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## **Girls online: An exploration into the relationships between social media use and wellbeing for 8–11-year-old girls**

### **Abstract (100-150 words)**

In our digital age, with the creation of online social groups, individuals are constructing their identities in different ways. This convergence culture maps a new territory where consumers can manipulate online media in offline and real-time spaces. There has never been a more recordable or observable 'looking-glass' than that of social media, whereby all utterances that are sent out online have the potential to elicit a reaction. This research article shares empirical research conducted with girls aged 8-11 years old in the United Kingdom (UK), using interviews, questionnaires and a secure blog site. This qualitative study offers insight into the ways that social media use can influence wellbeing, and considers how these online interactions may influence children's identity formation as they 'figure' out who they are at this pre-adolescent stage.

### **Up to 10 key words:**

*Online, social media, children, blogging, internet, wellbeing, identity, girls*

### **Introduction**

This article explores how our understanding of identity has shifted over time, from the past (Goffman, 1959; Marcia, 1966) to present (Brook et al., 2008; Urietta, 2007). These theories of identity are considered through the contemporary social media practices of young girls aged eight to eleven, from a London primary school, in England in the UK. This article investigates how interactions in both the online and offline 'figured worlds' (Holland et al., 1998) of blogs influence children's identity formation as they figure out who they are at this pre-adolescent stage.

This study adopted a mixed methods approach, combining interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of interviews with thematic analysis of written blog posts and a dialogic analysis of questionnaires. These data offer valuable insight into young girls' perceptions, pressures and motivations behind using or avoiding platforms the Internet has to offer. This article has a particular focus on blogging and the opportunity for online communication on blogs.

This article begins with a review of the literature, and then highlights the ways in which identities can be seen to be informed, affirmed, and stabilised, through social media use. The article presents a discuss on how agency can be achieved by children through their

online practices. When other members of the online community positively greet online performances, in both the closed blogging platform within this study or other various contexts, this affirmation can inspire creativity, future-orientation and ambition in the individuals concerned. This article adds to the limited UK research on social media, blogging, and identity amongst children; we already know statistics around screen time and popular apps, but reveals in-depth and personal lived experiences of six young girls behind these figures. Findings for this sample show that three key motivations for using blogs are (a) connecting with others, (b) sharing feelings and experiences and (c) learning from others and helping others to learn.

### **Literature Review**

Social interactions have a key part to play in the development of our identities through the different 'figured worlds' in which we participate (Holland et al., 1998: 10). In our a heavily mediated society, a 'digital thread' is now woven through the fabric of young people's personal, social and learning lives (Livingstone and Sefton-Green, 2016: 56). Social interactions today are increasingly technologically mediated, with many children and adolescents interacting with others online (Reich, 2017). Regardless, little effort has been made to form connections between the phenomenon of social media usage and the identities children assume. Some studies explore these voices of 'globally mobile children' (Hannaford, 2018), and this paper contributes further to this growing knowledge base. This literature review section will reconsider recent literature concerning online interactions, and the presence of online communities in children's lives, before focusing on blogs and the platform that blogs present for social interaction and development of roles and positions. It must be noted that the blogging in this project was significant as a means to the research rather than a reflection of broader social media practice. The ways in which social media may link to children's wellbeing are discussed. Livingstone and Sefton-Green (2016: 55) warn that 'digital media – although not necessarily determining young people's lives – have become a key site of anxiety and struggle between the generations'.

### **Theoretical framework**

'Self' is the individual human vessel, composed of the 'I' and the 'me', built up through personal values and beliefs, culminating in self-concept, as created through reactions of others to the self's behaviour. The 'self' may have one true identity, or, more likely, be constructed of several identities and stories that we tell (Shaw, 2023). Harmony can be achieved when these selves and stories are similar and hold similar values and beliefs. 'Identity' is how we understand ourselves, created and presented by an individual, fluid and transforming through daily new experiences and interactions, and shaped by our culture and

society (Miller and Collette, 2019). Essentially, we may have several identities, each varying in different social groups or situations. Together, these form our 'self'.

### **Identity: Fixed or Fluid?**

The development of identity, theories about identity, and indeed the very question of how many identities a person may possess, has long since been a topic of debate. Cooley coined the notion of the 'looking glass self' which pointed to the key role of others' reaction to one's behaviour in the development of the self (Cooley, 1902); people imagine how others view them and act accordingly. Cooley's initial claims, although over a century old, are now proven valid through many individuals' motivations- and increasingly children's motivations- to interact with others online (Tahir and Husin, 2017). The ways in which these acts and behaviour are composed include the use of language, communication, and role-taking; these skills and abilities are thus central to the symbolic interaction by which the self is constructed, and which forms the basis of social life (Ashforth and Mael, 1989), as demonstrated through daily behaviour and activity both offline and online.

