highly media literate and feeling that the child is more tech-savvy than them; an acceptance that it is not possible to see what the child does at all times when online; and a desire to respect their child's privacy and show that they trust them.

'I trust my children not to [get into unsafe situations] because I've given them enough guidance but even I can be innocent against it. Like I said, like with fake dating accounts and things like that. So I'm lazy with it. I don't look at the settings. It's difficult to know exactly what to do as well.'
Mother of Girl, Gaming, 10-11 yrs, Wales

However, parental, caregiver and older sibling involvement was not entirely restrictive. It also involved collaborative gaming and shared experiences for fun and bonding. In these scenarios, children had also learnt advanced technical gameplay skills which allowed them to have a better overall experience when gaming online with others. Social media also presented positive learning moments in the form of critical thinking and evaluation skills, with one mother involving her children when reviewing profile content, and another, who owned a beauty business, allowing her children to get involved and see the positive impact of live streaming on her TikTok business page.

Older siblings play a major role in bridging the gap between a parent's own knowledge of the online world and what the parent wants their younger child to know. Where there was a gap in media literacy skills of the parent, the older sibling was often tasked with the responsibility of encouraging and teaching higher media literacy skills to their younger sibling.

'My mum doesn't need to fit any settings on my end because I think my sister is the setting.'
Girl, Online Gaming, 11-12 yrs , Scotland

This study found that family, especially parents and older siblings, play a critical role in developing media literacy skills. Children demonstrated an understanding of their media use and how it can best be adapted for their need as result of ongoing oversight of online activities from time limits to tracking tools. Guidance from parents and older siblings enabled children to learn privacy controls, some critical evaluation skills, safety protocols, and positive usage techniques. However, when accounts or profiles were set up without the involvement of the child, this can create a media literacy gap as children are unaware of the process and any settings that have been put in place.

3. TRIGGERED BY A NEGATIVE EVENT

Negative experiences online served as learning moments for some children. These one-off experiences encouraged them to improve their media literacy and change their behaviour to ensure the same did not happen to them again.

Many participants described examples such as being exposed to inappropriate content, online bullying, unfair trading in games, accounts being hacked, and fake accounts as illustrative of where they have had a negative experience online which has instigated a change in their behaviour.

Being exposed to content and interactions that they deemed inappropriate, harmful or upsetting was a key driver of high media literacy among our children. Some children had experienced seeing inappropriate and harmful content in the form of racism or homophobia, one had been sent a sexual image. Discovering unwanted content made these children more cautious about who they interact with online, what they click on, and if they have their sound on while gaming.

Many children reported personal experience of online bullying or were aware of friends who had experienced online bullying. One boy mentioned that he had received negative comments about his looks when he posted on social media when he was younger. As a result, he now considers the implications and risks of showing his face on any public accounts. Another 12-year-old girl talked about her experience of boys from her school class accessing the same online gaming server as her and her friends, and causing damage to the worlds they had created, which she found upsetting and frustrating.

'There's one [private social media account] I show my face on and it's all about me and my mates. The other one [public social media account] is just random stuff. Stuff without my face. Like rugby clips for example. I put my face on my public account when I was 7 and then people were just like, weirdos.'
Boy, Gaming, 11-12 yrs, Wales

CASE STUDY: being impersonated on social media

Honey is a 10-year-old girl who uses several social media and communication platforms to connect with her friends. A couple of years ago someone created an account on one social media platform, pretending to be her. The account holder used her name and her photo and started following her mum. The same thing happened to two of her school friends. Her mum immediately contacted the school and the police. Honey is still not sure what has happened to the fake account. Most of her friends have new phones so can't see the fake account but she thinks friends with old phones may have access to it. This incident has encouraged her to be more careful when using the platform. Now, she only accepts people she knows, she doesn't post anything on public stories, she doesn't go onto anyone else's public story and doesn't share content widely. With these measures in place, she feels safe on the platform.

Another form of negative interaction was item theft when gaming online. Some children said that they had entered into an agreed trading session, only to have their item stolen and not receive anything in return. These events drove children to limit their interactions to those that they know, refrain from any item trading, and doing more to critically evaluate a person before trusting them online.

'I got scammed once for my Arctic Ranger, but then I just built myself back up, and then I got an Arctic Ranger again. And now I'm kind of rich again. Yeah, like, trolling is basically everywhere.'
Girl, Social Media, 11-12 yrs, Northern Ireland

Participants had also come into contact with fake accounts which they deemed inappropriate or harmful. They identified these by assessing elements such as: lack of profile picture, a profile which looked like it belonged to an adult, the presence of any links which did not include https/www, or if the account has messaged them asking for information or to click a link within the message. When this occurred, children used the block and/or report function to reduce any further negative impact.

Having an account 'hacked' was another trigger point to developing high media literacy for a few children. Experiences of hacking led children to be more cautious in the amount of personal data they share online, typically on social media; change passwords across different online accounts; and, in a few cases, learn how to ensure they had two factor authentication set up. For example, one boy gamer was playing a game when he got logged out after being told his username and password had been changed. As a result, he set up a new account with a two-factor verification after learning about this from a video he had watched on YouTube, which a gamer content creator had posted. Another gamer realised his account had been hacked when he received an email to reset his password, which he had not himself requested. He was able to reset the password and re-access his account but noticed a lot of his game-world contents and items had been stolen. As a result, he then reset his password for a second time to include a special character and one number.

'It's happened to me on [a gaming platform]. I tried to log back in, but my login didn't work. I checked my e-mail. There's a thing that said the password changed. It says if you're unhappy about this, please use this link and then I use that, reset my password, logged back into my account, noticed a lot of my stuff was missing... so I changed my password once again. Made sure it's got like a special digit special number. Then I had a secure password'.
Boy, Social Media, 8-10 yrs, Scotland

Not all children had experienced these negative events themselves, but some had heard about them occurring to others, including friends and family being hacked or scammed. Hearing these experiences was enough for some to trigger behavioural changes in themselves.

This study found that experiencing one negative event is unlikely to be enough to drive consistent higher media literate behaviour, either within the same platform or across platforms. Changes in behaviour may occur in only one specific area, with learnings not necessarily translating to other platforms. Many children described more than one negative trigger event that they had witnessed or experienced, and while they were able to demonstrate enhanced media literacy skills which directly related to this event, such as being hacked leading to using two factor authentication, it did not lead to broader media literacy.

