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Positive family relationships in a digital age: Hearing the voice of young people

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Abstract

This study focused on young people's perspectives about family relationships and how they can be strengthened or weakened through digital media practices. Located in Melbourne, Australia, 20 participants aged between 13 and 17 years were interviewed about how digital devices and practices shaped the way they interacted with family. The thematic analysis points to the young people's commitment to family cohesion. This was demonstrated through responsible use of social media, admitting the need for device-free time, acknowledging the challenges of being online, and their sense of responsibility as a family member, which informed and shaped the way they individually acted.

KEYWORDS

communication, families, qualitative research, relationships, technology

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, everyday lives across the world are shaped by technology and digital interactions. These digital preferences and media-infused experiences also affect how families relate to each other inside and outside the home. How family relationships are maintained or have changed because of digitised interactions and influences have been previously documented (Hertlein, 2012; Mesch, 2006). This study was particularly focused on young people's perspectives about family relationships and how they can be strengthened or weakened through digital media practices. We were interested in young people's perspectives on how families might work together to

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maintain and strengthen relationships within a digital age¹. Technology is often painted as the enemy of human relationships as Internet use has morphed into daily, frequent digital practices with multiple devices. Overuse of technology among young people is a very strong community concern (Francis, 2017; Johnson, 2009, 2015). This research sought to give young people a voice and subsequently offer adults a unique insight into the youth perspective.

The research questions were:

1. What challenges and benefits do young people identify as they use and negotiate social media?
2. What digital practices do young people identify and recommend to benefit family relationships?
3. What do young people suggest parents do to strengthen their families as they negotiate a digital age?

This initial study formed part of a larger research agenda where we hoped through completing the research, we would improve adults' understanding of the importance of a strength-based approach to family digital technology use, and the harms associated with a dismissive approach. We asked the young people about their experiences with digital technologies and about their family's use of digital technologies too. Through hearing the young people, we sought to identify and recommend positive practices for individual and family well-being. We hoped to increase parents' understanding of the children's media use, and identify (and recommend) positive digital practices enabling families to be close and connected.

PREVIOUS LITERATURE

A child's family relationships (including extended family and those with carers) are acutely influential on children's well-being (Schrodt, 2020). The quality and stability of these relationships have a lasting impact on the child's mental health, self-confidence, learning and how the child relates to others, especially their parents (Schrodt, 2020). Recent research suggests the best way to improve child and adolescent development in this digital age is to learn more about their experiences online (Francis, 2017; Livingstone et al., 2014; Third et al., 2017). This qualitative research was founded on James and Prout's (2015) construction of the child as a 'human being', rather than as 'becoming a human', positioning the child and young person as someone from whom we can learn and as someone who has something to contribute. Influenced by youth-led participatory research (Prellis & Delomez, 2017; Smithson & Jones, 2021), we align with Pariera and Turner's (2020) explorative approach which identified contributions young people made to successful parent-child conversations. Their work was built on the premise of not trying to change opinions or 'persuade' but rather to exchange perspectives to increase understanding between young people and their parents. While this pilot study was not youth-led itself, the underlying belief of this research agenda was if we spend the time to relate to young people and their media platforms, we would be in a far better position to help them navigate a media saturated world. The Listening and Learning toolkit designed by the Search for Common Ground organisation conveys the importance of listening to young people and having them participate in research as well as in decision-making (Prellis & Delomez, 2017). Enabling participation in research can bring about social justice and challenge hegemonic structures of inequity (Smithson & Jones, 2021). Engaging in communication on 'a child's terms' can bring about increased communication and create opportunities not previously available (Koch & Brandt, 2021). It is important to avoid falling into the trap of being nostalgic of a past before the Internet came as

this only serves to further perpetuate a generational divide. Instead of perceiving young people as being in danger, and in need of a strict set of rules, we wanted to start from a place of understanding.

In an age where human relationships and self-image have been profoundly influenced by the Internet, there are opportunities to nurture and engage our children by relating to their media. Often technology and social media is viewed and understood only from our adult perspective. Many adults do not know how to reach out to cross the digital divide with the younger generation. As Pariera and Turner (2020) have highlighted, exchanging perspectives founded on respect and trust can bring about successful parent-adolescent communication.