The way in which identity is considered is often only concerning the child's entry into adulthood (Calhoun, 1994). There have been other attempts to view identity as a question and to locate it socially. Such efforts are found in the work of Mead (1934) and Goffman (1959). In their work, we see attempts to understand identity as a **process**, as something that can be achieved rather than something that is innate, as done rather than 'owned'. If identities are created through a viable process, it begs questions as to how our daily lived experiences impact upon that process. When children have accepted and welcomed social media into their daily lives, how is this phenomenon of generating identities online impacting upon their personal identity process, and, in turn, what forms of identities will be achieved? In the 1950s, the humanistic movement challenged the idea of a 'fixed' identity. Erikson (1950, 1968), argued that identity may be more fluid and socially shaped than initially believed and that individuals may adapt their identity depending on the response of the 'others'. Erikson named this social identity as an 'ego identity', created through social interactions. Erikson constructed a psychosocial model with eight stages a person's identity goes through during their lifetime, and also, like Marcia (1966), considered the importance of emotional conflict and identity crises.

The 1980s brought yet another consideration of the construction of identity, with Tajfel's (1985: 255) work on social identity at the forefront, claiming social identity to be:

*'That part of the individual's self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of social groups, together with the value and emotional significance of that membership'.*

Tajfel and Turner (1985) emphasises the importance of two key influences on identity: personal identity and self-concept, versus the social context within which self-concept is situated. Similarly, Badiou (2014) talks about the 'subject' and the 'situation'. Identities are considered here as being fluid, on being entities that are reliant on the membership within social groups. This dependence offers a new conflict in the identity debate. Ultimately, identity gets down to the problem of the subject versus agency (Badiou, 2014), with the first issue addressing mind-body duality: am I uniquely and only my body? Or do I transcend/transform/transgress my body? Can there be a disembodied me? The process of growing up and ageing locates the body as a vessel in time, which presents further questions: will I survive my body? And if I do, will I (now) know about it then? The second issue around identity addresses free-will versus determinism. If I am socially constructed, and fluid (or even just a collection of hormonally driven associated behaviours) am I responsible for my acts?

A further debate around identity is that of performativity, introduced by Butler (1999). Butler expanded upon the notion of a socially constructed identity by introducing performativity and the extent to which an individual's identity is discursively constructed. Performativity relates to the discursive construction of identity (McKinlay, 2010). Butler's key concept is performativity: how gender identity is embodied and enacted, rather than a more or less adequate reflection of some underlying bodily reality. Butler draws on Foucault (1982) in several respects, not least her stress on the physicality of individual and social life, and her concern to understand identity as a social process. Identity is always provisional rather complete, a profoundly ambiguous and unstable moment. Performativity is not reducible to performance, and the degree of choice involved in identity construction both makes it appear more 'natural' for the individual and also open to reinterpretation (McKinlay, 2010).

In agreement with Butler, Urrieta (2007: 118) defines identity as a 'dynamic co-constructed cultural phenomenon', formed within our societal and cultural constructs, through dialogic exchanges with our audiences. To better understand the fluidity and multiplicity of identities, and the nature of interactions, this reconsideration of the literature is essential.

Identities are 'in constant flux' (Urrieta, 2007: 119), ephemeral entities and therefore difficult to assess or measure. It is through the relationships with others, the interactions with others,

and the experiences shared with others that identities shape, form and change. The 'other' here becomes key, as Sarup (1996: 47) highlights:

*'...identity is always related to what one is not—the Other. Identity is only conceivable in and through difference. One is not what the Other is, but is critical in defining who one is.'*

While older literature seems to define 'identity' as a more intrinsically-shaped entity, more recent literature emphasises the role of the 'other' as an external, extrinsic factor that can shape identity development. Holland et al. (1998) consider how it is through internal dialogue with ourselves that we consider the 'self-making' process. We present ourselves to others and tell the 'others' who we are, but this process involves us also telling ourselves who we are and acting under this projection, and importantly involves the multiplicity of identities as we communicate in different forms. Self-making allows us to construct a sense of who we are, 'as individuals and in collectivity' (Urrieta, 2007: 119). Identity is about how people understand themselves and the journey during which they come to 'figure' who they are from participation within the various 'worlds' that they hold membership in. Key processes in identity construction involve how we relate to others within and outside of these worlds (Urrieta, 2007).

The concept of 'figured worlds' focuses on understanding the individuals' practice of improvisation and innovation, namely 'agency', their ability to make choices and changes. Due to this, when viewing the world through a figured world lens, we think of individuals as actors- like Goffman's initial idea (1959), however these actors can perform to a particular type of script, but also may or may not have the power to improvise within the figured world narrative (Holland et al., 1998). Holland et al. (1998) emphasise figured worlds as spaces of practice wherein actors 'form' as well as 'perform'. Particular individuals are figured collectively in practice as fitting certain social identities, and thereby positioned in power relations, as shown in Simpson's study (2013). Over time, it is argued, actors 'grow' into their worlds, establishing themselves and gaining an understanding of their position, power and power dynamic of that particular community of practice (Bartlett and Holland, 2013). For many young girls, navigating online worlds is a part of their lives; this study offers a glimpse into these identity explorations.

## **Methods**

The research aims of this study are to analyse how young girls, who regularly go 'online', perceive their identities and to provide an insight into how the girls' lived experiences of

online interactions may be contributing towards their development of identities, alongside the nature of their blog posts.

### **Methodological position**

'Methodology' can be defined as the philosophical stance that informs the design and style of research (Jupp, 2006).