Summary

We have found that the acquisition of high media literacy cannot be attributed to any single source, requiring a combination of institutional guidance, involved parenting and family guidance, and accumulated lived experiences to build skills over time. While schools provide a baseline of knowledge around safety best practices, family plays an even greater role in developing critical evaluation abilities and influencing positive online behaviours over time. Lived experiences involving inappropriate interactions or harmful content exposures also served as pivotal moments that drove some children to become more discerning in their online use.

3.2 How platforms support and hinder high media literacy

Participants identified numerous ways that they felt online platforms and programmes support media literate behaviour.

Many children were aware of the exact age restriction of an app or game and were aware of actions taken by apps and games in relation to age restrictions. While some children in our sample did not always abide by account age restrictions, the restrictions did promote awareness and critical thinking about suitability of content. Having to verify their age encouraged those children who were using the services, or accessing particular content on a service when they were below the minimum age to do so, to stop and consider whether a particular app or game is right for their age group or not. Additionally, this encouraged more dialogue with parents and caregivers about appropriate content. Needing parental approval or help bypassing age gates opened up conversations about why certain restrictions are in place.

'So every once in a while, like TikTok, the platform will check your video, see if you look over the age of 13 or something. If they don't, they like ban your account and then you can appeal. Then you have to stand with an adult, put your date of birth up. I think I was a bit too young, a little bit too young, so if I put my date of birth up they'd ban me, so I just didn't appeal and I stayed banned.'
Girl, Social Media, 11-12 yrs, England

'I know why I can't play the little box games, because my games are 9 pluses and some games are 13 plus. I can't play 13 plus, I can play younger but there's probably not any younger (games). I think some games are for older people on Roblox'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, Scotland

'I personally don't use the age limit on Roblox games, but I can use the age limit just to check if it is safe.'
Girl, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

'In Roblox the age restrictions are the same as YouTube. If I say to my dad, I think this game I could kind of play, it's not inappropriate or anything. I think the games I'm playing now are fine 'cause they're kind of popular and they're good for children at my age.'
Girl, Searching, 8-10 yrs, England

Some social media and gaming platforms allowed children to customise their experiences by limiting unwanted interactions. Muting other players in online games, turning off in-game chat features, and the requirement to actively accept friend requests were common ways children felt in control. Some children also described default behaviours like always staying muted on voice chat with strangers.

[While playing with strangers] 'No, I just like keep silent and yes, I can hear them, but I just don't talk.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

Similarly, many children used on-platform moderation tools when gaming and using social media, which allowed them to control what content they saw and who from. Participants found reporting inappropriate behaviour or flagging concerning content easy and intuitive because of familiar interfaces where available across platforms (e.g. "three-dot" menus).

'You can be safe by having a private account and blocking them. Or report them. You can actually report specific things such as violence or bullying. I've reported before loads of times. If you look down on the menu you would use to share the video there's the different options to repost, report, block or copy link.'
Girl, Social Media, 11-12 yrs, Wales

'I've had a mean comment on my YouTube videos before but I just delete them. There's the three dots upwards. I click on that and it says delete, comment back, or report and I normally just delete the comment. I already knew how to do it because I had already learnt how to delete things on Roblox.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

Participants also reported some ways that gaming platforms in particular incorporate features that promote safer and more informed use. For example, some children mentioned that the Roblox platform automatically blurred out or censored inappropriate language, reducing exposure to mature content. Additionally, children felt that some games felt inherently safer for children as they are specifically designed for younger players, and expressed confidence that player reports led to account bans and demonstrated awareness that human moderators review flagged content.

Some children also reported that preview/synopsis features helped them assess the suitability of search results or social videos before clicking through. Some platforms provided snapshots of content or required age verification before permitting access. These glimpses helped children to avoid unsuitable material.

'Because normally they say like at the start of the YouTube shorts or the YouTube video, they're like saying what video's about so just from that small little thing, you'll be able to tell if it is suitable or not.'
Boy, Social Media, 11-12 yrs, Wales

'I normally hover above it and it lets me have a quick preview… before I even click on it. I would do that, find out if anything looks wrong and if something does look wrong, I just find a different video.'
Boy, Social Media, 8-10 yrs, England

Participants also found that platform-generated screen time summaries assisted their self-monitoring. These nudges encouraged them to consider the time they had spent on a specific app or game, evaluate how they were feeling in that moment, and make a judgement if they should sign off and do something else.

Summary

Participants identified many elements of platform design which they felt supported them with being safe online and resulted in an overall more positive online experience. This included age restrictions and verifications that, although did not prevent children from accessing social media when they were under-age to do so, did promote critical thinking about suitability of content; customisation features like muting players or turning off chat functions that allow control over interactions; easy access to reporting tools for inappropriate content or behaviour; platform features like automatic profanity filtering that reduce exposure to mature material; preview snapshots that help assess suitability before accessing content; and screen time summaries that encourage self-monitoring of usage.

While children identified various ways in which platforms can take actions which can enhance or encourage high media literacy, children felt that a number of factors hindered higher media literacy behaviour.

Some gaming platforms, particularly those that employ a 'Battle Royale'[15] style of gameplay, require players to play with others that they did not know. Participants felt less in control when playing these sorts of games, compared to others where they could choose teammates/opponents. Based on what they had experienced in the past when playing this type of game, some were worried about receiving abuse or harassment, hearing or seeing inappropriate language being used, or having to interact with adult strangers. This also left some feeling less able to control the amount of time they spent online if they wished to or when they stopped for a break, as the live gameplay with others resulted in feeling the need to be fully focused for the duration of play so they did not let their 'team' down.

'Sometimes I play Fortnite and with that you can't really like pause the game to do anything.'
Girl, Search, 8-10 yrs, Wales

[When playing Fortnite with strangers] 'I don't like when people are mean to each other. Sometimes I hear people argue. Like, 'who wants to go there, who wants to go here?' It's just stressful.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

Participants felt some gaming platforms make it difficult to avoid in-app purchases. Many children believed that games are often designed to encourage purchases to advance in the game or have their character look a certain way. Other in-game purchases related to items like 'skins', changing the look of characters in the game. Not having these items made children worry about their success when online gaming, and feel concerned that other players may judge them as inexperienced or as a weak player.

'I don't like how Robux[16] costs money though. You can't do anything to get free Robux. Robux is the currency to buy skins and you have to get that with real life money, like actual money'.
Boy, Social Media, 8-10 yrs, Northern Ireland

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[15] A style of gameplay where large numbers of players compete against each other, eliminating players or teams throughout the gameplay.
[16] Robux is Roblox's in-game currency.

