From occasion to obsession:

The connection between relationships,

media literacy and the changing use of

computer mediated communication from

2005-2018

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Abstract

2005-2018 saw an era of rapid technological change, particularly with regards to digital media and computer mediated communication (CMC). During this time mobile phone ownership grew, the internet became a key utility in UK homes, and the development of various online platforms – such as email, video calling and social media – led to CMC use becoming increasingly normalised. Academics and regulators queried how best to promote media literacy skills in this ever-changing media landscape, where rapidly changing forms of CMC meant it was increasingly difficult to determine how and why literacy skills were developed.

This thesis is based on a collaboration with the UK Communications Regulator Ofcom. It examines how the use of CMC between 2005-2018 shaped relationships, and, in turn, how relationships shaped CMC use. It uses data from Ofcom's Adults' Media Lives (AML) longitudinal project, consisting of filmed footage from annual in-home interviews with the same 18 participants. This thesis finds that initial access to CMC and facilitating technology was often the result of encouragement – or coercion – from loved ones. As use increased and numerous communication platforms emerged, many participants managed their different relationships across multiple platforms, forming their own norms and etiquette for CMC use. Those who misunderstood these norms faced isolation and ostracization in both online and offline spaces, drastically impacting on their relationships. Over time, public discourses around CMC use, such as negative news coverage regarding online bullying, addiction and security threats, became as impactful as personal negative

experiences. Participants were often unsure of how to respond to CMC-related moral panics, caught between the desire to protect themselves and loved ones from supposed dangers online, and the perceived need to continue to use CMC to conduct said relationships.

This thesis provides a deeper insight into the complex connection between CMC use and relationships. The longitudinal exploration uncovers how and why the same people alter their usage of and attitudes towards CMC over time, and how relationships factor into this change. It considers how the wider socio-cultural climate shaped the personal experiences each participant had as their relationships and CMC use fluctuated year-on-year. The increased use of CMC and facilitating technology between 2005-2018 both helped and hindered participants' relationships and literacy skills. On the one hand, the increased expectation of use often caused conflict for participants, where they struggled with the financial and social pressure to constantly adopt developing technology, felt uncomfortable engaging with certain CMC and online public platforms, or feared for their own and loved ones' wellbeing. However, relationships also played a positive role in the uptake and use of CMC. They were often the motivators of initial purchase, providing lessons and skills to build confidence, literacy and use. In turn CMC use acted as a connecting link between participants and their relationships as they grew older, moved around the UK and shifted life stage. Understanding this complex and dynamic connection provides new insight into how media literacy is developed with CMC, by revealing relationships as a vital component in this process.

Contents

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List of figures and tables

Introduction

In the first few months of 2020, COVID-19 began to rapidly spread across the planet. This led to a global pandemic, where people worldwide were required to alter their everyday movements and behaviour in order to avoid spreading the deadly virus. The UK went into lockdown in March 2020, with citizens urged to stay at home and avoid leaving the house for non-essential activities (CIPD, 2020; Fuchs, 2020; Ofcom, 2020d). People were suddenly forced to alter how they performed the everyday tasks that they had previously taken for granted, including the ability to socialise with loved ones and interact with wider friends and acquaintances. Rather than being able to visit family homes, meet with friends for coffee, or catch up with work colleagues at the office, people had to rely on computer mediated communication (CMC) to perform social activities. Whether this was through phoning, instant messaging, video calling or social media, there was a sudden, unprecedented dependence on mediated means of communication.

Scholars have argued that people were increasingly incorporating CMC into their everyday lives long before 2020, where it was already deemed an essential aspect of daily life that facilitated the conduction of relationships (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Chambers, 2013, 2017; El-Jarn, 2014; Giddens et al, 2015; Prieto-Blanco & Schreiber, 2016; Miller et al, 2016; Parks, 2017; Norton et al, 2017; Okdie & Ewoldsen, 2018). Both technological and social change had motivated an increased use of the internet and CMC, especially as communication technology became

more portable, converged and efficient over time (boyd, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2014; boyd & Donath, 2004; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Lambert, 2013; Meikle, 2016; Prieto-Blanco & Schreiber, 2016; Norton et al, 2017; Parks, 2017).

For those people who were already communicating online, the sudden dependence on CMC to contact loved ones in 2020 may have only required slight adjustments. However, the abrupt and unprecedented lockdown following the spread of COVID-19 meant that many people may have found themselves unprepared to conduct the majority of their interactions from home (Fuchs, 2020; Ofcom, 2020d, 2020e; Robinson et al, 2020a, 2020b). They may have been ill-equipped for the sudden need to rely on CMC, both in terms of not owning the appropriate devices or internet connection, and in terms of lacking the skills to adopt and use new online platforms for communication (Fuchs, 2020; Robinson et al, 2020a). This era of estrangement from relationships has already impacted negatively on people's sense of wellbeing and mental health (Fuchs, 2020; Ornell et al, 2020; Parrish, 2020), and a lack of the necessary tools or skills to use CMC may have exacerbated this issue, motivating a sense of isolation during lockdown. If scholars felt that society was dependent on digital technology, the internet and CMC before 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak exacerbated this dependence, highlighting how truly integral CMC had become in facilitating communication and the maintenance of relationships.

The use of CMC during these unprecedented events did not occur in isolation: it followed decades of already altering perceptions of relationships and communication. This thesis longitudinally examines the cyclical connection between CMC use and relationships between 2005-2018, and how people developed the skills to effectively use CMC to communicate with loved ones.

The majority of this thesis was written before the events of 2020. It was a response to an already rapidly changing technological landscape and shifting cultural attitude regarding CMC use. However, the uncertainty felt in 2020 exposed three crucial aspects of daily life that are highly applicable to this research. First of all, it illustrated how vital relationships are to people, and how much individuals can struggle in day-to-day life without loved ones available to support them. Secondly, it showed the core role that CMC plays in everyday life, and just how essential its use has become. Finally, it illustrated the necessity of having access to internet facilitating technology and the appropriate media literacy skills to be able to properly use CMC to communicate with others across a range of different platforms.

COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown period highlighted the importance of understanding how individuals make sense of and engage with CMC: something that can be achieved through considering usage and attitudes over an extended period of time. It is crucial to understand how people were already using CMC and what risks may have been involved for those who were already struggling to adopt, use and understand different forms of online communication. This thesis focuses on

events up until 2018, but the findings discussed here provide a highly topical

context for the role CMC use played during 2020 and beyond.

I will begin this exploration by introducing and defining two terms that are central

to this research: computer mediated communication and media literacy. These will

be referred to throughout this thesis, as I explore how they connect to relationships

and became increasingly interwoven over time.

Computer mediated communication

An array of varied terms have been used to describe communication via media,

such as mediated communication (Baym, 2015; Hobbs et al, 2016), technology or

digitally mediated communication (Chambers, 2013; Dalessandro, 2018), mediated

interactions (Carpenter et al, 2018; Lim, 2018), computer-mediated social

interaction (Caplan, 2003) and communication aided by ICT (Brown et al, 2020).

These terms portray similar types of communication, and often encompass

interaction that is akin to the term I will be using in this thesis: computer mediated

communication.

The phrase computer mediated communication (CMC) is a recurring term used in

academia to describe online communication, and has been employed by multiple

scholars examining changes to digital technologies and communication over the last

two decades (see Parks & Floyd, 1996; boyd, 2006; Chambers, 2006; Lievrouw &

Livingstone, 2006; Castells, 2010; Wright & Webb, 2011; El-Jarn, 2014; Brody &

Peña, 2015; Schrock, 2015; Favotto et al, 2017; Norton et al, 2017; Parks, 2017;

Okdie & Ewoldsen, 2018; Sutcliffe et al, 2018; Favotto et al, 2019). Yuhua Liang and

Joseph Walther (2015, p504) offer a basic definition of the term, noting that

'computer-mediated communication (CMC) involves sending messages through

computer networks such as the Internet' (see also Favotto et al (2019) for a similar

description). Bolin Cao and Wan-Ying Lin (2017, p23) elaborate, noting that 'CMC is

characterized by its capacity to overcome temporal and spatial barriers, as well as

its convenience and potential anonymity'. Communications scholar Joseph Walther

is a prolific writer on CMC, having studied its development and role in relationship

management over numerous years (see, for example, Walther, 1992, 1993, 1996,

2007; Walther et al, 2001; Walther & Parks, 2002; Walther et al, 2008; Tong &

Walther, 2011). While he typically focused his studies on text-based forms of CMC

(such as email and online bulletin boards), he noted that the ever-changing forms

of CMC meant that 'computer mediated communication is a broad term, and it is

growing broader with each technological innovation' (Walther & Parks, 2002,

p530).

The repercussions of these changing forms of CMC were observed by scholars over

time. Many scholars argued that as the internet and the platforms available for

communication developed, there was a move from simple text-based interactions

to a myriad of new forms of communication and relationship development

opportunities (Parks & Roberts, 1998; Boellstorff, 2008; Liang & Walther, 2015; Cao

& Lin, 2017; Carpenter et al, 2018; Quan-Haase et al, 2018). For example, in the late

1990s Malcolm Parks and Lynne Roberts considered how the use of Multi-User

Dimensions (or dungeons) for gaming allowed for the creation of online characters,

in turn facilitating new forms of relationship conduct, identity play and network

development (Parks & Roberts, 1998; see also Boellstorff, 2008). In 2001 Walther et

al studied how the display of personal images via CMC may influence impressions

online, in turn also shaping relationships (Walther et al, 2001). A decade later Erin

Bryant, Jennifer Marmo and Artemio Ramirez Jr. (2011) noted how social

networking sites emerged as a new form of CMC, providing unique forms of

communication distinct from previous means of online interaction. Stephanie Tong

and Joseph Walther (2011, p98) reinforced this notion, describing social networking

sites such as Facebook and micro-blogging sites such as Twitter as 'contemporary

CMC technologies'. In fact, in recent years social media (SM) and instant messaging

have been a focus of research on CMC, with multiple scholars considering how

ongoing access to an array of CMC services while on the move is again reshaping

communication and relationships (Brody & Peña, 2015; Chambers, 2017; Norton et

al, 2017; Okdie & Ewoldsen, 2018; Sutcliffe et al, 2018).

As this thesis is concerned with changing communication over a 14-year period, it

was essential that I used terminology that was consistently pertinent but

encompassing of the ever-altering technological and communications landscape.

Due to its persistent and broad use, I have utilised the term computer mediated

communication (CMC) throughout this thesis. This term is used here to describe

any communication that is conducted with a computer or via the internet, including

communication with text-based, audio and visual content. I include services that

facilitate the sharing of these types of content, such as phone calling, texting,

emailing, video calling, instant messaging and social media. I have also considered a

range of devices that facilitate the use of CMC, such as desktop computers, laptops,

tablets and mobile phones.

 Much of the existing research described above is concerned with how the changing

use of CMC is altering relationships. While some scholars argue that many aspects

of this change are positive as it allows for long distance and ongoing

communication with those we cannot see face-to-face (Couldry, 2012; Chambers,

2013; El-Jarn, 2014; Frolova, 2016a) others worry that by gaining quantity of

communication we are sacrificing quality, negatively impacting on our face-to-face

relationships and altering established social norms (Gergen, 2002; Caplan, 2003;

Rosen, 2007; Lanier, 2010; Turkle, 2011; Favotto et al, 2019). However, the growth

of CMC use and its now crucial role in our communication with partners, family,

friends and workmates means that it is not productive to continue to discuss

whether or not CMC *should* be used, but instead focus on *how* it is being used

(Miller, 2016; Parks, 2017).

Furthermore, as media and technology – and the social expectations surrounding

their use – are still constantly changing, academics have argued that it is essential

that people continuously develop the skills needed to use CMC and digital media

(Walther & Parks, 2002; Hargittai, 2002, 2010; Dennis, 2004; Livingstone, 2004; Seiter, 2007; Notley, 2009; Gershon, 2010; Boonaert & Vettenburg, 2011). Thus, I will next examine how academics present the skills that people develop and maintain when using media – a concept often broadly referred to as media literacy – and how this connects to my research on CMC and relationships.

Media literacy

'Media literacy' is a term that is widely used across a range of academic fields to describe how people engage with an array of media (Facer et al, 2001; Bond, 2014; Manzoor, 2016; Parry et al, 2017; Lee, 2018). It broadly relates to the ability to access, use, understand, and create with different forms of media such as radio, television, film and, more recently, the internet (Hobbs, 1998; Livingstone, 2004; Parry et al, 2017; Ofcom, 2020a). As with CMC, the definitions and presentations of this term have altered over numerous years as media and technology have also changed. Tom Boonaert and Nicole Vettenburg (2011, p60) argue that we are now 'living in a society that demands not just one literacy, but multiple literacies' (see also Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Mahajan et al, 2016; Jones 2017), a stance reinforced by Everette Dennis:

> If there is a consistent argument for media literacy, it is that of complexity: the media system is more complicated than ever before, it generates more content across different technological platforms, and it is deemed more significant – and powerful – than any other time in human history (Dennis, 2004, p204).

In more recent years media literacy has been applied to ICT skills specifically, where scholars argue that the use of digital technology, portable devices and the internet 'require a broader and more comprehensive set of skills, including social and cultural abilities' (Park, 2012, p87; see also Buckingham, 2000; Livingstone, 2004; Livingstone et al, 2005; Hargittai, 2010; Park & Burford, 2013; Manzoor, 2016; Parry et al, 2017; Hatlevik et al, 2018). This new set of skills is often referred to as internet literacy or computer literacy and typically relates to the knowledge and competence required to effectively and safely navigate the different platforms and services available online (Papert, 1996; Facer et al, 2001; Livingstone, 2004; Livingstone et al, 2005; Park, 2012).

Much existing research on computer or internet literacy focuses on those who have access to and are using the internet and those who do not, and considers the repercussions this may have (Hargittai, 2002, 2010; Dennis, 2004; Livingstone, 2004; Notley, 2009; Park & Burford, 2013; Robinson et al, 2020b). This 'digital divide' is defined by Boonaert and Vettenburg (2011, p55) as 'unequal access to the internet and its use because of the interplay between different factors' and is typically associated with the demographic differences (such as age or socio-economic status) that may lead to such inequalities (see also Tapscott, 1998; Prensky, 2001; Livingstone & Bovill, 2002; Rogers, 2003; Seiter, 2007; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Hargittai, 2010; Bond, 2014; Dingli & Seychell, 2015; Robinson et al, 2020b). This divide has also been referred to as 'the participatory gap' (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008), or 'social exclusion' (Seiter, 2007;

Notley, 2009), where those who are unable to regularly access the internet are at

risk of being excluded from behaviour normalised by the society they live in

(Rogers, 2003; Seiter, 2007; Tsatsou, 2011).

This research on the digital divide has proven to remain pertinent throughout my

research period and during the events of 2020 (Robinson et al, 2020a; Robinson et

al, 2020b) and will be considered throughout this thesis. However, the second

aspect of Sora Park's (2012, p87) definition of media literacy noted above

references the need to develop 'social and cultural abilities' when using the

internet, which is also highly relevant for this research. These abilities illustrate that

literacy is not just connected to the skills needed to know how the mechanics of

devices work (such as how to use a mouse or turn on a computer), but also driven

by social skills and an awareness of social etiquette.

However, despite this being a prolifically debated subject, there are a number of

areas that could benefit from further study. First of all, while media literacy is often

the subject of research, it is not always explicitly mentioned. The overt use of the

term 'media literacy' often highlights the significance of certain social and

pedagogical issues, therefore failure to use this terminology can undermine the

importance of certain skills or behaviour. For example, while many scholars have

considered the skills needed to communicate with others online via CMC,[1] this is

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[1] For example, Palfrey and Gasser (2008) use the term 'netiquette' to describe online etiquette, and Ilana Gershon (2010) contends that individuals have their own media ideologies that drive how they interpret content on CMC platforms.

often referred to with regard to social protocol or norms and not in connection to media literacy, thus failing to position these as essential skills that help people navigate an array of media (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Gershon, 2010; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Furthermore, although the social aspect of building media literacy is evidently increasingly vital, there are few studies that explicitly study this connection in academia. For instance, numerous authors acknowledge that relationships play a key role in providing the skills needed to use the internet (Papert, 1996; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Notley, 2009; Tsatsou, 2011; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018), however there is again limited research that focuses specifically on the connection between multiple relationships and building media literacy. As so much credence is placed on the development of 'literacy' when using changing technologies, the lack of this terminology in numerous studies means that the necessity of certain skills and the importance of relationships in building these skills may be overlooked.

Beyond this, existing research on relationships and the acquisition of the skills needed to navigate CMC platforms tends to isolate different experiences. For instance, research on the roles of relationships in providing skills has previously focused on specific relationships, such as the parent-child dynamic (see for example Lim, 2018; Naab, 2018; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018). While this provides evidence that relationships do indeed play a crucial role in the development of online skills and motivate how people use different technology and platforms, the focus on only one relationship fails to acknowledge the significance of the multiple other relationships an individual may be partaking in.

Furthermore, there is limited research that cohesively explores the different uses of multiple CMC in relation to each other. Although Daniel Miller (2016; see also Miller et al, 2016) considers the 'polymedia' environment we are now living in,[2] and Malcolm Parks (2017) identifies mixed media relationships (i.e. 'social relationships that parties conduct in whole or in part through the use of multiple media, including F2F' (p506)), most empirical studies tend to only focus on one 'type' of CMC in their research. For example, scholars have considered the development of skills needed to use individual platforms, such as Friendster (boyd, 2004), Facebook (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010; Lambert, 2013) or texting (Brody & Peña, 2015). Thus there is again limited research that considers the multitude of CMC platforms that people may use in relation to each other. Just as it is limiting to consider only one type of relationship, it is also restrictive to only consider how and why people develop skills with one form of CMC.

Finally, in addition to focusing on one type of media or relationship, much research in this area tends to focus on one moment in time or one specific life stage, where even longitudinal studies often only consider the behaviour and attitudes of those experiencing a particular phase of life.[3] This approach fails to account for the

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[2] Polymedia refers to the environment where 'none of these [SM] platforms can be properly understood if considered in isolation because the meaning and use of each one is relative to the others' (Miller et al, 2016, p4), where people choose a form of CMC to use from their 'wider media ecology' (Chambers, 2017, p7).

[3] See, for example, Umemuro and Shirokane (2003) and Shapira et al (2007) for studies that focus on older people and retirees, and Livingstone and Sefton-Green (2016) and Thomson et al (2018) for longitudinal research focused on children. An exception to this is Miller et al (2016; see also Miller, 2016), who spend an extended period of time studying an array of people from different societies across the globe during their ethnographic study on social

changing life stages and altering priorities different people may encounter over an extended period of time, and how this in turn could shape their experiences with CMC. All of the above studies are relevant and provide vital context for this study, but also illustrate gaps in the field where few authors have considered multiple contextual factors together, over numerous years.

This thesis explores how people use a range of CMC to manage multiple different relationships over a 14-year period. By considering how the same people use CMC to engage with others over a number of consecutive years – observing as they encounter, embrace or reject different forms of CMC – it is possible to develop a deeper understanding of how different people build literacy skills across multiple CMC platforms. This thesis will highlight how literacy is an ongoing and never-ending process, where experiences with one technology or platform can shape experiences with the next. It will also contend that the types of skills needed alter as people move between life stages and as literacy needs fluctuate over time. By adopting a longitudinal methodology I am able to address these gaps in current literature and develop new insight into how and why people use CMC in relationship management, and how the development of certain skills may shape this process. To do this, I utilised longitudinal datasets produced by Ofcom, the UK media and communications regulator. The next section outlines how and why Ofcom prioritises the research of media literacy as part of their regulatory duties.

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media use. While this is invaluable research for exemplifying how longitudinal research is useful, their 18-month fieldwork period – consisting of ongoing contact with participants during this time – differs greatly to the research presented in this thesis, which is the culmination of a four-year investigation exploring how the same participants use CMC and associated technology over a 14-year period.

Ofcom and media literacy

Ofcom ensures that UK residents have access to and are able to use an array of communications services, including broadband, television, radio and postal services (Ofcom, 2020b). Under the 2003 Communications Act Ofcom also has a duty to promote media literacy. As part of this duty Ofcom regularly conducts research to examine how UK citizens understand and use electronic media (Ofcom, 2020a). This research informs their understandings of media literacy as media and technology develop, in turn allowing them to shape public policy and inform external organisations (Ofcom, 2020a).

This thesis utilises two studies that were commissioned by Ofcom to further inform their understandings of media literacy: Adults' Media Lives and Adults' Media Use and Attitudes. Adults' Media Lives (AML) is an ongoing qualitative project, consisting of annual in-home filmed interviews with the same people each year since 2005. Adults' Media Use and Attitudes is the quantitative counterpart, consisting of annual nationally representative surveys conducted across the UK with approximately 2000 people each year. Both of these longitudinal studies aim to understand developing media use and attitudes in the UK, and how and why media literacy may alter over time (Ofcom, 2020a).

As part of a Collaborative Doctoral Award with Ofcom I was provided with access to these longitudinal datasets in order to examine how the use of CMC may alter

relationships over time (and vice versa). While the role of relationships and the growing use of CMC was evident in Ofcom's data, this topic had not yet been fully considered due to the wider aims of the research (i.e. to more broadly examine UK media use and attitudes). Furthermore, workload and time constraints within Ofcom meant that a thorough, systematic analysis of how these longitudinal datasets had altered over time had not been previously conducted in the manner achieved in this thesis. Thus through this research I have been able to add further insight to Ofcom's existing findings regarding media literacy.

This longitudinal exploration using these datasets also allowed for the gaps in academia identified above to be examined, where I was able to connect relationships, CMC use and literacy in a new manner. I focused my analysis on 18 of the participants from the AML research, observing, transcribing and thematically analysing the unedited video footage from each interview from 2005-2018. I complemented these findings with an examination of the Adults' Media Use and Attitudes quantitative reports from 2005 onwards, using quantitative analysis to substantiate and provide context for my qualitative findings. The three thematic chapters outlined in the next section consider the outcomes from this longitudinal analysis.

Thesis structure

This thesis consists of two parts. The first half discusses the existing scholarly debates regarding CMC and relationships, then highlights how I will be able to

provide new insights to the field through my unique longitudinal methodology.

Chapter 1 explores existing academic debates that consider the connection

between relationships and CMC. It begins with an exploration of prevailing

scholarly definitions of relationships from a range of different disciplines, such as

sociology, anthropology and psychology. Through this review I establish how

perceptions of relationships have altered over time as socio-cultural expectations

and norms have also shifted (Giddens, 1991, 1992; Wellman, 2002; Evans, 2003;

Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Chambers, 2012, 2017). The latter half of this chapter

examines the academic debates on how relationships may have further changed as

the use of CMC became a routine part of daily life. This review considers the

academic presentation of numerous contextual factors that may motivate the use

of CMC, exploring how personal experiences, wider social change and technological

affordances are all noted as shaping engagement (boyd et al, 2011; Baym, 2015;

Quan-Haase, 2015; Chambers, 2017). This exploration of academic debates

provides the framework for how I present, analyse and discuss the connection

between CMC, relationships and media literacy throughout the rest of this thesis.

In Chapter 2 I explain the methodology adopted for this research. I outline my

relationship with Ofcom in more detail, using two interviews that I conducted with

stakeholders to illustrate how my role in a Collaborative Doctoral Award with

Ofcom allowed for a new analysis of their longitudinal datasets to be performed.

This chapter discusses the aims and background of the AML qualitative study, and

how it is currently used by Ofcom. I then present the method I used to analyse the

qualitative data, adopting an inductive approach where I observed, transcribed and

then thematically analysed the 14-years' worth of unedited videos from the AML interviews, developing my research questions and focus as I went. I also note how I used the quantitative findings from the Adults' Media Use and Attitudes reports to provide context and further substantiate my analysis.

The second half of this thesis consists of three thematic chapters that explore how relationships, CMC use and media literacy are connected. Chapter 3 – the first thematic chapter – considers the role of relationships in motivating access to and uptake of CMC platforms and facilitating devices. It begins by examining how CMC facilitating technology (such as laptops, tablets and mobile phones) developed between 2005-2018, and how attitudes and use also shifted. This chapter considers the role of the uptake process in shaping experiences, offering a new insight into a different aspect of 'access' and media literacy that is currently not focused on in academia. I discuss the role relationships have in this process, exploring the extent to which they may motivate or hinder access to CMC platforms and facilitating technology, again offering new insight to current media literacy discourses.

Chapter 4 considers the experiences the AML participants had while using different CMC services such as email, video calling, social media and instant messaging. I explore how both changing technological affordances and social expectations shaped how participants engaged with CMC each year. I consider how behaviour online altered over time and how participants adapted to new social protocols across a range of platforms, exploring the negative experiences some had while trying to adjust to these new forms of communication. I again examine the

repercussions this has for media literacy, considering how these participants developed new skills over time, how they learned the 'correct' way to behave online, and how changing communication in turn shaped their relationships.

Chapter 5 – the final thematic chapter – considers the fears expressed by participants when discussing the use of CMC, and how they worked to overcome them. It contextualises these fears by exploring the manner in which UK news coverage presented CMC use throughout the study period, providing insight into the culture within which these participants were developing their own views on CMC. By considering the predominant concerns expressed by participants regarding CMC use, I explore the fears that were motivated by personal experiences versus the views that may have been exacerbated by wider moral panics at the time. This chapter thus adds another layer of context to the findings presented in Chapters 3 and 4, by examining personal experiences through the lens of the wider social context at the time.

The conclusion of this thesis connects the key themes that emerged throughout this analysis and considers the repercussions they may have for current academic understandings of CMC use, relationships and media literacy. While I discuss the limitations of this study and indicate where further research may be beneficial, I also illustrate how this thesis has been able to add impactful insight to the field of media studies that can shape academic debate and inform future policies regarding media literacy.

By exploring this subject across three thematic chapters, this thesis addresses four key research questions:

- How did CMC use shape relationships between 2005-2018?

- How did relationships shape CMC use between 2005-2018?

- What other contextual factors shape the use of CMC in relationship management?

- What role do relationships play in the development of media literacy, specifically with regards to CMC use?

By considering these research questions longitudinally, this thesis interrogates the connection between CMC use, relationships and media literacy in a manner that provides new insight to the fields of media studies, media education and digital sociology.

Chapter 1 - Relationships and computer mediated communication (CMC): an analysis of existing literary debates

Introduction

As the use of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) in relationship maintenance is an ever-growing area of study, it is imperative to begin this thesis by discussing existing research on relationships and CMC. This examination allows me to establish the core ways in which I will present CMC and relationships throughout this thesis, subsequently motivating how I discuss their connection to media literacy in the thematic chapters.