Often, digital citizenship discussions with young people are fixated on Internet safety and dealing with cyberbullying rather than exploring the experiences and realities experienced by young people. As Amanda Third and others have claimed, 'Children around the world are thinking in sophisticated ways about the positive and negative implications of digital technology ... They offer valuable insights for ongoing research, policy and practice efforts in this field' (Third et al., 2017, p. 11). We wanted to put young people at the forefront of this study.

Early research highlighted the potential of communication technology to empower families and foster independence (Parsons, 1997) and enhance family life in the home (Arnold et al., 2006). Early, empirical research explored the impact of the Internet on family relationships and their quality (Mesch, 2006). The survey of Israeli youth focused on family boundaries in terms of the frequency and type of Internet use, exploring the contention that more time spent using the Internet was negatively associated with increasing the possibility of family conflicts. Mesch found that the Internet could contribute positively to family boundaries via sharing information and photographs through messages, but that high frequency of young people's Internet use could weaken family cohesion. Mesch also noted, 'the Internet may well be used in other family contexts to strengthen the boundaries of the family and to create memories that help develop a collective identity' (Mesch, 2006, p. 134).

More recent work has explored how technology-based communication can enhance the parent-youth relationship (Racz et al., 2017) and the role digital devices have in parent-child relationships (Sikorska, 2020). It is notable that the place and understanding of technology within the family environment has been explored to predict future behaviours (e.g. Tobias, 2017), and to explore the connectedness of families in the digital age (Racz et al., 2017; Rauscher et al., 2020; Smyth et al., 2020). Hence, our study sought to identify and understand their individual digital practices, collective digital practices and how (quality) family relationships are maintained. By digital practices, we mean how digital devices and platforms are used in the everyday for work, leisure, communication and entertainment. This is important given the family is a social system that has a collective identity, and individual digital practices are fluid, and ubiquitous.

Adult narratives around young people's technology use tend to be fear-based, dismissive and negative. Some research has explored the place of restrictions and rules within the family surrounding use of digital devices (Martins et al., 2019; Meeus et al., 2018; Mesch, 2009; Valkenburg et al., 2013). These quantitative studies have explored the inconsistency of parental mediation and how it negatively affects young people's behaviour (Martins et al., 2019), and specifically the relationship between content and behaviour, whether prosocial or antisocial (Meeus et al., 2018). These studies have focused on the restrictions imposed, the levels of autonomy associated with these guidelines, whether they are consistently applied, and have used structural equation modelling to demonstrate the relationships between the findings (Martins et al., 2019; Meeus et al., 2018; Valkenburg et al., 2013). Other studies which have explored parental mediation have focused on the parents' perspective (Livingstone, 2007; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Mascheroni, 2014), especially given the rise of media-rich practices and the increasing use of mobile devices.

It is useful to consider the perspectives of young people in agreement with the literature of ‘child-as-being’ rather than ‘child-as-becoming’ (James & Prout, 2015; Uprichard, 2008). This supports Third et al’s assertion about being open to children’s participation and committing to ‘ongoing international dialogue—however messy and sticky that may be in practice’ (2017, p. 22) will help children to be the authors of their futures and enact their individual and collective rights (Livingstone & Third, 2017; Third et al., 2014). For example, other studies have explored the role that children have in teaching parents how to use digital devices (Correa et al., 2015). Haddon (2015) explored children’s views on their parents’ interventions into their internet use, where he acknowledged the gap in the literature surrounding the child’s viewpoint. The extensive, longitudinal *EU Kids Online* project (Livingstone et al., 2012) was innovative in its child-centric approach. Building on and continuing this work, our study is rare in terms of asking children how they would like to be guided and sought to find out what suggestions they would make about maintaining positive family relationships in a digital age.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A total of 20 young people aged between 13 and 17 were interviewed by the second author at a public place mutually convenient to the participant and the interviewer, for example, at school or the local public library. The semi-structured, individual interviews of up to 30 min explored two key areas. First, family use of technology and second, what the young people themselves felt would be helpful in navigating healthy and positive family relationships in a digital age. Interview questions were sent to the participants before the interview to provide the opportunity and option for participants to read the questions, think about their answers and consider how they would like to respond without being put on the spot. While this enables participants the opportunity to consider their responses, few tended to do any prior preparation preferring a spontaneous response to the questions. They were not encouraged to discuss their responses with others prior to the interview. Following the audio-recorded interview, a transcript of the interview was sent to the participant to check for accuracy, and additions or edits were made. Pseudonyms were used.

