Nottingham Centre for
Children, Young People and Families

Lords Covid-19 Committee: Inquiry into Living Online: the long-term impact on wellbeing Evidence Submission

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Inquiry into Living Online: the long-term impact on wellbeing

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We are happy to provide oral evidence if required. Please contact Professor Carrie Paechter on carrie.paechter@ntu.ac.uk for further information.

1. Executive Summary

- Our submission is based on two bodies of research:
  - Research by Lucy Betts, Sarah Buglass, Loren Abell, Oonagh Steer, Rowena Hill and Melina Throuvala on how people behave online
  - Research by Rachel Harding and Professor Carrie Paechter on the experiences of families with children under five in Nottingham during Covid-19
  - We also report evidence from parents of children with disabilities collected by Dr. Lauran Doak from her network of parents of these children.

- Social media often bring overlapping social networks together into one place. This makes online social groups more diverse, but also removes some context, which makes misunderstanding of behaviour more likely. For example, posts intended as banter can be misinterpreted out of context and cause reputational damage to the person posting.
- There are fewer non-verbal contextual clues in online communication. This makes it harder for people to indicate their meaning, and leaves their communications open to misinterpretation, and in particular to negative misinterpretation

- This lack of clues can also be used as a cover for bullying, as the bully can argue that the victim misunderstood their intention.
- It is important to consider the audience and the visibility of messages when engaging in online banter and interpreting ambiguous messages. Participants considered that banter in the context of private chat was preferable.
- Our research with older adolescents, emerging adults, and adults revealed that individuals were optimistic about their own online interactions, reporting that they thought they were less likely to experience cyberbullying than other people. This has implications for how online safety messages are framed.
- Fear of missing out - the belief that others are having more fulfilling lives than we are – can lead some people to engage in compensatory behaviours such as self-disclosure and attempting to embarrass or exclude others online.
- Our research with older adults highlights the potential digital divide between those who actively engage with digital technology and those who do not. Barriers to engagement include the language used about digital technology and an individual's lack of confidence in using it. Other barriers include fear of damaging the technology, breaches in security, and theft of personal data. Older adults feel relatively helpless to protect themselves from, identify, and resolve the issue if these things happen.
- Parents of both disabled and non-disabled children have found the move to online medical appointments, where appropriate, very helpful.
- Parents of both young and disabled children reported that their children enjoyed watching such things as storytelling on-screen.
- Young and/or disabled children found it hard to engage with online interaction. For children with severe disabilities, this extended to interaction with peers and school staff whom they were used to seeing in person. It is also harder for children without traditional literacy or verbal communication skills to sustain interaction on-screen.

- We recommend that:
  - Social media users should be encouraged to think about how their online social networks are different from their offline social spheres
  - The Government should consider encouraging people to reflect on who, from their whole social group, will witness their behaviour online.
  - Social media users should be encouraged to ensure that there is a common understanding of how to use and interpret multi-media cues such as memes, emojis, and hashtags. For young users, this could be through educational opportunities at school and for older users, this could be through an awareness raising campaign on social media.
  - Social media users should be encouraged to consider the audience they are communicating with and whether their messages are private or public.
  - As people tend to be optimistic about their own relative risk of experiencing online harms such as cyberbullying, the Government should consider how online safety messages are framed to ensure that individuals think they are the intended target.
  - The Government should consider developing recommendations to support users to manage their social relationships online.
  - When designing interventions, feedback from self-monitoring of social media activity, practicing mindfulness and mood tracking may be helpful to reduce distraction.
  - When developing sessions designed to enhance older adults' knowledge of digital technology, providers should consider approaches that are accessible, appropriately paced, inclusive, personalised to the older adults' learning needs, and that demonstrate the capabilities of digital technology.

- General practitioners and specialist services should continue the option of having online medical appointments, while remaining aware that this will not be suitable for all people or conditions.
- When designing online education and social activities, providers should consider accessibility to children with disabilities, especially those who do not have traditional literacy or verbal skills.

2. Submission

Our submission is based on two bodies of research:

- Research by Lucy Betts, Sarah Buglass, Loren Abell, Oonagh Steer, Rowena Hill and Melina Throuvala on how people behave online;
- Research by Rachel Harding and Professor Carrie Paechter on the experiences of families with children under five in Nottingham during Covid-19.
- We also report evidence from parents of children with disabilities collected by Dr. Lauran Doak from her extensive network.