I begin this chapter by exploring how scholars from a variety of academic disciplines define and discuss relationships. I consider how presentations of relationships have altered over time, exploring how socio-cultural changes have shaped how authors define relationships. These presentations of relationships provide a context through which to consider this topic throughout this thesis.

Once I have established what a relationship is, I then consider how CMC has been presented as facilitating and disrupting these relationships. I explore the numerous ways in which authors discuss the connection between CMC and relationships, highlighting the at times opposing narratives on CMC use. This literature review

reflects on the complex and diverse academic discussions on relationships and CMC use. This subject has been deliberated at length in academia over a number of decades as technology has developed, thus it is essential that this complicated field is explored before I discuss the empirical findings from the Adults' Media Lives (AML) dataset. Through this exploration I identify a number of ways that relationships and CMC use will be presented in this thesis.

Before I explore scholarly debates on the connection between relationships and CMC, I will first examine what a 'relationship' is by discussing how relationships are considered and defined in existing literature.

Considering 'relationships'

Scholars consider relationships to be difficult to define due to the complexity of their nature and the vast quantity of different relationships one person can have. For instance, Vered Amit and Nigel Rapport (2002, p16) contend that the 'indeterminacy of infinitely overlapping tangles of personal relationships' makes them difficult to conclusively summarise. On a very general level, relationships can be recognised by the extent to which one person can 'impact' on the other, and the creation of 'interdependence' between those two people (Kelley et al, 1983; Cahill, 1998; Parks, 2017). Scholars note that some relationships are more permanent than others; some are closer than others; and some are more intimate than others (Allan, 1979; Kelley et al, 1983; LaFollette, 1996; Cahill, 1998; Cheal, 2002; Chambers, 2012; El-Jarn, 2014). Therefore, rather than providing a finite,

overarching definition of relationships, I will now consider how scholars have handled these 'overlapping tangles' (Amit & Rapport, 2002, p16) and examined the nuances between different relationships.

There is a tendency in scholarly literature to present relationships in a categorised manner consisting of different 'types', encapsulating the different relationships that scholars believe are typical within Western society. For instance, a norm in sociology or anthropology texts is to draw distinctions between 'kin', 'friends' and 'romantic relationships' when introducing this topic (see for instance Ferraro, 1992; Kuper, 1992; Hicks & Gwynne, 1996; Cheal, 2002; Schultz & Lavenda, 2005; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Deborah Chambers (2012, p184) identifies and outlines five different 'types' of relationships: family based; friend based; partner based; neighbourhood based; and professional based (see also Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Each of these 'types' connote different expectations associated with each relationship, where they are considered to perform different roles and functions. These types exemplify how relationships are typically depicted in literature, therefore it is worth briefly exploring how they are defined, structured and differentiated by scholars.

The first 'type' highlighted above is referred to as either family or kinship (a categorisation that includes distant relatives and parent/ child relations), and is often presented as 'the main basis of relationships' by many scholars (Cheal, 2002, p62; see also Ferraro, 1992; Hicks & Gwynne, 1996). These relationships are defined by blood ties and are constructed based on historical connections, thus are perceived to be hard to leave and 'rigid' in nature (Allan, 1979; Giddens, 1992; Hicks

& Gwynne, 1996; Ferraro, 1992; Cheal, 2002). This rigidity often implies

permanence, where these relationships require little effort to continue (Argyle,

1992). Friendships differ in that they are perceived by scholars to be social

constructs rather than biologically determined and are thus entered voluntarily

(Allan, 1979; Allan, 1989; Giddens, 1992; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). As a result,

scholars argue that while these relationships are built on mutual acceptance and

interest, they are also fragile and subject to change or termination if circumstances

and perceptions alter (Allan, 1979; Allan, 1989; Giddens, 1992; Evans, 2003; boyd,

2006; Chambers, 2012). This fragility could be attributed to the lack of symbolic

gestures or rituals made in friendship: there is usually a public ceremony for

marriage, for instance, but no such ceremony exists in friendship (Allan, 1979). As a

result, some scholars argue that while romantic relationships are similar to

friendships in that they are socially bestowed concepts, they differ in that the

tendency in Western culture to encourage official ties (such as marriage) means

romantic relationships are much harder to end (Giddens, 1992; Hicks & Gwynne,

1996; Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Chambers, 2012). In this sense, the more committed a

romantic relationship becomes the more it resembles kinship in terms of its

expectation of permanence (Chambers, 2012). Neighbourly relationships also

reflect kinship in that they are typically unchosen, built on circumstance and

require little maintenance to be sustained. However, they are not expected to be

lifelong attachments and can be withdrawn from at any time (Chambers, 2012).

Similarly, professional relationships are typically developed under circumstantial

situations rather than entered voluntarily, require little effort to maintain, and can

be easily exited once one party decides to end the relationship (Cheal, 2002;

Chambers, 2012). The five main 'types' of relationships outlined above – plus their

main attributes and expectations as presented by scholars – are illustrated in Figure

1.
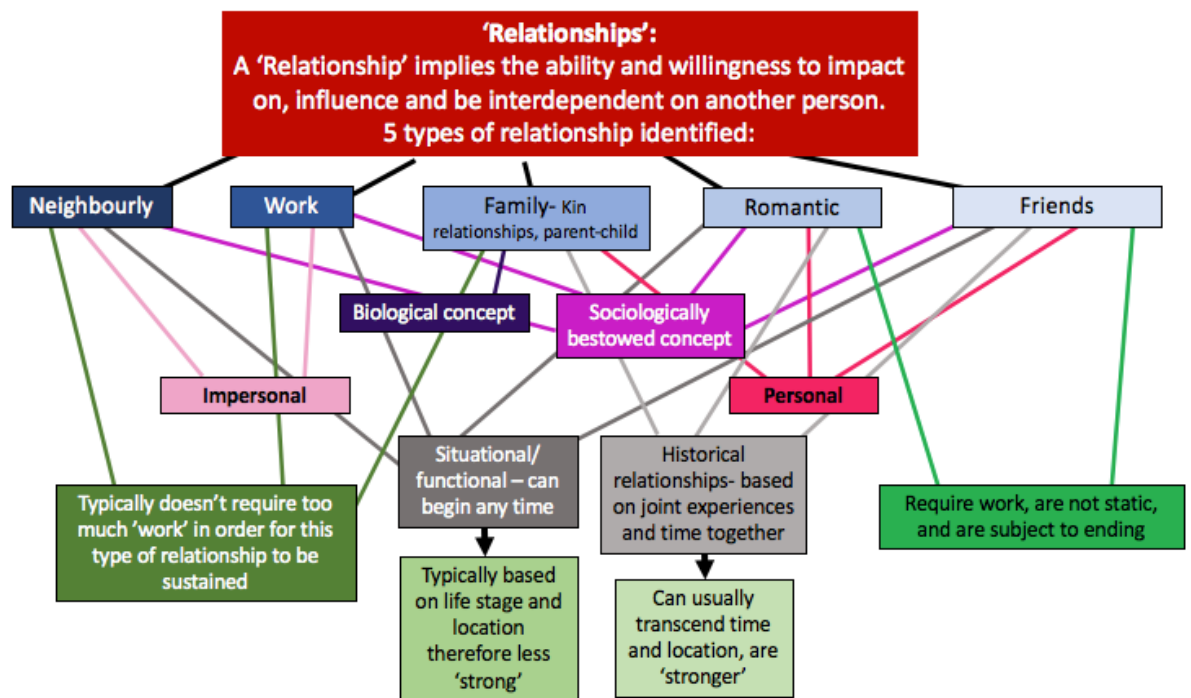
Figure 1 - Illustrative diagram of different 'types' of relationships and their nature.
Figure based on discussion from Allan, 1979, 1989; Giddens, 1991, 1992; Ferraro, 1992; LaFollette, 1996;
Cheal, 2002; Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Chambers, 2012. This diagram illustrates how multiple 'types' of
relationship may overlap with each other, sharing certain similarities as well as clear differences.

Understanding the nature of these different relationships – and how they are built,

maintained and ended – is pivotal for this thesis as it provides a theoretical context

for a number of the relationships that are examined in the following chapters.[4]

As Figure 1 demonstrates many of the characteristics of these relationships overlap,

with no one type standing completely apart from the others. In fact, it could be

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[4] While neighbourly relationships are mentioned here as they are included in academic discourses on relationships and provide further insight into how relationships may differ, they play no role in the Adults' Media Lives participants' interviews. Thus, they are only briefly explored here.

argued that these relationships share more commonalities than differentiators, implying that describing a relationship by 'type' alone is not enough to indicate its characteristics and distinguish it from other relationships. It has been argued by some scholars that only considering relationships in simple rigid categories could potentially omit the nuances and discrepancies that exist from relationship to relationship (Giddens, 1992; Evans, 2003; Parks, 2007). The structures outlined above focus on biological and social imperatives, often leaving out the emotional and personal aspects that could also motivate how and why an individual maintains a relationship. Therefore I will now consider further ways in which relationships are discussed in academia.

Relationship 'networks'

Rather than presenting relationships as existing in fixed categories, scholars such as Mark Granovetter (1973), Malcolm Parks (2007), Paul Wellman (2002) and Lee Rainie and Wellman (2012) argue that every individual develops their own personal network, composed of all the relationships they are partaking in. Wellman (2002, p1) argues that this stance moves away from the at times rigid titles outlined above, arguing that modern relationships are shifting 'from being bound up in homogenous "little boxes" to surfing life through diffuse, variegated social networks'. This stance maintains that all the 'types' highlighted above (i.e. kin, friends, partners, workmates and neighbours) exist within the same personal network (Wellman, 2002; Parks, 2007; Jarvis, 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Rozer et al, 2015). Within these networks lie close ties and weaker ties, which may shift depending on how the individual feels about the person in question and how 'close'

they are at any given time (El-Jarn, 2014). Thus, this argument deems the nature of

the relationship to be as integral to how it is conducted as the 'type' of relationship.

It implies that while the titles given to these relationship 'types' are still highly

relevant, they do not automatically determine how someone feels about the

relationship. Figure 2 utilises these theories to provide an illustrative example of

how an individual's network may look, with the individual at the centre and all of

their relationships shifting across the outer layers of the network.
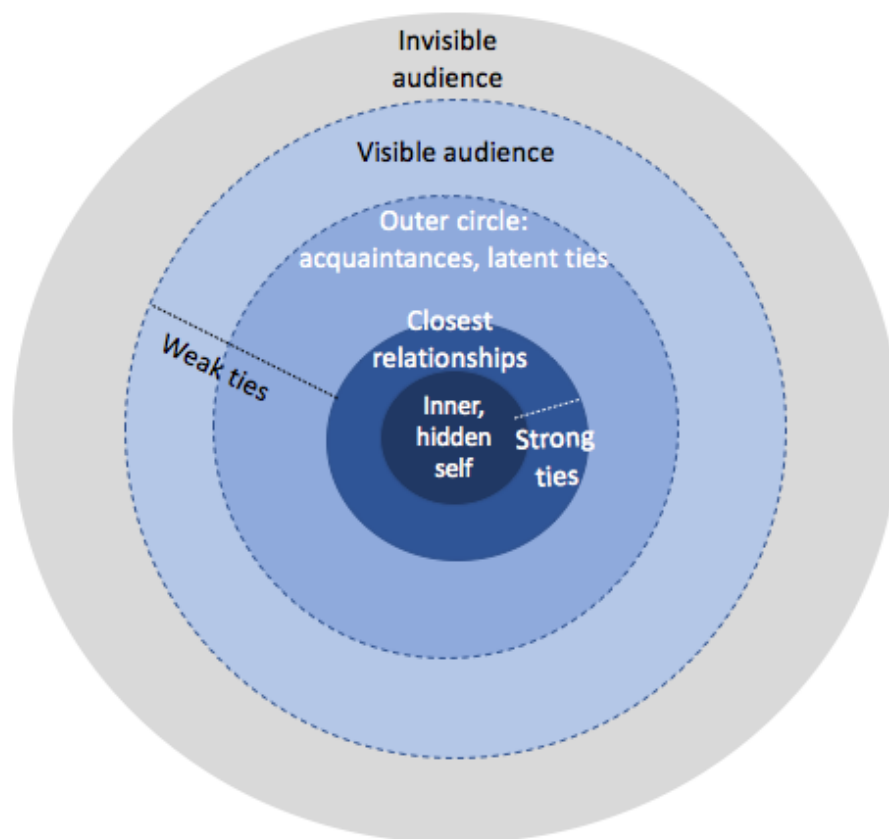
Figure 2 - Diagram illustrating how an individual's relationship network may be constructed. Figure based on theories from Granovetter, 1973; Feld, 1981; Dunbar & Spoors, 1995; Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Parks, 2007; Jarvis, 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; El-Jarn, 2014.[5]

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[5] The 'invisible' and 'visible' audiences shown in Figure 2 are reflective of the scholarly consensus that within and beyond every individual's network there are two types of audience: the 'visible', 'imagined' audience – who the individual is aware of and expects to be aware of their actions – and the 'invisible', 'unimagined' audience – who the individual does not necessarily know about (Gershon, 2010; Garde-Hansen, 2013; Meikle, 2016; Chambers, 2017). It is arguable that the rise of CMC has increased the potential for an unknown 'invisible' audience to observe an individual and their actions online, without

The dotted lines in Figure 2 illustrate the notion that relationships are permeable and subject to change: no relationships have a fixed place within these networks, but instead fluctuate as they develop (Wellman, 2002; Parks, 2007; Jarvis, 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). As such, relationships can move between the layers shown in Figure 2. For instance, scholars argue that as relationships grow emotionally closer they move towards the centre of the network and become a stronger tie; as they become emotionally distant they move further away from the centre (Wellman, 2002; Parks, 2007; Jarvis, 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; El-Jarn, 2014). It is not necessarily the label attributed to the relationship that determines where someone sits within an individual's network, but instead the nature of the relationship and level of interactions between two people (Granovetter, 1973; Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Parks, 2007). While the title attached to the individual may stay the same (i.e. a biological uncle will always be an uncle), their position in the network may alter over time. Conversely, while a title may alter (for example, a neighbour may become a friend after a house move), their position in the network may remain consistent. Scholars argue that relationships closer to the centre of a network are often there because the individual perceives this person to be a confidant, someone they can rely on and someone who they would be greatly upset to lose (Granovetter, 1973; Dunbar & Spoors, 1995; Chambers, 2013).[6] As a

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them knowing (Gershon, 2010; Garde-Hansen, 2013; Meikle, 2016; Chambers, 2017). This will be considered further in the following thematic chapters, particularly in Chapter 4 where I explore network management.

[6] 'Close' relationships are multi-faceted and positioned as being driven by a number of different desires, such as a want to spend time together; mutual and reciprocal

result, there is a general consensus in academic literature that relationships that

are closer to the centre of a network are more valuable to the individual and thus

they will work harder to nurture these relationships (Granovetter, 1973; Rosen,

2007; Turkle, 2011; Parks, 2007; Garde-Hansen & Gorton, 2013; Baym, 2015).

Relationships that are further from the centre of a network are less likely to be

perceived in this way, instead becoming friends that a person would share idle

gossip with, or distant acquaintances that they would greet in the street, but

nothing more (Dunbar & Spoors, 1995; Jarvis, 2011). [7]

Engaging with the concept of personal networks built on 'closeness' in this manner

is valuable for this thesis, as it illustrates how people may work to maintain certain

relationships while allowing others to drift further away. It also provides a

framework through which to consider how the use of CMC may also shape these

networks – something that is explored in great detail in this thesis. Scholars argue

that understanding relationships as working within networks is valuable for

exploring relationships and CMC use, as online relationships are often described as

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involvement; a want to share intimate, personal and revealing information; the ability/ want to influence the others' choices and decisions; and a shared history and desire for a future relationship (Allan, 1979; Kelley et al, 1983; Giddens, 1991, 1992; LaFollette, 1996; Cheal, 2002; Parks, 2007; Rosen, 2007; Chambers, 2012; Garde-Hansen & Gorton, 2013).

[7] Despite this perception, this does not mean that 'less close' relationships (also referred to as weak ties) are unimportant. In fact, Dunbar & Spoors (1995) argue that the majority of an individual's network is made up of these weaker ties, as a person can only successfully sustain a handful of 'close' relationships at once due to their emotional and time demands (see also Granovetter, 1973; Jarvis, 2011; Chambers, 2013; Rozer et al, 2015). It is argued by scholars that weak ties are also important for building networks and introducing individuals to a wider range of contacts (Granovetter, 1973; Parks, 2007; Rosen, 2007; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Chambers, 2013). Therefore, although the consensus in the literature is that 'close' relationships within networks are of greater value to the individual, it does not necessarily mean they are 'better' (Rosen, 2007; Chambers, 2013).

being part of 'networks' and understood to fluctuate in the manner outlined above

(Rosen, 2007; Chambers, 2012; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Garde-Hansen & Gorton,

2013). Thus, this thesis will consider all Adults' Media Lives' (AML) participants'

relationships as existing within their own personal networks, noting how and why

they may fluctuate over time and the role CMC plays in this.

Relationships and external factors

While the nature of relationships has been seen to alter over time as scholarly

debates have shifted their focus, academics also emphasise the importance of

acknowledging other influencing factors. Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992)

notes the importance of considering external factors when attempting to

understand the motivations behind what drives the nature of relationships.

Giddens (1991, 1992) coins the term 'pure relationship', which he defines as a

relationship that is built on personal desires rather than social imperatives,

emphasising the equal, mutual aspects of these relationships.[8] Giddens – along with

several other scholars – attributes this development in relationship nature to

numerous wider social changes, driven by shifting values and norms (Giddens,

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[8] Giddens elaborates on his definition of 'pure' relationships, arguing that they are not a permanent certainty, but instead relationships that are based on the wants and needs of an individual at that time, and that may end once the relationship is no longer appreciated (Giddens, 1991, 1992; see also LaFollette, 1996; Amit & Rapport, 2002; Chambers, 2012; Hobbs et al, 2016). Although scholars have noted that Giddens' emphasis on 'pure' relationships overlooks prevailing inequalities in relationships, such as gender inequalities in different cultures (see, for example, Chambers, 2006), this idealised concept at least further underscores the argument outlined in this chapter that relationships are fluid, dynamic and conditional, and that multiple factors were already motivating a change in relationships, prior to the growth of CMC use.

1991, 1992; Evans, 2003; Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Chambers, 2012, 2017; Quan-Haase et al, 2018). For instance, scholars argue that both the rise in gender equality and the increasing normalisation of opting to divorce, cohabit, live as single parents, or remain single and childless has allowed for fewer people to enter marriages or parenthood against their will (Giddens, 1991, 1992; Evans, 2003; Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Chambers, 2006, 2012; Hobbs et al, 2016).

Scholars also believe that globalisation has presented individuals with a wider array of relationship options, with individuals now able to travel, live and work abroad and thus widen their social circles (Kuper, 1992; Wellman, 2002; Schultz & Lavenda, 2005; Chambers, 2006, 2017; Giddens et al, 2015; Quan-Haase et al, 2018). This has only been amplified by the increasing usage of CMC, with scholars arguing that the introduction of CMC into daily lives has enabled individuals to 'meet' and form relationships with those they would never have encountered otherwise (see for example boyd, 2004, 2006, 2007; Chambers, 2006; Boellstorff, 2008; Turkle, 2011; Baym, 2015; Brown et al, 2020).

Scholars propose that these developing societal factors have allowed for greater freedom of choice over what kinds of relationships individuals can develop and with whom, thus changing the way they perceive and enact their relationships (Giddens, 1991, 1992; Kuper, 1992; Wellman, 2002; Evans, 2003; boyd, 2004, 2006, 2007; Schultz & Lavenda, 2005; Boellstorff, 2008; Turkle, 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Baym, 2015; Giddens et al, 2015; Chambers, 2017; Quan-Haase et al, 2018). This in turn has led to a rise in 'networked individualism', where the societal shifts away

from living in close-knit small communities allow individuals to engage with diverse networks across the globe and use the internet to develop numerous online networks based on shared interests and characteristics (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Chambers, 2017; Hampton & Wellman, 2018; Quan-Haase et al, 2018). Developments in portable technology, affordable internet and multiple CMC platforms further aid the networked individual in garnering more control over how they communicate with both existing and new relationships in multiple new contexts (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Hobbs et al, 2016; Hampton & Wellman, 2018; Quan-Haase et al, 2018).

This analysis provides insight into factors that could shape the types of relationships individuals enter and underscores the conclusion drawn above that contextual considerations need to be accounted for in any analysis of a relationship. Furthermore, this review introduces the idea that CMC has become a key contextual factor in relationship change, highlighting the importance of research into this topic. The rest of this chapter will explore existing debates on the connection between CMC and relationship formation and maintenance, exposing potentially problematic ways in which scholars discuss this dynamic and eventually concluding on an analytical lens to be utilised in the rest of this thesis.

Connecting online and offline relationships

When discussing CMC and relationships there is a tendency in some literature to present online relationships in comparison to offline relationships, implying that they are entirely separate entities that work independently (Parks, 2017). For instance, social scientist Sherry Turkle discusses 'how we are changing as technology offers us *substitutes* for connecting with each other face-to-face' (2011, p11, my emphasis), and Christine Rosen argues that 'in some vein, social networking sites are often convenient *surrogates* for offline friendship and community' (Rosen, 2007, p31, my emphasis). The use of language such as 'substitutes' (Turkle, 2011, p11), 'displaces' (Boellstorff, 2008, p29) and 'surrogate' (Rosen, 2007, p31) propel the narrative found in some literature that one form of relationship replaces the other (Turkle, 1984, 2011; Parks & Roberts, 1998; Rosen, 2007; Boellstorff, 2008; Long & Moore, 2013).

However, empirical research has indicated that many CMC users are using CMC to maintain existing ties, rather than using it to replace their offline relationships with new online ones (for example see boyd, 2007; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010; Lambert, 2013). For instance, in her qualitative study on the use of social networking sites (SNS), danah boyd (2007) found that most connections that individuals had and communicated with on MySpace were existing friends from offline spheres such as school or work. This theory has been reinforced by many other scholars exploring relationship building via CMC (such as Mendelson &

Papacharissi, 2010; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Chambers, 2013; Lambert, 2013; boyd, 2014; Baym, 2015; Miller et al, 2016; Miller, 2016). The implication here is that online and offline relationships do not exist entirely independently, but instead are often related and developed across both online and offline spheres via numerous different platforms.

In support of the stance that online and offline spheres are connected, some scholars argue that it is not a case of one replacing the other but instead that CMC is another means for facilitating relationships, where 'ICTs supplement – rather than replace – human contact' (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, p144; see also Capecchi, 2018; Sutcliffe et al, 2018). Nancy Baym (2015, p95) further illustrates this by arguing 'what happens through mediation is interwoven, not juxtaposed, with everything else'. This school of thought contends that CMC is not supplanting offline relationships with online ones but is instead simply offering another way for individuals to build and maintain them, even providing new opportunities for a relationship to be reinforced and strengthened (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Chambers, 2013; Parks, 2017; Baym, 2015; Quan-Haase et al, 2018; Sutcliffe et al, 2018).

I concur with the latter argument, maintaining that it is more suitable to present both offline and online communications as having the propensity to facilitate the same relationships, rather than as two separate elements that form two different

kinds of relationship. This thesis utilises longitudinal data to provide further insight into this dynamic, exploring how relationships are maintained across both on and offline means over time.

There is also a divide in how scholars present CMC's role in shaping relationships: some theories imply that CMC is influencing people's behaviour and thus their relationship formation and management (see, for example, Gergen, 2002; Rosen, 2007; Lanier, 2010; Jarvis, 2011). Conversely, other theories argue that it is the way that people *choose* to engage with CMC that is shaping their relationships (such as in literature by Baron, 2008; Gershon, 2010; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Chambers, 2013). This polarisation of views was a dividing narrative in media studies long before the rise of CMC, as scholars have long debated the extent to which media shapes people versus people shape media (Quan-Haase, 2015). Although this is too large a subject to try to cohesively conclude on within the confines of this thesis, these are pertinent debates to outline in this chapter as they provide context for some of the academic and mainstream narratives that exist around relationships and CMC usage (these debates will be addressed further in Chapter 5). I will not attempt to conclude on whether one is 'right' or 'wrong', but will address these different depictions in order to inform the tone I will use in my thesis when discussing this subject.

Determining how to present CMC and relationships

There are two broad manners in which academics tend to present this subject:
either noting how CMC use is shaping people and their relationships, or examining
how relationships and people are shaping CMC use.[9]

Position 1 – CMC shapes people

> The erosion of face-to-face community, a coherent and centred sense of
> self, moral bearings, depth of relationship […]. Such are the results of the
> development and proliferation of our major communication technologies of
> the past century (Gergen, 2002, p9).

One of the leading narratives presented in academic literature – usually in a
negative, alarmist manner – is that CMC is changing people and how they behave,
with particular emphasis on their relationships (see for example Gergen, 2002;
Rosen, 2007; Lanier, 2010; Jarvis, 2011; Turkle, 2011, 2015). Much of these
arguments derive from theoretical reviews, personal experiences and anecdotal
stories, as scholars observe changes and attribute them to the rise in CMC (Gergen,
2002; Rosen, 2007; Lanier, 2010; Jarvis, 2011). Other theories that support this

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[9] Many scholars often acknowledge and explore both aspects of CMC use in their literature
(see, for example, Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Chambers, 2013, 2017; Baym, 2015; Capecchi,
2018; Favotto et al, 2017; Favotto et al, 2019; Benvenuti et al, 2020), once again illustrating
the complex and diverse uses of CMC. Again, this section does not wish to ascertain the
'correct' approach to presenting CMC, but aims to examine how the complexities behind
CMC use have been considered thus far, determining the most appropriate theoretical lens
to discuss CMC use through in this thesis.

argument emerge from observations or from a comparison of a range of empirical studies conducted over time, providing credence to this point of view. Sherry Turkle, for example, develops her perceptions of CMC and relationships over a number of decades via a range of qualitative research and literature reviews (1984, 2011, 2015). As time progresses she shifts from a hopeful stance that anticipates CMC becoming a useful tool in society (Turkle, 1984) towards a more sceptical narrative, warning that CMC could be damaging user relationships (Turkle, 2011, 2015). Her main message was one of concern, warning that online communication is 'dumbing down' society, causing 'a wilful turning away from the complexities of human partnership' (Turkle, 2011, p6; see also Capecchi, 2018).