Some children felt that social media platforms did not do enough to protect them from harmful or inappropriate content[17]. Video-based platforms in particular left children feeling at risk of stumbling across content that they did not want to see as a result of scrolling through their recommended content feed. Some felt that platforms should blur out harmful or inappropriate content as a default, and that social media apps should do more to tailor recommended content to the user, particularly if the user has taken the steps to report similar content as inappropriate. One participant said that they would like a 'child only' version of the social media platform available, to allow children to still use the platform without risk of seeing adult content.

'It's random things and it [social media content] can be really inappropriate.'
Girl, Online Gaming, 11-12yrs, Scotland

'Sometimes you see something funny. Other times you see things you don't want to see. When Five Nights of Freddie came out, it's another horror film, it shows you clips of it. The worst clips of it, it's really scary. And if you like something it comes up with more things like it. Sometimes it's just a normal video and then they change it to something scary at the end, like a jump scare.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, Wales

Summary

While children discussed some platform features that can support media literacy, some children felt platforms should do more to tailor content and recommendations for young users, better filter inappropriate material, facilitate safe interactions with strangers, and limit emphasis on monetisation that has the potential to exploits the user.

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[17] It should be recognised that some children in the sample were using some services while being younger than the minimum age limit in those services and were therefore operating in an online environment much of which is not designed with their needs in mind.

4. HIGHLY MEDIA LITERATE BEHAVIOURS

This chapter describes and evidences the highly media literate behaviour demonstrated and discussed in the study. As a reminder, we have used the terms 'highly media literate' and 'high media literacy' as shorthand for the set of skills, knowledge and understanding individuals need to be 'safe and savvy' online, as well as the confidence to flourish.

Participants did not consistently apply their high media literacy skills to all aspects of their online behaviour and this chapter also describes behaviour that could be described as 'less media literate'. For the purposes of this report 'less media literate' means online behaviour which introduces risk or is at odds with the children' own goals.

4.1   Online Identity

For the purposes of this report, online identity refers to creating and managing personal online profiles, and that, when viewing or interacting with other profiles, an online identity may not reflect real-life identity.

Participants were aware that they could decide how much personal information to share when creating online profiles and most took steps to maintain their privacy by minimising the information shared online.

Participants, particularly those proficient in online gaming and social media, chose to take steps to minimise personal data sharing in their personal online profile setup, often due to advice from parents, siblings or school. These steps included ensuring usernames did not reveal personal information, such as by not including any references to names, addresses etc., or by only including a first name but not surname. Participants created usernames which used fantasy and playful words, and often included a random selection of numbers as part of their username. Many children ensured their gaming profile pictures were avatars, rather than a photo.

'Avoid using your surname in a username, so that they don't get close and know who you are.'
Girl, Online Gaming, 11-12 yrs, Northern Ireland

'I would say to my brother to choose a username that's your personality.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

'First of all, don't use your name in your username at all or your password. Chose something really random, like if you like Star Wars you should say Darth Vader or something really random. And for your password keep it something quite complicated but something you would remember, not forget. Don't use your real name, be quite discreet. You can pick your avatar and make it look like you as there's no problem in that.'
Girl, Social Media, 11-12 yrs, England

While most children felt that providing less personal information is a way to protect yourself, some children noted that not sharing personal data in usernames or in profile photos can act as a barrier to checking whether someone is who they say they are, particularly when wanting to connect with known friends. When identifying other online identities, often children used the style of a username to identify whether the online account was held by an adult or child. For example, usernames that include words such as 'unicorn' or 'marshmallow' were perceived to belong to children's account without any subsequent checks.

'We do have gamer tags and game names, but you wouldn't share your real name or where you live.'
Girl, Search, 8-10 yrs, Wales)

'On Roblox you don't show your face or anything like that. You type in when your birthday is and how old you are and then you make an avatar like a doll with clothing. No one knows what your face looks like or how old you are. It's a hard thing to say if it's a good thing because there could be older people pretending to be kids to be your friend.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, Wales

'You can view their profile and it'll show their information on their profile. It'll tell you their username and stuff but sometimes they put their username as Unicorn or something to try and be someone else.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, Scotland

When interacting with others and posting content on online profiles, children undertook various actions to restrict sharing personal information. In addition to just simply restricting information, children considered which content to share with which audience, demonstrating highly media literate behaviour through applying critical thinking to their content posting strategy. Examples included:

- Only posting anything personal on private accounts, where only known and accepted friends and family could see the content.
- applying privacy settings to their social media accounts and gaming accounts which meant that only those they knew and accepted as friends could view their content and interact with them.
- carefully considering what is posted on public accounts, including using emojis to cover faces, hiding school uniforms and thinking about information in the background of photos such as street names.
- Following the advice of school and parents not to share any personal information online including names, home address or location, phone number and faces.

'One account is public where I post things I like, like Christmas and it's a shared account with people who like Christmas from our school. And then there's the account that's only for me and I post things like I had a sleepover the other day and we posted things like TikToks.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, Wales

'Say I have a sleepover with my friend I'd post that on my private, but say I went to the beach I'd post that on my public because no one really knows where you are.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, Wales

'On TikTok I block my school badge out. This YouTuber before, she used to post things and then she'd get people sending things to her school.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, Wales

'Sometimes I choose photos that cover my face. On TikTok when you make a video you can pin an emoji to your face.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, Wales

Case study: maintaining anonymity

Lily is 11 years old. When deciding what to share on social media, Lily takes measures to hide her identity by having both a public and private account, using the former to post content on her general interests, and the latter to safely share her day-to-day activities with close friends. Lily takes further measures to protect her anonymity, by placing an emoji over pictures of her face or by blocking out her school badge to remove the risk of this information being used to identify her and her address.

Some children struggled to explain why they undertook steps such as minimising personal data shared. While some expressed fear of being found by strangers 'in real-life' and others made vague references to 'hacking' or 'scamming', often they were unclear as to any reasoning that might underpin the behaviour. Even children who are highly media literate would not, at this developmental stage, be expected to fully understand the broader implications of personal data being shared. Generalised understanding that there may be some reasons for minimizing data shared may be sufficient for adopting a strategy for data sharing, with a more nuanced understanding coming later. For example, there was no strong associated risk of identity theft among children.