All the aspects of a researcher's lens are interconnected. My interpretivist standpoint is shaped by my past experiences and interests. I appreciate that girls' responses to particular questions can offer insights into characteristics of their personalities. By looking at the ways that girls interact, it will be possible to discern how they perceive each other; this is built upon years of working with young people and interacting with them to help them achieve in an academic and personal sense. These beliefs are also closely linked to my social and personal position and my axiology. As I am focused on better understanding how a child's identity or self-concept is influenced by their life or 'lived experience' it is necessary to select a methodology that supports this.

This is why, from the outset of the article, phenomenology, interpretivism and the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) have been introduced as they closely align with my standpoint, but also many other components of my researcher lens such as the theoretical framework and paradigm. Regarding ontology, I recognise that there are multiple ways that girls can describe their identities and others can 'see' them too. In terms of social and personal position, it stands to reason that our identity; our social, cultural, economic and personal statuses or 'roles', our age, gender and demographic location, will all have some interplay on how we view the world, the research we deem necessary and the data we regard as valuable. We are not all the same, and this calls into question the need for a researcher to identify and discuss their positions within their research project. Deciding on one's methodology involves establishing philosophical reasoning to the answer 'what do I want to find out?' (Holden and Lynch, 2004: 3); creating a philosophical perspective requires that the researcher make several core assumptions concerning two dimensions: the nature of society and the nature of science (Holden and Lynch, 2004: 3)

With a focus on the social construction of self, the desired information on how individuals react to problems they are confronted with, and how they deal with them (Pizam and Mansfeld, 2009), this study aligns with an interpretivist viewpoint. Assuming a critical realist ontology, and an epistemology defined by contextualism, requires an interpretivism standpoint due to its focus on social construction, relativity and meaning-making. When looking at the participants' feelings, experiences and perceptions, qualitative data is required. Concerning the type of knowledge sought through research, for the positivist

researcher, this is about ascertaining facts or beliefs that are out in the world. For interactionists, which focus on how the individual shapes society and, crucially for identity development, how the society shapes the individual, knowledge is about symbolic interaction and 'the coming together of two or more persons for focused interaction' (Denzin, 2008:133).

To support the IPA approach of this project, the principal method of data collection was semi-structured interviews (Flick, 2002); this method allows the participant to recall an accruing narrative account over time of their experiences, whilst being prompted by the researcher towards critical questions and points as needed (Silverman, 2010). Knowledge is produced through interaction between interviewer and interviewee (Kvale, 2007), helping to understand the world from the subject's point of view and unfold the meaning of people's experiences. Each girl's experience is unique and cannot be explored with closed, specific questions. Due to the interpretive nature of these communications both on and off-line, a hermeneutic approach was taken for data analysis (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000), fitting with the IPA framework. The founder of IPA, Professor Jonathan Smith (1996), claims that IPA studies should have no more than between three to six participants. However, it is intended that, by close examination and metaphorically shining a light on a small area, such as the six participants involved in this study, this may lead to the illumination of the whole. Bassey (1998:55) would claim that 'fuzzy generalisations might be made'. IPA, therefore, involves finding a small homogeneous sample, for whom the Research Question can be meaningful (Smith et al., 2009), thus defending the small sample used in this study.

To facilitate the interviews, two other methods of data collection were used.

The first of these was questionnaires, sent out in three rounds, and the second was a closed blog created solely for this study. The blog was not intended as a source of data, but to provide a safe and secure experience for the participants to 'blog' and interact with other participants. The purpose of the blog was, essentially, to allow participants to experience a blogging platform, to reflect upon these experiences asked about in the interview. It was 'closed' by method of only allowing access to usernames that had been set up by the researcher, and that were issued to the girls after they had returned their consent form, also signed by a parent or carer. Only the enrolled accounts could access the blog.

### **Questionnaires**

Questionnaires are a research method that provides a self-reported data collection and can obtain information about participants' *'thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, values, perceptions, personality and behavioural intentions'* (Johnson and Christensen, 2008: 203).



Response rate and quality of responses are better for shorter and medium-length questionnaires than for lengthy questionnaires (Johnson and Christensen, 2008); this guided my questionnaire writing so that there was a maximum of eight questions per questionnaire.

### **Blog analysis**

Blog analysis is a term that encapsulates any analysis that uses blogs as a source of data, meeting a wide range of approaches and a wide range of research questions (Snee, 2014). Discourse analysis has been shown to be an appropriate approach to analyse written comments on blogs through several previous studies (Bosangit et al., 2016), although 'dialogical analysis' may also be used. Dialogical analysis explores the embedded communicative significance of utterances and could be seen as a way of analysing what the utterances may mean about the participants' views of themselves, the other, and the other's view of themselves. It is worth mentioning here that, due to the IPA approach to this study, blog analysis was not initially deemed necessary for this project.

### **Semi-structured Interviews**

Perhaps the most dominant advantage of the interview over other research methods is its flexibility and 'adaptability' (Bell, 2009: 157). An interviewer can remodel and shape the interview to follow up leading ideas, 'probe' responses and explore emotions further, which a static, written questionnaire cannot do. The 'unwitting' evidence of interviews lies in the interviewer's observations of how the interviewee's responses are made, such as through the tone, body language, facial expression, or with pause and hesitation (Bell, 2009: 157), providing additional information that the 'witting' evidence of a written comment may not reveal. Where questionnaire responses are immobile, responses in interviews can be further moved on through further questioning, development and clarification.