Turkle's concerned stance is not uncommon. The consensus across the literature explored in this section is that CMC is adversely changing how people engage with each other, communicate and perceive their relationships. Some scholars warn that the rise of CMC is preventing users from valuing close, meaningful relationships. They contend that it instead distracts users, causing them to neglect face-to-face communication and prioritise online relationships, focusing on more shallow, immediate aspects of communication (Caplan, 2003; Rosen, 2007; Lanier, 2010; Turkle, 2011, 2015). Jeff Jarvis (2011, p45) argues that CMC 'has changed the infrastructure of relationships. […] We are coming to rely on the idea that people we want to meet are a connection away', underscoring the theory that CMC usage has motivated users to expect more immediate forms of communication with whomever they wish to contact (see also Rosen, 2007; Chambers, 2013). Some argue that the availability and global use of CMC encourages people to enter and

end anonymous relationships online at will, creating a sense that online

relationships are less 'real' than those conducted offline (Parks & Roberts, 1998;

Jarvis, 2011; Turkle, 2011; Baym, 2015).

Furthermore, some scholars warn that CMC can even damage relationships that

were formed without the aid of this technology. Lindsay Favotto et al (2019) found

in their quantitative study of Canadian youths that CMC use was associated with

reports of increased loneliness. Psychologist Kenneth Gergen (2002) argues in a

theoretical article that the increasing use of media – especially CMC – has changed

users' perspectives on how existing relationships should be managed. As part of

this argument he coins the phrase 'absent presence', warning that the use of CMC

incites those who are physically present in someone's company to be emotionally

and mentally elsewhere, thus disengaged with the person in front of them (Gergen,

2002). Rainie and Wellman (2012, p102) also note Gergen's argument, stating that

'this can create awkward, annoying social discontinuities as people "leave" the

group they are physically a part of to take a call or respond to a text message from

someone afar' (see also Turkle, 2011; Baym, 2015).[10] Scholars argue that this in turn

could negatively shape the emotional closeness felt in these relationships (Gergen,

2002; Turkle, 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Baym, 2015).

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[10] Please note that Rainie and Wellman (2012) also counter Gergen's (2002) stance by noting how CMC also allows those who are physically absent to feel 'present', through online communication. This conflict of thought over how CMC use is altering how 'present' someone is in their interactions is returned to throughout this thesis.

Further to this, there is an argument in the literature that implies that CMC has

altered social protocols, forcing users to adopt a new set of social rules when

forming and maintaining relationships (Gershon, 2010; Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

Social networking sites are often identified by scholars as core platforms for

motivating changing relationship social norms. boyd has conducted extensive

research on social media (SM) usage, typically through qualitative interviews with

CMC users (2004, 2006, 2007, 2014; boyd & Donath, 2004). She argues through this

research that SM platforms such as Friendster, MySpace and more recently

Facebook have altered the way users perceive and enact their relationships. For

example, boyd contends that SNS have made it normal, even imperative, to publicly

display friendships online to others (e.g. through acts such as 'liking' or commenting

on content on Facebook or creating 'Top 8' friend lists on MySpace) (boyd, 2004,

2006, 2007, 2014; see also Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010; Lambert, 2013;

Chambers, 2013, 2017). In fact, boyd (2004, p4) perceives this to be an integral

behaviour on these platforms, arguing that 'the public nature of these sites *requires*

participants to perform their relationship to others' (my emphasis). Scholars

contend that this sense of requirement leads to others also adapting their online

behaviour so as not to feel left out or excluded by their friendship group (Rainie &

Wellman, 2012; Lambert, 2013). The implication is that 'this technological design

engineers particular kinds of sociality' (Chambers, 2017, p4), where SM settings

have motivated a shift in how users enact their relationships (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Lambert, 2013; Baym, 2015; Chambers, 2017).[11]

Finally, many believe that CMC and SM use is altering how people perceive and define their own relationships. For instance, scholars argue that the use of the word 'friend' on SM such as Facebook has challenged how people perceive their relationships, as different connections from different aspects of their lives are combined onto one platform (boyd, 2004, 2006, 2007; Rosen 2007; Turkle, 2011; Chambers, 2013, 2017; Meikle, 2016; Miller, 2016; Sutcliffe et al, 2018). boyd argues that SM has led to individuals engaging in 'friendships' with those they may not have otherwise sought out, purely to comply with this new trend for 'friending' and thus avoid an uncomfortable social situation (boyd, 2004, 2006, 2007; see also Lambert, 2013). This is furthered by arguments that CMC is driving a trend for users to engage in and maintain relationships with people they may have otherwise ceased to keep in touch with, motivating subsequent debates over whether or not this is a positive change (Boellstorff, 2008; Lambert, 2013; Chambers, 2013).

This example reinforces the narrative that CMC use is driving changes in the social norms surrounding relationships. Rather than the nuanced relationships depicted earlier in this chapter, online 'friends' cause a condensing of relationships into one, over-simplified category. The potentially harmful ramifications of this was

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[11] This thesis examines these changing norms in more detail, exploring how they are established and alter over time as new forms of CMC develop (this will be mainly discussed in Chapter 4).

illustrated by the now infamous SM platform Google Buzz, where in an effort to recreate personal networks online Google collapsed all of an individual's email contacts into one place, causing social chaos (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Responses to online network collapse will be examined throughout this thesis, as I explore how the AML participants struggled to adapt to these new online presentations of relationships.

The above section briefly explores some examples of the changes in relationships identified by scholars, for which CMC is often identified as the main cause. These changes have been illustrated in numerous studies on this subject (such as in the empirical work by Turkle, 1984, 2011; boyd, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2014; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010; Favotto et al, 2019). However, a number of the other points of view discussed in this section emerge from personal, anecdotal or theoretical viewpoints, where scholars have observed changes around them and directly attributed them to CMC (see, for example, Gergen, 2002; Rosen, 2007; Lanier, 2010; Jarvis, 2011). These arguments are compelling, however the lack of grounded evidence behind them casts doubt on how eligible their concerns truly are. Furthermore, CMC is often presented here as an almost active entity that stimulates people to behave in a certain manner, as neatly illustrated in a subheading in the first chapter of Jaron Lanier's book: 'the most important thing about a technology is how it changes people' (2010, p4).

The narratives discussed above offer useful insight into the role CMC may have in shaping relationships. However, rather than considering CMC as 'doing something'

to relationships, there are counter arguments that contend that it is people and the relationships they are in that actually shape how CMC has developed and been used over time. It is important to note that just as the above examples are not automatically 'anti- CMC', the below considerations are not inherently 'pro-CMC' (although there is arguably a tendency for these theories to present CMC in a more optimistic manner than the point of views outlined in the previous section). Instead, the following section presents academic views that position CMC as being available for people to use as they wish, whether positively or negatively.

Position 2 – People shape CMC

> People take technologies and use them in many ways – including some never dreamed of by their inventors (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, p65)

This section addresses how people are seen to utilise CMC to fulfil specific social needs. Scholars argue that there are numerous CMC platforms that users engage with to communicate with others, and that people are increasingly choosing which platform they wish to use, depending on the situation (Walther & Parks, 2002; Gershon, 2010; Turkle, 2011; Parks, 2017).

As CMC is able to transcend physical distance and create opportunities for relationships to be maintained over longer periods of time (Gergen, 1998; Couldry, 2012; Chambers, 2013; El-Jarn, 2014; Frolova, 2016a; Favotto et al, 2017; Brown et al, 2020), users adapt their behaviour in order to manage these different relationships. For example, video calling services such as Skype are considered a

prime type of synchronous communication for building a sense of intimacy between users, as both parties appear in the same 'place' at the same time to engage in focused conversation (Chambers, 2013). The ability to see a loved one's face, their non-verbal cues and their home also aids the development of closeness and intimacy (Chambers, 2013).

However, immediacy and intimacy are not always sought after in exchanges, and scholars maintain that users utilise other services to reflect this. Texting and emailing have been presented as forms of asynchronous communication that are useful for continuing communications over an extended period of time, where parties can respond as and when is convenient, and there is no immediate need to end a conversation (Gershon, 2010; Chambers, 2013). As relationships vary so too does the use of platforms: scholars note that other forms of communication such as instant messaging (via services such as WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger) have been adapted by users to be either synchronous or asynchronous, depending on how the users wish to use them at any given time (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Parks & Roberts, 1998; Gershon, 2010; Chambers, 2017). In this 'polymedia' environment, people are constantly making decisions regarding which form of media they wish to use to engage with different people or perform different types of communication (Miller et al, 2016; Miller, 2016).

In these instances, it is arguable that it is the user who is choosing to interpret the functions of CMC to utilise it in a way that best suits them and their relationship at any given moment (Walther & Parks, 2002; Gershon, 2010; Turkle, 2011). In her

qualitative study on how people utilise CMC during romantic break ups, Ilana

Gershon (2010, p49) argues that this personalised use of different CMC platform

functions has led to each person having their own 'media ideologies' that shape

how they feel about and use each platform. She argues that this in turn can lead to

a more generalisable pattern emerging for the 'role' and meaning that users

attribute to different platforms (Gershon, 2010; see also Turkle, 2011; Chambers,

2013). For example, Gershon (2010) argues that many of her sample deemed email

to be a formal, unemotional form of communication; a phone call to be a personal

form of communication for intimate conversation; and a group chat on instant

messaging services to be a social platform for group gossip or event planning. This

implies that while different CMC were created with the aim to facilitate certain

means of communication, it is the user who determines *how* different types of CMC

will be used and what social norms and etiquette will be applied to them (Quan-

Haase, 2015).[12]

Furthermore, scholars contend that users have adapted the content they create

and share on CMC to add further personalisation to their communication (Parks &

Floyd, 1996; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Baym, 2015). It is argued that one of the

primary reasons detractors initially denounced the rise of text-only CMC was the

belief that the lack of non-verbal cues could in turn lead to misunderstanding,

confusion and conflict (Walther & Parks, 2002; Walther et al, 2008; Gershon, 2010;

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[12]I will explore this concept in more detail in Chapter 4, examining how these expectations
and norms regarding different platforms develop over time as relationships are increasingly
enacted on different forms of CMC.

Turkle, 2011; Chambers, 2013; Baym, 2015; Meikle, 2016). However, scholars argue

that as people became accustomed to new technology and platforms, they also

adapted how they express themselves online. One example of this was the creation

of the smiley face using simple punctuation on keypads to express mood and

emotion to others (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Baym, 2015). This was very much a user-

driven adaption and has since been reflected by updates to CMC platform features,

through, for example, the long list of symbols and images (known as 'emojis')

available on texting and instant messaging applications (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Rainie

& Wellman, 2012; Baym, 2015). Once again, this exemplifies an occasion where

user behaviour drove CMC adaptations, not the other way around.

Further to this, scholars argue that CMC users utilise profiles on SM such as

Facebook to present varied versions of themselves and communicate with their

friends via numerous manners. This is achieved through filling in 'about me'

sections, carefully choosing the photos that they share and adopting a certain tone

in comments and statuses (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Walther & Parks, 2002; boyd, 2004,

2006, 2007; Jarvis, 2011; Chambers, 2013; Lambert, 2013; Baym, 2015; Giddens et

al, 2015; Brown et al, 2020). Scholars also argue that users are increasingly aware of

their online audiences, and adapt their behaviour online to appeal to/ avoid certain

audiences. For instance, Gershon (2010), Turkle (2011) and Meikle (2016) all

separately observe users utilising different SM platforms as a way of managing

different types of relationships. They argue that these users create a number of

separate profiles displaying different content and narratives with their potential

audience in mind (these often also allow for experimentations with different sides

of their personalities) (boyd, 2007; Turkle, 2011; Baym, 2015). This once again illustrates users adapting how they use CMC to manage their relationships and experiment with identity online.

Finally, scholars argue that people are utilising CMC as a means for controlling their relationships both on and offline. First of all, Naomi Baron (2008, p32) argues that people are using CMC as 'volume control' for their relationships (see also Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Baym, 2015). She contends that CMC use is allowing for people to engage with others as and when they wish, postponing conversations they do not wish to have at that moment or establishing an immediate conversation when desired (Baron, 2008; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Baym, 2015). Daniel Miller (2016, p100) refers to this use of CMC to control communication as scalable sociality, describing how users adopt a 'Goldilocks strategy' where 'social media both keeps people in contact and keeps them at a distance, which is nice'.[13] Scholars also note that this control via the use of SM also makes it possible to observe the behaviour of others. Chambers (2013, p22) argues that 'today's communication technologies now provide opportunity for individuals to trace, check on and link up with intimate and loose networks through a range of channels' (see also Haartman, 2008; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). This implies that CMC use has presented users with more means through which to watch or engage with others (through, for example, friending

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[13] Miller (2016) also argues that this need to set boundaries between private and public, available and unavailable, is a behaviour that is distinctly English (i.e. it was most prevalent in the findings from their ethnographical fieldwork in England (see also Miller et al, 2016). I further explore how and why the AML participants scale their use of CMC to manage relationships in Chapter 4.

someone on Facebook and looking through their profile to note their online activities). Gershon (2010) argues that this could have negative repercussions, with romantic partners in particular utilising CMC to become obsessed with viewing content shared by loved ones (see also Brown et al, 2020).

In this sense, the new levels of relationship control found via CMC could be either positive or negative – again, it is how people choose to use it that is the crucial factor here. This thesis examines the extent to which AML participants assign meaning to different devices and platforms, why they do this, and how this behaviour may differ from participant to participant and across different relationships.

Repositioning the narrative

The above discussion considers the different manners in which scholars have presented the use of CMC. On the one hand, its growing use has been positioned as drastically altering how people conduct their relationships, where users seemingly have little control over how to manage their online interactions. On the other hand, scholars argue that people have utilised the varied affordances of CMC over time to manage a range of different relationships via multiple forms of communication, using CMC to reflect the level of closeness and type of contact they desire. This thesis will consider both the positive and negative aspects of using CMC in relationships, strongly upholding that this is a complex form of communication that

cannot be presented as simply being 'better' or 'worse' for relationships (Favotto et al, 2017; Benvenuti et al, 2020). In fact, the polarity in discussion here is generally related to the level of autonomy CMC is credited with in literature, rather than a difference in opinion over how 'good' CMC is for relationships. Thus it is worth briefly considering the different theoretical stances on where agency should be placed, in turn establishing the stance that I wish to use in this thesis.

The narrative that CMC is harming relationships (Gergen, 2002; Rosen, 2007) has been accused of being technologically deterministic, as it implies that technology is directly causing certain behaviour (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Chambers, 2013; Baym, 2015; Quan-Haase, 2015). Technologically deterministic claims are widely disputed, as they provide technology with agency and overlook the role of external agents such as personal, societal and cultural factors. The insinuation that technology *does something* to people is therefore avoided in this thesis, where instead I chose to focus on people's *use* of technology and CMC.

The opposite of technological determinism is often positioned as social determinism, where social factors are attributed to 'creating specific uses of technology' (Quan-Haase, 2015, p48; also referred to as 'social constructivism' by Baym, 2015, p49). Although this offers credence to my earlier conclusion that acknowledging social contexts is key in exploring the use of CMC, this stance has also been critiqued for again assigning too much credit to one specific influencer (in this case, social factors) (Baym, 2015).

Finally, Quan-Haase (2015) outlines a third viewpoint: instrumentalism. This stance considers technology as a 'neutral tool' used by people in the manner that benefits them (Quan-Haase, 2015, p49). This point of view is valuable as it acknowledges that personal choice is a factor behind usage, attributes users with agency and removes autonomy from CMC and technology. However, the assumption that users have complete power over their use of technology disregards the influence of numerous potential social pressures to adopt and use new technology.

Therefore, I argue that it is beneficial to consider CMC use in a manner that allows for the consideration of numerous potential influencing factors. In this thesis I adopt Baym's (2015) 'middle ground' that she refers to as 'social shaping', where 'the consequences of technologies arise from a mix of "affordances"' and 'people, technologies, and institutions all have power to influence the development and subsequent use of technology' (Baym, 2015, p54-55; see also Capecchi, 2018). Adopting this stance allows for a number of wider and often overlapping factors to be considered in this thesis when discussing the connection between relationships and CMC, ensuring that an array of contextual issues are considered.

Conclusion

This literature review has considered established perceptions and definitions of relationships, how these have changed over time as social norms have also altered,

and finally how scholars have again reconsidered relationships as the use of CMC has risen over time. The key arguments that have been presented in this chapter were utilised to inform the research presented in this thesis in three core ways.

First, this literature review shapes how relationships were considered in the analysis and discussed in the following chapters: they are presented as dynamic, fragile entities that are constantly changing as socio-cultural attitudes also shift. Exploring them through this lens ensures that the nature of a relationship is not taken for granted in this analysis, and external factors are always considered. Secondly, this review informs how relationships 'in real life' and relationships via CMC are discussed: the two will be presented as being interwoven and working alongside each other, rather than juxtaposed as separate entities, where one replaces the other.

Finally, this review establishes the context through which CMC's role in the shaping of relationships is presented. CMC is understood as a tool that is used by people to facilitate their relationship maintenance (rather than as a force that independently impacts on people's relationships), with this usage also being driven by a range of socio-cultural factors. As Megan Brown et al (2020, p56) note, 'ICTs are complex in nature, and the subjective interactions require analysis within the individuals' goals and the broader relationship context'. This emphasis on considering both wider and personal contexts has been evident throughout this review and will remain critical in how the findings from this study are presented in this thesis.

Through longitudinal analysis this thesis provides a deeper insight into the cyclical role of CMC use in relationship maintenance over time. Furthermore, the depth of the AML interviews and the ability to observe the same people over a number of years allows me to provide a new insight into CMC's use in relationships while taking other social factors (such as personal factors like a divorce or a house move, and wider cultural factors such as the recession) into account. This thesis utilises the longitudinal data to observe relationship fluctuations over time alongside changes in technology and CMC usage, providing a deeper understanding of how the two may intersect and work alongside each other. This methodology will now be examined in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 - Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the methodological approach adopted in this thesis. For my research I predominantly used qualitative data from Ofcom's Adults' Media Lives (AML) longitudinal dataset. I also used quantitative data from their Media Literacy and Media Use and Attitudes reports to complement my qualitative analysis.

This chapter begins by revisiting Ofcom, their remit, and why they do research. I introduce the core project I used for my research – Adults' Media Lives (AML) – from the perspective of both Ofcom and The Knowledge Agency (the market research agency who conducted the research), discussing how and why the project was created. I then explain how I came to collaborate with Ofcom, using their data to conduct my own research project. Following this I provide a more thorough summary of the analytical approach I used to conduct my exploration into how computer mediated communication (CMC) connects with relationships. I then devote a section to introducing and discussing the participants I included in this thesis. In the final sections of this chapter I consider some of the limitations of my methodological approach, how I overcame them, and the unique benefits of my methodology.

Methodological context

In order to provide further context to this methodology section, I conducted semi-structured interviews with two researchers who played significant roles in the AML project: Alison Preston from Ofcom, and Mark Ellis from the market research agency The Knowledge Agency.[14] I approached Alison and Mark for these interviews as they both have unique insights into this project. Both were involved in AML from the beginning: Alison as a member of the research team at Ofcom; Mark as the Director of The Knowledge Agency, who were procured to conduct the fieldwork. Thus they both offer invaluable insight into the reasons for, conduction of and outcomes from AML, providing detailed context for my own methodology.

I interviewed Alison on 2nd April 2019 at the Ofcom Headquarters in London, and Mark via a Skype video call on the 10th February 2020. Alison's interview lasted for 21 minutes 44 seconds; Mark's interview was 59 minutes 2 seconds. The disparities in interview style and methodology were due to time and availability constraints: in order to be able to discuss AML with Mark and Alison I needed to be flexible with when, where and for how long I conducted these interviews. I prepared discussion guides for both interviews (please see Appendix 1), but adapted the questions as and where relevant. For example, while I focused on discussing the research process with Mark, I spent more time asking Alison about Ofcom's motives for beginning AML. This allowed for a well-rounded insight into both the client and the

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[14] Both Alison and Mark were provided with participant information sheets and consent forms before their interviews. They were given time to ask any questions they may have, and gave permission for their names to be used in this thesis.

consultant's perceptions of the methodology and the outcomes of the study. The content from these interviews was used to provide context for this methodology chapter. Much of the background provided in this chapter was garnered from these interviews, with quotes from Mark and Alison utilised to illustrate points.

Ofcom and Adults' Media Lives

Before I talk about *my* methodology, it is important to explore what AML is, how it began and how it is currently conducted. AML is a longitudinal project consisting of annual in-home in-depth interviews with the same participants. At the time of writing AML is still an active, ongoing project, with fieldwork taking place every October. AML began in 2005, but under a different name (called Media Literacy: Setting the Scene, please see below), and not as a longitudinal project. The project was commissioned shortly after Ofcom was created as a regulatory board in 2004. As part of the 2003 UK Communications Act, Ofcom are expected to research and promote media literacy (Ofcom, 2020a). Alison noted that her department were provided with funding, and that Ofcom wanted to use that funding to develop an understanding of people's existing media literacy, in order to be able to promote it:

> …It was felt that it would be most helpful to focus on beginning tracking and understanding people's actual media literacy so that we then knew what the landscape looked like and so on. *Alison, Ofcom*[15]

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[15] The professional interviews with Alison and Mark were 'cleaned up', i.e. stumbles, pauses, changing of mind mid-sentence, etc. were removed from the quotes used in this

Ofcom valued mixed-methodological approaches – where both qualitative and quantitative studies were conducted to inform each other – as a means for garnering a cohesive understanding of use and attitudes with media. This qualitative approach was introduced to supplement quantitative studies that already existed at the time in order to provide a 'richer and deeper understanding of why people are doing the things that they said they'd done and the reasons behind their attitudes' (Alison, Ofcom).

The Knowledge Agency were greatly involved in the initial set up of AML, and have continued to work on the project since its beginning. Although the project was not initially intended to be longitudinal, Mark noted that the shape of the project as it began in 2005 was very similar to how it is now, with the biggest change involving alterations in the sample:

> The first [year of the study] was called 'Media Literacy: Setting the Scene', and then we did 'Re-setting the Scene' in October 2006, and then obviously there's been one every October since. By far the biggest change between that 2005 wave and 2006 wave – we changed quite a lot of the sample first of all. The methodology evolved somewhat [and became] much more centred around the individual.   *Mark, The Knowledge Agency*

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chapter. This was because these elements of discussion were not deemed relevant for the quotes in this chapter, and ensured that the quotes here are readable and succinct.

Mark alluded to sample changes in the above quote: these will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, where I consider the overall AML sample and the specific sample I used for my own study. The changes here refer to the removal of some participants in the sample who were considered less 'camera-worthy' (in terms of their ability to articulate their thoughts and attitudes in front of a camera) and the recruitment of new participants who were deemed better suited to the filmed element of the project, as well as fitted with wider demographic sample specifications. Again, this will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Both the research agency and Ofcom shaped how the project altered as it moved from a one-off study into a longitudinal study. As Mark noted, the AML fieldwork was conducted every year in October. Prior to each wave of fieldwork the agency and Ofcom worked together to produce a discussion guide for each wave. This was edited year-on-year, based on wider cultural and technological changes that were pertinent at the time. The agency also reconnected with participants during the year prior to the fieldwork phase, arranging dates and locations for interviews.[16]

Once the time and place for each in-depth interview was confirmed with participants, Mark and other consultants from The Knowledge Agency began the fieldwork. They aimed to revisit the same participants each time, so as to ensure continuity. This also allowed for a relationship to be built between interviewer and

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[16] This connection throughout the year was essential as while the aim was to conduct the interviews in-home, some participants relocated during the year over the course of the study. In 2016, for instance, the in-depth interview with participant Julia (pseudonym – all participant names in this thesis are pseudonyms, to protect identity) was conducted via Skype as she worked abroad for a year.

participant, ensuring participant comfort during the interviews (this relationship will be examined in more detail below). Each interview was filmed by either the interviewer or a separate cameraperson. The filming element was a crucial part of the study, as the footage from each interview was used not only in the analysis but also as a means for debriefing the findings from each wave back to Ofcom via edited montages. Mark noted the manner in which the capturing, storing and sharing of the video footage changed over the years, saying:

> It's got more sophisticated and the volume of data has got bigger, but effectively the same [method has been used, of] taking each interview, identifying 20-30 interesting clips from that, and then creating a database and constructing those scenes in different ways – that really started in 2006. In 2005 it was a bit more a kind of 'we've done a bunch of interviews and just here are a bunch of themed montages'. […] We don't have '[Daniel] individual videos 2005', we just have [themed montages of clips, such as] 'motives for' which featured a bunch of other [participants and content]. The kind of intellectual framework if you like for doing it was slightly different. 2006 onwards it's been effectively the same consistent model it's been now.   *Mark, The Knowledge Agency*

Mark was referring here to the online catalogue of clips from each participants' interviews that Ofcom and associates (such as myself) can access. The only footage available from 2005 – 2007 was in the form of edited montages of combined themes from a number of participants' interviews. From 2008, it was possible to

examine clips from each individuals' interviews separately, as well as view themed

montages in the debrief sessions held between Ofcom and The Knowledge Agency.

This will again be addressed in more detail below, as I examine my own

methodology.

Once fieldwork, analysis and video editing were complete, The Knowledge Agency

would debrief their findings in an annual face-to-face meeting with Ofcom. They

then produced reports on that year's findings, which were circulated within

Ofcom's research team and used to inform other research projects. They were also

then shared with other teams within the organisation, where certain findings may

have been of interest to a specific department. From this, further questions or

areas of interest would arise, which Ofcom would then feedback to the agency to

inform the next wave of AML.

Building relationships with academia

As AML developed into a longitudinal project that eventually spanned a number of

years, Alison noted that Ofcom felt that it would be beneficial for an external party

to undertake an analysis of the data generated over time. Undertaking a secondary

analysis of qualitative data is a growing method across a range of disciplines and

topics, due to 'general trends promoting openness and sharing' (Bishop, 2016, p

395). Libby Bishop (2016) notes that secondary analysis does not equate with

second-class quality, and that it can in fact add to a field of interest. This is

especially the case during re-analysis, where:

Re-analysis asks new questions of the data and makes different interpretations from the original researcher. It approaches the data in ways that were not originally addressed, such as using data for investigating different topics of study (Bishop, 2016, p397).

Alison noted that Ofcom and the research agency could only perform limited analysis on the findings each year, as they were unable to dedicate the time and resources to analysing the data longitudinally. As such, Ofcom decided to open up the data to academia so that time and focused resources could be committed to a longitudinal analysis on the dataset. Alison also felt that an academic point of view would allow for a more cohesive examination of the data, providing a fresh insight from a different industry:

It was the idea that we're sitting on this dataset that was unique, and it's you know a unique slice of social history, and we're not able to do that much with it, and so yes, if academics can [utilise it] that would be a good thing.   *Alison, Ofcom*

Mark reiterated this, claiming that his role as part of the agency was to provide findings from each year, and while they made the occasional reference to previous waves where applicable, they were unable to conduct a detailed longitudinal exploration of their findings:

The idea of someone who's not got the same kind of constraints on their

time, being able to pour over things [is a positive]. So for example I would

never have time to go back through old interviews from each year, however

interesting it might be [...]. A fresh set of eyes is great, and someone

potentially approaching it with an academic researcher's mindset, and

therefore a slightly different point of view to the kind of stuff where I come

from and my own experience in my analysis, is all positive.