The participants constituted nine males and 11 females. Three of the 17-year-old participants attended a local TAFE/polytechnic (equivalent of a junior college in the USA). The remaining young people were aged 13–17 and were students at one of four secondary schools. All procedures performed and data collected as part of this research were done in accordance with the ethical standards of the said committee (approval number 2019-00013-JOHNSON) and the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2018).

Participants were recruited from the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria in Australia. Flyers were distributed at local libraries, schools, out-of-school drama classes, other community venues and a local community-based health organisation in order to advertise the project to recruit participants. Potential participants contacted the interviewer (second author) who then provided them with the information sheet and consent form, then scheduled a mutually convenient interview time with the participant.

Our first call for participants resulted in no one volunteering to participate. We submitted an ethics amendment and obtained approval to provide a \$30 voucher which was covered by the community-based health organisation partnered in the research. Providing the voucher was couched in a way to state it was a token appreciation of their time and could cover travel costs. This resulted in 20 participants volunteering to participate. While this may influence the type of sample we obtained in the end, it was deemed appropriate for the pilot purposes of the study.

The data were analysed utilising an inductive approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), and while this pilot study was exploratory, we focused on answering the project's research questions. We focused on obtaining intra-coder reliability in terms of consistent coding. Codes of data segments became the building-blocks which created the themes as can be seen in Sections 4 and 7. This is in alignment with a reflexive, qualitative approach and an interpretative analysis of the data—one where researchers provide a thorough description of steps taken in their research (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The insights obtained from the study are fit for purpose in the sense we wanted to focus on the young people's perspectives. Throughout the paper, we emphasise and highlight the voices of young people through using verbatim interview excerpts.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the pseudonyms, age and gender of the participants. It also provides an overview of whom they referred to during the interview, and their main uses of technology or devices.

As shown in Table 1, none of the females predominantly played games, whereas six of the males' dominant use was playing games on a range of gaming consoles. Almost all the participants used photo-sharing applications (apps) such as Instagram and the dominant messaging app was SnapChat. These apps were mostly used to communicate with friends the participants knew in real life. Other notable usage included using the social media platform Facebook, watching the online television streaming service Netflix, and viewing videos on YouTube. Dylan's use was atypical to the other participants in that he talked of having many online interactions with friends from overseas whom he had met online. With these virtual friends, Dylan would share music, play games, collaborate on musical instruments and gain feedback on his visual art and musical compositions. The other participants' online contacts were almost always comprised of friends and family members they already knew and had met in person.

All participants had a smartphone, and most obtained their first smartphone when they went to high school (year 7), at about the age of 12 or 13. All participants typically owned or shared at least one other device with family members such as a gaming console, tablet or a laptop computer. A few participants referred to having a school laptop provided via a lease arrangement often required by the school. All participants had Wi-Fi Internet at home and did not mention data limits nor slow usage times. All lived in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne and attended public schools or vocational education providers. That said, we did not ask for additional demographic details such as parental education or qualification levels, ethnicity, languages spoken, employment, income or whether their parents owned their own homes.

Benefits of being online

The following sections address research question one in exploring the benefits and challenges of being online. The overwhelming benefit of being online was social connection with friends and family and finding out information or about other perspectives. Furthermore, the participants enjoyed being able to choose whom they would interact with. Another significant reason for obtaining a smartphone was for safety reasons when they started going to secondary school (college). Some mentioned this was because they were required to go on the bus (public transport).

TABLE 1 Demographics of participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	People referred to during the interview	Main use of technology/device(s)
Andrew	17	M	Mum, dad, mates	Snapchat; Instagram
Brittany	17	F	Mum, dad, sister, friends	Snapchat; Instagram; Facebook; YouTube
Ethan	16	M	Mum, dad, sister, friends	Facetime; Snapchat
Max	17	M	Mum, dad [no friends]	Puzzles and program solving games; Facebook; Playstation
Chloe	14	F	Parents, friends	Skype; Instagram; Snapchat
Emily	16	F	Cousins, friends, family, mum, brother	Instagram; Snapchat; Netflix
Isabella	13	F	Mum, sister	Instagram; Snapchat; Pinterest
Lucy	15	F	Mum, dad, brother, sister	Snapchat; Facebook
Layla	13	F	Mum, dad, friends, sisters	Pinterest; SMS; YouTube
Mason	16	M	Siblings, friends, sister	PS4; Discord
Evie	13	F	Mum, dad, brother	Instagram; Stan; YouTube; vlogs
Madison	17	F	Mum; sister	Snapchat; Instagram; YouTube; Facebook; Tumblr
Oliver	15	M	Mum, dad, friends, sister	XBOX; Instagram; Facebook Messenger; Spotify; SMS; Netflix
Poppy	17	F	Grandparents, girlfriend	Instagram; Snapchat; Facebook; Netflix
Amelia	15	F	Friends; mum	Snapchat; YouTube; Netflix; Facebook; Instagram; Pinterest; FaceTime
Joshua	15	M	Mum; Dad; friends	YouTube; Sports shows; Snapchat
Riley	15	M	Brother; friends; mum	Reddit; Instagram; XBOX
Trent	15	M	Friends; mum	XBOX; Instagram; Snapchat
Dylan	16	M	Friends; mum; stepdad; dad; sister	XBOX; Switch; Twitter; Instagram; Netflix
Freya	13	F	Parents; friends	Google Docs; Instagram; FaceTime