To achieve this, the interviewer must have a 'great deal of expertise' to control the interview and must spend a 'great deal of time' on analysing the findings (Bell, 2009: 161), complementing Smith et al.'s IPA guidelines (2009) that considerable time must be devoted to the reading and re-reading of transcripts. A slight difference with IPA interviews, however, is to aim for the dialogue to be as participant-led as possible, with only prompting from the interviewer when necessary.

Having read widely around the issues of online communication, such as 'trolling', where strangers purposely write mean and hurtful comments on the posts of others, 'cyber-bullying', and the often-tragic outcomes from these that are media-covered, I appreciate that there are disadvantages as well as benefits in the state of 'knowing' since the views of the researcher-interviews may not always be easily detached from the research investigation (Hammersley, 1992; Silverman, 2010).

Since no situation will ever be viewed in the same way by all, the interview is the primary path through which to discern these multiple realities. Semi-structured interviews were adopted, not just as the IPA method of choice, but because this style of interview enables the interviewer to probe and expand on meaning once the respondent has answered initial basic questions (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995). The six participants in this study were asked the same significant questions, but the opportunity was available to explore responses so that each interviewee had a unique experience. The aim was to enable participants to tell their own stories even though I had in mind a list of issues that I wished to raise, a technique proposed by Stake (1995).

### **Setting and Sampling**

Setting: This study took place at Fairtrees Primary School (name has been pseudonymised), an independent, selective girls' school in London that takes pupils from Reception up to Sixth Form. At the time of the study, Fairtrees Primary School was expanding and moving from a one-form entry to a two-form entry school. At the time that this research study took place, there was only one form in each class in Key Stage 2. Fairtrees Primary School is a prime location for this study to take place as it is a single-sex girls' school. As this study requires only the participation of girls to look at the vulnerability of girls in our modern society, conducting this study at this school allowed for pupils to be selected from a range of backgrounds. As the focus of this research is to advance understanding how the phenomena of social media are shaping identity in children's lives, this primary school setting allowed for IPA with girls that are shown to be having daily lived experiences with this phenomenon.

### **Participants**

All pupils in Years 4 to 6 were invited to opt into the project. With twenty-four pupils per class, this had a potential total of seventy-two pupils. Once all pupil and parental consent forms were returned, thirty-four out of seventy-two pupils wished to take part.

With projects undertaking IPA, the aim is to attempt to understand the lived experiences of participants and the meanings and sense that the participants give to these those experiences, therefore, it was essential to interview participants who had experience of the phenomena in question. This was made clear during the recruitment process.

Each participant also designed their own 'avatar' to represent themselves on the secure blog set up for the study. The avatars are presented below with pen portraits of the interview participants.

The six participants (using pseudonym names) in the interviews were:

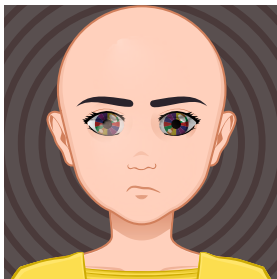
**Participant 1: Bella- eight years old – fashion fan.**



Bella was very enthusiastic to share her experiences with social media during her interviews. With a strong emphasis on wanting to be part of friendship groups, Bella likens online communications to a party and shows a daily dependence on contacting her friends online. Bella says that even the thought of being left out of online chats gives her ‘goose bumps’ (T1, P4, L7). Bella speaks about her future aspiration to launch her clothing label and discusses how the Internet would help her business to become ‘global’ (T3, P7, L4).

For Bella, main uses include threads on her email account and fashion pages on Instagram.

**Participant 2: Author: Charlie- nine years old - YouTube and Vlog fan**



An avid YouTube fan, Charlie, nine-years-old, aspires to be a stand-up comedian or scriptwriter in the future with her ‘fan base’. Charlie sees online spaces as an ‘exciting’ space and talks about how she shares some of her comedy routines with friends online .

Primary uses for Charlie are WhatsApp messenger and YouTube comment threads.

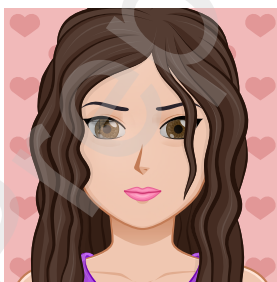
**Participant 3: Daisy- ten years old- online gamer**



Daisy, ten-years-old, admits to her passion for online gaming and shares experiences of communicating with others in online games. Daisy shares both positive and negative lived experiences of the online gaming world.

For Daisy, main uses are the chats on online games.

**Participant 4: Summer- ten years old- connecting with friends and family.**



Summer spoke about the Internet as a private, personal space. An only child, she also spoke about how having the chance to communicate with others online in the evenings, at the weekends and during holidays provided welcome company from isolation.

In her emotive interview, Summer shares both positive and negative emotional lived experiences as she connects with others online.

Summer’s main platforms online are the class wiki page and her email threads.

**Participant 5: Diya- eleven years old- Instagram and private messenger.**



Diya talks about how friends make up who she is, and the ability to keep in touch with past friends makes up her history.