Mark, The Knowledge Agency

As such, the University of Nottingham and Ofcom worked together to create a

Collaborative Doctoral Award where the analysis of Ofcom's longitudinal datasets

would be the prime focus of the research.

Method of analysis

I approached this project aiming to examine how the use of digital media had

changed relationships over time. I was fortunate to have access to Ofcom's dataset

in order to conduct this examination, as longitudinal methodologies are widely

considered to be the most effective means of studying change (Singer & Willett,

2003; Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010; Thomson et al, 2018). As mentioned, I initially

proposed a mixed-methodology approach. I envisaged combining the qualitative

AML dataset with findings from Ofcom's longitudinal quantitative datasets (such as

the Technology Tracker, which observes technology changes and use, and Adults

Media Use and Attitudes, which examines UK usage and attitudes year-on-year

across a range of media). This section will examine the challenges that emerged during this research process, how they led to changes in my approach, and the final methodology that I adopted.

Establishing existing Ofcom findings

Before I began to analyse the raw data, I spent a number of months reading through existing reports generated by The Knowledge Agency and Ofcom during the research period. This was for two reasons. First of all, I wanted to establish an understanding of what insight had been garnered so far. In doing this, I was able to note the extent to which there was data relevant to my area of interest (i.e. that relationships were an evident theme in some way, even if they were not a focus). Secondly, I wanted to make sure that my area of research had not already been exhaustively studied and I would be able to offer a new angle of insight by analysing this subject. While I wanted to confirm that the content was actually present in the data, I was keen to ensure that my research would be original and impactful for both Ofcom and in academia.

During this time I also conducted an extensive literature review, examining existing research into relationships and digital media. I initially kept my area of interest very broad, focusing on an array of media and different relationships. This was again to build an understanding of what currently existed in the field, what was missing and where I could provide unique insight. This means that I entered the study with a deductive approach, where I undertook 'a thorough search of a broad range of

literature before choosing [my] own specific area of study' (Harding, 2013, p12).
However, as Jamie Harding (2013) also notes, this process is often not this clear-cut
in practise, as I approached *the data* in an inductive manner. The literature review
gave me an overall understanding of the field and what topics I could study, but did
not generate research questions that guided me through to the end of my thesis
(Harding, 2013). It was the findings from the data that eventually motivated my
overall focus and areas of interest, and drove me back to conduct more literature
reviews. I undertook a dynamic process of moving between the data and literature
and back to the data, crafting themes and foci as I conducted the analysis and even
after I began writing. This is discussed below, where I detail my analysis process.

Qualitative analysis

Once I had examined existing research (both from scholars and the research teams
involved with Ofcom) I began my own analysis of Ofcom's data, starting with AML.
While The Knowledge Agency had created the online archive of themed clips from
each years' in-depth interviews, it was imperative that I had access to the full,
unedited videos, wherever possible. This was the unique differentiator for my
project as these full videos are not publicly available or easily studied by other
researchers, and allowed for a deeper analysis of the participants' interview
footage. While the online clips provided instant access to themes and patterns in
conversation, they did not give a detailed insight into the personal developments of
participants each year, or the nature of their relationships. As the focus of my
research was very much on these relationships, it was essential that I gained access

to the 'in-between' moments of conversation, where participants discussed their loved ones and changes in living circumstances, in potentially less 'camera-worthy' conversation. As noted above by Mark, in the early years of the study I could only access montages of edited clips, rather than full videos. I accessed these through the online archive, but only when this was the only option. I ensured that I observed the full, unedited videos wherever possible. These were supplied to me by Ofcom on a password-encrypted hard drive.

In order to engage with the data I used two laptops – a Windows laptop rented from the University of Nottingham and my own personal MacBook – to begin viewing and transcribing the video footage. I viewed the videos on the Windows laptop (as the hard drive was incompatible with my MacBook), transcribing on the MacBook as I went. This was a time-consuming process, as I was keen to watch the videos as well as transcribe. Observation of the participant allows for a deeper connection to be drawn between participant and researcher and for themes to be recognised, especially when conducting secondary analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Silverman, 2020). Although I was not planning to conduct a content analysis or to include analysis of non-verbal cues in my study, I felt this observation was an important step in feeling closer to the participants (especially as they were filmed in-home), thus building a greater longitudinal understanding of their personal context. This observation meant that elements of my research approach bore certain similarities to that of an ethnographer, who is interested in 'observing people in their 'natural' settings' (Harding, 2013, p15; Gobo & Marciniak, 2016; Silverman, 2020). These similarities will be discussed in more detail below. Rather

than creating verbatim transcriptions that noted the intonation, pauses, stuttering etc. of participants that would be more fitting to a conversation analysis (Davidson, 2009), I prioritised the capture of key themes and quotes while transcribing. While this meant that I did not end up with professional standard transcriptions, it allowed me to observe while typing, speed up the transcription process and ensure that I could commit more time to a thematic analysis.

For the 2005, 2006 and 2007 interviews, i.e. where I only had access to the online archive clips that were part of an edited montage, I watched all the content that I could access. These montages were titled by themes, such as 'Understanding' and 'Creative', giving an indication of the topic of discussion. I tried to disregard these category titles as much as was possible, as I was keen to approach the data from as 'pure' a perspective as possible, and not transcribe and later theme the data with pre-existing notions of how to create my categories. This was surprisingly easy to do, given how general the titles applied to each category were and the fact that the study and its aims had altered since these early years. I avoided the online clips altogether when I had access to the full unedited videos. Again, this was to escape being influenced by someone else's pre-determined categorisations, and to allow myself to form my own themes based on my own analysis.

Given the volume of qualitative data and the option to approach the datasets from a number of angles (e.g. I could analyse the data year-on year, participant-by-participant, topic-by-topic, etc.), I adopted a system for observing and transcribing the videos from the offset. I decided to analyse the data in a manner that focused

on each participant one at a time. At the beginning I selected participants to focus

on based on who I knew had been in the study for a long time (thus would generate

a substantial longitudinal analysis), but became more demographically- focused

towards the end (for instance at one stage I chose to focus on the youngest

participants in succession). This will be examined in more detail below when I

discuss the sample. I would then observe and transcribe all of the individuals' video

footage over time. So, for instance, I watched Mary's[17] edited clips from 2005 –

2007 (transcribing her sections as I went), and then observed and transcribed the

unedited video footage from each of her interviews from then on. This system

allowed for me to become acquainted with the participant as they changed and

aged year-on-year. It helped me gain a deep insight into their personal contexts,

where I could observe their responses to personal changes as well as wider social,

cultural, economic and technological changes.

Once I had completed this initial observation and transcription of each participant, I

wrote a reflective report on who they were and their experiences during the

process. I noted what major changes – or consistencies – happened during their

time in the study, both personally and technologically. This was to ensure that I

considered and collated their key personal themes and experiences, providing me

with a concise summary of each participant to return to throughout my analysis

and writing up of the thesis. I then entered the transcripts into coding software

NVivo 11, supplied by the University of Nottingham. The use of such software when

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[17] All participant names used throughout are pseudonyms, to protect their identity.

managing large qualitative datasets is acknowledged and encouraged by some scholars, as it aids efficiency and organisation (Nowell et al, 2017).

While there are many diverse uses for NVivo, I chose to use it for collecting my numerous transcripts into one place, and then conducting a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is considered by researchers to be a simple yet underrated form of qualitative analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Nowell et al, 2017). It is seen as especially beneficial when managing a large dataset such as AML, as it allows for overarching themes to be coded, and then sub themes to also be generated (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Harding, 2013; Nowell et al, 2017). NVivo 11 was invaluable during this analysis process as it allowed for easy editing of the codes that were generated, and thus a flexible analysis that could be built on over time.

Once I had completed the observation and transcription of one participant, I uploaded all of the interview transcripts into NVivo and began my thematic analysis. This involved re-reading each transcript and coding each theme that I observed. Sometimes I would note areas that were of interest but not immediately apparent under a specific theme. Thus at this early stage I had numerous codes with an array of headings, ensuring that I was open to different areas of interest and not restricting myself. Over time I adopted a dynamic approach to the data where I repeatedly returned to the video footage and transcripts as I formed the themes and narrowed down my overall area of interest (Boyatzis, 1998; Nowell et al, 2017).

After completing this process for one participant, I moved onto another participant and started again. Once I had completed this for three or four participants, I would halt the process and scrutinise the themes I had saved in NVivo. I studied how they worked alongside each other, what recurring themes were evident and thus could be collapsed, and what new themes had developed as I had studied more participants. I would use this opportunity to re-name and organise my codes in NVivo, ensuring that the themes were clear, self-explanatory and informed my findings (Harding, 2013). Once I finished this stage, I created a thematic report, based on the findings from the three or four participants studied. This was a process that helped me gather my key findings and consider how they aligned with and built on existing research. These reports were shared with my PhD supervisors: scholars contend that an important part of coding and thematic analysis is 'peer debriefing', i.e. consulting another researcher on your findings thus far and using this process to reflect and inform the next stage (Nowell et al, 2017, p3; see also Harding, 2013; Richards, 2015).

Overall I conducted five rounds of this process and created five reports, using data from 18 participants. The first report consisted of analysis of participants Mick, Elizabeth, Daniel and Denise; report two covered Sheila, Dai, Julia and Jenny; the third report included Donald, Cathy, Eleanor and Mary; the fourth report covered Chloe, Tim and Robert; and the final report studied Dean, Sally and Peter.[18] This

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[18] As noted above, the order of analysis on participants was for the most part random, but initially driven by the time participants had spent in the study. This altered by report 3, where I chose to study the oldest participants, and report 4 where I examined the youngest participants. This was because I had noticed some patterns related to age, and wanted to examine these further.

analysis and reporting process took place between October 2017 and May 2018.

Adopting a systematic approach such as this is considered to increase accuracy and

sensitivity to the context of the dataset, and is prioritised in thematic analysis

(Boyatzis, 1998). Each thematic report shaped the next, as I finetuned themes over

time and became aware of overarching patterns in the data. By the end of this

process, I was able to return to NVivo and reshape my themes in a clearer, more

defined manner that incorporated all the relevant insight from all participant

interviews.[19]

As mentioned earlier, this process was both deductive and inductive. Lorelli Nowell

et al (2017, p4) emphasise that this is common in thematic analysis, where rather

than being a linear procedure 'it is actually an iterative and reflective process that

develops over time and involves a constant moving back and forward between

phases'. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006, p4) argue that one of the main

benefits of thematic analysis is its 'flexibility', and the fact that it is not restricted to

one specific stage of a linear research process. I began my research by informing

myself of the existing academic field, generally researching literature on

relationships and media. I read literature from numerous different academic

disciplines during this stage of research, including media studies, sociology,

anthropology and psychology. This helped me form an idea of leading scholars in

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[19] At this stage of the research process I had only been supplied with data up until the 2016 wave of AML (as I began my study in 2016). Whilst on secondment at Ofcom in Spring 2019 (a role that was part of my Collaborative Doctoral Award) I was supplied with the unedited videos from the 2017 and 2018 waves, so was able to add them to my dataset, using the same methodology to establish new insight from the final two years of the project.

the field and general schools of thought. However, my study was also inductive in that I ensured my analysis was very much data-driven (Nowell et al, 2017). I regularly returned to my transcripts and occasionally to the video footage, revisiting 'older' footage as new themes came to light. I was flexible with my aims and research questions: I allowed these to form as I conducted my analysis and did not go in with set hypotheses to prove or disprove.

This approach meant that I allowed my focus to change as I became more intimate with the data. I initially set out to examine 'digital media', however as I became increasingly knowledgeable about the changing media landscape and how participants were using technology, I chose to narrow my area of interest down to computer mediated communication (CMC). I had initially expected romantic relationships to be a core area of focus during this study, but during the analysis realised that these particular participants primarily discussed friendships, familial and work relationships. Finally, repeatedly returning to my data meant that my overall thesis layout and chapter design continually developed during and after I had finished my initial analysis.

Allowing for a degree of flexibility when analysing the AML data was crucial. My focus on an ever-changing technological field meant that it was essential that I continually updated my understanding of academic literature as it was published during my research period, and used this to shape my arguments. Furthermore, the

very nature of the research, where I was studying change across numerous contexts, meant that it could have been detrimental to be too rigid in my approach. Thus I ensured that I remained flexible and open to changing themes as I continued my studies.

Quantitative analysis

While the qualitative longitudinal data was very much my primary dataset, I also studied the quantitative data produced by Ofcom. As mentioned, before I began my own analysis I read existing Ofcom publications. This included reports from their quantitative Adults' Media Use and Attitude (formally known as Media Literacy Audit) and Technology Tracker studies (Ofcom, 2020c, 2020f). These were also longitudinal studies, running from 2005 onwards.

During my qualitative analysis I noted a number of instances where statistical information would be useful for adding context or further insight. For example, as I saw attitudinal and reported behavioural differences emerging between the older and younger participants, I became interested in examining whether or not this age discrepancy was evident on a larger, quantitative scale. Upon completing my qualitative reports and noting areas where quantitative insight would be useful, I compiled these notes into an Excel spreadsheet. This spreadsheet included the themes and sub-themes I had identified, what I would like to gain from the

quantitative data regarding these themes, and where I would be able to find that data (i.e. which Ofcom study may have generated such insight).

I then began to attempt to source the quantitative data from its original, raw datasets. This provided much more of a challenge than accessing the qualitative data, for a number of reasons. First of all, there were inconsistencies regarding how the data was gathered, challenging the longitudinal analysis that I wished to conduct. The method for collecting the data had changed over time, with some years having multiple waves, others only having one wave, and on some occasions the study was only conducted every two years. This made it difficult to provide a consistent year-on-year analysis.

Furthermore, the changing technological landscape during this time meant that a number of the questions in the survey had altered (in terms of their phrasing and the types of platform/ device that were included in the question) – sometimes drastically – again making a year-on-year comparison of answers challenging.

Finally, the method used for storing the quantitative data had also changed over the years, where the data was located in different online locations (from the Ofcom website to the National Archives) and in a number of different formats. This was especially an issue when attempting to access data from the early years of the research period: often on locating a dataset I discovered that the data was in an unreadable format, and sometimes even titled under the wrong year/ name. Each

of these issues presented huge challenges before I even had a chance to begin a new quantitative analysis.

During this time I continued to re-visit the qualitative reports I had generated and further explored themes and areas of interest. This process led to the continued uncovering of new areas to consider, cementing my sense that there was already a vast array of existing themes to cover for my specific research. Thus, I made the decision to change my initial methodology, placing more focus on the qualitative element of the data and spending less time analysing the quantitative data. As a mixed methodological approach is considered highly advantageous in research as it provides a cohesive insight from both angles, 'where one is used to 'check' the other' (Harding, 2013, p10; see also Benoit & Holbert, 2008), I was still keen to incorporate the quantitative data, where relevant. Therefore, I returned to the Excel spreadsheet that I had created (which contained the themes that could benefit from quantitative insight), and began to re-read Ofcom's quantitative reports from 2005 onwards. From this I was able to collate findings longitudinally from as early as 2005 (in a manner that had not been done before) and use these to provide context for my qualitative insight.

Thus, while I was not conducting a new statistical analysis from the raw quantitative datasets, I was still utilising the quantitative findings to accompany my own analysis. The difficulties with sourcing the quantitative data actually benefitted this study, as it meant I could focus my attention on AML and use the quantitative data

in a very targeted manner, rather than commit extra time to a detailed quantitative analysis and lose focus on the qualitative aspect.

<u>Further contextual research</u>

Finally, I sourced news articles and headlines from online newspaper archive Nexis. This was to provide an extra layer of context for Chapter 5's discussion on participants' experiences with moral panics. I searched for UK newspaper articles from between 2005-2018 that were related to the issues noted by the AML participants, searching for key terms such as 'troll', 'internet addiction' and 'online security' (i.e. terminology used by participants). This was to provide an insight into the wider cultural context behind my findings from the AML data. As such, I used Nexis to gather articles on existing concerns evident from my analysis of the AML dataset, rather than to perform a new, detailed content analysis of newspaper coverage (this was not deemed necessary, given the wealth of data I already had). I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 5.

Sample

By 2020, the overall AML sample consisted of 20 participants, with some of the participants having changed over the course of the research period. For my study however, I used a smaller sample. Table 1 shows the AML participants whose interviews I used in this thesis. Seven of these participants joined the study in 2005; five in 2006; three in 2008; one in 2013 and two more in 2014. Although the study

is ongoing, I focused on interviews up until the 2018 wave due to data availability at

the time of analysis.

Table 1 - AML participants included in my research.

Please see further tables noting their age in each year of the study and details on their children (where relevant) in Appendix 2 & 3.

Pseudonym	Job	Age when in study	Year recruited	Home life	Race/ Nation
Chloe	Student/ Gymnastics instructor	14-18	2014	Lives with parents/ house share	White/ English
Tim	Student	15-20	2013	Lives with parents before going to university	White/ English
Robert	Student/ tutor	18-22	2014	University/ house shares	White/ English
Jenny	Student/ make-up artist	16-26	2008	Lives with parents before going to university	White/ Scottish
Dean	Various (including bar work, plastering)	16-28	2006	Multiple house shares. Has a daughter who lives with her mother	White/ English
Julia	Doctor	17-29	2006	University/ house shares	White/ Irish
Daniel	Bank worker	22-35	2005	University/ house shares	Black/ English
Dai	Web Officer	27-39	2006	Marries and has 2 children during study	White/ Welsh
Denise	Charity fundraiser	28-41	2005	Married and has 1 child during study	White/ Welsh
Mick	Engineer	31-44	2005	Married with 2 children	White/ English
Sheila	Stay-at-home mum	32-45	2005	Divorced during	White/ English

				research; 2 children	
Sally	Housing Officer	39-52	2005	Married with 2 children. Both leave home during study	White/ English
Elizabeth	Casual worker	45-57	2006	Lives alone but with lodgers	Black/ English
Peter	Alarm fitter (unemployed for numerous years)	47-57	2008	Married with 2 children. Grandchildren born during the study	White/ Irish
Donald	Semi-retired police officer	52-64	2006	Married with 2 adult children	White/ Scottish
Cathy	Retired	64-74	2008	Widowed during study. 1 adult child; 2 grandchildren	White/ Scottish
Eleanor	Retired (left study in 2016)	69-80	2005	Married with 1 adult child	White/ English
Mary	Retired	72-85	2005	Widowed with 3 adult children, grandchildren and great grandchildren	White/ English

I made the decision to exclude a number of participants who had featured in AML at one point or another for three reasons. Firstly, as part of the participants' provision of consent (provided both at the recruitment stage and again during the UK GDPR change in 2018) they chose whether or not to allow for third parties (such as myself) to access their data. One participant did not permit this, thus I did not include them in my sample. Furthermore, I chose to omit participants who joined

the AML sample after my own study began in 2016. This included one female and two male participants. This was because my focus was on the longitudinal element of the data, therefore I wanted to ensure I had at least 3 years' worth of data to use. Finally, I chose not to include the participants who only appeared in the first wave of AML in 2005. The Knowledge Agency did not re-recruit a number of the original participants in the 2006 wave, arguing that they were not considered suitable for the project going forward:

> We enlarged the sample in 2006, went up from 12 to 15 or 18 or something, but also about a good third of the people we spoke to in 2005 we didn't re-recruit in 2006, and I think probably mostly because we decided that we didn't want to […]. I think there might have been a couple who we never said we would re-recruit, so we tried and they didn't want to, but the majority – we kind of got rid of about 4 or 5. We decided they weren't very good [in front of the camera] basically.
>
> *Mark, The Knowledge Agency*

Carla Ginn et al (2017) note that maintaining participant interest and involvement in ongoing waves of longitudinal research is a common issue found with this methodology, and Mark argued that this was especially difficult following the first year as AML had not yet been set up a longitudinal study, thus re-recruitment was not suggested to participants. Given that the footage from the early years of the study was already limited and part of wider video montages, I decided that it was

not beneficial to my overall project to include these initial participants who did not return in subsequent years.

As shown above, the filmed element of the project also played a significant role in how the sample was determined. Mark considered the filmed footage to be integral in the overall outputs from the project, thus emphasised the need to ensure that participants were able to relax and clearly articulate their experiences in front of a camera:

> We were conscious from the start [that] there was a balancing act […] we want them to be as representative as they can be of the population at large, but also we can be cognisant of the fact that, you know, you're dealing in a visual medium and some people are very bad on camera and very shy or reticent. And while that doesn't technically disqualify them from being research participants or being representative of a population, they're actually not very interesting to watch in a project like this.
>
> *Mark, The Knowledge Agency*

Here Mark emphasised the importance of procuring charismatic participants during the recruitment process. He built on this, further noting that – where possible – The Knowledge Agency re-recruited participants that they had engaged with in previous research studies, in order to be confident in their quality as a participant:

Even back in 2005 and the same in 2006 we had demographic criteria and

behavioural characteristics that we wanted to [include], but unusually

perhaps for a research project we actually wanted people who participated

in research before, just because the idea of coming round to your house,

sticking a camera and lights on you think is quite intimidating [...]. Not just

people who'd been in research but in research *we'd* conducted, so it wasn't

unfamiliar faces turning up on the doorstep.

Mark, The Knowledge Agency

For AML, a familiar participant who was comfortable with their interviewer was

crucial. This did not shape my experiences when analysing the data negatively: if

anything, it made the opening of interviews – where participants 'caught up' with

the interviewers – more thought-provoking and informative, as participants were

comfortable sharing personal updates and changes in their circumstances. There

was minimal 'warming up' time needed at the beginning of the filmed interview,

and I often found these early, context-establishing aspects of the interview most

useful for garnering insight into the participants' relationships.

Beyond participant comfort in front of the camera, Alison also noted that diversity

was key when creating their sample specifications:

We definitely absolutely needed nation-wide spread i.e. nation by nation:

that was critical. All the usuals really: it was nation, it was age group, it was

gender, it was ethnic minority and social class as well. And also indeed the

range of digital ability. We did make sure that they weren't all digitally

savvy, we wanted people that weren't [digitally savvy] as well in the sample.

Alison, Ofcom

Mark also noted that in the early rounds of the study new recruits were selected

based on their 'preferred' form of media:

And then we also had at that point a kind of you know 'which is your

favourite' or 'which is the most important media platform to you' filter, so

we wanted to make sure we had some people for who radio was most

important, some people who think television is most important and some

people for whom internet is most important. I think it was just a three base

split at that point because obviously […] at that point the distinction

between those three things was quite clear.

Mark, The Knowledge Agency

Due to the many specifications required from the recruitment, the sample was

carefully selected in order to ensure it was 'a broadly representative cross section,

as opposed to a demographically representative stratified sample' (Mark, The

Knowledge Agency). For example, the participants were never grouped into specific

socio-economic groups (SEGs), but instead broadly recruited to be a mix of ABC1

and C2DE. This was even harder to ensure as the participants altered their lifestyles

over time, often moving SEGs in the process as their careers fluctuated. As a result I

have not been provided with clear-cut SEG information for participants, only their

job titles. Furthermore, while ethnic diversity was considered in the sample, the emphasis was more on ensuring a national spread across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Once again, the nature of the longitudinal methodology made the recruitment of participants that consistently fitted into these specific 'categories' impossible. For instance, when Julia was first recruited she was a 17-year-old student at school, living in Northern Ireland with her parents. Over the course of the study she moved to England to go to university to train as a doctor, before qualifying and moving around the country (and briefly to Australia) during the study. As such, her SEG, life stage and location within the four nations changed drastically during the study.[20]

As the focus for my study was on the AML dataset I chose to include all of the participants possible, bar the aforementioned people who were omitted. I was at the mercy of the pre-determined recruitment process and the sample specifications, where my main priority was to ensure a longitudinal exploration of the existing AML participants. I am aware that this unfortunately limited the extent to which I could discuss certain demographics (such as ethnicity), thus I avoided making sweeping statements in this thesis based on demographics, instead utilising the quantitative data to substantiate apparent patterns observed where possible.

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[20] Unfortunately the racial diversity in my sample was further compromised due to my own sampling constraints: two of the AML participants who were not included in my sample (one because they asked to not to be included; another because they joined after 2016) were non-white, thus further limiting my opportunities to consider ethnicity. This will be discussed in the future implications section of this thesis' Conclusion.

Methodological limitations and benefits

One of the most unusual aspects of my study was that I was not part of the initial set up process and played no role in gathering the dataset I am using. AML was not created as an academic research project, and began long before I was even considering entering academia.

In not running the study, forming the aims, writing the discussion guides or meeting the participants, I had very little control over the research process. Ofcom's overall objective was to examine media use and attitudes on a broad scale, incorporating a range of media into their interviews. This meant that while CMC became an increasingly discussed aspect of the interviews as it developed and was integrated into participants' lives, it was not the focus of the discussions. There were often moments in the interviews where I would have probed a comment made by a participant in much more detail, but instead discussion moved onto different topics. This was frustrating at times as it meant there were certain reports of CMC use and relationships that I wanted to know more about, but had no ability to interrogate deeper. While this was a challenge, the use of someone else's data – where someone else had asked all the questions – allowed for the themes to emerge organically, unprompted by my own research aims and interests. As I *could not* delve deeper into certain topics I was at the mercy of not only the discussion guide and moderator each year, but also of the changing technological landscape and participant interests over time.

As time went on there were occasions where it appeared that the moderator had difficulty getting participants to *stop* talking about CMC. This was especially the case for the younger participants, where the use of CMC truly became an integral part of their everyday media usage. Thus, while my lack of input during the research process was frustrating for me, I do not believe it hindered the themes uncovered in this study. If anything, the organic rise of conversation about CMC underscored the importance of studying this topic further and longitudinally.

Another limitation – one that is present in a lot of qualitative research – was that this study relied on reported behaviour. Whereas in ethnographic studies researchers can integrate themselves into their participants' lives (through observation, regular and frequent visits, and ongoing contact) and thus observe a range of behaviour (Gobo & Marciniak, 2016; Miller et al, 2016; Miller, 2016; Silverman, 2020), this methodology depended on annual semi-structured interviews. Even though I was able to garner a deeper understanding of participants and how they discussed CMC than I would have via one-off, isolated studies, I was still dependent on analysing what they claimed to do, not what they actually did.

However this was in itself a valuable aspect of the data. How people *perceived* their relationships with CMC use was just as crucial an area to study, as I was interested in capturing their thought process and personal stance on their usage. These participants would consider and report on what was really important to them personally and which experiences mattered most in their uptake and usage process

regarding CMC. Thus, analysing reported use and attitudes provided a deep insight into participant experiences through their own words: a highly valuable insight.