A notable addition to the culture of Victorian public schools in Australia was the ban of mobile phones from the beginning of the 2020 calendar year. In 2019, Amelia commented on the proposed ban:

I like to bring my phone to class just because in Maths I might want to take photos of notes on the board or something like that. So, then I can bring it home and I don't have to carry my textbook home. So, I think – I don't know, it benefits me personally. Obviously, some people might get distracted by their phones in a negative way. There's this thing going around that they're discussing if we should bring phones to class ... they're probably going to say don't bring phones to class. But it's hard when they don't see the benefit of also bringing phones to class.

Most of the participants stated the main benefit of being online was being able to stay connected with their friends when they were not with them in person, mainly at school. Ethan illustrated how he was able to use social media, Facetime in particular, simulating studying together in a library:

When I go on Facetime, instead of going to a library or something, you kind of basically get the same feeling, you kind of set up your desk and you're just having chats about the work, asking questions while you're in a group video chat. So, me and my mates – since year 9 we've had this little study group that we use.

The young people also identified positive uses of social media in examples of their life experiences. Brittany gave an example: 'Well within the beauty community there's been a lot of progression around skin tone and being inclusive about it within our makeup'. Layla referred to general social media messages like 'be strong and be yourself and don't try and be like other people and so just try and stay true to yourself kind of thing'. Freya highlighted online benefits: 'Oh definitely easier to talk to people and meet up and stuff instead of going to a library and stuff to do work. It's so much easier and say I'm looking for a word in the dictionary for hours you can just search it up and everything's fine'. As well as stating the benefit was being connecting to his friends, Andrew said,

Probably 24/7 I follow a lot of things that ... empower me. I, I'm very heavily into my fitness and sport and stuff. So, I follow a lot of my clubs I support, a lot of health, a lot of fitness models, whatever, I [may] not aspire to be them but I follow a lot of stuff that I enjoy to look at.

While there were identified benefits in being online such as improved connections for social and educational purposes, we also asked them about the challenges they negotiated on social media.

Identified challenges as young people use and negotiate social media

A challenge experienced by many of the young people was the physical comparison enabled by social media. Ethan admitted he had an Instagram account but was not a fan, claiming Instagram was corrupt in:

... the way it's making people think that they have to fit this certain standard. You're seeing images of just unrealistic lifestyles, you're seeing bodies that you want to have, and it's just, in a way I don't like it. Last year I deleted it for a few months, but then I kind of got a fear of missing out [FOMO] in a way, cos I couldn't see what everyone was up to.

The issue of comparison was an ongoing issue for females by Amaro et al. (2019) whose recent study focused on new mothers and online social comparison. The main challenge 17-year-old Brittany cited was around 'comparing yourself to others, very easily because we always want what we don't have'. Brittany spoke from experience to state:

Specifically with Instagram there's a lot of content that is unrealistic, specifically directed at young girls and it, some of it can be interpreted as, that's an image of what I should be or what I need to be. And that can be really damaging, I think more so when you're still figuring out your personal identity. So, 13–14 year olds I think really struggle online especially Instagram with Instagram models and beauty influences.

Other challenges identified by the young people pointed out the extensive amount of time it took to curate images for Instagram. For example, 13-year-old Layla stated:

They have to make sure everything's perfect because they don't want to be made fun of on it. They're going to make sure everything looks good ... they want to make sure people don't make fun of what they've put on their accounts so yeah. Well a lot of my friends show us a picture before they post it, they'll be, does this look cool, do you think people would like it?