Primary uses for Diya are her WhatsApp Messenger and private messenger on Instagram.

**Participant 6: Magdalena – nine years old- animal lover.**



Magdalena's definition of the Internet: I would say that it is a place you could get information and find images without having to move.

Magdalena talks about her love of animals and being able to play animal games as she isn't allowed pets at home. Magdalena is hesitant to use the Internet and cautious of dangers that may be lurking. Skype is one of the few platforms used.

**Finding and discussion**

i) Informed identities

From the IPA analysis, this study proposes that those participants who are constructing positive and stable identities online are those who have an **informed** identity. Surprisingly, one of the most commonly talked about themes, in each of the six individual narratives and the data set overall, involved the idea of underlying threats or dangers online. Although nearly all of the participants mentioned some rather shocking rumours and risks and seemed aware of several dangers that they could encounter online such as false identity, 'catfishing', isolation online, addiction and cyberbullying, this still did not hamper their online use. The girls would rather utilise the somewhat risky and slightly dangerous social networking sites to 'be in touch' and 'know about' others' activities and be 'seen' as an active member of the online community, rather than be left out, not knowing what is 'current', such as fashion or the latest news.

This behaviour raised the need to look into the lived experiences of these children to try to establish how they are navigating these online spaces, and how their ownership of this navigation is linked to their identity. It is proposed that the exposure to, and awareness of, these online risks helps the participants to construct informed identities that are prepared for performances online.

There is a clear link between the awareness of online risks and the subsequent development of strategies to deal with such dangers, as shown in when Bella talked about 'catfishing',

users with fake profiles. Bella warned that *'you just have to be careful and just think, if something doesn't feel right, then it probably isn't right. And then just tell someone like your mum or something'*. Findings suggest that individuals need to make decisions on whether to connect with strangers online, and this can be achieved through reflection and resilience, as Bella highlights. By knowing about 'catfishing', Bella has an informed identity; she emphasises how she has been prepared offline, in the non-virtual world, through her viewing of the television show. This show has acted as a warning, in an offline space, to help Bella be aware of an issue she may encounter online, and as a result she talks about the need for informed self-judgement when going online, the need for a guarded performance, to use Goffman's dramaturgical analogy, when interacting with other performers and observers on the online stage.

Diya discussed an anecdote shared by her mother that outlines the need for safety online:

*Diya: And this person said, 'I'll only leave this chat if one of you sends me a naked picture'.*

*Interviewer: How does that story make you feel?*

*Diya: It makes me mad. And sad. And actually, I think it's wrong that a person would actually say something like that to girls who they didn't know. I think it's wrong that, just because they are kind of anonymous, because it's online, I mean, that that person thought they could do that. Like, I don't think that someone could just go up to a group of girls and ask them, just on the street or whatever. At least I don't think a person would do that- I HOPE they wouldn't! But I think that...I don't know what those girls did; I think they told their moms because it was wrong, but, I don't know what happened to that person. I really hope that the police caught them and stopped them from doing that (T2, P4, L1-22)*

This extract shows how information gained in the offline, non-virtual, world has equipped Diya with information to help build her online and offline identities. Diya feels ready to take to the stage to perform, knowing that there may be dangers ahead. Diya here reveals her strategy for how she may deal with this situation which is speaking to her mother, and appropriate agencies, external to the online community, perhaps needing to be notified. Despite the knowledge that such experiences may be encountered, however, did not deter Diya's online use; this can be seen to suggest that informed identities offline support stable digital identities online. These identities are inter-related.

Daisy shared a negative experience with an unknown user online which hints at her stable identities:

*There was a time with my friend when we went on the Internet. We made a comment, and one person got really angry with that comment, got really angry, and so my mum had to shut the game down, and we never went on it again. I think it's weird how... (pause) someone can get so angry about a comment. It's actually a bit scary. I suppose it's creepy because you don't know who that person is. They might just be a very angry person. (T2, P4, L15-23)*

Daisy has dedicated support in place with her mother being able to take control of the situation and 'shut[ting] the game down', and she is then able to avoid repeating dangers by saying she 'never' went on that game again. Daisy can now take control of the situation through avoidance. This experience has not, however, dissuaded Daisy from using the Internet, as she admits to continued daily use, showing resilience and stability of character.

Across the datasets, possible dangers were frequently discussed. Lived experiences that had happened to participants were interwoven with anecdotal stories shared by friends or family members. Offline were brought to bear online and vice versa. Interestingly, however, awareness of dangers does not appear to be linked to the amount of Internet use. The one participant, Magdalena, is the girl who least uses the Internet and sees the least potential for online platforms. In her interview, Magdalena warned that the person you are talking to online '*might be a man*' (T3, P5, L10) who can '*get your details and track you down*' (T3, P5, L12).

Whereas the other participants reported they perceived their identities as being enhanced through the connections provided by online networks, recognising the potential in Internet use, Magdalena talks about the Internet as being problematic, such as resulting in less interaction with others in the real world. It seems that the participants who have managed to navigate through online dangers have developed strategies to deal with such dangers, and as a result are committing to stable digital identities. As for Magdalena, although she knows the important eSafety rules, the lack of exposure to online social interactions means she hasn't experienced a crisis. Limited online activity means individuals are constrained in the extent to which they can relate to a wide range of experiences online and connect them to offline contexts or situations too. Again, the inter-play of these identities is revealed.