'You make up the name, that's like Tactical Pluto or something. You can either make it your name but that's confidential, or you can make it a made-up name. I don't want anyone to know my proper name on Xbox. It's just a feeling I have. I don't want anyone to know my personal stuff like my name. When I started playing Fortnite my friends helped me pick a name and told me not to use my real name.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 11-12 yrs, Northern Ireland

'My friend [name] has her name, her last name and then when she was born in her username. But I would not really recommend that. I would just think of something random and nice that you like because if it's not really that special to you, people can't connect stuff with you but if they found out your name and age they could – it could lead to hacking.'
Girl, Search, 8-10 yrs, Wales

Not all children took steps to minimise personal data sharing online.

Although most children were aware that there were potential risks to sharing personal data online, not all children believed that usernames should not contain full names. Some thought it would not matter as others would not know whether or not it was a real name, and others deliberately included personal details on usernames so that friends would recognise and add them. Children balanced the potential risks that they were aware of with their needs when using different platforms.

'I don't think it matters if you use your name in your username because nobody will know if you've used your real name or not. I haven't used my real name in my username but I don't think it matters.'
Girl, Search, 8-10 yrs, England

Summary

Most children chose to take steps to minimise personal data shared online; typically children used 'made up' usernames and either did not share personal content publicly or took steps to reduce personal information shared. Some children found it difficult to express exactly why they felt these actions were important, and not all were aware of potential consequences or risks of sharing personal data online.

4.2   Online Relationships

For the purposes of this report, online relationships mean communicating with others online, including identifying who you are communicating with, and the steps taken if other users act inappropriately.

Proficiency in media literacy allowed children to connect and communicate with their friends. Across both social media and gaming, connecting with friends was consistently demonstrated as a positive use of online skills across children.

For most, gaming provided an opportunity for children to come together and play, but also catch up on non-game related topics of conversation. Participants used headsets to communicate verbally with their friends, either in the game itself or using game adjacent platforms, and this was considered an easy way to communicate with others. Gaming was particularly important for connection when children were unable to visit friends due to distance or were unable to play outside due to poor weather. For a couple of children, it was also a way to connect with friends who did not have mobile phones. Many children expressed the benefits of having a game to 'focus' conversation around rather than simply chatting, and this was particularly the case for our boys.

'I think gaming is a perfect way to communicate with friends and family. It's better than a phone call because that way you would have the sound from your computer and from your phone. It's important to play the game while you're chatting because you can ask your friend for help in the game. For example, if my friend was by himself and there were lots of players around him, he could ask me for help and I could come over in the game.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

'During COVID I didn't really have a way to communicate with anyone because I didn't have my phone yet so I downloaded Fortnite so I could play with my friends.'
Boy, Social Media, 11-12 yrs, Wales

Many children also connected with their friends on social media by posting and sharing content they thought their friends would be interested in and enjoy, as well as engaging in group conversations on communication platforms.

Participants were very aware that people online may not be who they say they are, in particular, adults pretending to be children, and provided many examples of ways to ensure they were either communicating with people they know in real-life or checking that a request comes from someone who is who they say they are.

Whether on social media or when gaming, children checked that the requests they received online were from their friends. This included checking with them in person at school the next day, or by sending a message on a different platform to cross-check. When gaming, specific gamer tags were shared among friends as identifiers.

'Well, the people I've friended, I know are all my friends and I know that I can trust them because I do this test to see if it is them. So when I friend them I can chat to them on the game and then when I go to school the next day I ask them what we chatted about just to make sure it was them.'
Girl, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

'I know they're my friends because I know their gamer tag. And before I play with them, I'll text them and see if they're coming on so they can join me.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 11-12 yrs, Northern Ireland

Some participants employed many methods to check whether an account belonged to the person that claimed it or was likely to be an impersonation or scam account. This included:
- whether the profile picture matched other photos posted.
- whether the location described matched other images, for example, if the stated location is London then whether there are photos of London in the profile.
- whether the number of followers feels appropriate to the account type, for example when presented with a mocked-up profile, children noted that if the account holder was a model-actress as described, they would expect the account to have more followers.
- when online gaming, children looked for inconsistencies over time, for example, if a user referred to living in London a few weeks ago but now says they've always lived in the US, this would be considered an indicator that the person is not who they say they are.
- when using YouTube, children noted whether the account is linked to other 'creators' (i.e. other verified accounts called 'creator friends'), and, if so, it is considered more likely to be legitimate.
- assessing when the profile was created; a recently created profile could indicate one set up for scamming purposes.
- asking a parent for advice on whether to accept the request or not, if unsure.

'[When viewing stimulus material] It looks like a really big red flag that he has faceless photos, he doesn't post his face that much. Since he doesn't have many photos of himself you never know what he may look like, he may be 80 years old. You don't know how old he is.'
Girl, Social Media, 11-12 yrs, Northern Ireland

'Usually before I accept someone if I don't know them, I usually go on their profile and watch some of their videos, because there's some people with photos of teenage girls but then they have no videos and the profile looks fake. There's some people I know from school but I don't know them, so I watch their videos and I see the school badge in it. So I'd watch their videos and try and work it out. If I couldn't tell I wouldn't accept it.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, Wales

'Normally I would decide myself but sometimes I do ask my parents if I can accept friend requests if they seem fine... I think it would be fine but some people are sketchy and I would be friends with them if I didn't ask.'
Girl, Search, 8-10 yrs, Wales

'[When viewing stimulus material] I think it's a bit red [untrustworthy] because he's got 50 followers but he's following 4,850. You can follow that many people but if your friends are those followers, they would follow you back. He's saying he'll help you post the coolest pics to get more followers, but he's got less followers and he's saying he'll help. I don't think I could him trust him.'
Girl, Search, 8-10 yrs, England

'So it said here he joined in 2013 so you can tell the account's been running for 10 years. And down here it says creator friends, these are all his friends so you can tell as it's a big count. If they never featured in his videos you could probably tell that it's fake.'
Boy, Social Media, 11-12 yrs, Wales

'On TikTok anybody could take over an account, or re-upload videos and say they're their own, or just take stuff from others. So I check how recent the videos were to check if I've already watched it. That's one way I know if they're copying someone or not.'
Boy, Social Media, 8-10 yrs, England

'I'd have to play with them for a while to trust them. I'd see how they sound, how they act, if they swear. If you play with them once and they have a voice changer for example, the next time they might have a different voice.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 11-12 yrs, Wales

Most children did not want to communicate with strangers, and so would reject unknown friend requests, on social media and when online gaming. Participants were aware and acted on the knowledge that they could block and report accounts that attempted communication or unwanted friend requests. Some cited knowledge of the number of times that an account needed to be reported for action to be taken on certain social media sites and the different reporting options on others.