This was echoed by 13-year-old Freya who commented on the high levels of 'self-consciousness about what you do and how you seem through social media'. Young people's focus on gaining 'likes' on social media can be a source of immense pressure. Isabella shared how one of her friends who was focused on obtaining 'likes' talked about who liked their recent posts and how she could get to 200 'likes'.

Unsolicited photos were an issue for some. Fifteen-year-old friends Oliver and Riley both referred to a negative aspect of social media where unsolicited nude photos were sent to other students. Oliver stated:

So, that's one thing that I don't personally like, because it's not something I enjoy. Just don't want to see. I go on there just to speak to friends. I don't want this random photo popping up of someone naked. That's not right to me.

Other challenges included inauthentic engagement. Evie (13 years) commented on how social media users may not live in the moment, and experience reality via photos or video only:

I remember once there was one place where I went to with my grandma and my cousins to see this performance and this girl was on her phone just recording or taking photos of it ...

Interviewer: Yeah, and what do you think that person is missing out on ...?

Evie: Well just the performance in general because they're more absorbed in texting their friend which I don't get because you've spent money on trying to go to this performance but you're not observing their thing yeah.

Others commented on the inauthenticity that can occur when using technology and that being face to face was preferable. Freya questioned whether the person online she was talking to was 'really real'. Commenting on the rise of cyberbullying, Lucy pointed to the inauthenticity of only saying something online: 'because if they can't even say it to my face, they have to say it through a screen, then it doesn't mean anything'. Poppy thought: 'Yeah it's not a shared experience even though you're physically next to them'. Amelia (15 years) pointed out that fake accounts can be created for the purposes of cyberbullying and being 'whoever they want to be on social media'.

Max thought apps could be used for 'negative purposes' and believed technology could lead people down wrong paths towards addiction, pornography, catfishing and hacking. Max appeared isolated stating he did not have any friends, and thought his mother over-used technology. Mason referred to the lack of privacy online giving the example that while you might share something only intended for your friends, they can show it to other people. While many stated their awareness of negative practices such as trolling, cyberbullying, racism, sexism and hate speech, few admitted they had experienced them personally.

Fear of missing out and the need to be connected

When the authors first collaborated, the acronym FOMO was often used to describe 'fear of missing out' among adults and the need to always be connected, often depicted by avidly checking for updates or new messages. Hence, one of the specific questions we asked the participants was, 'Do you or any of your family members ever get FOMO? And if so, have you got an example?' Eleven of the interviewees admitted they probably experienced FOMO themselves at one time or another or suggested another family member probably did have it. While FOMO itself was not a term commonly used by these young people, most were able to identify the kind of behaviours associated with the phenomenon. For example, Andrew stated, 'I'm not entirely invested in my phone but I do use it, I do need to have it on me, I feel disconnected when I don't have it on me'. Sixteen-year-old Mason commented on how being connected online was important nowadays compared to before the Internet:

Well, you miss out on quite a lot of information if you aren't online and you aren't into it, so you don't know when parties are on or this happened and you don't know and so you're in this conversation, it's like, whoa, what's this, I didn't know that, and parents I don't think really get that because it wasn't like a thing back then, but it is now.

WHAT CAN BENEFIT FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS?

The second research question asked the participants to identify and recommend digital practices to benefit family relationships. Overwhelmingly, most participants recommended no technology or screens when sitting down in the evening for the daily family dinner. Poppy stated:

That's when I really get to connect with my family members and find out how their day was and just be in the moment because I've got the whole rest of the night to be on my phone – you know you can spare 20–30 minutes.

All but two specified they had a family rule of no phones at the table at dinner time. Other suggestions included having a restriction on devices before bed to 'disconnect', all sitting down to watch one screen together for a big family movie night and limiting screen time for younger children. Additional suggestions were for everyone to be together (in the living room for example, rather than in separate rooms throughout the house) even if they were on their digital devices, and to share social media posts with each other, both online and in person.

Five participants suggested device/technology free time where the family is encouraged to 'just be in the moment' with their family, which could be for a short period of time or a day or a longer period like going away camping. Layla recommended putting away devices when going somewhere nice with one's family. She emphasised the benefits of being able to 'realise' what is going on in family member's lives and hearing from each person, as opposed to being on one's phone and being focused on other people.