Furthermore, the longitudinal aspect of this study meant that I was able to mitigate any potential limitations that may have come with analysing reported behaviour in a number of ways. First of all, longitudinally exploring this subject allowed for a period of drastic media change – especially regarding CMC – to be captured over time, year-on-year. Participants were discussing this change as it happened, rather than using hindsight to report on their behaviour from a number of years ago. There were a number of occasions where participants had only just purchased a new form of technology when interviewed, or were considering doing so. This meant that the study captured the uptake and usage process from a number of different angles over time, where they could continually discuss the extent to which said technology and platforms were incorporated in their lives from different stages of use.

The longitudinal methodology also allowed for each form of media to be considered within the context of other media and for the changing relationship with different technology to be captured over time. For example, the longitudinal exploration meant that it was possible to track participants' changing use of mobile phones over a number of years, as they adopted, considered and rejected different devices. This allowed for a unique insight into their contextual relationship with media, where each adoption was not considered in isolation but in the context of previous interactions with media. The interviewers (and I, when I reviewed the data) had

access to years of contextual information about the participants that could be used to build a more cohesive understanding of their attitudes and behaviour. For instance, without knowing how ardently against internet- facilitating mobile phones Mick was in 2006, his enthusiasm over checking his emails on his iPhone a few years later would not seem noteworthy. Without knowing how dependent Elizabeth was on her friends in the early years of the study, the magnitude of her losing these friends in a falling out, and then turning to CMC to create new friendships, would be lost.

Finally, because the study lasted 14 years, many participants dramatically changed life stage during this time. This provided another layer of context, where it was possible to consider how CMC was integrated across different life stages (such as parenthood, university, workplaces, etc.) and how each participant adapted their use and attitudes as they made these transitions.

Recognising all of these contextual elements was only possible because of the longitudinal nature of the study, providing layers of understanding to the data that are not available in short term studies (Gobo & Marciniak, 2016; Silverman, 2020). They also meant that the reported nature of the study was less limiting than it may be in other studies, as there were so many other contextual factors that could be considered when examining these reports.

Thus far it is evident that this study has some affinities with ethnography, therefore it is worth examining these connections. Ethnography is a type of (normally

qualitative) study interested in the everyday aspects of people's lives (Harding, 2013; Gobo & Marciniak, 2016). Typically, an ethnographer immerses themselves into a society or social context to observe and study every day, normal occurrences (Harding, 2013; Gobo & Marciniak, 2016). Thus AML is *not* ethnographic: the researchers did not immerse themselves into the everyday lives of the participants and conducted relatively limited observation. However, their annual re-visits and emphasis on building relationships with participants does differentiate this study, as studying participants 'in the wild' (i.e. in their homes) allowed for a revealing insight into their everyday lives not possible through laboratory or standalone research (Chamberlain et al, 2012).

Over time it was increasingly evident that media became an integral part of everyday life (as will be illustrated throughout this thesis). By examining media engagement, The Knowledge Agency were essentially examining a large component of the ordinary, daily lives of these individuals (Harding, 2013; Gobo & Marciniak, 2016). The deep, personal connection the moderators at The Knowledge Agency developed with the participants is typically associated with ethnographic research projects (Harding, 2013; Gobo & Marciniak, 2016; Miller et al, 2016; Miller, 2016). Mark noted this in his interview, saying that they strategically planned to have the same moderator revisit the same participants every year, to ensure there was a genuine bond and relationship formed between the researcher and the participant. He said that he developed an attachment to the participants and felt involved in their worlds, claiming 'it's amazing, quite a privilege almost to be part of these people's lives' (Mark, The Knowledge Agency). The researchers' familiarity with

participants as they revisited them each year was evident in the interviews, as they were able to build on pre-existing contextual knowledge. Miller (2016, p17) emphasises the importance of 'a commitment to contextual holism' in ethnographic research, noting that understanding the numerous contexts within which a participant exists is essential. Thus while AML is not an ethnographic study, each of these aspects of the study differentiate it from one-off market research, and even arguably from other longitudinal studies that focus on different participants for shorter periods of time.

While I did not conduct the interviews myself, by immersing myself in 14 years' worth of data I also began to feel like I knew these individuals. I felt excited for them when they gained a new piece of technology, felt sorry for them when they lost a relative, and felt worried for them when they made dubious decisions. When Eleanor left the study in 2016 due to illness I felt sad for her, and a strange sense of loss. I never met these individuals, however had undoubtedly developed an attachment to them. In many ways this was a positive: it kept me engaged with the data, made me more sensitive to subtle changes in their character or actions, and meant I was able to develop a thorough knowledge of the dataset.

However, this level of unplanned attachment came with some complications. I developed a personal perception of them, inadvertently forming expectations for them. Mark further noted that my attachment to the participants may be rose-tinted in some way, as I did not have to deal with any of the frustrations the primary researchers felt that came with the annual re-recruitment process.

Furthermore, my contextual knowledge of the participants over time may have in some ways meant that I was at risk of adding subjectivity to my analysis as I revisited the data. For instance, my awareness of Eleanor's diagnosis of dementia leading to her leaving the study in 2016 may have reframed how I looked at her in her earlier years. My knowledge that Denise and Dai struggled with finances and were time-poor in the final years of the study may have caused me to over-exaggerate how enthusiastic they were about technology in the early years. My overall knowledge of these participants could have shaped how objective I was about each years' set of data.

As I was aware of this potential risk, I took a number of steps to ensure that it did not negatively impact on my analysis or on my writing, and worked hard to maintain an objective stance. I continued to return to transcripts throughout the study in order to try to remain unbiased and ensure that my analysis and conclusions were rooted in their interviews, not in any perceptions I may have developed of participants. A huge aspect of this was ensuring I continually committed to my thematic analysis, repeatedly returning to my themes and categorisations, and the emerging patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al, 2017). I created numerous overarching themes through which to examine the data on different levels (for example, generating overall nodes that examined participants on a personal level, examined technological use and attitudes, and examined change over time) to ensure that I considered the analysis from a range of angles. This meant that I ensured I was led by the data, not the personal

perceptions or attachments that I may have developed for participants. In this sense I avoided allowing my feelings regarding the participants to hinder my research and instead used them to become closer to the dataset and aid my unique analysis.

Finally, as mentioned above I was at times restricted by Ofcom's quantitative datasets and methods of storage. This meant analysing the quantitative data was difficult, time consuming, and essentially abandoned after a few months of attempts. However, the wealth of qualitative data meant that I in no way felt I was at a detriment as a result of this challenge, as I did not lack a quantity of useable, valuable data. If anything, the difficulty accessing the quantitative datasets meant I returned to the qualitative data and performed further levels of analysis, allowing for a more cohesive study of the AML dataset. This qualitative dataset was seen to have a genuine richness and ability to identify trends in UK media use and attitudes, with Alison reflecting that AML often worked as a 'bellwether' for predicting developments:

> One of the valuable things around Media Lives is that we do use that now and over the years as a bit of a bellwether, because we do tend to see things emerging earlier from that - even though its only 20 people, [compared to findings] from our big 2000 [sample-size] survey- so for instance the kind of levelling off of Facebook use we saw a few years back, you know that was apparent in the fieldwork in the qual. before it was apparent in the quant.
>
> *Alison, Ofcom*

Therefore the qualitative data on its own was considered to provide an insight into behavioural patterns and trends. The regular reports published by Ofcom on the statistical findings meant that I was able to employ quantitative context where beneficial, thus did not feel that this experience negatively impacted on my overall methodology or findings.

Conclusion

This chapter discusses the methodology I used in this thesis. Through the use of interviews with two researchers who were heavily involved in AML from the offset, I have been able to provide context for my study and insight into how it developed over time. I considered the sample and why it was such a unique and vital aspect of my thesis, but also acknowledged its restrictions and why these need to be taken into account throughout this thesis. Finally, I considered how my role as a secondary researcher impacted on my analytical process, exploring both the benefits and limitations of engaging with this dataset in this manner. I concluded that despite there being limitations and complications during this process, this methodology allowed me to gain a valuable insight into the same individuals' lives and how the connection between their CMC use and relationships developed over an extended period of time. In the next three chapters I provide a detailed analysis of the insight garnered from my thematic analysis of the datasets.

Chapter 3 - The role of relationships in encouraging access and uptake

Introduction

I began this thesis by introducing the concept of media literacy, noting how it is prolifically studied but rarely explicitly connected to a diverse range of relationships. Within the Adults' Media Lives (AML) sample participants' relationships altered year-on-year, as they met new partners, had children, moved away from their family homes, or lost loved ones. With this came regular opportunities or challenges that shaped their media literacy. The parents in the study suddenly had to adapt to their children growing up in new technological landscapes, learning about new technologies and platforms in an effort to protect and teach them. Older participants sometimes felt isolated, struggling to find the motivation to access new forms of computer mediated communication (CMC) without the encouragement from someone within their household. The teenagers in the sample regularly encountered new incentives to purchase new technology and develop media literacy skills as they moved from school, to university, to work and widened their personal networks. For every member of the sample, it was evident that fluctuating relationships played a pivotal role in motivating or hindering their access to new devices and CMC, shaping their overall media literacy.

This chapter considers the first aspect of media literacy – access – in more detail, examining how this stage connects to relationships. The ability to 'access' media is frequently presented by scholars as an essential component of media engagement (Hobbs, 1998; Livingstone, 2004; Hsieh, 2012; Park & Burford, 2013). In fact, it is often considered to be the gateway to becoming media literate, positioned as the vital first step towards allowing people to use, understand and create with media, including the internet and CMC (Prensky, 2001; Hargittai, 2002; 2010; Dennis, 2004; Livingstone, 2004; Seiter, 2007; Notley, 2009; Boonaert & Vettenburg, 2011; Park & Burford, 2013; Miller et al, 2016).

However, despite the consistent references to 'access' in media literacy research there are a number of omissions from prevailing academic discourses that mean this vital element of media literacy has not yet been fully explored. For instance, while access is generally considered to be an essential aspect of media literacy, some scholars go so far as to imply that having access is all that is necessary, where once access opportunities are available individuals then have all the tools required to effectively use the internet and CMC (Papert, 1996; Tapscott, 1998; Prensky, 2001). This assumption is problematic, as it oversimplifies 'access' by presenting it as a rapid, linear experience, and implying that successful access leads to successful use (this limitation is also noted by Park & Burford, 2013).

Furthermore, this stance fails to acknowledge other key elements that are pivotal in the 'access' experience. This chapter will illustrate that guidance, uptake, ownership and choice are all crucial elements that influence access experiences, in

turn shaping future use and attitudes. Often, the 'uptake' process and ownership of devices is either assumed or completely omitted from studies on access (Umemuro & Shirokane, 2003; Shapira et al, 2007; Park & Burford, 2013). I will illustrate in this chapter how 'uptake' is a fundamental, complex and often time-consuming process that plays a crucial role in shaping overall media literacy. The motivations behind initial access and uptake are again pivotal in driving subsequent usage and attitudes towards different devices and platforms. Thus, garnering a greater understanding of the reasons for this behaviour and the nuances involved in the 'access stage' of media literacy is vital for providing insight into this overall examination into the connection between relationships, CMC use and media literacy.

This chapter will explore the concept of access in more detail by examining it in relation to the uptake of devices (such as smartphones, tablets, laptops) and CMC platforms (such as instant messaging, email, social media [SM]), illustrating the processes participants go through over time. It will study participant motivations for access and uptake of CMC and facilitating devices, considering the extent to which individuals believe they have choice in these processes. The role of relationships will be explored throughout this chapter, as they repeatedly prove to have a pivotal role in shaping access and uptake experiences.

I begin this chapter by explaining how I define and differentiate access and uptake in this chapter. I then discuss how current research on media literacy considers the access stage, examining how methodological limitations of existing studies may have thus far hindered understandings of access and uptake, and noting how this

longitudinal exploration will be able to add to the academic field. Following this I

present the changing technological landscape between 2005-2018, noting how

developing devices and internet infrastructures allowed for a shift in how

participants accessed and adopted technology and CMC services during this time.

The last half of this chapter examines how the AML participants experienced access

and uptake between 2005-2018, exploring how formal relationships (such as those

developed through work and education) versus informal relationships (such as

familial and friendships) motivated them to access and adopt different devices and

forms of CMC over time. First, however, it is important to clarify how and why I

separate access and uptake.

Access and Uptake

For the purposes of this thesis I define access as the beginnings of opportunity,

starting with the knowledge of a device's or platform's existence and basic

functionality, and including the chance and ability to make the first steps towards

engaging with devices and CMC platforms. I incorporate knowledge and awareness

here in order to illustrate how 'access' can be multi-levelled, with different people

having different degrees of access, thus different levels of opportunity. 'Access'

alone is a concept that does not imply anything about usage or attitudes, as it is

possible for individuals to have the opportunity to access devices or platforms,

without actually owning or even using them. Thus, while the term access refers to

awareness of and initial experiences with a platform here, making it an essential

component of the overall process of use, it needs to be built upon in order to fully portray the initial engagement people have with devices and CMC.

Uptake refers to the process of learning about, observing and eventually adopting and owning devices or CMC platforms, either through purchase, signing up or receiving them via other means such as gifting. This chapter will explore the role relationships play in uptake, arguing that they are crucial in driving the decision-making process. Ownership occurs as part of this process, where individuals go from simply observing or playing with devices or platforms, to owning their own versions. The term 'uptake' therefore includes owning a piece of technology, signing up to a social networking site (SNS) or downloading a CMC service/ application, such as Outlook email.

Thus, in this thesis, 'access' refers to having the opportunity to engage; 'uptake' is the process of actually doing so, and incorporates ownership: something that is not automatically associated with access in current academic research (although this is often assumed). Acknowledging uptake in this way advances the academic definitions of access by moving it beyond discussions on whether or not someone has the opportunity to access a device or platform, to considering the reasons for uptake and the role this process plays in CMC use. This is key, as this chapter will illustrate how the decision to own a device personally has great implications for personal experiences, where individuals claim to behave and feel differently towards their own devices and platforms versus when using something that belongs to someone else. I will consider both access and uptake in this chapter, as it

is important to continually recognise and distinguish opportunity from actual

engagement with and then ownership of CMC and facilitating devices, and identify

the different behaviours that emerge as a result.

The limitations of current academic studies on 'access'

Before this chapter can further examine access and uptake empirically, it is useful

to briefly summarise some of the academic debates on access, focusing on how

current studies on this subject may be limited and the opportunities this presents

for my research. This review of existing literature uncovers three key approaches to

'access' research in current academia and their limitations, in turn framing how I

present the subject of access and uptake with regards to relationships.

First of all, a number of studies examining media literacy involve a stage where

researchers supply their participants with devices as part of the experiment,

followed by the observation and monitoring of their usage and attitudes regarding

said device (see Umemuro & Shirokane, 2003; Shapira et al, 2007; Temple &

Gavillet, 2008; Blažun et al, 2012; Park & Burford, 2013). For example, Hiroyuki

Umemuro and Yoshiko Shirokane (2003) supplied participants with a tablet

specifically created for their study, provided a two-hour training course and

encouraged subjects to use the tablet before reporting their findings. This study

found an increase in confidence, usage and positive attitudes towards computers,

inferring that access to devices is a crucial first stage of positive experiences

(Umemuro & Shirokane, 2003). However, I argue that in providing participants with

devices these studies fail to observe the more natural uptake patterns that may

emerge in a real-life context, underestimating the role of the adoption process in

how people then feel about and use technology. Even in their longitudinal study

that focused on media literacy, Sora Park and Sally Burford (2013) bypassed the

uptake stage of access by again providing participants with tablets at the beginning

of their one-year study. This tendency to neglect to acknowledge the importance of

uptake and ownership means there is a gap in the academic field, one that I will

add to by examining the uptake and ownership of devices and CMC thoroughly in

this chapter.

As also illustrated in the above example, these studies often include a process of

education, where participants are either provided with instructions or training on

how to use the device they are supplied with (Umemuro & Shirokane, 2003; Blažun

et al, 2012). For example, Na'ama Shapira et al (2007) provided participants with a

computer training course and ongoing access to a computer room before

examining their changes in attitudes. This process of education (supplemented with

device provision and active encouragement to use) is intrinsic in the outcome of the

study, however it is not explicitly referred to as part of the access process. Again,

this is not representative of real life: not all users of devices will be privy to formal

training before their initial interactions. Furthermore, it oversimplifies and

perpetuates the narrative that access equates with use, failing to acknowledge that

providing education during the access stage could greatly shape how individuals

approach and feel about their initial interactions with said device. In this chapter I will identify how significant a process of demonstration, guidance and advice – or total lack of this process – is to individuals' initial experiences, and how relationships are often intrinsic in this form of assistance.

Finally, many scholars have noted the issues that individuals may face if they lack access opportunities in day-to-day life, examining the potential reasons for this. For instance, there has been a great focus on demographics and access opportunities, with scholars examining gender (Papert, 1996; Facer et al, 2001; Livingstone et al, 2005; Seiter, 2007; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Bond, 2014); socioeconomic group (SEG) and income (Livingstone, 2004; Livingstone et al, 2005; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Hargittai, 2010; Bond, 2014); age (Tapscott, 1998; Prensky, 2001; Seiter, 2007; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Dingli & Seychell, 2015); and education levels (Seiter, 2007; Hargittai, 2010; Boonaert & Vettenburg, 2011) as potential factors behind some people having access opportunities, and some not. However, despite some scholars finding that relationships play a key role in overall literacy (Papert, 1996; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Notley, 2009; Tsatsou, 2011), there is limited extensive research on the role of relationships in encouraging access and uptake opportunities specifically.[21] As relationships are often intrinsic in shaping a number

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[21] When this is researched, there is a tendency to only focus on specific relationships, such as the role of parents in encouraging or discouraging children's access (see Frolova, 2016a; Miller, 2016), the role in teachers in providing pupils with access (for example, see Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; Bragg, 2018) or how the elderly adopt technology to connect with family (see Quan-Haase et al, 2018). All of these relationships will be considered later in this chapter, as part of a wider exploration into how multiple different relationships can impact on access and ownership.

of the demographic and life stage experiences noted above, it is crucial that their connection to access is explored further.

Therefore, this chapter will examine the role of relationships in driving access to and uptake of CMC facilitating devices and platforms, how the Adults' Media Lives (AML) participants felt about this relationship input, and what the repercussions are for those who lacked relationship intervention during this process.

The role of technological change in shifting access and uptake expectations

I will begin this exploration by considering how the AML participants discussed the changing technological landscape and the impact it had on their everyday access to, ownership of and use of CMC. Between 2005 and 2018 there were multiple developments in technology that facilitated a change in the access opportunities people were privy to, as well as motivated a shift in how people felt about uptake. This was a period of great economic change and insecurity, as the recession coincided with a time of rapid technological growth and the two created a conflict in how individuals felt about uptake. There were multiple ways in which these changes – both technological and social – drove a shift in expectations and assumptions regarding access and uptake specifically (this is also noted by Daniel Miller, 2016).

This section examines these changes over time, considering the connection between technological development, wider socio-cultural and economic change,

and claimed attitudinal shifts. It also highlights some of the key motivations behind growing access and uptake.

First of all, technology changed drastically during the research period, becoming increasingly converged, multi-functional, portable and internet-enabled. This change was evident in Ofcom's quantitative reports over time.[22] In 2005 54% of people had the internet (Ofcom, 2006), rising to 62% by 2007 (Ofcom, 2008). By 2007 mobile phone ownership was at 84% and 2 in 3 people were regularly engaging with multiple devices at once (Ofcom, 2008). By 2010 74% of the UK population had taken up the internet, and an ever-growing amount (31%) of internet users were going online on their mobile phones. By 2013 82% were using the internet, 92% used a mobile phone, and 62% of adults had a smartphone. Between 2012 and 2013 the number of people using tablets to go online nearly doubled (from 16% in 2012 to 30% in 2013) (Ofcom, 2014), and there was a continued increase in adults using any devices to go online in a range of locations. By 2017 88% were online, with internet use being almost ubiquitous across those aged under 55 (Ofcom, 2018). 70% used their smartphones to go online, and it was the device participants claimed they would miss the most (Ofcom, 2018).[23]

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[22] As noted in the Methodology, some of Ofcom's questions changed over time. Therefore, in this instance I present this data in the form of a summary – rather than in charts – in order to ensure that I am not visually presenting findings that derived from differently phrased questions. Throughout this thesis I will present data in graph form wherever possible, and note question alterations where relevant to the longitudinal analysis.

[23] This examination of the changing technological landscape will be further elaborated on in Chapter 4, where I explore the use of different CMC platforms over time.

The smartphone as the epitome of change

AML participant Daniel discussed how these technological changes corresponded with his shift in attitudes. At the beginning of the study he showed little interest in smartphones as he did not think they were advanced enough to replace the numerous different devices he owned at the time (such as a phone, camera and MP3 player):

> I don't use my phone for the internet: I've got access to it on the computer […]. If I got a phone with a camera that was a lot better [then] I'd use it more […] but if I know I will want to use my camera for something specific I will just take my actual digital camera out with me.
>
> **Daniel, age 23, 2006**

> Phones can do all these brilliant things but they're still not as good as the stand-alone things they came from. There will be a time you have everything in your one phone device: TV, satellite, camera, it'll be a very useful thing. It's not something I feel I need but if it did get to that level I'm sure I'd indulge in it like everyone else […]. It's definitely going that way now with like iPhones and things […] it's going that way but until I think it can do all those things as well as a stand-alone technology, I don't think I'll take it on.
>
> **Daniel, age 25, 2008**

In 2008, Daniel perceived the rise in smartphones as something to be 'indulged' in, not yet a necessary device. However, as time went on and these devices developed further, Daniel did indeed buy into the iPhone series and celebrated its multifunctional nature, noting that the numerous releases of the iPhone that he adopted over time became intrinsic parts of his everyday life:

> One of the reasons I'm interested in the iPhone 4 is not so much for the depth but the breadth, it covers so many different things and you can have this tool in your pocket that does so many different things without having to have the individual tools, and that's one of the things I'm interested by […]. I was out in the US a little while ago and one of the things I had on the agenda was that I wanted to get a new iPod […]. I thought if I'm gonna spend that money on a new iPod I may as well buy an iPhone: sound quality is better, it's got more memory, it's got video on it, so it's got so much to it now I don't need to take my camera with me, don't need my iPod in my pocket, it's just a little hub that can do everything.
>
> **Daniel, age 27, 2010**

> I got an iPhone 6 about six months ago […]. I think I've become better at- more effectively integrating how I use technology, particularly my phone, in my day-to-day life. It's something I've really benefited from the last six months […]. I organise through my phone, I have to do lists on it, got apps for it […]. I've got into podcasts recently, I got hooked on Serial about a month ago. **Daniel, age 32, 2015**

This sentiment was evident across the sample, as most participants adopted smartphones during the research period. They noted that smartphones went from an 'indulgence' to a normalised necessity over time, expressing mixed feelings about this. For instance, Donald said that he expected changing communication and a shift in assumptions of use, but was not necessarily happy about it:

> They tell me that the phone will take over everything […]. I suppose you've gone from the standalone to the laptop, so things have moved, so they say everything will be done through the mobile. That may well be […but] the screens are not terribly big, the keypads are not terrifically key friendly, so they've still got a long way to go, albeit that's the direction they appear to be going, because you're carrying it around with you, you'll always be on call, people will always know where you are – it'll be a sad day, but that's the way we're going [laughs]. **Donald, age 56, 2010**

For Donald, smartphones had a certain inevitability about them: they were simply the next stage in the constant technological development he had witnessed over numerous years.

Multiple converged devices

Although there was an emphasis on smartphones as being the epitome of converged technology, the developments in other devices such as laptops and

tablets meant that participants were able to consider other options for ownership, contemplating devices that were best suited to them and their needs. For example, many older members of the sample struggled with mobile phones throughout the study. This was often connected to poor eyesight or dexterity issues meaning that they felt that mobile phones were difficult to use, as illustrated by Donald above. The release of the larger, more basic tablet offered these individuals a viable alternative to the mobile phone, as it was deemed more user friendly while still offering all the functionalities desired by this sample, such as the ability to browse and shop online, source news, and communicate via Skype or email. Thus, the tablet was considered a viable gateway device to access opportunities for those who previously struggled with mobile phones, as illustrated by Eleanor and Peter:

> I think I'm a little bit more happier with [the tablet], I'm a bit more confident with the internet […]. The iPad I can access easier, 'cos it's quite frightening, I mean the telephone [mobile phone she had previously purchased] is a disaster. **Eleanor, age 78, 2014**

> [The iPad] is probably easier for me 'cos [there is] no keyboard [like there is on computers], this is just touch screen […]. If something is on the screen you can just touch it [….] that's easier, its straight in front of you.
>
> **Peter, age 49, 2010**

Furthermore, this convergence and ability to choose between devices was beneficial for those who were financially constrained, as they were able to choose a

specific device to purchase, rather than feeling they should have a range of different devices for different needs. This was especially important during this time period, as, as noted above, the recession led to an increase in reported financial concerns in this sample. For example, Dean discussed how he would have liked to have a tablet however the cost was too great. However, not owning one was not a significant problem, as he had his smartphone:

> *Interviewer: Have you used a tablet?*
>
> No I never have anything like that, I would like to […] if I had the money or was into my technology I would like one. [But...] an iPad is just a big phone isn't it […] if I got my iPhone it would be alright instead wouldn't it?
>
> **Dean, age 22, 2011**

As such, devices becoming increasingly converged during this time – as well as each device often offering the option for many CMC functionalities – was beneficial both logistically and financially for these participants, and provided them with more access and uptake opportunities.

The rise of affordable contracts and plans

Alongside these technological changes, this sample argued that data plans and mobile phone contracts altered considerably during this time period. They changed in a manner that led to more affordable plans and again facilitated an increase in uptake. In the earlier years of the study participants often reported that they were

unable to afford brand new mobile technology due to the expense. For example, Denise was interested in purchasing an iPhone for a number of years, but felt they were out of her price range, so decided to wait until the plans became more affordable:

> There's other [phones] I've seen that look good that I want, like the iPhone? I really, really want one of those [laughs] but they're a bit out of my price range for now so we'll see how it goes, I'll wait a little bit for it to come down.   **Denise, age 30, 2007**

Furthermore, participants also noted incurring a number of surprise costs as they adopted contracts they did not fully understand and often exceeded. Julia struggled with the restrictions of phone contracts for many years, as the combination of her love for using data on the go, her use of her phone overseas, and her restricted data allowance (enforced by her parents, who paid for her phone contract for the majority of the study period) meant she was often penalised for her overuse with substantial bills:

> I got it [my mobile phone] at the end of August just before I came [to England from her parents' home in Ireland]. I [was] on pay as you go and got a contract for coming to university. It was a bad move I think [laughs]. I've spent way too much on it since I've been here, it's got 500 free texts and 400 free minutes for 36 [GBPs] a month, and last month my bill was 186 and this month its 107 [laughs] oops. I just phone home far, far too much, and I

use the internet a bit on my phone.

