

Social Media, Social Capital and Adolescents Living in State Care: A Multi-Perspective and Multi-Method Qualitative Study

Aims

This paper draws on data from a 4-year long Digital Life Story Work programme exploring how adolescents looked after by the state can use a range of digital technologies to reflect on their lived experiences. The research was ethnographic, meaning we took more than 100 visits to four children's residential care homes to observe how adolescents actually used a range of digital technologies. During these visits, we asked ten adolescents questions about their social media use, and asked their thirty-five carers their perspectives regarding adolescents' social media use. We also conducted focus groups with carers and adolescents to discuss what we had observed. This provided a rich understanding of what we had seen and *how* adolescents living care use social media.

Key Findings

The findings illustrate that we must view adolescents in state care as active agents in the development of their social relationships. That is, we need to appreciate that adolescents use social media apps for particular purposes. The three main themes we created from this analysis indicate the nuanced ways in which our participants experienced this:

- **Contacts as currency:**
 - Adolescents purposefully maintained connections and/or re-connected with friends and in some cases former carers via social media apps. Adolescents viewed connections as things that could be useful in generating a range of opportunities. Connections with peers outside their current living context and care settings themselves tended to be more sought after.
 - In this study, professionals expressed concerns about adolescents having many loose or informal contacts (i.e., friends of friends) in their social networks. However, in agreement with previous research involving a 'broad and shallow networking' approach, we found this strategy offered access to a wider range of opportunities.
- **Promoting and protecting the self:**
 - In agreement with previous research, this theme illustrated that adolescents used social media to stay in contact with people known to them. This allowed adolescents to generate a closeness to their life before coming into care. Adolescents experienced this as significant and used connections to generate feelings of closeness. This was important to adolescents who were geographically distant, yet via their social media use, remotely connected.
 - In some cases professionals had attempted to 'add' adolescents to institutionally created social media profiles as a safeguarding strategy. This enabled professionals to view what adolescents were publicly posting. Professionals' saw this as a way to discourage adolescents sharing content openly, particularly content viewed as inappropriate. All adolescents were very protective of their online privacy. However, how professionals and adolescents viewed privacy differed.
- **Transitions:**
 - By connecting to formal networks (such as care home social media profiles) or informal networks (such as with friends, friends of friends etc) via social media apps, adolescents had a tool to access the benefits of existing relationships and a way to generate new ones. For the adolescents we worked with, the role of social media apps during transition processes, which dislodge and disrupt connectedness, emerged as significant. Social media use enabled opportunities for adolescents to feel more supported and connected across transitions. This suggests that social media apps may play an important role in this process for adolescents. This needs further examination to create best-practice guidance.

Policy Context

- Care admissions can mean adolescents can lose touch with people of importance. This may include friendships prior to admission and relationships formed in care with peers and former carers. Adolescents have opportunities to reduce this loss by using social media apps. Policy and practice must take a longer-term view regarding the risks of

social media use. This would allow a greater appreciation of the lifelong impact of care experiences on adolescents' wider social networks.

- Policy and practice must recognise that the risks of social media use, such as sharing too much with those who would do adolescents harm, shift as adolescents mature and progress towards independence. Workers need to support adolescents to pursue their own digital resilience and recognise that becoming digitally autonomous is a progressively important part of transitions to independence. A large part of this is acknowledging that we often learn by making mistakes.
- Social workers and carers have an important role in guiding adolescents in assessing and managing the risks of social media use. We need to keep in mind that when adolescents make mistakes, practitioners need to support adolescents to learn from these mistakes. We cannot simply attempt to naïvely restrict access.
- There is a lack of research into how to support the use of social media by adolescents living in state care. Urgent research is needed to address this gap. This research should examine how social media use may promote opportunities gained from connecting with other people and their networks. This research would create best-practice guidance enabling a balanced approach towards adolescents' social media use to succeed in practice.

Methodology

- Seven months of fieldwork across four residential care settings during a four-year Digital Life Story Work research programme was undertaken. Fieldwork visits involved lead researcher (Hammond) attending each location on a weekly basis to evaluate Digital Life Story Work interventions. It was during this work that the importance of social media apps to adolescents in care became clear.
- Ten adolescents (six males and four females, mean age 15 years, age range 14-18 years) and thirty-five residential social care professionals from across the four homes were recruited.
- We used multiple qualitative data collection methods to gather in-depth data. These included reflective fieldnotes from observations and transcripts from conversations during observations, focus groups, semi-structured interviews and in-situ recordings of conversations stimulated by adolescents' use of their social media accounts. These were analysed thematically.

Background

Billions use social media applications (apps) daily to communicate. Adolescents living in state care are no different, yet the potential risks of their social media use are. These risks include unwelcome contact with, or from, birth family members. However, until now the automatic assumption has been that social media apps such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp only pose risks and offer no benefit. This ignores evidence highlighting their role in the promotion of social capital, a term used to describe the opportunities gained from connecting with other people and their networks of relationships. This has meant that *how* adolescents living in state care use social media apps remains unknown. This study offers a new perspective by examining *how* this group actively use social media.

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