Online behaviour

Contextual collapse

In the offline world our social networks are made up of many social spheres. We interact and communicate with different people, often at different times and in different contexts. Our spheres therefore tend to be linked to our role identities – our understanding of who we are. These role identities are important as they frame expectations and judgements about behaviour, and people often adapt their behaviour to suit the context and audience of the interaction. Offline this is something that we can control and keep track of relatively easily. However, when interactions take place via digital media, they are prone to contextual collapse. The term 'contextual collapse' describes a situation in which the social boundaries that normally separate an individual's social spheres are blurred, with everyone coming together in one place. This issue is particularly common in the largely flat social structures of social media platforms, where individuals from multiple different social spheres are often in one large social space, for example when different friendship groups are all part of one person's Facebook page.

In these digital contexts, the interactions and information that people share are visible to a socially diverse audience, which may lead to

increases in both unwanted and unintended communications. Our research with young people and adult social media users indicates that as individuals connect to more people online, the diversity of social spheres on their networks increases. This in turn may make the networks more prone to social tension, as the different groups are taken out of their usual context for interacting.
The lack of context may mean that actions or statements are misunderstood by other people in the same social space. This has potential implications for reputational damage through banter taken out of context, and for relational aggression, a form of bullying characterised by exclusion and damaging the reputation of the person bullied.

Ambiguous messages: banter versus cyberbullying
Many of the non-verbal social cues that we rely on in face-to-face interactions are not as easily interpreted in the online world. This has implications for using digital technology to form and maintain social relationships. Our social interactions through digital technology are likely to be different from those offline, especially when we are interpreting ambiguous messages. Banter is a form of social communication that is characterised by jocular humour, mocking, insults, and teasing between friends. Our previous research shows that adolescents and young adults consider cues such as intent, audience, and speaker characteristics when interpreting behaviour as either banter or bullying. Online environments pose a particular challenge for interpreting banter. Although multimedia cues such as text, memes, emojis, and hashtags can be used as mechanisms to convey banter, the success of these cues relies on: (1) the author's ability to accurately express their intent and (2) the audience's ability to understand and interpret the cues. Without the required level of understanding of these multi-media cues, the intent of a message is harder to determine and behaviours are more likely to be interpreted in a more negative way. Of course, these multi-media cues could be used as a way to try to minimise, hide, or mitigate hostile intent. In these circumstances, emojis and hashtags are used to explain away and legitimise bullying

behaviour. Considering how these multi-media cues are used in communications is therefore important.

Our participants also highlighted the importance of considering the audience and the visibility of messages when engaging in online banter and interpreting ambiguous messages. Banter within the context of an online private chat was regarded as preferable. When similar online communications were conveyed to a larger, unknown, or loosely connected audience they were more likely to be perceived as relational aggression or cyberbullying. Engagement in this more public form of banter increased the risk that the exchange would be misinterpreted by third parties and be damaging for the reputations of those involved in the original banter exchange. Participants also highlighted how these more public interactions involving third parties increased the risk of humiliation and psychological harm. Therefore, considering the audience when posting digital content that is ambiguous in meaning is important to ensure the wellbeing of others.

Perceptions of experiencing online risk

Although digital technology affords many benefits for social interactions, there is the potential for individuals to encounter online risks. Our research with older adolescents, emerging adults, and adults revealed that individuals were optimistic about their own online interactions, reporting that they were less likely to experience cyberbullying than other people. Our participants believed that groups that were socially close to them (i.e. friends or family) were less likely to experience cyberbullying than those who were socially distant from them (i.e. strangers). They also thought that those younger than them were more likely to experience cyberbullying. Therefore, across all of the age groups we worked with, people seem to have a self-protective belief that they understand how likely they are to experience the specific online harm of cyberbullying. This has implications for how online safety messages are framed. People may be less likely to engage with such online safety messages because they believe that they are not the intended audience.

Fear of missing out and relational aggression

Social media use and engagement is underpinned by numerous motivations and individual differences. However not all of these are positive. For example, to overcome fear of missing out (FOMO) - the belief that others are having more fulfilling lives than we are - people may engage in compensatory behaviours such as self-disclosure and relational aggression. On social media, relationally aggressive acts can include tagging individuals into embarrassing photographs, deliberately ignoring someone on chat or excluding individuals from seeing profile content. Our research with young adults shows that Facebook users who experience FOMO engage in social manipulation to avoid the feelings of inferiority associated with it and may also exclude and embarrass their Facebook friends as a way to compensate for and mitigate feelings of inferiority. Together, these findings suggest the need to support users to manage their social relationships online.