Julia, age 19, 2007

The repercussions of the high cost of technology and internet plans – and the divide it may cause between those who are financially able to keep up with such technological innovation and those who are not – have been considered by scholars exploring the political economy of media (such as Wasko et al, 2011; Golding, 2017). These scholars note that many UK citizens may struggle to find the funds to continuously update technology and pay for the internet, especially as the expectation of use continues to change year-on-year (Golding, 2017). This was apparent in the AML sample (especially in the early years of the study), as a number of participants were unable to buy new technology as it was made available, or fell foul to high penalty fees for using the internet on said new devices.

Over time, more flexible contracts became the norm, allowing for more control over how money was spent on mobile phone handsets vs. airtime and offering more choice over how they were paid for (e.g. via rolling contracts, direct debits, or the option to buy new bundles each month). Mobile bill limits were also eventually 'capped' to stop surprise charges (Ofcom, 2018b). These changes allowed for further access and uptake opportunities, which was most beneficial for those in the sample with financial constraints. The speed at which technology developed during this time also provided further options for those who prioritised price, as constant innovation and new releases meant that older device versions were often

combined with more affordable plans. This meant that Denise could finally

purchase an iPhone, adopting an older version in order to save money:

> I love it [my iPhone] every time I've spoken to you I've been going on about
>
> my iPhone […] I'm pleased with it, it's the 3GS, I couldn't afford the 4 yet […]
>
> I got a Vodafone package, it's really good.   **Denise, age 33, 2010**

In fact, by 2018 very few participants prioritised buying the latest device releases,

as they were happy with the functionality of the 'older' devices they owned and

could save money on cheaper contracts. This – combined with the increasing

pressure for mobile providers to be transparent about and flexible with the cost of

handsets versus airtime contracts (Ofcom, 2019b) – allowed participants such as

Dai to explore their options prior to purchase:

> I worked out the cost of buying a handset and going sim only, I took my
>
> costs back to EE [my current phone provider] and they managed to match it
>
> if not go a bit cheaper […]. We've brought together my wife's and my phone
>
> under the same contract, so save a bit of money with that […]. I got an
>
> iPhone 8, it's not that new now especially in handset terms. I didn't go
>
> iPhone X, it was a bit much.   **Dai, age 39, 2018**

Furthermore, adaptations in contract flexibility allowed for Julia to buy into and add

to plans that were more tailored to her usage needs, and own devices and services

that were more affordable:

I'm on contract until May next year […]. I'm paying 30 a month for it and it's probably my fault 'cos I don't really know how much data I'm getting, but I think it's about 1GB a month, which should be loads but I seem to be going over it all the time […]. I think I pay 6 pounds for an extra gig and I never go over that, so it's not a lot but it adds up and it's annoying.

Julia, age 26, 2014

Interviewer: Tell me about the data package?

Off the top of my head I think it's 8GB for the AUS $50 [AUS dollars: Julia was in Australia in 2016] I top up each month, and I always have to buy extra: the Wi-Fi is really bad in the flat 'cos if anyone else is Facetiming or whatever I have to use my data instead […]. I have to buy like 4 [GB] extra […] you can top up 2 gig at a time and it costs 15 dollars for each time.

Julia, age 28, 2016

Although Julia continued her high usage over the course of the study and regularly went over her allowances, she was aware of the repercussions in advance and had more control over the extra costs she incurred. Thus, while her contracts still did not completely meet her needs, she no longer had to pay the surprise financial penalties that she received in the earlier years of the study.

Changes in Wi-Fi versus data packages

Finally, as the use of the internet on mobile phones developed and 3G and 4G

connections became increasingly normalised, there was a drastic change in the

participants' priorities regarding the costs and value of internet data allowance.

This was shown by Robert and Chloe's rapidly changing attitudes regarding their

dependence on data and Wi-Fi between 2014-2018. In the mid 2010s, these

participants prioritised seeking Wi-Fi zones in order to save their data allowance:

Interviewer: You got that 80% [data allowance usage] warning, have you

ever gone over and what would happen if you did?

No. I think if you go over you get charged extra. But I got the 80 [% warning],

and then you get another text when you get to 100 [%], so I tried to use it

more conservatively. Then I got the 100[%] text the week after so just kept

my phone off 3G until the next month […]. I learnt a lot of places had Wi-Fi

that I never knew did before […]. But also especially with the Cloud I think a

lot of places do provide that, so once you sign in once you automatically do

again. So I think a lot more places have Wi-Fi than people know, 'cos I only

found out through not having data.

Robert, age 19, 2015

For me it's important [to access the internet on holiday] 'cos you're not with

your friends for a while and want to know what's going on […]. I felt like the

Greek restaurants were advertising the Wi-Fi like 'come to my restaurant,

we have Wi-Fi'. You could see all the English people in there on their phones, we went with three families and as soon as we got there it was 'what's the Wi-Fi [password]?!'. And you'd be on there, post the pictures from that day, take them during the day and think 'I know when I get to a restaurant I'll post or write that'. [...] everyone [I was with] wanted Wi-Fi at some point, it's universal now.   **Chloe, age 16, 2016**

However, by 2018 some participants had such large data packages – plus data roaming charges had been abolished for UK citizens travelling in Europe (Ofcom, 2020g) – that they did not feel the need to worry about connecting to Wi-Fi when out and about, as they were so confident that they would not exceed their allowance:

I paid extra for my data so I get unlimited a month [...]. Unless the service is bad I don't really connect to [Wi-Fi] – say I'm at a friend's house –I don't connect to it unless the service is bad [...]. I don't need it [...] if I've got enough service which is pretty good with 3 [mobile phone provider] it's fine, it's fast enough and strong enough.   **Chloe, age 18, 2018**

Each of the technological changes explored above allowed for individuals to have more opportunities to access and adopt devices and CMC platforms. As time went on they could tailor this uptake to their personal and financial needs. These

changes also motivated a general assumption in the sample that as of 2018

everyone was accessing CMC, or at least *should* be accessing CMC. The

repercussions of this sentiment will be explored in this chapter, as this shift in

outlook drove a fundamental change in how participants communicated and

conducted relationships.

Key relationship sources of access and ownership

The drastic technological changes between 2005-2018 also corresponded with a

number of social changes. Numerous social sources of access and uptake became

apparent during this time, as participants reported enforced expectations of use

coming from both people in authority (such as educators in schools or workplace

managers), and from unofficial, informal ties (such as family and friends). I will build

on pre-existing research on different media educational sources (such as Sonia

Livingstone et al's (2005) discussion on how children and young people learn how

to engage with media from both formal and informal sources of education), by

exploring the role these two different forms of education have in motivating the

access and uptake process for a wider range of life stages.

'Formal' sources here relate to relationships that – as Chapter 1 noted – were often

weak, unchosen ties, such as the relationship an individual may have with a work

manager or a teacher (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). These relationships may stay weak or

may grow into something more meaningful (Cheal, 2002; Parks, 2007; Chambers,

2012): either way, the 'enforced' nature of these relationships played a key role in the manner in which they drove access and uptake, which will be explored in more detail below. While many participants had 'formal' relationships that provided a first port of call for access and uptake opportunities, these were often impersonal. As such, the access opportunities discussed here were generally enforced because of wider cultural changes deemed to benefit society – such as changes in the education national curriculum or shifts in how work was created and shared across broader businesses – rather than to benefit the individual.

In comparison, stronger, more personal relationships – such as family and friends – were often seen to encourage access or uptake in a manner they considered to be beneficial to the individual's best interests. These stronger ties would often make recommendations on the basis of pre-existing knowledge about the individual's personal attitudes and needs. While this encouragement was also often driven by wider shifts in societal expectations (such as the assumption that people needed to be contactable whilst on the go), it was also often motivated by personal interest and consideration.

By exploring the distinctions between these sources I will consider how various types of relationships created and propelled different expectations of access and uptake. The varied backgrounds and life stages of the AML participants allowed me to consider these expectations from both the perspective of the person motivating access and ownership, and the experiences of the individual receiving such encouragement. The longitudinal analysis further facilitates this, as it allows for

both the wider socio-cultural and personal contexts of participants to be taken into account here, providing new means for exploring access and uptake over an extended period of time. This section will examine these two different sources in more detail, highlighting how they often overlap or exist in tension, and how relationships are often pivotal in these interactions.

Formal access and uptake opportunities

In his study on the diffusion and uptake of technology, Everett Rogers' (2003, p29) refers to 'authority innovation decisions', where an individual has limited choice over their actions as adoption and use is enforced by someone in power. Numerous AML participants discussed being subjected to formal – often compulsory – access and uptake opportunities. These were instilled as part of their day-to-day lives, where individuals were expected to access or even own devices/ certain CMC platforms. In this sample, schools and the workplace were often discussed as key sources of 'formal' access and uptake, as they encouraged, insisted on or enforced device and platform access or uptake.

Formal Access: Work

Many participants had careers that encouraged or required access to and uptake of CMC and facilitating devices. There were numerous instances where the participants positioned work as motivating them to access devices and platforms they may not have otherwise come across, and even encouraged them to purchase

devices. These professional roles were key in providing some participants with the awareness and knowledge of existing devices and platforms that may have been beneficial to them. Beyond this, they also often offered initial engagement with said devices/ platforms, and from this motivated uptake. This was especially apparent as mobile technology developed between 2005-2018. I will draw upon three examples from the AML sample here to illustrate the numerous ways in which work shaped access and uptake, discussing the experiences of Mick, Denise and Donald.

Mick: from contemptuous to confident

Mick experienced one of the biggest transformations over the course of the study when considering his outlook on and usage of CMC facilitating devices, particularly smartphones. At the beginning of the study he was uninterested in technological change, feeling little incentive to access unknown devices and platforms and expressing no desire to uptake unfamiliar technology and CMC:

> I know that you can access the internet and everything, [but] I can't see the purpose of having that on a phone when the screen is so small [...]. I've got it but I never use it and I never will use it […]. You get texts from mobile [provider] saying you can have 3 months free internet access. I just text back and say 'no thank you', it just doesn't interest me. If I want [the internet] I can go on at work or warm up the valves on my computer.
>
> **Mick, age 31, 2005**

[I've] never sent an email, never. Never had the urge to send an email. If I want to speak to someone, I'd phone them up. And it's the same with texting, my friends text me and I phone them back.

Mick, age 31, 2005

However, his changing workplaces and roles over time meant that he was forced to move outside of his comfort zone and learn about new technology. He struggled with this early on, especially when he was asked to move from his shop floor engineer role to a more office-based position, where as part of this transition he was provided with a work computer and required to attend training courses:

Yeah I went to a company [for training]: Three days of Word, three days for Excel and I think two days for the rest of them [...]. That was the hardest bit because I hadn't actually worked with the computers so had to learn [...]. I think I learnt more when I started the job, it was quite an in-depth course [...]. I did a questionnaire that was like 'what's your knowledge of the software?' and I was like 'none' [...] I've opened [Word] up but I've never – not used it, played around, probably done a letter, but not to the point it is at work now [...]. The course wasn't basic, it was into the next level [...] it was quite overwhelming for myself.

Mick, age 34, 2008

This reinforces the notion that a process of education – or in this case, formal training – can often be integral to successful initial access experiences. Despite

showing apprehensions about the course, Mick did eventually look back on this time and concede that these courses provided him with vital knowledge that became essential to his work:

> When I first started [the study in 2005] I was just an engineer on the shop floor. My use of computers was just [the] store's computer: I ordered parts. Obviously I got a job working in the office, did Microsoft Excel courses, Word courses. It just completely blew my mind, but also opened my mind up to the world, and obviously I was sat at a computer all day, access to the internet, and it's just changed. **Mick, age 40, 2014**

In this case, Mick was offered numerous opportunities that motivated access: his work provided awareness of and information on what was available, training courses where he was educated on use, and a device to use every day.

Mick's career went through another drastic change when he was unexpectedly made redundant in 2009 following his company's financial struggles during the recession. Mick quickly found a new job, and once again was provided with devices (such as a laptop) and exposed to new technology he had not previously encountered. This time he approached this challenge much more optimistically:

> [My new job is] completely different to what I was doing before, a big learning curve [...] a bit of a shock 'cos I'd been in one job so long [...]. It was a shock to start again, was hard, but I enjoy it […]. Whereas my old job I was

> just using Word and that sort of thing and taking stuff from the company
>
> server to transfer files [….] this I'm more set by the company: they supply a
>
> program that's very complex. **Mick, age 36, 2010**

Although many of his experiences with new technology at work were not CMC specific, Mick explicitly attributed his overall change in outlook towards technology and CMC usage to the access opportunities provided by his roles, arguing that his change in attitude 'would have been a slower process had I not changed my job, definitely, definitely' (Mick, age 40, 2014).

This illustrates a pattern that was evident with numerous members of the sample (one that will be highlighted throughout this thesis), where it was evident that each experience with one piece of technology or platform played an integral role in how an individual felt about and approached the next experience. In this instance, Mick took his previous experience with suddenly having access to unknown technology and positively applied it to this next experience, approaching this new form of technology with greater enthusiasm.

Despite his initial contempt for smartphones, Mick went on to adopt – and wax lyrical about – an iPhone, which he used for both personal and professional needs. He argued that it was an integral part of his new job, as it facilitated on the go contact while he was away on onsite jobs, both with his co-workers and with his family and friends. Although Mick's iPhone was bought for personal usage initially,

it was apparent that it became an invaluable part of his career, and the need to be able to use email, video calling and the camera was increasingly essential for him to effectively meet his co-worker's expectations:

> I use my iPhone a lot more now, 'cos obviously I pick up my emails when you're on the move. We haven't got mobile internet on the computers obviously, 'cos the hotels we stop in [for work trips] a lot of them charge you [for Wi-Fi]. And if you're there for a night for what I need you can get it there on the iPhone.   **Mick, age 36, 2010**

Furthermore, Mick attributed his initial access to the iPhone to observing co-workers utilise their smartphones in the workplace where he claimed, 'a couple of people at work had [iPhones], and then just I was ready for a new phone and I liked the look of it' (Mick, age 36, 2010). Thus it could be argued that his willingness to uptake – especially considering his initial disinterest in new technology – could be attributed to both awareness of the device through co-workers, and his experiences with new technology at work helping him feel more confident about uptake.

Denise: from want to need

Another member of the AML sample who reported that her work was vital source of access opportunities was Denise. Denise and her husband began the study reporting to be very enthusiastic about technology. She discussed actively seeking

information on technological developments, keen to note any new releases that she could add to her household devices:

[We're] still in the same house […] getting lots of gadgets […]. They're joint gadgets really […like a] new telly […]. We want the Wii Fit but can't get it anywhere at the moment, there's a backlog, but put our name down for it […]. I was going to get a Sat Nav but Nokia have a new phone out that's got the navigator on it, that's a Sat Nav in the phone […]. We've got a shared iPod […]. I wouldn't class myself as a technophobe by any stretch of the imagination.   **Denise, age 31, 2008**

Therefore, it was evident that her personal interest was in itself a key motivator of device uptake. However, Denise's position as a charity fundraising manager demanded that she developed a greater knowledge of SM too, and she was expected to access and engage with a range of different platforms. This was to an extent enforced on Denise, as her personal interest in SM was low at the beginning of the study, with work in fact initially being a key reason she did *not* take the time to learn about it:

Interviewer: Are you into social networking: Facebook, Myspace?

No I haven't but it's not 'cos I'm not being nagged to death to go on it by all my friends 'cos they're all on there […]. To be honest work wise I just don't have the time to sit there and set something up in my lunch time 'cos I don't

really have a lunch hour.

Denise, age 30, 2007

Although she did eventually create her own personal accounts (as a result of this peer pressure – this will be covered more in the next section) her personal interest in SM continued to diminish over the course of the study. However, as her workplace norms around communication with clients and colleagues shifted, Denise reported that access to SM became a priority. As a result, she ensured that she continued to stay knowledgeable about the different platforms her clientele would be using, and increased her access to and uptake of platforms:

I use Facebook more, mainly for work, I commit the ultimate faux pas and don't use it personally, I use it for work a lot 'cos I have to update it a lot […]. I have a personal Twitter account […] but again that's more for work. LinkedIn, Flickr, things like that for work […]. It's a way we can instantly thank people: they get the note via email, most people have a phone to pick up the alert, it's instant, where-as if we did it on print media they wouldn't get it 'til the following week […]. It's strange this year, we're moving away from print and more towards the social media and radio advertising […]. A lot of these people are online so we can communicate with them that way.

Denise, age 35, 2012

As a result, it could be argued that Denise was accessing and adopting CMC platforms for work that she would otherwise have not encountered. Furthermore –

like Mick – Denise discussed the need to utilise CMC while on the go for her job,
and as such a mobile phone was integral in her day-to-day life. This only increased
over time, and Denise discussed being provided with a specific work mobile phone
that she disliked, but needed for her job:

> *Interviewer: You have a Blackberry now?*
>
> Yeah, I don't like it! It reminds me of a mini calculator […] you're writing
> emails on this titchy keypad […] it makes me want to just do it on my laptop
> […]. I'm in the car 80% of my week so the laptop just doesn't get switched
> on much […]. I've given up on the internet browser on it, and I think it's so
> slow […] downloading a document just takes forever on Blackberry […]. I
> think you either like one or other, touch screen or keypad […] I've got a
> friend who absolutely hates her iPhone, she has one for work and a
> Blackberry for personal, and I'm the other way round.
>
> **Denise, age 35, 2012**

The decisions made by people in authority positions here (Rogers, 2003) meant that
Denise was forced to use technology that she did not personally like, and even
considered to be a backward step – rather than an advancement – in technology.
She resented being 'made' to use a Blackberry phone rather than an iPhone,
causing her frustration.

Finally, there was a notable change in Denise's behaviour when she had her
daughter in 2009 and took a year of maternity leave. She discussed feeling out of

the loop when it came to new technology and CMC, arguing that her realignment of priorities from work to motherhood had negatively impacted on the access opportunities she had and her interest in device uptake:

> [My baby is now] six months old, so feel like my life has been turned upside down [laughs] I don't remember my name half the time […]. I don't have time to watch TV, Facebook: what's that? I don't have time! […]. You can't get anything done without someone watching her […]. I go on the internet if she's asleep, or if [my husband is] home, that's the only time I can check my phone account or emails or look for a break [….]. It's not as leisurely as it used to be! […] I've tried having her on my lap and typing at same time but it doesn't work [laughs].   **Denise, age 32, 2009**

This only changed when she returned to work, where the enforced expectation of access and uptake made her again increase her use of CMC and associated technology. In 2016 Denise and her husband decided to set up a side business on top of their full-time jobs. Denise reported that the process of making the website was a big learning curve for her, and running the business led to an increased uptake in new devices and services:

> We bought a new laptop, for the business, a newer iPad for the business, we're on Voice Over Internet talk for the business.
>
>   **Denise, age 39, 2016**

As such, it is evident that even for technology enthusiasts like Denise work was a key motivator for driving access opportunities and the adoption of new online platforms.

Donald: keeping up with changing times

Finally, Donald's experiences present another example of how work could motivate uptake where he otherwise may not have considered it necessary. Donald spent the majority of the research period semi-retired, taking on a number of different part time jobs throughout the study that were connected to his previous role as a policeman. At the beginning of the study he was only utilising CMC for his personal life, and therefore was quite happy to communicate with others via his desktop computer on a regular but not frequent basis, and to continue to use his 'basic' mobile phone:

> I know there's been new phones, Blackberries and whatever, but I've actually retained my old phone like a brick, but it does me for the purpose.
>
> **Donald, age 54, 2008**

However, as time went on, he began to discuss the need for portable internet facilitating devices, such as a laptop and a smartphone. As he reported noticing an increase in expectations to use these devices for work, Donald claimed that he felt he was at a detriment by not owning what he deemed to be the appropriate technology. While his workplace did not actually supply him with a device, he felt

his line of work required smartphone and laptop ownership, so purchased himself these products with work very much at the forefront of his mind:

[When responding to a question regarding why he chose his new phone]

I needed the GPS, many other telephone companies charge for the GPS facility, whereas this one doesn't. That combined with the internet access and the quite large amount of telephone calls were certainly crucial in me choosing the phone [...]. The NVQ part [of the job] I'm doing involves going out to meet candidates on the street, so sometimes I've got to walk to meet people, and sometimes I have to walk back to the base from where I was dropped off, therefore the GPS on the telephone is very handy for that sort of thing. **Donald, age 55, 2009**

Depending on the job I've got at the time will depend on what system I get [i.e. a computer versus a laptop], whether I go purely to the laptop with everything else being wireless [...] I'm more inclined to go purely into the wireless on the laptop. **Donald, age 58, 2012**

Donald predicted that there would be changing social expectations regarding technological use for work and adopted new devices accordingly. Donald's experiences and motivations for buying new technology exemplified how the shifting demands of work during this period encouraged individuals to access and uptake devices they may not have otherwise considered. This is further exemplified when considering Donald's age and semi-retired status: his decision to stay in work

was arguably a key factor in why his device uptake and access opportunities differed to his contemporaries of a similar age in the sample (this will be examined in more detail in the second half of this chapter).

Each of these examples illustrates how participants often positioned work as a key instigator of initial access to devices and CMC. Furthermore, work often motivated uptake and ownership, either by actively providing individuals with their own devices as part of the job, or by promoting a work structure and culture where individuals felt they required ownership of certain devices and platforms in order to successfully fulfil their work obligations. It was evident that this sentiment increased over time, as workplace technological priorities changed.

Formal access: Educational institutes

The next example of formal access opportunities that participants discussed themselves or their loved ones being subjected to was through places of formal education, such as schools, colleges and universities. It was evident in this sample that there was an expectation for those in education to utilise technology and CMC as part of their school lives, and schools often provided students with regular access to technology and platforms to utilise. As with work, there was evidence that this assumption increased over time, with students fearing they would be at a detriment if they were unable to fully access the devices and platforms expected (both to communicate with their schoolmates and teachers, and to complete their work). The longitudinal nature of the study, alongside the recognition that participants came from a diverse range of life stages, backgrounds and

demographic groups, meant that this theme could be examined from both the student and the parents' point of view, observing children's experiences through pre-school, primary and secondary school, college and university.

Teenage participants Tim, Chloe and Robert often reported that they felt they had to use CMC in order to fully engage in their studies. Tim claimed that he was expected to create and use an email account in order to communicate with his tutors and complete homework tasks. He initially resisted this, however quickly discovered that this uptake was an essential component of his studies:

> If I didn't have [an email account] I wouldn't be able to cope without it at college […]. In the first week of college they said 'we highly recommend you get an email', and I was like 'no I won't need it', then after a couple of weeks everyone was like 'have you done this?' and I was like 'no how'd you know about that?' and they were like 'the email'. So I got myself an email, and that helps a lot, you can get reminders, you can email the teacher […] I use that more than I ever used it before.
>
> **Tim, age 16, 2014**

Tim quickly found that email went from (what he considered to be) a superfluous form of CMC to an essential means of communication, as he moved into higher education.

The parents in the sample also claimed that schools were increasingly expecting the use of the internet for homework, where parents felt that teachers often assumed the ownership of devices and the usage of CMC back at home. For some this was seen to be a real benefit, as they appreciated the extra interaction with teachers, felt their children gained more support as a result of access to online school portals, and felt reassured by being able to gain greater insight into what their children did while at school. In this way, the relationship between students, parents and teachers was strengthened, becoming more intertwined and dynamic. Sheila appreciated this when her 14-year-old son changed schools after they moved to a new house in a different area:

 [The school has] got a website […] they send a letter with username and password, everything on there on what homework is expected of them […It] will say their attendance, what lessons they have on what day, homework that's been set, also has registration, whether child registered or bunked off, which I thought was ingenious! Not that [my son] would bunk off but it's good to know.   **Sheila, age 41, 2014** [24]

Despite the positive experience discussed here, this was not evidently always the case. In the earlier years of the study some of the younger participants argued that their schools did little to facilitate easy access to computers, the internet and CMC:

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[24] Please see Appendix 3 for a table noting all AML parents and their children's ages during the study period.

[I learnt how to navigate a computer by] just using it, just picked it up. I never do anything complicated on computers. We did [an IT course] at school but that wasn't really the internet, that was just PowerPoints and stuff.   **Julia, age 18, 2006**

I'm not proper clued up or know a lot about it […] we got the internet not too long ago. Like my GCSEs: we didn't have the internet when I was doing my GCSEs, obviously all my mates did [at home], they could go on Google and research lots of stuff, whereas I didn't have a clue.

Dean, age 22, 2011

This lack of access opportunities regarding schoolwork and the internet was also discussed by some parents in the sample. Sally reported that she was expected to help her daughter out with computer-based tasks at home for homework, something that she argued should be the school's responsibility:

The most recent one is for her History project, they had to research her family tree […]. Trying to find out information about her great grandparent was kind of difficult so she did sit down here [in the living room with us] for her dad's side to research [….]. She wouldn't be confident enough to know how to go about information like that, so we need to go through it with her step by step, say 'we need to go onto this site'.

Sally, age 43, 2009

Sheila expressed concerns that her son's school failed to provide him with constant and flexible access opportunities to complete his work. She worried that this could be detrimental to her son's overall education with computers, as his access opportunities within school grounds were limited to certain times:

> The schools are good 'cos they do lunchtimes and that, so if a child hasn't got a computer at home, doing it at lunchtime or half an hour after school, but [my son] can't do that 'cos he gets a lift home.
>
> **Sheila, age 41, 2014**

Sheila felt that the limited amount of time her son had to use computers at schools negatively impacted on his education, and put her under extra financial pressure – this will be returned to below.

Parent-teacher tension

The above exploration implies that schools were often a core formal venue for providing access, and this increased over time as participants reported that evermore technology was integrated into the classroom and lessons. However, I contend that unlike the workplace, which was illustrated above as often being a great motivator of uptake, schools did little to facilitate genuine ownership opportunities.

This is also evident in academic studies. For instance, Sara Bragg (2018) found in her ethnographic research on children in education that – despite the growing narrative that children rely heavily on technology during school time – schools were often under-supplied with devices, where teachers had to prioritise a small amount of students per class who could access and utilise technology (such as tablets) over other students. This would often be decided by the children, who would barter for the right to use technology in that lesson (Bragg, 2018). As such, children appeared to lack any sense of ownership of devices whilst *in* the school, let alone outside of school. Scholars have noted that this apparent shortcoming in formal education leads to parents having to take on a more active role in a child's engagement with the internet and facilitating devices, where the expectation of device provision and ownership is evident (Papert, 1996; Prensky, 2001; Buckingham, 2000; Livingstone et al, 2005; Miller et al, 2016; Bragg, 2018; Hatlevik et al, 2018; Livingstone & Byrne, 2018; Thomson et al, 2018).