'If they get reported three times they're out. They lose WhatsApp and get kicked out basically.'
Girl, Search, 8-10 yrs, England

'Say you want to report something, it comes up with a red button that's quite visible. And then you go down where you share it with other people and it says repost, report, block or copy link.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, Wales

While talking to adult strangers was not considered acceptable or desirable online behaviour by most children, communicating with people they did not know, but were of a perceived similar age, was something some were more open to, as a way of making new friends. Some had made real life friendships from doing so and met up in real life, while others felt that taking the relationship offline would be a step too far and were content with an online relationship. In addition to sense-checking their username (as discussed above), children would also use the sound of someone's voice as a sense-check for their age. However, this was not universal; other children were aware that voice alteration software exists, so a person's age could not be judged by the sound of their voice.

'If they're your age and you can hear their voice and you can tell they're acting like someone your age or talking like someone your age, maybe turn your mic on and say hi and become friends on the game.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 11-12 yrs, Northern Ireland

'I don't really want to talk to anyone, even if they're younger, because you can put this thing on which is a voice changer and it changes your voice to an adult's voice or a kid's voice. I don't want to take the risk really.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

Participants expressed more difficulty maintaining high media literacy when managing their relationships when online gaming compared to social media.

Participants noted that while they felt that blocking and reporting users when gaming was more opaque than on social media, there was a lack of clarity and certainty over what happens after blocking and/or reporting a user. Similarly, there was less clarity on account settings (whether in game or through the console) when gaming, compared to social media accounts.

'Your account settings are sometimes difficult. It's difficult to find where the settings button is because it's quite small. If you're in a game it's quite easy to find as there's always three buttons at the top of the chat box. So in the game it's not hard to find but in your account settings it's hard to find the button for where to go. They should make account settings a big button so it's more visible. Like the account settings, changing your username, changing your password, privacy, safety, terms and conditions and stuff like that.'
Girl, Social Media, 11-12 yrs, England

Summary

Children were aware that people online may not be who they say they are and provided many examples of ways to ensure they were either communicating with people they know or checking that a request comes from someone who is who they say there are. Most did not want to communicate with strangers, but some were more open to it and used the style of username and their voice to assess whether they were of a similar age. Some children noted it was harder to maintain positive online relationships when gaming than on social media, as blocking can be harder to identify and there was a lack of certainty over what reporting other players does.

4.3   Evaluating Information Online

This section is about effectively searching and evaluating information online, including what makes something legitimate and how results are displayed.

Participants were able to access desired content quickly and easily and demonstrated an awareness that online content is not always reliable.

Most children used their proficiency in media literacy to access desired content quickly and easily. Social media was used to access a broad range of content, encompassing information relating to hobbies and interests, as well as information to support homework. Conversely, search engines had a narrower remit and were primarily used to access factual information and to support homework. Participants felt they were competent in their use of search terms to generate the results they needed.

Many children demonstrated an awareness and understanding that online content may not be reliable, particularly content posted on social media platforms. For instance, some children were conscious of the potential for misinformation and biased reporting when accessing news content on social media. There was also an awareness among most that visual portrayals on social media may differ from reality, and a few referenced emerging AI technologies.

'I'd avoid TikTok for homework because TikTok is fake. Most of the stuff on there is not, just not real. Technology is getting advanced now isn't it, AI and all that.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 11-12 yrs, Wales

'Some adverts can be fake, like food adverts. It can be real food but it's not cooked or it might be painted… it doesn't look as good in real life as the ad.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, Scotland

When using search engines to access information relating to homework, some children gravitated towards specific trusted websites, perceiving content to be more suitable and trustworthy than lesser-known websites due to guidance from school.

'I'd use Safari or Google to look up how to make a reliable candle holder that would last. I'd click on a few, I'd look at one for a bit, I'd watch that video until halfway so I at least know a bit of what to do and then I'd click another. I'd click on five different ones on YouTube.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 11-12 yrs, Wales

A wide range of validation techniques were employed to assess legitimacy of online content, particularly in relation to social media platforms.

Participants employed a wide range of validation techniques to assess accuracy and trustworthiness of content consumed. On social media, this included searching for markers such as a verified 'tick' and thoroughly examining social media accounts to determine the account's legitimacy and, by default, the legitimacy of the content posted. This included looking at the follower accounts and information provided in the biography and scrutinising the content posted to ensure it matched with the account holder's claimed identity. When using search engines, children employed some validation techniques, including looking for markers such as the padlock and pages with high-quality writing, with the absence of spelling mistakes and grammatical errors.

'Some websites can be quite difficult [to work out if the content has been edited], but some can be easy to work out. Because if they've changed the writing, with some facts you immediately know that it's not true, that it's false. Sometimes you wouldn't know but on certain websites it could be anything like wrong punctuation, wrong facts, really anything like that.'
Girl, Search, 8-10 yrs, Wales

'You'd know it's the right account because it's verified, so you'd see the tick. If they have a tick then it's a real person.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 11-12 yrs, Wales

'There are things like Google, which are good. I go on Google but it shows me Wikipedia links. I'm on Google for a reason. It's bad because on Wikipedia you can type your own things on there. No, I wouldn't trust Wikipedia. School taught us you can type yourself on Wikipedia.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, Wales

When evaluating sources, some children cross-checked results within and across platforms to be confident in the reliability and accuracy of the result generated. Participants used several sources to search for the same information and often cross-checked results from social media platforms with the results from search engines.

'On YouTube you're watching a video where it could show you things you've never learnt. You'd check if it's the truth by going to a different site. You see if that is the same information, and if you're still not sure, you go to another site. I'd go to Safari to check because sometimes people on YouTube would exaggerate.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, Northern Ireland

'I'd type the question on Google again to see if the answer is the same.'
Girl, Online Gaming, 11-12 yrs, Northern Ireland

'I would try and check my answers with a trusted website. I'd probably use something like BBC Bitesize.'
Girl, Search, 8-10 yrs, Wales

Some children demonstrated critical thinking when engaging with online content and claimed to apply common sense when evaluating search results, particularly when determining the authenticity of information. Some recognised the different styles and sources of information when searching online, including the ability to identify sponsored content.

'If you're not sure if it's true, try and think to yourself if it would be real, if it's a sort of situation that would actually happen.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, Wales

Some children were skilled at monitoring or restricting content to ensure it meets their needs and is appropriate.