Disruption of attention

In the 'attention economy' multiple online and offline activities compete for a share of our attention. This trend is expected to grow in the face of increasing communication complexity and information overload, which is becoming even more prevalent partially due to the accessibility, immediacy and convenience of smartphones. Our research suggests that online content and smartphone availability act as a major motivational pull for engagement, prompting multitasking and frequent loss of attention.

Emerging evidence on cognitive function has shown that smartphone availability, daily interruptions and checking behaviours are associated with distraction and micro-disengagements from the main focus of attention. These constant disruptions may be associated with a rise in attention problems, because allowing goal-irrelevant information competes with goal-relevant tasks. This may in turn have impacts on wellbeing, productivity and academic achievement, particularly amongst young people. Our findings suggest that this access may be

partially intensified by people's need to control content, relationships and self-presentation. Low-cost interventions which encourage mindfulness, self-monitoring of social media activity and mood-tracking may be helpful in managing attentional 'drifting'.

Older adults

Our research with older adults highlights the potential digital divide between those who actively engage with digital technology and those who do not. We found that barriers to engagement included the language used about digital technology and an individual's lack of confidence in using it. Other barriers included fear of damaging the technology, breaches in security, and theft of personal data, with older adults feeling relatively helpless to protect themselves and resolve the issue if these things happened. Although the older adults that we worked with were themselves digitally aware, they were also acutely aware that older adults without access to digital technology were not able to access certain information and participate in online communities and activities. They saw this as potentially becoming a self-propelling spiral of isolation in which older adults who lack access to online opportunities can continue to become more isolated. Acquiring digital literacy was seen as a key mechanism of overcoming the digital divide: there was a clear desire for knowledge because the older adults recognised the value of digital technology as a tool to participate in society. The older adults had a clear 'wish list' of how they could be supported to gain knowledge, including an accessible, appropriately paced, and inclusive learning environment that was personalised to their learning needs and that demonstrated the capabilities of digital technology. Also, key to creating an appropriate learning environment was ensuring that older adults' confidence was not damaged through participation in sessions that were too fast paced, judgemental, or which included inaccessible jargon.

Effects on young and/or disabled children and their parents

Medical appointments

Parents of both disabled and non-disabled children have found the move to online medical appointments, where appropriate, very helpful. Parents commented that they were much easier to attend as they did not have to take other children with them or obtain childcare. For some children with disabilities (such as autism) online appointments are also much less stressful. Parents also reported that being able to email their children's specialist medical staff can mean more timely support. A parent whose child had multi-agency meetings found that they were easier to arrange, more frequent, and better attended when held online. However, some children with disabilities find onscreen interaction difficult or stressful, which may limit their access to therapies they need, and some activities (such as measuring a child for specialist paediatric shoes) are not possible online.

Social interaction

Parents of both young and disabled children reported that their children enjoyed watching such things as storytelling onscreen. Some parents also found that their young children engaged with activities such as an online playgroup which included other children. One parent of a child with a disability found that her child was more able to take part in online Guides sessions because she could have support from an adult to do so, which would have been less available offline. Others, however, reported that their children watched such provision with clear longing to actually be able to play with the other children involved.

Some parents found that young and/or disabled children found it hard to engage with online interaction. For children with severe disabilities, this extended to interaction with peers and school staff whom they were used to seeing in person. It is also harder for children without traditional literacy or verbal communication skills to sustain interaction on-screen.

3. Recommendations

- Encourage social media users to think about how their online social networks are different from their offline social spheres
- Consider encouraging people to reflect on who, from their whole social group, will witness their behaviour online.
- Ensure that there is a common understanding of how to use and interpret multi-media cues such as memes, emojis, and hashtags. For young users, this could be through educational opportunities at school and for older users, this could be through an awareness raising campaign on social media.
- Encourage users to consider the audience they are communicating with and whether their messages are private or public.
- As people tend to be optimistic about their own relative risk of experiencing online harms such as cyberbullying, consider how online safety messages are framed to ensure that individuals think they are the intended target.
- Consider developing recommendations to support users to manage their social relationships online.
- When developing interventions, low cost solutions of self-monitoring social media activity and practicing mood-tracking and mindfulness may help reduce distraction.
- When developing sessions designed to enhance older adults' knowledge of digital technology, consider approaches that are accessible, appropriately paced, inclusive, personalised to the older adults' learning needs and that demonstrate the capabilities of digital technology.
- Continue the option of having online medical appointments, while remaining aware that this will not be suitable for all people or conditions.

- When designing online education and social activities, consider accessibility to children with disabilities, especially those who do not have traditional literacy or verbal skills.

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