This was further demonstrated in this research, as participants expressed concerns that schools appeared to assume that they would have their own technology at home. For some parents this was an inconvenience, but they were willing to adapt their own device ownership in order to support their children's schoolwork. This was due to the concern that they would be letting their children down if they did not, as illustrated by Sally buying her 12-year old daughter her own laptop purely for schoolwork:

> *Interviewer: What prompted [you to buy her a laptop]?*

Schoolwork. 'Cos it's changed, it's all changed quite drastically now how schoolwork is presented. Erm the majority of homework is done with Word processing, and there's four subjects where it's directly emailed through to the teacher. So although she could have used ours, she wanted her own, and we thought it was probably the best way, for her to have her own and control her own homework, to be responsible for that.

Sally, age 43, 2009

This sense of necessity led to a conflict in emotions, as some AML parents felt they were allowing their children to have personal access to technology too soon, but also wanted to make sure they were prepared for school. Some parents expressed a reluctant surrendering to the changing technological landscape, especially as expectations of access appeared to begin when the child was as young as pre/ primary school. Denise illustrated this by discussing her mixed feelings regarding her daughter learning how to use a tablet at home in preparation for school:

In her [future – once she begins school –] class they have iPads, they've started a hub on the internet that parents can log into, she's got her own password for it so she can add pictures and things […]. I don't want to restrict her 'cos she'd be at a disadvantage if she didn't know how to use it […] but at the end of the day she's five, she should be out and about running around and getting paint and glitter everywhere and things like that.

Denise, age 37, 2014

Despite her apprehensions, Denise still adopted technology in order to help with her daughter's upcoming education.

However, for some of the other participants this was more than simply a conflicting inconvenience. Some struggled with this increased expectation, stating that financial constraints made it difficult to ensure that they owned the relevant technology at home, however they felt pressured into aiming for ownership as a necessity. As a parent Sheila especially often struggled as a result of this assumption. The lack of easy access to computers at school, combined with her own financial constraints at home, meant she worried that her sons would not be able to fully engage with school tasks. This was a concern that continued for many years as both of her sons progressed through secondary school:

> With [my oldest 12-year old son] now he's at secondary school it's gonna be part of his homework, and I don't think he resents the fact he doesn't have [his own computer] but he's like – it does wind him up sometimes where he's like 'everyone else is doing their homework with the internet mum and I don't understand it and I can't do it'.
>
> **Sheila, age 34, 2007**

> Most of the homework they give out now is on the computer. That's fine if you've got one, but when you haven't that makes things very difficult […] I said to [my youngest, 15-year old son] 'the school don't know you've not got a computer do they?', he said 'no but most homework is on paper at the

moment, but it will kick off on computer soon', so I had to get him one. It was 400 quid which is money I don't really have when you're trying to save and you've got nothing, but it has to be done.

Sheila, age 41, 2014

Sheila's ongoing struggles to afford the new technologies that were increasingly expected in everyday life exemplify the digital divide highlighted by scholars (Hargittai 2002, 2010; Dennis, 2004; Livingstone, 2004; Notley, 2009; Park & Burford, 2013; Robinson et al, 2020b), where she often trod the line between 'have' and 'have not'.

Sheila's experiences also illustrate a discrepancy between expectations of access versus actual ownership, again highlighting the importance of separating the two concepts. Schools were perceived to provide a degree of access (in terms of knowledge and ability to use devices at certain times), but the limitations of this were highlighted by the increasing pressure on students to continue to work with computers beyond school hours. For this sample, schools seemingly assumed personal device ownership, rather than facilitated it. These assumptions of personal uptake were problematic and could lead to some students – especially those from lower income families – being at risk of marginalisation, unable to fully engage with school assignments.

This also presented a tension between teacher, parent and child, where the responsibility was split and it was unclear who should be considered the main

provider of access and ownership. Thus, while in some ways changes in technology facilitated a strengthening in this three-way relationship (for instance by allowing for the same online platform to be accessed by all), it was evident it also created a sense of uncertainty and even resentment, complicating the relationship between the three. By examining this shifting dynamic, this exploration again highlighted the significance of considering access and uptake as two different entities that facilitate very different experiences and levels of literacy.

The above exploration shows that there were two main sources of 'formal' access opportunities for this sample: work and school. These were often considered to be positive opportunities by this sample, however there were two key limitations of these sources that are noteworthy. First of all, both – but especially school and the teachers – increasingly showed an expectation of ownership. Workplaces tended to cater for this by providing workers with appropriate devices, however this sample's experiences with schools implied that they were less forthcoming with device provision, leading to a discrepancy between growing expectations of access and the at times complicated logistics of ownership.

Furthermore, this examination highlighted two very specific life stages where people were subject to formal access opportunities: those in education and those in employment. This meant that there were numerous people – such as those who were out of work or retired and those who were before or after school age and had no need to encounter technology and CMC in day-to-day life – who missed out on these formal opportunities. In this sample it was evident that as participants grew

older and transitioned through different life stages (such as from childhood into
employment, from being parents of young children to being empty nesters, from
being employed to retired, etc.) there were fewer formal opportunities and
incentives to access devices or discover new platforms. This was evidenced by
Cathy, who expressed her concerns for friends who have never accessed
technology and CMC through work or education:

> I think it's a shame, there's still a generation of people who never went out
> to work, the wives never went out to work, and people don't have a clue.
> Like, most of my friends never went out to work, so they're asking me
> 'Cathy will you do this', 'Cathy will you do that'. There's a whole generation
> still and I feel they're being more isolated and more isolated.
>
> **Cathy, age 70, 2014**

In the absence of consistent formal access and uptake incentives, I found that
members of this sample typically tended to rely heavily on informal sources of
access and uptake opportunities that were instigated by their other relationships. In
fact, these were often presented as being an even more prevalent or useful sources
of knowledge, awareness and uptake.

<u>Informal access and uptake opportunities</u>

This sample often discussed the unofficial means through which they gained access and uptake opportunities, and it was evident that relationships of a more personal nature – such as family or friendships – were often pivotal in these experiences. This sample's tendency to spontaneously discuss these relationships as providing them with opportunities to access, learn about, use and then encourage uptake implied that they were fundamental in this process. They were often positioned as a source of guidance, demonstration, assistance and even device provision, helping loved ones in a personal manner that met their individual needs. Due to this, there was the implication that these stronger-tie relationships often presented more fruitful, personalised opportunities than the formal sources. However, I will argue over the next section that these relationships could also cause a sense of tension or frustration, as individuals felt increasing pressure from loved ones to access and take up certain devices/ platforms. As such, it is constructive to explore the different ways in which less formal relationships facilitated access and uptake opportunities, examining the numerous points where they often intersected or overlapped with formal sources. I will begin by focusing on the parent-child relationships in this sample specifically.

Parent- child dynamic

Many scholars have already extensively considered the role parents play in their children's access to and adoption of technology, noting the conflict parents feel between wanting to parent 'correctly' while still ensuring that their child experiences the opportunities available through using technology (see, for example, Frolova, 2016a; Miller, 2016; Miller et al, 2016; Kardefelt-Winther, 2017; Peer,

2017; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018; Lim, 2018; Livingstone & Byrne, 2018; Naab, 2018).

However, much of this research is focused on either a moment in time or on a specific 'phase' of being a child. Even Sun Sun Lim (2018, p33), who notes that 'the range and extent of parent-child mediated communication will naturally differ by age as children become more independent and have growing access to, and competency with, personal media devices', only focuses on communication between parents and children as the child ages from pre-school to emerging adult. As such, she stops studying the 'child' as they reach adulthood. This implies that the parent-child relationship is less worthy of study once the child becomes an adult. While this dynamic does indeed alter, it is limiting to assume that this relationship is less significant after this point. Justin Peer (2017) calls for new research to examine this changing dynamic over an extended period, rather than only focusing on the already highly researched relationship between parents and children at home. He argues that:

> It is logical to assert that digital relationships may evolve as the emerging adult moves closer and closer to the independence, self-sufficiency, and personal responsibility associated with adulthood. Little is known about how digital relationships change during the course of emerging adulthood. Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies that compare the influence of

digital technology on parent-emerging adult relationships across this entire period are needed. (Peer, 2017, p114).

The AML sample consists of a mixture of grandparents, parents, teenagers and adult 'children' (i.e. individuals who have reached adulthood but still maintain a relationship with their parents (please see Appendix 3). As such, it is possible to explore the parent-child relationship from multiple different angles, examining how this dynamic altered as children and parents age and move life stage. Through the use of longitudinal research I am able to consider how this relationship alters for the same people over many years, recognising how complex this relationship can become as this power dynamic shifts and the needs for CMC and technological uptake also change.

From the above exploration, it is evident that there is a tension between children, teachers and parents, where although schools were presented as a core formal source of access opportunities, it was often the parents who were expected to create uptake and ownership opportunities. However, the reported experiences of the AML parents illustrate that many initial access opportunities for children began long before they started at school, with parents encouraging their children to engage with technology and platforms whilst they were still babies or toddlers. For example, Dai expressed a sense of amazement and pride over his son's ability to use his wife's tablet:

[My 3-year-old son] navigates my wife's iPad very well, he's got apps on there and programmes on there, he's got a drag and drop exercise with farm animals and zoo animals on it and he's really proficient with it.

Dai, age 35, 2014

As shown earlier by Denise's apprehensions regarding teaching her daughter how to use an iPad in preparation for school, this access to devices at such a young age could cause a conflict in emotions for some parents. However, it was evident that the decision to encourage access to devices from a young age was not always tied to school or education. For instance, Mick and Dean often discussed offering their children their devices in order to provide the child with entertainment or a distraction. Again, some parents in this sample expressed concerns over their children spending too much time with devices, however it was evident from these examples that these children often gained their first access opportunities from their parents' provision of or encouragement to use devices:

It's generally in a morning […my kids (aged 4 and 5)] get up generally about 7 o'clock so if they're bored about 8/9 o'clock they'll say 'oh can we go on the computer?', we'll put it on and [ask] 'what do you want to play on?'

Mick, age 33, 2007

Interviewer: What's [your 4-year-old daughter's] relationship with media?

She's really good at it, she's better than me, I think 'cos her mum's on it all the time […]. On the way home we will put on like Insy Winsy spider [on her mum's phone in the car to get] her to sleep.   **Dean, age 26, 2015**

Further to this, this sample's parents were often key facilitators of their children's first experiences with personal device ownership, often buying them their first smartphone, tablet or laptop. Mobile phones were especially seen to be an essential device for children to own. This again often conflicted with the parents' feelings on the subject, where even if they disliked the idea of their child owning a device or accessing SM, they considered it to be an increasingly essential part of growing older. Due to this conflict the parents in the sample often planned ahead, articulating in advance when they thought it may be appropriate to buy their child a device. This was often linked to when the child was old enough to go to secondary school (typically 11 years old in the UK), as this was consistently considered to be a key turning point in the child's life:

Yeah, the nearest [secondary] school is just over a mile away so it's not too bad- I think then, that's when [my 10-year-old son] will be getting [a mobile], I think the year before, next year, I think that's when the reins will be loosened. When he can start with his mates- 'cos some of his mates go out now, I think it's a bit young for it at the moment. So next year he'll start going out more and that's when I think he'll have one.

Mick, age 38, 2012

Interviewer: And does [your 11-year-old daughter] have [her own phone] yet?

No. we've said to her that- she has asked for one, but we said to her that when she starts senior school she'll be able to- that's when she'll have a number.   **Sally, age 42, 2008**

There were multiple reasons this sample associated secondary school with device provision. First of all, this appeared to be considered a symbolic transition into an era of greater independence and freedom for the child. This was because parents felt that their child's move in school often coincided with an increased need to utilise public transport, be away from the home for longer, and have more opportunities to make their own decisions. Therefore, parents saw the purchase of a CMC facilitating device (typically a mobile phone) as being emblematic of relinquishing control and giving their child more agency.

Furthermore, the phone was perceived to be a vital tool for ensuring the child's safety during this transition. It was used as a lifeline between parent and child, where the parent could check in with how their child was getting on in their day-to-day life, and the child could alert their parent to any potential issues. This meant that while the child was transitioning into a life stage with greater independence the parent still felt reassured about their wellbeing. Sheila illustrated this by ensuring both her sons had mobile phones so that they could safely contact adults while outside the home:

[My oldest son, aged 11] got his own phone so if he goes out on his bike or whatever he's doing he can phone me up at any time, and he does.

Sheila, age 33, 2006

[My youngest son's (age 16)] phone he takes to school. I don't wanna give him an expensive one and I don't want him to be a target to people stealing phones […but my friend] picks him up, sometimes might be a bit late, or in a different car, so [my son] will be told by him [via his phone].

Sheila, age 42, 2015

Breaking this lifeline between parent and child could cause anxiety, as illustrated by teenage Chloe when she had her phone confiscated at school and felt worried that she was no longer in direct contact with her mother:

Well I got my phone taken off me at school the other day 'cos I was on it, and it was really worrying 'cos I needed to get the bus into Coventry after school and I needed contact with my mum about that, so [the teacher] was gonna keep it so I had to pick it up the next day, so I just went and spoke to him and was like 'no I need it'. 'Cos I suppose it is a little bit dangerous me getting the bus by myself into Coventry to work without it.

Chloe, age 15, 2015

This was also connected to children gaining more authority over their social lives, as they began to be in control of communicating with friends and organising social

activities. This was met with two opposing responses from the parents in the group: some parents left their children to manage their social lives online in the manner they wished; others were very careful to continue their authoritative and educational role in facilitating access. For example, once Mick's children reached secondary school age, he and his wife provided them with their first devices. Mick knew that his children were accessing different platforms on their phones and utilising different forms of CMC and SM, and chose to offer general guidance but then left them to experience each platform in their own way:

> ***Interviewer: Is [your son on] Insta[gram] or Snapchat?***
>
> Erm [thinks]. Both I think. I don't know, I don't even know how to use them, I don't want to know. […] The one they use the most is where you look at something and it disappears
>
> ***Oh that's Snapchat […]***
>
> Oh it is? I don't know […] They're constantly on them, constantly, it does my head in, really does. **Mick, age 42, 2016**

At his strictest, Mick and his wife decided to 'friend' their children on Facebook in order to monitor their actions. Mick also claimed that he established rules for access before they could utilise the platform:

> Luckily [my children] wanted to be [mine and my wife's] friends on it, so we know what they're doing and saying, that was the rule of getting Facebook, so we can see what they're doing and who they're talking to […]. I didn't

want to be friends with them, but I said I will do just so I can check up on it

and see what you're doing.   **Mick, age 42, 2016**[25]

In contrast, Sally discussed feeling very nervous when she thought about her

daughter accessing CMC platforms – especially Facebook – by herself. As a result,

Sally ensured that she was present for her daughter's first access experiences,

explaining the functionalities, purpose, opportunities and risks she associated with

SM:

> She was on hot bricks waiting for her 13th birthday in September 'cos she
>
> could go on Facebook […] 'cos when she came home from school like 'I
>
> really would like to go on Facebook mum', I said 'okay, let's set it up'.
>
>   **Sally, age 44, 2010**

Sally gave in to her daughter's requests to use SM once she was at the 'appropriate'

age of 13,[26] but made sure that her ongoing access and behaviour online was easily

monitored:

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[25] Mick's assertion here that he 'didn't want to be friends with them' highlights a further issue this sample experienced when coming into contact with family members in online spaces: this will be examined in more detail in Chapter 4.

[26] Although Sally does not explicitly refer to Facebook's age restrictions here – where it allows people to join from the age of 13 – it appears that her daughter was well aware of this rule and used it as a point of negotiation with her mother, expecting to get an account as soon as she turned 13.

> [My daughter] is on Facebook, but the deal is when she went on Facebook
>
> we'd have her password, that she had to realise that, you know, it was going
>
> to be monitored.   **Sally, age 45, 2011**

The difference in attitudes here regarding mobile phone ownership and access to different forms of CMC demonstrates the necessity of considering access opportunities to both devices *and* platforms, as these parents responded to each of these in very different manners, attributing different risks and opportunities to devices and platforms.[27]

Finally, the shift in wider expectations regarding the use of devices to facilitate social relationships and communication played a considerable role in shaping children and parents' outlooks on device provision. A number of the younger members of the sample discussed feeling an increasing need to own their own mobile phones in order to keep up with their friendship groups. However, they were also often at the mercy of their parents' financial control, unable to purchase their own devices. As such, some of the younger participants discussed pressuring their parents into buying them CMC facilitating devices, and, again, this was typically a mobile phone. Julia spent a number of years at the beginning of the study negotiating with her parents in order to gain the best devices and contracts to fulfil her social needs:

---

[27] The difference between parenting styles with regards to media use – and the levels of success they may have – has been explored in more detail by scholars such as Buckingham, 2000; Livingstone et al, 2005; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018; Naab, 2018.

I've wanted an iPhone for *so* long and then I just thought 'I'm gonna try and get one and speak to my parents about it', and it was last weekend, after the [iPhone] 4S came out, and it wasn't that much more expensive than the 4 so I thought 'I might as well go in for that 'cos it's a 2-year contract'. And mum agreed to 40 pound a month and said I could do what I want with that, so I got it finally!   **Julia, age 23, 2011[28]**

Jenny also made a deal with her parents to help her financially when she wanted an upgraded mobile phone – without their help she said she would not have been able to buy the device she wanted. This coincided with Jenny taking on extra part time jobs around her studies in order to finance her half of the contract deal:

Like last week I got my new Blackberry […] 'Cos I'm working now I pay for half of [the contract], and [my parents are] paying the other half. And it's more expensive, I think it's 30 [GBP] now, or 35, and they're paying for half of it and I'm paying for the other half. 'Cos when I was at school they paid for it, but now I'm working we just go half and half.

Jenny, age 18, 2010

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[28] Please note Julia's age: at this stage she had left the family home and was independent in many aspects of her life, but still relied on her parents for financial support. This child dependence long into adulthood will be explored further below.

In fact, in this sample the ability to demonstrate financial independence and responsibility often led to a child being able to gain autonomy over what devices they could possess. Sally, who often considered herself to be quite strict and protective as a parent, allowed her 14-year old daughter to buy herself a tablet in 2011 because she had saved up her own money, therefore Sally felt she had earned it. Thus, it was evident that children and parents engaged in a process of negotiation when it came to initial device access and ownership, and this was emblematic of wider themes in their relationship. On the one hand, parents were keen to maintain control over their children's activity, monitoring and restricting their initial experiences and setting strict rules around ownership. However, on the other hand, the loosening of these rules around access and ownership were often symbolic of wider dynamic shifts in the relationship between parent and child, where the ability to own and later pay for one's own device illustrated the child growing in maturity and gaining greater independence. As such, the process of access and ownership signified two very separate but equally important milestones for parents, and were considered significant indicators of their child's transition into adulthood.

Although the movement from young, dependent adolescent to older, more independent teenager was a crucial era (with regards to relationships' role in access and uptake), it was evident that the parent-child dynamic continued to be vital in this process long after the child entered adulthood. However, as the child aged and gained more independence with technology there was a shift in knowledge and power, where many members of the sample claimed that the child became a key

driver of access and ownership opportunities for the parent. Adult participants

often discussed orchestrating their parents' and grandparents' first experiences

with access, and appeared to often be a fundamental catalyst in their uptake:

> I just taught my Grandad how to email. He just got a laptop, and my mum is
>
> trying to email him. I had to go round and set him up an email address, had
>
> to write it all down. He's got an A4 page [on which] I've written it all down:
>
> 'turn computer on, wait for five minutes, type in your password, click the 'e'
>
> in bottom left hand corner' so he clicks the 'e' and internet comes up.
>
> **Dean, age 21, 2010** [29]

This initial enablement of access could take numerous forms, highlighting how

limiting it is for academic studies to bypass these initial stages of learning when

researching device use, especially with older people (see, for example, studies by

Umemuro & Shirokane, 2003; Shapira et al, 2007; Blažun et al, 2012).

For instance, many of the older members of the sample claimed that their first

experiences with learning about different devices came from watching their

children and grandchildren utilising technology in their presence. Mary observed

her children engaging with devices long before she actually used them herself, but

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[29] This is noteworthy as Dean frequently discussed having a lack of confidence/ literacy regarding technology. He appeared to no longer provide (or at least not discuss) these teaching moments in later years, perhaps indicating that education is not linear and conclusive, and the opportunity to teach could also be a confidence builder for the *teacher* (thus in lacking these opportunities in later years Dean lost confidence – this will be returned to throughout this thesis).

this opportunity to watch provided her with valuable awareness and experiences, and was arguably instrumental in helping her with her own eventual purchase of a computer, as was evident when observing her interviews longitudinally:

> [My daughter] will ring me up and I'll go down and she'll have the computer set up with the photographs, and we'll discuss different things and we'll look back on them and have a laugh and that's it.   **Mary, age 73, 2006**

> I go to my daughters [to use the internet...] she'll sit down and see that you're doing it right, as long as it's checked at the very end before you press the button to pay.   **Mary, age 78, 2011**

> You'll be surprised I got myself a new computer! [...] Well I think there's no point in having a laptop unless I'm on the internet, 'cos I want to be able to book my own holidays, browse around different hotels which is very good, I think that's good. Several different things*.*   **Mary, age 79, 2012**

Mary gradually developed from observer, to assisted user, to owner of the internet and a computer, with the early access opportunities arguably motivating her eventual uptake.

Many other participants increasingly discussed witnessing their loved ones use smartphones, computers or tablets in front of them. As a result, even those who were not actively seeking out access to CMC were provided with more and more

opportunities to observe and interact with devices and platforms as they became
increasingly core in loved ones' lives:

> My wife uses [her tablet] for Facebook, I don't but you'll be watching TV and
> next thing this noise starts blaring out: 'what are you doing?!' And she's on
> Facebook or YouTube and you have to pause TV and watch what she's got
> […]. She's got friends all over the world: Africa, Scotland, so that's how I
> know how you keep in touch.
>
> **Peter, age 53, 2014**

These small encounters added up towards providing extra access opportunities,
and again illustrated that access is not the same as usage or as ownership: these
individuals were gaining access without having to own their own device or online
profile. However, it is important to note that this initial access arguably played a
role in any uptake experiences these individuals went on to have, as illustrated by
Mary's above experiences with computers.

In 2017 Mary gave her computer to her granddaughter when she went to
university, thus resumed the habit of only using technology with her daughter when
she bought her tablet over on visits. This illustrates that literacy, access and use are
not linear processes, but can instead fluctuate. It also again highlights the
difference between access and ownership, and how you can have one without the
other. Finally, it exemplifies how important the parent-child relationship continues
to be well into adulthood.

These demonstrations and lessons appeared to typically happen in low-pressure scenarios, where these access opportunities were an incidental part of a wider social activity, or the device was a conversation piece and individuals had the opportunity to learn with minimal pressure. However, there was also evidence that some felt there was an increase in pressure to access devices, and this was often most apparent when members of the sample discussed coercing someone or being pressured themselves into purchase. Familial relationships were often presented as being a core reason individuals felt 'forced' into purchasing a device, with a few participants saying they would not have bought one had they not been pressured into it by loved ones. For example, Mary resisted acquiring a mobile phone for most of the study, but eventually conceded after her anxious daughter insisted she bought one:

> My children were very concerned a few weeks ago, I took [my 4-year-old grandchild] out to- where they got their uniforms for the school […]. We went out half past 8 in the morning, [we got on the wrong bus and then went for food]. Half past 7 I come home, my eldest daughter [was worried, so she] phoned up the shop: 'has an Irish woman come in?!' So they phoned up the shop looking for this Irish woman and a little girl. I was in there a couple of hours beforehand [laughs] […]. They said: 'you could have really done with a mobile, do you know how worried they were, an 81-year-old with a 4-year-old [laughs] going around the country'. I said: 'I was alright!'; 'that's not the point mum, get a mobile' I said: 'I will, I will'.

Mary, age 81, 2014

Here Mary felt she did not have a choice: her children and grandchildren deemed a mobile phone to be an essential tool to own, thus she was no longer able to resist uptake. In this instance, close relationships were comparable to work relationships, where the sense of necessity regarding device ownership grew increasingly strong as time went on. This was even more apparent as the parent grew more elderly and adult 'children' took on a more authoritative role. This illustrated just how intrinsic relationships were in this process, where without them uptake, and maybe even initial access, may not have taken place.

The above exploration shows that there was a complex dynamic between parents and children, where each played a fundamental role in driving the others' initial access and uptake experiences. The manner of this dynamic appeared to be very much driven by what stage in life the parent/ child was in, and what level of influence one had over the others' opinions and actions. Whereas parents entered this relationship with full control over their children's access and initial ownership, this control lessened as the child became increasingly independent. As a child entered adulthood and the parent aged (and eventually went into retirement), the power regarding device access and ownership opportunities shifted in the child's favour, where they became the main facilitator of these experiences for their parent or grandparent. Figure 3 qualitatively illustrates this shifting relationship, demonstrating that not only were relationships pivotal in access and uptake opportunities, but that this was also an ever changing, complex dynamic that

benefits from observation over an extended period of time, as it allows for

changing life stages and how they shape access, uptake and use to be captured.
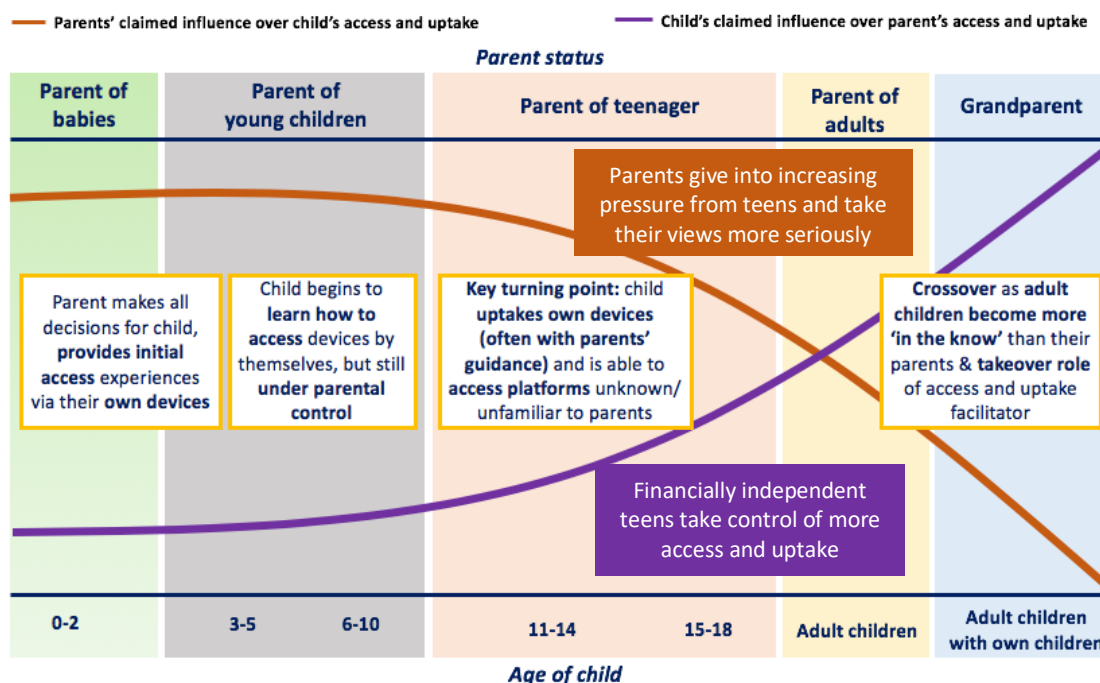
Figure 3- Illustrative diagram based on qualitative findings, depicting how AML participants experienced the changing dynamic between parent and child with regards to device/ CMC access and uptake.