Relating to Lave and Wenger's CoP (1991), less participation in an online community may mean that individuals remain more on the periphery of understanding and consequently this may affect online identity development. Magdalena's behaviour shows that her informed identity is hampered by lack of online time, as there has not been practical experience and practice to consolidate the information Magdalena has acquired. The inexperience of online interactions through lack of online time, and the nature of experiences when she has been online, leaves Magdalena without confidence to participate in CoP or CoL. This behaviour suggests that more experience is more likely to enable her to better commit to her 'online' identities through affirmation by group interaction and collaboration.

However some of the participants show strong control over their use of social spaces. Bella discussed switching between virtual and non-virtual communication:

*Normally I'm just really tired, like at the end of the day, and I can't be bothered to type that much. But if we're talking, I'm always in the mood for chatting! So, I'd have to say it depends on my mood, on the time and place... if I'm in the mood, maybe like on a weekend, I love to just go online and check my emails, look at cute videos, look at fashion. And there are some really cool fashion pages with all the styles. Or if you look on Instagram, you can see so many good clothes and looks and also make-up and hair and jewellery, and that is good because otherwise, you can't know about these things. (T1, P3, L1-12).*

Bella's response about the use of SNS, such as the photo-sharing site Instagram, reveals not only her autonomous navigation of such platforms but also emphasises her control over whether to use such sites or not, saying that she needs to be 'in the mood' (Bella, 2:3). The link to 'mood' also portrays some emotional aspect here, suggesting that social media can fulfil an emotional need. She sees the Internet as offering an insight that, without it, 'you can't know about these things' (Bella, 2:5), an essential aspect, suggesting, however, an almost premature acquisition of such knowledge about 'make-up and hair and jewellery' and a desire to 'look at fashion' that without the Internet would perhaps not be available or accessible to an eight-year-old girl. Bella added:

*But you can choose if you want to talk to someone or not. Like, if you go out, you're going to see people you know, and you have to talk to them. But, if you go online, you don't have to chat you can just maybe look at things or...you don't have to talk to someone if you don't want to. (T1, P3, L19-24).*

Bella's autonomy here is seated in her digital literacy and her manipulation of digital spaces, which seems predominantly self-taught. Children are learning to both consume and create digital content from an early age, and here this is now manifested in Bella's confident control over when she wishes to access this content. A well-developed identity gives on a sense of one's strengths, weaknesses, and individual uniqueness.

## ii) Connected and affirmed identities

The need for a support network is shown not only to be rooted in the social identity theories that define the basic need for social contact and communication, but also as a way of individuals affirming their identity (De Grove, 2014). For the participants in this study, there seems to be a value in the fact that the Internet is, necessarily, available at any time. 'Self-esteem' is a key personality characteristic in developing an 'affirmed' identity. By being able to be part of a virtual, online community in times of isolation or loneliness- times of identity crisis- identity can be reaffirmed through social interactions with others, such as the sending of a 'heart' (Diya, page 3:2).

As is shown throughout Charlie's narrative, she is strongly committed to one of her identities as a comedian, and this identity is a continual thread throughout Charlie's life both online and offline. This commitment can imply greater self-efficacy and self-esteem.

*What am I like in real life? Funny, definitely, because I'm the class clown. I'd say I'm quirky, or strange. And sporty. What am I like online? I guess online is where I can put my funniness across. (T1, P1, L13-16)*

Here, Charlie asserts herself as the 'class clown', using strong affirmation of 'definitely', showing she is confident in her identity and how her peers see her. She also considers her perception of herself with 'I'd say', showing an awareness of people having different opinions and perspectives, which links to the characteristic of moral reasoning. Charlie appreciates that the Internet offers up a different stage and different opportunities for behaviour management, which suggests that by being able to engage in both offline and online spaces, she is constructing separate parts of her identity in diverse ways.

Charlie accepts that online responses may not be real but is not fazed by this.

*That's the cool thing about the Internet as well- what I'm putting out there... are my jokes. I don't need to know my audience; I just want their response. The likes or the reactions. Or the comments. I can send out a video on my WhatsApp group and see*



*what my friends say. Do you know what they say- in comedy- it's all about timing? And I think; also, the thing is that, with the timing, I can post a video or a joke or whatever when it is a good time for me. The Internet or the WhatsApp group...they're there all the time for when it's the right time. (T1, P2, L16-18)*

Here a link can be made between the constancy and loyalty of the Internet and Charlie's ambition. Charlie's claim of how she 'just want[s] their response' links shows that she wants to know what others think, and this may be seen to link to self-esteem if she regards their judgement as positive. Charlie's consideration of using the Internet 'when it is a good time for [her]' links to Bella's needing to be 'in the mood' mentioned earlier in this paper.

For Summer, it appears that engagement online can help to provide support in a time of crisis. For Bella, Charlie and Diya, membership of various online communities is threaded throughout their narratives and is seen as an accepted part of everyday life. For Magdalena, there is no mention of an online community. This behaviour concurs with the discreditation of Prensky's term of 'digital natives' (2001), as even within this small data set of six participants, the Internet is not seen as integral by all. These participants may be growing up in a digital age but, as Magdalena's narrative shows, there is a deeper connection between upbringing, personality, identity and Internet use. It should not be assumed that because all children are digitally 'native', born into a digital world, that they are digitally active.