Several measures were employed by children to monitor or manipulate content to ensure it is suitable to their specific needs. This included one participant who used the translate function on websites to access content originally published in a foreign language.

'Normally the recipe is in the top bit. So, I think I double clicked it or held the button and it said translate section to English and then it gave me the recipe and ingredients. It's happened to me a lot, there's been lots of different language recipes so I normally just double click and it translates for me.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, England

Some children also employed measures to avoid inappropriate and/or distressing content. This included reading caption information of videos on social media platforms to gain insight into the video content prior to watching, enabling the Safe Search option on search engines and accessing content specifically aimed at children.

'Normally at the start of a YouTube short or video they say what the video is about. So just from that small little thing, you'll be able to tell if the video is suitable or a bit inappropriate for my age.'
Boy, Social Media, 11-12 yrs, Wales

'I feel safe because I feel like I've cancelled all the channels that bother me, and I'm safe with the channels that I'm watching. So there's a thing at the bottom of the video you can press to cancel the channel or you could dislike the video and it just goes away.'
Girl, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

Not all children consistently applied their high media literacy skills to evaluating information online, particularly within the context of using search platforms.

Participants had little understanding of the difference between search engines and browsers. Participants discussed browsers as though they were search engines and were unaware of the search engines they were using when accessing information through browsers. One participant 'verified' his answers from Google by using Safari. Another used Google Chrome, claiming it to be smarter than 'normal' Google. This limited understanding hindered children's ability to cross-check information accurately.

There was also a desire to access information as quickly as possible. This meant minimising the number of clicks or pages accessed to reach children' desired content. When using search engines, it was common for children to look at the summaries generated or the responses to what other people have asked, as opposed to clicking on website links.

Participants were also unclear as to exactly why some search results are at the top, with most children thinking that results were ranked based on the most popular results.

'I use Google Chrome because it's smarter and gives better facts than normal Google.'
Boy, Search, 8-10 yrs, England

'I would click on the "people also ask" because it's not pressing on any other links and it's giving me the information that I need.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, England

'It comes up when you type. It says like "people also ask" and they're questions that people ask about the same thing.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, Wales

Furthermore, children held an implicit trust in search engines (in contrast to social media). Most children used Google and considered it reputable and trustworthy as they felt it was well-established and familiar. However, children demonstrated limited awareness of data sources, and rarely evaluated the accuracy and trustworthiness of results generated. There was also some confusion around the role of Google and the results it generates, including one participant who believed Google only displayed links to different Wikipedia pages, and another who believed the source of the links was Google. This limited understanding of data sources also expanded to voice search, with children having little awareness of where the information came from.

'[In response to being asked where information from Google comes from] Actually, all the smartest people in the world combined together and they've created Google, I think.'
Girl, Social Media, 11-12 yrs, Northern Ireland

Discourse analysis: How do children talk about online trustworthiness?

Discourse analysis is a method which analyses the language used, and how the words, phrasing and structure of the conversation work together to build a particular message or understanding. The full discourse analysis on this topic can be found in an appendix.

Children used language which indicated that trustworthiness is a black and white issue, there is no nuance. This is consistent with the developmental stage of particularly our younger participants, even those who are highly media literate, but it is important to know that their language in reference to online trustworthiness is black and white and often definitive.

When children talked about things being fake online, they generally recognised that there are people behind it with specific motivations, this could be taken as an indicator of their high media literacy.

Children provided detail on how they determine trustworthiness of information or people. This ability to provide detailed examples of how they evaluate information is another example of their high media literacy.

Summary

In relation to searching on social media platforms, children showed consumption habits that thoughtfully assessed the reliability and objectivity of online information. Participants could mitigate risks of misinformation and bias through their savvy consumption patterns. Participants felt in control of the information they consumed and articulated their awareness that there can be a significant difference between what is shared online versus the reality. Their discernment allowed them to navigate the social media space safely, efficiently and positively. However, children exhibited fewer media literate behaviours when using conventional search engines. They demonstrated limited awareness of data sources and were less able to mitigate against the risks of accessing inappropriate content.

4.4   Health, Wellbeing and Lifestyle

This section is about the impact of technology on health, wellbeing and lifestyle. It focuses on how highly media literate children manage their use of technology alongside other activities.

Most children felt that there was a need to balance time spent online with other activities.

Most children felt that there could be downsides to spending too much time online. They spoke of the need to balance their time spent online with other offline activities. There was a consensus among children that being online too much was not always good for them, although they could not always articulate why this was. Children had different strategies for balancing the time they spent online with other activities. Some had specific clubs or planned activities which they prioritised over being online, while others simply talked about how they tried to have a good balance of offline and online activities.

'So proper gaming makes you more focused. But sometimes I go on a call with my friends and then I do drawings when I'm just talking to someone.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, Wales

'If I'm online too long I'd maybe spend less time on it and do more outside activities.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, England

'I think I should be spending less time online. I do football instead. Online isn't good for me and my eyes. I should go outdoors but don't know why I don't.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

Despite this, children still felt they spent a lot of time online, which sometimes impacted upon their overall wellbeing. For some children, they found that their sleep was negatively affected, as they would stay up late watching video sharing platforms. Participants were able to recognise how they were drawn into spending more time than expected online. Some could describe how video recommendations or simply clicking through all the interesting videos meant they could spend a lot longer than planned online. One participant was able to describe how online content could be addictive. However, very few mentioned any strategies to manage this outside of parental controls.

'I woke up at 11:30 because I stayed up late last night. I was doing my hair but also watching TikTok.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, England

'I think when I first got my phone my average screen time was about 20 hours a week. At the end of the first month I had my phone I got a notification saying that my average screen time a week is bad. I try to cut it down. I wouldn't feel great about myself if it said my screen time was 26 hours.'
Boy, Social Media, 11-12 yrs, Wales

'I know it makes me unhealthy but it's just addictive. I think I'm addicted to gaming.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

Parents often played an active role in managing time spent on devices.

While most children wanted to balance their time spent online with other activities, they often acknowledged that their parents played a large role in managing their time online. Some parents had put app controls on their children's devices, which children accepted as a part of their use of the device. Other children spoke of rules their parents had about device use, such as not being able to use their devices until homework had been completed. For some children the rules were more ad-hoc and parents would simply tell them that they had spent too much time online.