Other positive family practices included playing digital games together. Riley gave an example he thought other families could try: 'What I try to do is when someone's talking to you and you're on something, you just look up and make eye contact because then you're actually focusing. And, it's just kind of I guess more respectful'. Brittany went further to point out the importance of enjoying someone else's company and paying attention to them as much as possible, rather than looking at her phone.

One of the interview questions drew on photo-elicitation techniques (Harper, 2002) and showed a photo of a family in the same room all looking at their own individual screens. The interviewer asked, 'Here's a picture of a family sitting around together and they each have their own digital device in front of them. Is that scene familiar to you and, and if so, what do you think about it?' A range of responses were noted when asked about the photo. Most assumed the individuals were not engaged with other family members and were in their own mediated world, and some identified similarities within their family (Oliver, Max). Mason was more direct and stated, 'That's just wrong'. Emily agreed stating it did not look like a healthy family relationship. However, Brittany commented how it was a common practice among large friendship groups that they transition back and forth, over and over, between verbal conversations, using their phones, and then verbally commenting to each other about what they were viewing on their phone. However, she did note a predictable response when looking at that family scene would be to assume everyone was being antisocial.

POSITIVE PARENTING IN A DIGITAL AGE

The third research question asked young people for suggestions about positive parenting. We asked them what they would recommend parents do to strengthen their families as they negotiate a digital age. Many respondents thought their parents could show more interest in their digital practices which they thought would increase understanding between generations. Amelia thought parents could sometimes be a bit more understanding about the amount of device usage:

They think we're just constantly addicted and we – we're just using it in a negative way on ourselves. And we're not getting out the house enough and I'm like, I go to school 5 days a week for 6 hours. I'm not getting out the house enough – I go to work 2 or 3 days a week. I play sport, yeah, I'm on my iPad but I also have done [my] homework. But you just weren't home when I did it.

It appeared easier for parents to have a negative view of technology usage. Madison wanted her mum to understand that being on a digital device did not mean she was being unproductive. Dylan thought parents should not fall back on blaming game playing, for example:

I've seen so many people do this and they blame everything on something their kid does or anything on games and it's like oh you've been playing this game too much, what's wrong with you and then they're just like oh you're doing everything wrong because you've been playing the game too much.

The need for increased understanding was affirmed by Poppy who stated:

I want them to know that the world is a lot bigger than what it used to be ... it's more that we have it at our fingertips so it's what we create for ourselves ... I think that they should put more of a focus on putting trust in us I suppose and just teaching us, assisting us on how to be better online rather than just the banishment.

Statements like these reinforce the perception that parents' default thinking tends to be digital practices are negative. Lucy wanted parents and adults to understand young people's lives are very different now:

That it's different kind of nowadays from when they were a kid. They didn't have any of this and that's how they grew up, but we're growing up in a different stance. So, even though they may think it was better growing up how they were, in this kind of century, we're growing up in a different way, so we're going to think different things about social media than they do. ... Kind of understand the way we're growing up from how they did is different.

This suggests a collaborative approach to negotiating device usage would be helpful. When asked about the challenges, Amelia pointed out the pros and cons of online use:

It's kind of an escape even though it's a trap. For me going on YouTube or Netflix or anything like that it's the only way I can zone out of everything else like stress of exams coming up, stress of not doing my chores mom just nagging at me or something like that. You just have to watch this show, you don't have to think about your homework you can do that later. And it's kind of – even though it kind of traps you, you have to do your homework because it's due tomorrow or something. It's just like you zone out for a bit and it's nice.

Riley and Dylan both affirmed digital devices can be used as an escape, or for somewhere to 'space out'. Chloe asserted:

Sometimes they [her parents] don't like it when you're always on, looking on it all the time, but it can be entertaining and sometimes you can get away from reality because sometimes you're having an argument with someone and sometimes it can calm you down because ... and it just takes your mind off all these bad things that are happening.

These examples reflect an ambivalence about device usage, in recognising and experiencing both positive and negative aspects which makes managing usage a potential challenge.

Trent believed parents should be able to trust their kids about their device usage and should not be nosy and snooping, but young people should ‘just be open about what you’re doing. There shouldn’t be anything to hide’. This was echoed by Andrew’s recommendations for parents to have open conversations with their children from a young age. He asserted the benefits this had had for him and his family:

My mum talks about this a lot – resilience – you need to be able to experience things to know how to overcome it. So, if parents just constantly keep closing their kids out from it, not letting them see it, it’s, it’s going to become more of an issue when they do see it. So, I think resilience is a massive thing and obviously open conversations with them will improve that.