Several of the participants talk about the enjoyment of being able to look back at 'likes' or comments on online statuses or shared images. A key example of how engagement with online spaces can affirm identity is through Diya; Diya's identity is clearly founded in her past lived experiences and the connections and friendships that she has made while living in other countries. Diya mentions that these connections 'makes me affirm who I am' (T1, P2, L4) and stresses how her contact list is essentially 'a list of people who have had an impact on my life' (T1, P2,10).

This idea of being able to see a visible list is an interesting one; from view statistics on video sharing sites such as YouTube, to friend lists on SNS, the Internet can provide measurable totals. For Diya, this list provides a visual reminder and affirmation of her life network, which helps her to feel connected to those she knows, even when, in the case of many, they may be overseas in other countries. Similarly, Summer talks about how the Internet offers a connection to others, and this connection makes her. This links to the theoretical statement which shows an affirmation of her offline identity because of her online experiences. This affirmation also links to Bella's narrative, in which Bella states how seeing the audience's

reactions to her online posts is 'really, really good'. For Magdalena, in Foreclosure, she has not experienced the online dialogue with peers, and could not comment on the respect felt through online commendation of her words or actions. The only online communication Magdalena mentions is **Skype**, a video calling platform, which she uses to speak to her grandparents in Poland, and her uncle on occasion. This type of online phone call does not facilitate the 'looking back' that Bella, Diya and Summer all mention.

### iii) Stable identities and the role of autonomy

To first deconstruct and analyse the achievement of 'stable' identities, it will be useful to consider extracts from Bella and Charlie in greater detail.

When discussing when Bella uses the internet, she states 'I'd have to say it depends on my mood, on the time and place...' (T1, P3, L2). Bella can identify if she wishes to use the Internet, when and how she wishes to use it, and can independently identify her purpose for going online. She sees engagement with this third space as a way to gather information that cannot be gathered as quickly in the real world, stating 'otherwise you can't know about these things'. Independence is key. Bella discusses, in her interview, how 'you can choose if you want to talk to someone or not' (T1, P3, L19). Again, being able to take control of her actions, Bella shows she owns a stable identity that does not need to constant crutch of her online community. Interestingly, Charlie accepts that online responses may not be real but is not fazed by this.

*Charlie: That's the cool thing about the Internet as well- what I'm putting out there... are my jokes. I don't need to know my audience, I just want their response. The likes or the reactions. Or the comments. I can send out a video on my WhatsApp group and see what my friends say. Do you know what they say- in comedy- it's all about timing? And I think also, the thing is that, with the timing, I can post a video or a joke or whatever what it is a good time for me. The Internet or the WhatsApp group...they're there all the time for when it's the right time (T1, P2, L16-18)*

Here, Charlie's stable identities are founded in the social communications she has established when engaging with online spaces, and this foundation is supporting her future ambition of wanting to be a comedian or scriptwriter. Unlike Bella, however, Charlie shows less control over switching off from online spaces:

*Charlie: The people from my class, we all email each other. We have an email thread, and we're all on it. But you know when you're stuck in a group thread, and it's like "blah blah blah", and you're getting notifications constantly and it's all just pointless? I still read it. Every time (T2, P4, L7-9)*

Charlie's confession of still reading threads 'every time' shows not only the frequency of such conversations, but also hints at an addictive dependence upon needing to stay in the group and up to date with the conversation, despite her description of the conversations as 'pointless'. This behaviour shows how social relations play a part in Charlie's life, and she wishes to have the 'notifications'. Being part of the email thread helps Charlie to feel part of her real-world community even without having to respond or interact on the thread, it is more about knowing that her friends are there and reachable if needed, which provides comfort and security. Clearly, independence is linked to third space and community and the perceived ownership of the online stage.

Bella ended her interview by speculating about her future aspiration and ambition, which seems to link to her current Internet use, as shared earlier, around looking at online fashion pages and Instagram, where Bella discusses hopefully launching her own global fashion brand.

Charlie talks about the opportunity to be a performer on the stage; with the Internet as an entertainment platform and voices her desire to host a YouTube channel:

*I would definitely have my own YouTube channel... Lots of the YouTube channels I watch, some have thousands of subscribers or more, and some of the videos have millions of views. It is really mad because you can see how many times a video has been viewed. I think if it is more than, 10,000 I think, then the YouTuber gets paid for it. And the more views, the more money. And then companies will pay you to advertise products or sponsor you (T3, P9, L21-26)*

Here, Charlie shows her understanding of social media as a business, and how people can use the Internet to replace traditional employment roles. Interestingly, it is the fact that she doesn't 'have time' for it rather than lacking the capabilities, knowledge or skills, which Charlie explains as the reason for not currently being a 'YouTuber'. This reasoning shows that Charlie has confidence both in herself and her ability to host a YouTube channel, should she so wish. This confidence may stem from her encounters with online spaces and

experiences. By having the opportunity to problem solve online, Charlie has built her confidence and as a result, begun to widen her creative horizons.