'I used to spend a lot of time online. It wasn't accidental. I used to spend 9 hours online. It was a really long time and my dad said I'd been online too much. Somehow from him just saying that it got me to do just 2-3 hours a day.'
Girl, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

'I can set a timer for using my phone, but normally my mum sets a time limit for me, she chooses a sensible amount of time for me to play that day.'
Girl, Search, 8-10 yrs, Wales

Children recognised certain physical symptoms of spending what they considered to be too much time playing games.

Children, particularly gamers, reported that they experienced negative physical effects when they spent what they considered to be too long gaming. These triggers were ways that they recognised that they needed to stop gaming. For some these triggers were simply becoming overly tired, whereas others said they would have sore or watery eyes, or headaches. The children recognised that they needed to stop gaming, but sometimes they would move to watching something like YouTube or TikTok rather than choosing to do something offline.

'If I've been on Fortnite my eyes will be hurting sometimes.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

'I feel tired and happy when I've stopped playing the game. So I go on YouTube to just relax'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

'I get headaches when I look at the screen too much. Like my eyes hurt when I close them and they start to water.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, Wales

'I think I play too much because I'm getting grey under my eyes. And I'm sleeping too much now, I used to wake up very early.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

Some gamers mentioned experiencing extreme anger when playing games.

While gaming often bought some positive benefits to children, a number of the gamers mentioned that they often got extremely frustrated with their games, causing them to lose control. These triggers could be being unable to do something in a game, or losing to a friend or sibling in a game. These episodes of rage sometimes led to verbal outbursts at the game, but also sometimes led to physical actions. For example, one participant mentioned how they had thrown their controller at the TV and broken the TV because they were so upset. Another talked about having physical fights with his younger brother during the game, and they sometimes had to be separated by their parents.

Some children had put in places strategies for managing these episodes of rage. One participant described how she used meditation to calm down, while another mentioned deep breathing. However, some did not have strategies which involved coming off their devices, and instead would sometimes simply switch to a different game. Others would spend time watching content on video sharing platforms.

'If you get angry and annoyed if you're playing an obstacle course on Roblox and you just can't get past this level it can really annoy you – that's happened to me a couple of times. Sometimes I just go and meditate and it helps me.'
Girl, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

'One time I got angry but then I took one breath and then I felt calm again. Then I kept playing. So sometimes I meditate and breathing in and out and that always helps me.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

'When I was nine, before I meditated, I got so angry because one of my friends was beating me in the match so I got my controller and I threw it at the computer.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

'I feel not annoyed but I know I need to come off, but I like to carry on gaming. I sometimes try and play for a bit longer, I'll play a different game'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

Children were able to assess the value of purchasing content online.

The children who played games were all aware of the existence of downloadable content which could be purchased. Many of the children were able to assess whether the content was valuable to them, particularly compared to offline purchases they could make with the same money. Some children showed an awareness that the game put pressure on them to purchase, as downloadable content often meant they could progress more quickly through the game. Participants seemed able to resist the pressure to purchase. When they did purchase, they often relied on gift cards which provided them with in-game currency, rather than spending money on a regular basis.

'Normally we save our money and try to get a tracksuit or something else instead.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

'I might have looked at what they were advertising but I never actually considered buying them because it's a waste of money. I do watch sporty videos and then they show me sport ads.'
Girl, Social Media, 11-12 yrs, England

'Some games you need Robux which allows you to get new avatar features. But that costs money and I feel like it's just a waste of money for a game.'
Girl, Social Media, 8-10 yrs, Scotland

Summary

Most children felt that there was a need to balance time spent online with other activities and that there could be downsides to spending too much time online. Despite this, children still felt they spent a lot of time online, which sometimes impacted upon their overall wellbeing; and parents/carers were important in helping their children restrict their time online. Experiencing anger and rage when gaming was not uncommon and while some children had coping strategies, others did not.

4.5   Online Security

This section is about strategies to keep personal information safe.

Participants demonstrated limited awareness of data security, with some creating strong passwords to protect their data, but with a lack of clarity on why this was needed.

There was some evidence of children taking steps to maintain data security, for example, by using special characters in passwords to avoid being hacked. There was also some awareness of the need to remain vigilant against scams and being hacked, by not clicking on links that looked unusual or unfamiliar.

'I used to have at least one number and one special, one-of-a-kind digit as people can hack easier passwords.'
Boy, Social Media, 8-10 yrs, Scotland

'A good password needs a few letters, a few numbers and a few underscores.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 11-12 yrs, Northern Ireland

However, many children emphasised the importance of choosing memorable passwords and kept these the same across platforms and devices, without considering any risks.

'Be careful with your passwords. One time on my phone I actually forgot my password so I had to do my lock screen password to get a new password. So I'd say do a password that you remember.'
Girl, Online Gaming, 10-11 yrs, Wales

There was no real awareness of the function of cookies. Participants accepted or rejected cookies, based on what they had been told by others. One participant reported that accepting cookies would reveal where she lived but could not provide information beyond this.

'They always ask me to accept all the cookies and I always press it because I don't really know what it means.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, England

'I don't really know what a cookie is. I think it knows where you live.'
Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, England

'So you click reject all. I don't really know why, it just gets rid of it.'
Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

'I would press accept all. I haven't heard of cookies. I'd just read it through and sometimes I'd ask my mum if I don't know the answer.'
Girl, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England

Summary

Participants demonstrated limited awareness of data security: while some created strong passwords to protect their data, many prioritised the memorability of a password over its strength. There was no real awareness of the function of cookies.

5.   DIFFERENCES IN MEDIA LITERACY

5.1   Impact of age and gender on media literacy

While there was great variation across children's levels of media literacy, the study found some differences between girls and boys and, to a lesser extent, age.

Older (aged 11-12 year) girls demonstrated some higher media literacy knowledge and skills than both younger girls (aged 8-10 years) and boys, irrespective of their age.

The study found differences in the way girls and boys used social media, gaming and online searches, and some of these were related to the children's media literacy. The key differences are summarised in the table below.

	Girls	Boys
Social Media	More likely to watch influencers e.g. #GRWM videos[18]. *'I'm normally scrolling on TikTok. There's usually people dancing or doing Get Ready With Me videos. I like them because they're aesthetic.' Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, England*	More likely to spend time scrolling to find 'funny videos'. *'I go on my For You page and watch skits and just scroll through for hours' Boy, Social Media, 8-10 yrs, Scotland*
	More likely to post content for friends to view, like and comment on.	More likely to post content in competition with friends (to achieve more 'likes' and comments). *'It's like a competition. So one of my friends got 600 subscribers and I only have 400 and I'm getting kind of jealous at this point because they know how to edit so well but I barely know how to edit' Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England*
	More likely to watch videos that looked attractive or appealing (less content driven).	