Sixteen-year-old Emily also recommended helpful reinforcement of guidelines to support positive use: ‘Maybe just tell me that it’s been x amount of time or tell me what the time is, because I lose track of time. Or them come in and say, “Hey can I take your laptop and put it on the charger” or something like that’. Here, Emily has identified a proactive approach that reframes parental guidance and the language to be used as positive.

Oliver stated that if he were a parent, he would restrict his children to having a limit of 1 h of technology per day—a restriction he had when he was younger. Oliver was adamant about his future parenting role:

If I ever have kids, I’m not going to let them have technology until they’re 10. Just because I’ve seen little kids holding iPads watching TV, and to me that just doesn’t seem right, because I’ve heard studies show that that actually like rots their brain, like it isn’t good for them. So, I don’t – if you do, just make it a little amount of time as possible.

Now he was studying in senior high school, his homework load had increased so he did not have spare time to spend online. Having tighter restrictions for younger children’s device usage was also echoed by two other participants.

DISCUSSION

Based on the inductive thematic analysis, this study supports the claim surrounding the identification of sophisticated ways of thinking about the pros and cons of digital device use that young people are using (Third et al., 2017). The study found that the young people wanted their parents/carers to know their lives are very different to being a teenager from a previous generation, and identified that the default parent assumption was often that device use was negative (Johnson, 2009; Sikorska, 2020). Hence, they wanted their parents to understand their experiences and share an interest in what they were doing online, echoing Pariera and Turner’s (2020) recommendation for exchanging perspectives to enable successful parent-child communication. These young people used their devices for a range of purposes and they want to be trusted and respected in a sense they have the ability to make good choices about how much time they spend online, whom they interact with, and why they go online as they demonstrate increasing autonomy (Racz et al., 2017).

The participants recognised there was a balance to achieve between meeting schooling obligations and engaging in their preferred leisure and entertainment. These young people knew social media had downsides and had mechanisms to cope with that. While they understood the imagery of perfection portrayed on social media was unrealistic, they recognised its pervasiveness and the need for ongoing support and advice. The insights shared by these young people support giving them opportunity to identify and articulate the challenges and the benefits of being online (Third et al., 2017), especially given how the negotiation of digital technology use is ongoing and for many families, is a source of conflict (Graham & Sahlberg, 2021).

The participants recognised the impact of digital device use on the family (Third et al., 2017) and valued device-free time, being in the moment, and engaging with others. They understood if one is always looking at a screen it may mean they miss out on quality experiences and obtaining and sharing memories in and from their real life. Future research could explore the prevalence of being device-free compared to the acknowledgement that device-free time is beneficial. Exploration of how and when young people independently choose to disengage with devices in order to preference family members and family experiences would be useful.

The findings expressed here suggest very positively, young people want their families to function well in a digital age, and they have a collective sense of responsibility that affects how they individually act within their family, and how they want other family members to function (Third et al., 2017). Insights provided by the participants strengthen previous literature valuing the voice of young people (Koch & Brandt, 2021; Pariera & Turner, 2020; Prellis & Delomez, 2017; Smithson & Jones, 2021; Third et al., 2017; Uprichard, 2008). The findings should prompt efforts to support all generations in how to understand, critique and navigate positive family relationships in the digital age. These efforts have the potential to allow the Internet to be something that despite its challenges, can deliver benefits to the overall family and its cohesion (Smyth et al., 2020). The research should encourage others to position young adults as important contributors to research and decision-making (Haddon, 2015; Livingstone & Third, 2017; Third et al., 2014, 2017), including the recommendation of positive digital family practices in the home.

We acknowledge the limitations of the approach in terms of sample size, comprising only a convenience sample, and while no generalisations can be made from this pilot study, the insights and rich data obtained from this qualitative exploration is encouraging. While the interview questions did not focus on smartphone usage at school, revisiting these participants to explore their perceptions in the light of the mobile phone ban in secondary schools would be interesting in terms of both safety and social connectedness. While this project itself was not actually youth-led, we hope it will encourage other researchers to consider how they might place more value on hearing the voices of young people, and design research to enable this. Future stages of this research include the participants making a movie for adults about the kinds of things we found during these semi-structured interviews. A youth-led initiative would educate other generations and promote findings more broadly.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTE

¹ Please note this data collection occurred just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

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