To summarise, although IPA was not a sufficient approach to answer all three Research Questions for this study, it provided a tool to analyse how girls report they perceive their identities. The self-reports of the six participants have offered an insight into how girls, who regularly go online, experience this phenomenon of creating identities in virtual spaces. Key themes of being informed, being connected, and being affirmed through the membership of online communities emerged from the interview data, and the role of autonomy was discussed.

### **What is the nature and motivation of young girls' online interactions?**

Three key motivations have been drawn from the data, namely **connecting**, **learning** and **sharing**. Several users employed the blog as a space to **connect** with others, either simply by reading, or reading and posting to connect with both me as the administrator and also with other users. Secondly, users utilised the blog as a space for **sharing** their feelings and experiences with others. Thirdly, users also invested time in **learning** from others and offering advice to help others learn.

There is a clear parallel to Wenger's notion of a learning community (1998) and of 'domains' where individuals can interact. Lave and Wenger's CoP and CoL has informed my conceptualisation of this model. These motivations can be presented concentrically as the process for online communication, such as blogs, has connections at its core. The user must choose their platforms, such as an SNS or a blog, and this comes from a desire to connect with a particular audience. The audience, however, may not always be interactive. The audience may listen and 'lurk' in the rafters and may not even reveal themselves to the performer.

The girls using the blog mostly preferred to share comments on more emotive and creative issues, such as the questions about loneliness, or the 'five sentence challenges' that I created having seen the girls' enjoyment of creative writing in their English lessons during the school week. This behaviour suggests that blogs can provide a safe space for emotions to be shared, allowing for presentation of self-referent terms (Benites et al., 2016) as 'I feel', 'I think', 'I believe' and often under the chosen guise of a pseudonym. As with Benites et al.'s study into adults' use of blogs, this study has offered an insight into how online communication through blogs may help to achieve dialogical self-clarification and facilitate the 'emergence of new perspectives or self-actualising' (Benites et al., 2016: 431). The

implications of these behaviours for psychological wellbeing could be considered suitable for future study.

## Conclusion

So how can online interactions be seen to contribute to the development of identities and overall wellbeing? Initial findings drawn from the participants' interviews highlighted the role of the 'other' in helping to affirm and stabilise the identities being explored. The mimicry shown in behaviour and language from the blog analysis in this study demonstrates that there is a significant role that the 'others' have to play in the development of the individual. There is a process of 'self-making' (Urrieta, 2007: 118) that individuals undergo, both online and offline, as they hear a comment and engage with others' verbal interactions and adjust their behaviour accordingly. It could be summarised that, relating to perspectives of lived-experience both online and offline, two key relationships are at play- the individual's internal relationship with 'self', and their external relations with the 'others'. Blogs can help facilitate these relationships by providing a communication platform that offers the opportunity for verbalisation of 'internal dialogue' and sharing of emotions that they present (Thomas et al., 2018: 579).

Figurative or narrative identities develop through the ways that people interact with each other, that socially define one another (Holland et al. 1998); this affirms the notion that 'identities are collectively shaped, even if individually told' (Sfard and Prusak, 2005: 14). It is also worth noting the informal language that could be used on the blog, despite the educational setting, Fairtrees Primary School, in which it was introduced. Participants seemed keen to embrace the informal language that can be employed with online communications, such as on a blog. This informal communication enables users to better make their thinking and feelings understood, and thus is part of building an active learning community. Moments of informality, in an otherwise busy and formally-schooled childhood, may help an individual to develop their social presence in the online, figured worlds they spend time in.

One other significant finding from the blog analysis was that of 'invisible participants' or 'lurkers' (Gong et al., 2015), and the role that these less interactive, 'observing' members play in an online community. Although all thirty-four participants logged in to the blog interface at least once (and some several times), not all users chose to post or make themselves visible to the rest of the group by posting. This behaviour suggests that

communication is not always symmetrical and can be asymmetrical with the ability to read others' posts and not have to reply (or even be noticed) in the process; research shows that this practice is surprisingly common in social media (Gong et al., 2015), not just blogs. The implications of this should be considered for future research.

Wellbeing is of paramount importance now more than ever as we see levels of poor mental health, anxiety, depression and identity confusion at an all-time high (Affleck et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2018). Future research should look further into the ways that mental health and well-being can be supported through online platforms, such as blogging forums, and through the opportunities for '**connecting**', '**sharing**' and '**learning**' that these online, figured worlds can present.

Although the experiences of growing up and engaging with the Internet offer several crises that must be navigated, this study argues that it is through these crises that personality characteristics are developed, that dialogic exchanges inform how identities are being shaped as individuals become more self-aware and develop their agency. When other members of the online community positively greet online performances, and interact dialogically in a supportive way, this kind of affirmation can inspire creativity, future-orientation and ambition in the individuals concerned. Identities involve 'becoming' rather than 'being' (Urrieta, 2007: 119). Identities are not, as once thought, fixed and static, but are dynamic and fluid entities, shaped by our environment, the social interactions we engage in, and through the modern cultural artefacts we employ. It is only through continued research with such artefacts that the 'vitality' they offer can be revealed (Alexander, 2007).

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