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[18] #GRWM stands for 'Get Ready With Me' and the format involves steps someone might take in advance of going out, typically including choosing outfits and/or putting on makeup.

	Girls	Boys
Online Gaming	Experienced 'rage' when playing, but to a lesser extent. *'If you get angry and annoyed if you're playing an obstacle course on Roblox it can really annoy you – that's happened to me a couple of times. Sometimes I just go and meditate and it helps me.'* *Girl, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England*	More likely to experience 'rage' when playing. *'When I was 9 I got so angry because one of my friends was beating me in the match. I got my controller and threw it at the computer.'* *Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England* *'Getting in fights on Fortnite makes me really mad. My mum says if I fight when gaming I have to turn it off'* *Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, Northern Ireland*
		More likely to use online gaming for socialising *'Technology these days is amazing – it's just amazing what microphones can do, like talking to people in a different country. One of my friends lives in Portugal and I barely ever get to meet them but on Fortnite we get to talk.'* *Boy, Online Gaming, 8-10 yrs, England*
Searching online	More likely to demonstrate some critical evaluation of search sources. *'They say that if you search on the website and at the top of the screen where it says the link, if it has a lock by it then it's quite a safe website'* *Girl, Search, 8-10yrs old, Wales)* *'I was on a website and I found something that I really liked, but it was on a weird website that I've not heard of. So I did go on Google then and ask is this website legit? And then it did tell me it was so then I purchased it.'* *Girl, Search, 11-12 yrs, England*	

The role of parents in monitoring their children's online activities differed between our girls and boys. Parents of girls tended to have more input in what the child accessed and content they consumed than parents of boys. Interestingly, parents of girls appeared more likely to have safety

and security fears of the online world, influencing the behaviour of their children online. In contrast, parents of boys appeared to feel more comfortable with their children's experiences online, considering this 'safer' than potential behaviours and risks in the 'real' world. One example includes a mother who had full access via a shared cloud software to her nine-year-old daughters online accounts, but did not feel that this was necessary for her ten-year-old son.

'I do worry about [her] as she gets older because she's a girl obviously and I know what some men can be like with young girls. With the boys, I feel like they're a bit safer because they are boys. I don't know why. It's maybe just a whole mum, women, mum of a girl vs mum of a boy thing.'
Mother of Girl, Social Media, 8-10 yrs, Scotland

It should be noted that speaking with parents of highly media literate children played only a small part of the data collection; parents were spoken to after the in-home observations and in a handful of online interviews, in front of their children. Therefore, these findings should be considered indicative only.

5.2   Summary of consistent and inconsistent high media literacy behaviours

This research study involved speaking to children that exhibited high media literacy in at least one online area (gaming, search or social media platforms). While the previous chapter has exemplified the highly media literate behaviour identified, there was extensive variation across children's awareness, knowledge and behaviour across media literacy. The variation was identified across our children, and children themselves individually demonstrated both examples of higher and lower media literacy.

Areas where the research found **higher levels of consistency** across children in highly media literate behaviours included:
- having information sharing strategies which followed the advice of school and parents, whether in profiles or in content posted;
- restricting communication with adult strangers;
- recognising real or fake social media accounts;
- assessing the likely legitimacy of search results on social media; and
- accessing the content they want to find.

Areas where the research found **lower levels of consistency** across children in highly media literate behaviours included:
- blocking, reporting and limiting interaction with strangers, specifically when online gaming;
- assessing the likely legitimacy and credibility of search results when using search engines;
- coping mechanisms when time online leads to anger and/or frustration;
- strategies to manage time online; and
- creation and use of secure passwords.

OFCOM AFTERWORD

This report shines a light on the real-world experiences and behaviours of highly media literate children in the latter years of primary education and the start of secondary education.   The ICO's guidance on age and developmental stages[19] has highlighted ages 10-12 as being a key age range in which children's online activity is likely to change significantly, coinciding with the transition from primary to secondary school. Ofcom research has shown that between the ages of 8 and 12, mobile phone ownership and use of platforms increases significantly.[20] It is a time when children are developing media skills and the participants in this research demonstrate that it can be a time to flourish and build resilience online.

Our sample reflects what we know from previous research: that a significant proportion of children are accessing services despite being aged below the minimum age requirements on those services. Those children in the sample who were using services while being younger than the minimum age limit were therefore operating in an online environment much of which is not designed with their needs in mind. While knowledge of the minimum age requirements did promote awareness and discussion about suitability of content, the underage use of services may introduce additional risk, even for those children identified as highly media literate.

It is of note that children in the sample said that learning in school settings had centred around issues of safety, without discussing the benefits of developing the media literacy skills to navigate the online world effectively. This may point to a missed opportunity: if children can be supported to safely explore the benefits that connectivity can bring, they will be more likely to experience the types of positive outcome exemplified in this research.

The children in this research have described how being highly media literate allowed them to independently support their education, learn new skills, develop existing skills and support their wider interests and hobbies. High media literacy is seen to both enhance and enable life online for our participants, and the opportunities afforded by high media literacy are seen alongside the protections that it can offer from harms.

Of course, safety remains vital as children transition to high levels of media use, and this research demonstrates the many ways in which being highly media literate can support online safety. The children that we spoke to were seen evaluating and managing their online identity, safely navigating online interactions, evaluating online information, giving consideration to their wellbeing and beginning to develop strategies for protecting their personal information online. But while the resilience and strategies adopted by the children in this research are impressive, it should not be up to children to protect themselves from online harms and this research shows that there are aspects of media literacy that even the most highly media literate children will struggle with.

The report highlights the areas where our highly media literate children were less likely to be consistent. Platforms can play a key role here. The use of on-platform interventions to support users in real time can help to 'plug the gaps' that even highly media literate users have and raise awareness of trusted sources and platform tools. Previous Ofcom research has found that platform users feel that such interventions are vital for children to help reduce exposure to possible harms from being online.[21] The findings in this report add to our evidence base for both our work with

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[19] Annex B: Age and developmental stages | ICO
[20] Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes 2023 (ofcom.org.uk)
[21] User Attitudes towards On-Platform Interventions (ofcom.org.uk)

platforms and our own pilot initiatives to improve media literacy, as well as providing a rich picture of 'real-world' media literacy for this age group.