Friendships

Friendships were another key relationship for facilitating access and uptake. The

above section demonstrated that many participants had their first informal

experiences with access through watching family members using devices when they

were visiting or spending time together. While families were generally the main

relationship that facilitated this, it was evident that friendships were often also core

in this process. For instance, Mick, Daniel, Jenny and Julia all discussed becoming

aware of and eventually owning platforms/ devices as a result of observing friends

trialling and erroring new technology and forms of CMC, and using this to shape their own uptake decisions:

> We bought – it's a Dell something-or-other – I don't know. [We were] looking to buy a computer and then my brother-in-law bought one. It was a good deal so we discussed it and we went and bought the same thing.
>
> **Mick, age 32, 2006**

> … Everyone in Belfast seems to be into Bebo, I suppose it's strange that everyone in England seems to be into Myspace but here, it's all Bebo, Bebo craze has taken over the last year [laughs] […]. But now my friends have gone to university they use Facebook and Myspace more but here it's all Bebo. But since my friends have gone I've got invites to Facebook and Myspace so I've joined them as well.
>
> **Julia, age 18, 2006**

In these instances Mick and Julia were highly sensitive to their friends' opinions and adoption behaviour and mimicked them.

However, this reliance on friends was much more crucial for some participants than for others, where in certain instances a lack of a supportive family meant that friends became the main source of guidance. A minority of participants lacked the level of contact with immediate family needed to provide the experiences discussed earlier in this chapter. For instance, Elizabeth often discussed having a volatile,

distant relationship with her family and did not have any children; Daniel, while in contact with his parents, spent the majority of the study living away from them and moving from house share to house share; and Eleanor often claimed that her family were unavailable to assist her in the manner she required. In these instances, friendships become vital substitutes for these relationships, where individuals' opportunities to learn about and observe devices were often limited to occasions where they were with their friends. This was especially the case for Elizabeth and Eleanor: as well as lacking familial support, neither were in full time work or education, meaning they already had limited access opportunities.

Elizabeth often talked about her friends throughout the study, and their inclusion in many of her anecdotes about the devices she encountered illustrated how important they were to her, both in general and in her experiences with CMC and technology specifically. In the early years of the study, Elizabeth was heavily reliant on her friends to introduce her to and demonstrate how to use numerous pieces of technology that she otherwise would not have come across:

> Somebody gave me a computer […] only so I could email him 'cos he lived quite far away, so I learnt in the first instance accessing emails. I never ever used the computer for anything else, I would just look at my emails and switch it off […]. I had friends that were into computers and things like that and they would say to me 'ooo have you seen this? We'll send it to you it's really funny', and obviously with that there would be a link with that so you can look at other things, and so gradually you sort of find the boundaries

being pushed back and things, you know, expanding, whether you meant it

to or not.   **Elizabeth, age 45, 2006**

In fact, Elizabeth repeatedly claimed that her main reason for accessing devices,

internet services or CMC was to please those around her, arguing that she only

initially adopted the internet in her house as a result of her tenants requesting that

she kept up with changing technology:

> I don't have broadband, I've got dial up 'cos I rarely use it, but since I've had
>
> a lodger and subsequent people they ask if I have broadband. It's becoming
>
> a problem I think so [I am] gonna have to bite the bullet and get it [...]. One
>
> thing leads to another 'cos now they ask for wireless so they can be in their
>
> rooms [...]. I'm learning by default, whether I want to or not.
>
> **Elizabeth, age 46, 2007**

Elizabeth even claimed she was given technology by frustrated friends who were

keen that she kept up to date:

> *Interviewer: Tell me more- you had a big leap with your internet, you said*
>
> *your friends helped you set it up, but how do you normally learn new*
>
> *things?*
>
> [...] Somebody asks me, normally, I don't actually go out and buy things,
>
> even my mobile phone someone gave me, I don't think I've ever bought –

except the TV and surround sound – anything. They get frustrated with me, they're like 'what do you mean you don't have a laptop?!' It's more for other people, they want to be able to get in touch with you.

Elizabeth, age 47, 2008

Without her friends taking such an active role in her initial access and uptake of these devices, Elizabeth claimed it was unlikely she would have bought into them.

Furthermore, Elizabeth's reports provide further evidence to substantiate the finding that each uptake experience impacts on the next: her dependence on her friends to educate and provide her with devices in the early years of the study arguably helped her to be more assertive with uptake in later years. In 2012 she had a falling out with her two closest friends, who also happened to be her main source of access opportunities:

I was very, very ill […] it's eye opening 'cos you realise who your real friends are, I was stuck inside for a whole month and no one came […] everyone just sort of disappeared […]. It was all the people I didn't think I needed to rely on who came, and all the ones I expected to who didn't. I've got two friends who live around the corner who've got my spare key who never came, not once […]. So it has been a very eye-opening time and it has made me re-evaluate a lot of things about my friendships and the superficiality of friendships.

Elizabeth, age 51, 2012

This reinforces the notion discussed Chapter 1 that friendships can be much more fleeting and fragile than stronger, more permanent ties (such as familial relationships (Allan, 1979, 1989; Giddens, 1992; Evans 2003; boyd, 2006; Chambers, 2012)), and indicates that they may also be less reliable or enduring sources of access or uptake opportunities. Although Elizabeth found this upsetting, she also saw this as an opportunity to become more independent and self-confident in her ability to buy devices, purchasing her own laptop for herself. This laptop became a vital tool for helping her access new CMC platforms such as online forums, meet up groups and SM in order to build new friendships – platforms she only sought out in a bid to meet new people:

> When I was ill and everyone sort of fell away and I was realising I needed to make new friends, so I joined this sort of meet up group, [through] which I met a really nice crowd of girls, 'cos I haven't got any girl friends just guys […]. I thought 'I chose the wrong people' […]. So I joined a couple of these meet up groups 'cos it sounds interesting, you can meet new people.
>
> **Elizabeth, age 51, 2012**

Friendship was an initial motivator of access for Elizabeth when she was indifferent to technology and CMC use, but became an incentive to continue her access and uptake behaviour on her own in later years. Regardless of the outcomes of these specific relationships, they played a vital role in Elizabeth's changing engagement with media and CMC over time. As such, it could be argued that friendships – however tenuous – were pivotal in the access and uptake process in two ways: they

played a role in actively teaching and encouraging loved ones to adopt their own devices, as well as working as an incentive for those seeking new friends via CMC platforms to learn about and use the internet.

Eleanor's experiences with device ownership also illustrated how pivotal friendships could be in ensuring individuals were incentivised to access platforms. Eleanor lived with her husband and son, however often complained that they did little to help or encourage her usage of computers and CMC. She entered the study owning a computer, and made great efforts to try to learn how to utilise different technology throughout the study period, sporadically buying new devices such as mobile phones and a tablet. However, despite her uptake and ventures into ownership, Eleanor constantly expressed concerns about accessing and utilising her devices, often struggling with initial attempts, worrying that she was doing something wrong, and giving up:

> What would be nice to do on the internet is send pictures to my friends and to people that I've been writing to 'cos it's a visual, but when I can't get into my email that makes me extremely frustrated and quite angry, I could throw it all away. **Eleanor, age 69, 2005**

> I suppose what I would really like is some little person on my shoulder saying 'no don't do that, do that', but for most people that's not available

[...]. I think certainly people that haven't used it before need some sort of

guidance.   **Eleanor, age 75, 2011**

Her experiences once again illustrate that ownership is very different to access,

where simply owning a device does not automatically mean that someone is able to

access the services they want to. They also show how essential the process of

support, explanation and demonstration is in helping facilitate initial access.

In the reported absence of a supportive family, Eleanor's main source of access

incentives came from her friends. While she implied that her immediate family did

very little to encourage her access, her involvement in a number of different social

groups encouraged her to be persistent in her attempts to access CMC, as she

wanted to keep up to date with news and communications, which were increasingly

circulated online:

> *Interviewer: Who are you looking forward to getting emails from?*
>
> [...] I got one from the tennis [club] this morning. The guy who runs it tells
>
> everybody whether he's going to play or not, so I look up before I go to the
>
> tennis court in the morning whether anybody will be there. Well that's
>
> useful [...]. I think I would miss it if I didn't have it.
>
> **Eleanor, age 80, 2016**

Eleanor was quick to explain how important she felt these friendships were in helping her access platforms, and worried that there could be many other people in her age group and position who lacked these access opportunities, thus would struggle even more to access and uptake devices and CMC platforms. This was evidenced by her comparatively low access to a range of platforms: while her social groups incentivised her to utilise email and access certain sites, she had little requirement to use SM in her everyday life, as none of her friends used it. As such, she felt a sense of exclusion and rejection when she encountered references to SM during her day-to-day life, as she felt they were not aimed at her. She referred to Facebook as a 'secret society' for younger people in 2009, and later lamented:

> I find it quite disturbing actually, 'cos you don't- there's so much going on out there actually, I don't know half of it, a quarter of it actually, and you can easily get isolated because the world's moving on. And the other thing of course is about Facebook and that sort of thing, and I've got no interest in that sort of thing, but funnily enough I went into a shop yesterday and she gave me her card, it was just a food shop, and it said 'for further information I'm on Facebook', and I'm thinking 'well that's no good to me'.
>
> **Eleanor, age 75, 2011**

Once again, this shows that access does not equate with usage or uptake: although she knew Facebook existed and she had all the tools necessary to create herself an account and utilise the site, she did not socialise with friends who were already accessing the site. Therefore, she had two main barriers to accessing SM. Firstly,

she did not encounter the demonstrations or encouragement opportunities I have highlighted above as being so essential here. Furthermore, as no one she considered to be a contemporary (i.e. someone she knew of a similar age) was on Facebook, she lacked the incentive to access SM to socialise with her friends. This just continually reinforced the idea for her that Facebook (and other forms of CMC) was a 'secret society', not meant for people like her.

The above exploration demonstrates how relationships are a key driver of increased access and uptake for participants, whether through formal or informal means. There appeared to be a hierarchy in terms of demand and support, where work and education were the main initial enforcers of access and uptake. If an individual did not receive this formal access, they often turned to or were encouraged by immediate family. If this family was unavailable or unsupportive, then finally friends were turned to for guidance.

In many instances the role of relationships in this process was perceived to be very positive, as they were positioned as providing individuals with more options for communication and relationship management, as well as helping them keep up with what they claimed were inevitable changing times. However, there were also a number of reported negatives connected to this heightened expectation of access and pressure to adopt from loved ones. A lot of these negatives were associated with the amount of choice – or lack thereof – that participants felt they had in this process. Therefore, the final section of this chapter will explore the connection

between choice, access and uptake, and the extent to which relationships drove or hindered this.

Repercussions for personal choice

For many participants, the decision to access and uptake devices/ CMC platforms was less of a choice, more of an inevitable process that they felt they needed to go through. This was driven by multiple factors, many of which were wider social and systematic changes that meant there was an increasing expectation to utilise computers to complete everyday administration tasks or engage with public services:

> I've been forced into a corner, everywhere I go. And if I phone up a place it's 'www.' […]. I phoned up somewhere, had to press this button, that button, never got a human, that's what gets my goat that you're forced into a corner […]. It is annoying […]. I go to this club, this drop in club once a month, and this person said 'ooo you want info, what's your email address?' I said 'I don't have one'; 'you don't have an email address?!' It was as if I was daft, and I said I don't have a computer: 'you don't have a computer?!' It's as if I'm the wrong one.   **Cathy, age 67, 2011**

While Cathy noted experiencing an increasing pressure to adopt computers coming from external sources here, personal relationships were also often seen as a source of coercion. The above exploration illustrated how different relationships –

especially familial and friendships – could make individuals feel compelled to access and own devices. For some, this pressure – especially pressure to purchase – would evoke a feeling of resentment, where the individual felt they were backed into a corner and made to do something against their will. This was also articulated by Cathy after she eventually purchased a computer following years of resistance:

> I'm on the web now, I got myself a computer. I think the one I had before was my daughter's and it was so slow so I got talked into buying a new one.
>
> *Interviewer: Who talked you into it?*
>
> My daughter. 'Cos I kept asking her to look things up for me, and she said 'for God's sake mum will you go buy yourself a computer?!' So I did.
>
> **Cathy, age 68, 2012**

Mary and Elizabeth also expressed irritation over this as they claimed they disliked being told what to do by others. However they also eventually gave into the pressure in order to make other people happy. This resignation was perpetuated by a fear of isolation if they did not concede. Mary expressed concerns that if she did not access and own the 'right' devices or platforms she would be left behind, and said she felt an increasing sense of exclusion as she got older and devices became more prolific:

> I think at different stages your age does come into it. I have all these things where I could use them, [but] the time will come where I couldn't use it, and I might regret it. Maybe keeping up with the modern- when you have

children and grandchildren, and every place that you go they ask you 'have

you got an internet so I can get in touch with you through the internet?',

they say 'yeah I'd prefer you to be on the internet now'. Businesses and

shops, first thing they say 'have you got an internet?' […]. I feel left out now,

'cos it's asked that many times.   **Mary, age 79, 2012**

It was not only the older participants who felt they could become isolated if they

did not access the platforms and technology expected. Daniel, who was arguably

more confident and open to new technology than the older members of the

sample, also expressed a fear of being left behind if he did not access online

platforms that his friends used:

And it's almost a case of being left out as well. There are certain things

you're interested in and they post their stuff online on Twitter, and if you're

not on there you're left to play catch up with the rest of the world […].

When it becomes the convention for everyone else you either have to get

on board with it or suffer the consequences, so it's something I've definitely

decided to get involved with.

Daniel, age 30, 2013

This need to adapt behaviour in order to 'fit in' with others will be elaborated on in

more detail in the following two chapters.

There was an overall sense that individuals were resigning themselves to being part of changing times, where the speed at which devices were developing, along with the shift in social expectations around access, meant that these participants felt it was almost inevitable that the access and uptake of devices became a perceived necessity. Both Donald and Mary discussed being part of an ever-changing technological world, where they needed to be open to adaptation in order to not be left behind. Mary argued that 'you can't stop progress' (age 73, 2006), and Donald marvelled at how quickly the internet had become an everyday utility:

> I think there's an increasing realisation that technology is important and going to get important. I think what started off say ten years ago has now become mainstream, i.e. the internet. It's a bit like the washing machine is now a very important item that everyone must have. Many, many years ago people started to see internet names, 'www.': websites on buildings and vans and whatever, and people didn't really take that much notice of them to be honest with you, and now over the ten years there's been this huge leap of information that people have got access to via the internet.
>
> **Donald, age 60, 2014**

Thus, even those who were initially reluctant to adopt and use developing technology during this time grew increasingly aware of a socio-cultural expectation to alter their behaviour, adopt technology and CMC, and 'fit in' with those around them.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the role relationships play in providing – or hindering – access and uptake opportunities. It has argued that 2005-2018 was a time of drastically changing technology that motivated an increase in individuals' access opportunities. This in turn catered for a shift in social expectations and assumptions around access, where the access to and uptake of CMC facilitating devices and platforms was increasingly assumed.

This chapter has illustrated the numerous ways in which relationships could be deemed a driving force behind these increased expectations, both formally and – more often – informally. While work and education often provided enforced introductions to CMC and facilitating devices, not all members of the sample encountered these opportunities. Thus, parents, children and friends especially played vital roles in encouraging or enforcing access and uptake. Without these core relationships, participants claimed to struggle to gain access to devices or online platforms, triggering a sense of exclusion.

However, relationships were also at times negatively associated with access and uptake, with some participants arguing that people they knew had 'forced' them into accessing devices and platforms they otherwise would have avoided. This was especially the case when individuals were coerced into buying devices (such as smartphones) that they deemed superfluous. As a result, this exploration has shown that developments in technology that shaped an increase in access

opportunities, alongside a change in people's expectations regarding this process, may have also negatively impacted on the amount of choice individuals felt they had.

It is also evident from the above exploration that there were certain groups of people who were at risk of experiencing limited access opportunities, which could impact on their ability to take up certain devices and utilise them in their relationship management. This was concerning, as not only are healthy relationships essential in overall happiness, health and wellbeing (Argyle, 1992; Cheal, 1992; LaFollette, 1996), but they are also increasingly mediated (boyd, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2014; Boellstorff, 2008; Turkle, 2011; Baym, 2015; Quan-Haase et al, 2018). Those who were at risk of being excluded here included those who were from lower SEGs or who suffered from financial constraints, anyone who was not working (due to retirement, redundancy, sick leave, etc.), and those who lacked regular contact with loved ones. For instance, those from lower SEGS or with financial constraints (such as Sheila, Dean and Peter) arguably had less opportunity to buy new technology, even when certain aspects of their lives – such as their children's schoolwork – demanded it.

Furthermore, participants who were not working in a job that required the use of CMC facilitating technology (such as Peter, Elizabeth, Mary, Eleanor), missed out on a key incentive to prioritise access and ownership. This was especially problematic for those who already lacked interest in or confidence with technology, as without the compulsory access to devices and/or platforms that work often demanded,

they felt they had little need to learn. Finally, those who lacked immediate family or friends who could provide ongoing support, demonstrations, encouragement and coercion into accessing and adopting technology or CMC (such as Eleanor and Peter) often failed to see the need to persevere into unfamiliar territory.

Each of these issues evidently had a greater negative impact on the older members of the sample, as many entered retirement before they had a chance to encounter daily use of computers and CMC in their place of work, had fewer friends and family to hand, and were less inclined to spend their money on devices they did not deem essential.

Fortunately, each of the AML participants claimed to know a child, parent, sibling, partner, friend or colleague who encouraged access. However, both Eleanor and Cathy expressed concerns for people who lacked this network to provide guidance and encouragement:

> When I go to the classes [at the gym…] you phone up and they're not always available so you have to hang on […] so the booking online thing makes sense […]. That's okay 'cos I'm used to using a computer, but it worries me 'cos a lot of people, particularly in my age group [do not]. It is quite discriminating, 'cos if you can't use a computer, or you haven't got one – and a lot of people don't have one actually – what happens then? […] Like I say it doesn't bother me but I could see it bother – a lot of people I know

don't do it, so what happens to these people?

Eleanor, age 74, 2010

This old lady I'm going out with this afternoon really needs help […]. I went on the government website to see what she's entitled to, and there's a 32-page document she can fill in, but she doesn't have a computer, and I think 'do I really want to get involved in all this?' […]. I've asked for a paper copy for her […]. These are the things that make me angry [the assumption that people will have someone to help them go online to complete jobs].

Cathy, age 72, 2016

The knowledge that there were people who were isolated from the access and uptake opportunities outlined in this chapter troubled these participants. As society becomes increasingly dependent on CMC, those without ongoing close relationships to help and incentivise them are at risk of missing out of accessing a crucial aspect of everyday life.

The next chapter examines how these participants managed their different relationships once they were using CMC, and the complications that arose as they navigated the wealth of new CMC platforms developed between 2005-2018.

Chapter 4 - Relationships, network management and CMC literacy

Introduction

The previous chapter explored the role of relationships in motivating how the Adults' Media Lives (AML) participants accessed and eventually owned computer mediated communication (CMC) and facilitating devices. This chapter examines the subsequent experiences participants had once they had access to CMC, and how they used CMC to maintain relationships. It explores the extent to which the participants adapted their behaviour in order to manage their relationships and growing online networks between 2005-2018, developing new literacy skills as they navigated an array of CMC platforms.

Throughout the 14-year research period, the AML participants were vocal about how they managed their relationships online. The younger participants rapidly shifted between social media (SM) sites Bebo, Myspace and Facebook before adding Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter to their SM portfolios, assigning meaning and specific relationships to each platform as they went. The older participants were often baffled by this observed behaviour in younger people. They adopted new platforms at a slower pace and utilised fewer forms of CMC in a manner they deemed most suitable for their own personal networks. Despite these differences, it was evident that as time went on most participants became aware of the subtle

nuances between different forms of CMC, adjusting their behaviour – and berating those who would not adapt – each year. By 2018 the use of CMC for managing relationships was markedly different to its use in the early years of the study. This chapter examines how these participants came to alter their relationship management so drastically during this time.

Managing relationships

The term 'management' has long been contentious when used in the context of relationships. Although much of the terminology used in academic literature when considering relationships involves verbs such as 'control' or 'manage' (Parks, 2007; Baron, 2008; Jarvis, 2011; Garde-Hansen, 2013), Christine Rosen (2007, p27) critiques this way of discussing relationships, arguing that 'there is something Orwellian about the management-speak on social networking sites'. Nancy Baym (2015) also discusses this idea of 'management', arguing that it can lead to negative behaviour where relationships are manipulated to suit an individual's personal needs at the time (for example someone can ignore a loved one's message via CMC until a time that is suitable for them), and everyone is in turn managed by others.

Furthermore, the implication of the term 'management' is that it is a conscious, deliberate action. This conflicts with the academic consensus that the behaviour within any given relationship is often the result of *unspoken* norms and values established via the individual's social context, as well as contradicting the narrative that the nature of relationships can be fluid, fluctuating and hard to

compartmentalise (Argyle, 1992; LaFollette, 1996; Schultz & Lavenda, 2009; Parks, 2017). In this sense, the concept of 'managing' relationships can be controversial.

However, this chapter will argue that the AML participants' increasing use of CMC motivated a need to 'manage' their relationships. These participants were interviewed at a time where online networks were still a relatively recent phenomenon, thus they needed to learn – and often even create – new social rules on how relationships should be maintained and – in essence – managed. This process of learning new skills online often took a number of years and trial and error experiences, thus studying this process longitudinally allows for greater context to be garnered.

<u>Learning to manage online networks</u>

Academics have considered how people engage with and use media for many decades, with scholars debating over the level of autonomy media users have long before the rise of CMC. The uses and gratification approach has been widely referenced within media studies (Katz et al, 1973; Ruddock, 2007; Thornham et al, 2009; Dolan et al, 2016; Rathnayake & Winter, 2018; Benvenuti et al, 2020). It is considered to be one of the earliest audience studies approaches to present audiences as actively engaging with media (Dolan et al, 2016), where it positions audiences as interpreting media in a manner that befits their own personal needs and desires. As such, this approach contends that different people may engage with the same media in varied manners (Dolan et al, 2016).

Whilst this approach has been applied to an array of media over the past few decades, it has more recently been considered in the context of CMC and SM (see, for example, Rathnayake & Winter, 2018; Benvenuti et al, 2020). For instance, Martina Benvenuti et al (2020) note that while some people may use certain SM platforms to form and maintain relationships, others may use them for identity play or as a means for accumulating online information about themselves. As such, the role of SM is different for each person, depending on their personal motivations (Rathnayake & Winter, 2018; Benvenuti et al, 2020). Furthermore, it has been noted that the affordances of different platforms – such as how interactive they are, the types of content they present, etc. – play a pivotal role in motivating how people choose to utilise SM to fulfil their needs (Rathnayake & Winter, 2018). Thus, when this theory is considered in the context of the multitude of CMC options available, it is apparent that there are numerous diverse approaches users may take to using and considering different CMC.[30]

Despite this, scholars have argued that there are patterns in user behaviours, norms and social 'rules' evident, as users socialise across different forms of CMC (see Gershon, 2010; Miller, 2016; Miller et al, 2016; Carpenter et al, 2018). While users are engaging with different platforms based on their own needs, they are also

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[30] Although the uses and gratification approach continues to be used prolifically and remains relevant to recent media changes, some scholars have noted that it fails to consider the wider social and cultural contexts that may also shape an individual's use (Katz et al, 1973; Ruddock, 2007). This is discussed further below and in the thesis Conclusion, where I identify the future implications of my research.

doing so in a manner that is facilitated by the platform and that befits their wider social contexts. As first noted in Chapter 1, Ilana Gershon (2010) explored the different uses of an array of CMC platforms in her qualitative study on mediated break ups. She found that each person has their own 'media ideologies' that motivate how people communicate and interpret certain messages in different online contexts (Gershon, 2010, p21). Gershon (2010, p49) proposed that each understanding of a medium is only formed 'in the context of other media', and it is by engaging with multiple forms of media that individuals begin attributing norms of behaviour to each form (see also Hsieh, 2012; Miller et al, 2016; Chambers, 2017; Norton et al, 2017; Peer, 2017; Carpenter et al, 2018). Daniel Miller et al (2016, px) reinforced this requirement to consider each form of media within the context of other media, noting that we live in a 'polymedia' environment where the use of one type of CMC is motivated by prior and current experiences with other forms of communication (see also Miller, 2016; Chambers, 2017). This awareness of prior experiences is especially important as new online forms of communication are constantly developing. Academics call for further research that considers more recent CMC platforms as they emerge and are added to people's CMC portfolios, such as Instagram and Snapchat (see, for example, Peer, 2017; Brown et al, 2020).

This presents an opportunity for this longitudinal study to build a deeper understanding of the different forms of CMC an individual may use over time, providing a more cohesive insight into how the use of one form of CMC exists in the context of all other CMC. This allows for the contextual circumstances of platform use to be addressed, and for a deeper understanding of how overall CMC use may

develop as participants adopt new technology and platforms, building on their previous experiences with CMC.

Connecting new skills with new literacies

Although Gershon (2010) acknowledged that an understanding of the appropriate forms of CMC used in different social contexts is key, she did not explicitly connect this to literacy. Sora Park (2012, p90) did connect the two: she noted that there is a difference between device literacy and content literacy, and claimed that an important part of content literacy is a 'knowledge of cyber etiquette and ethics'. She elaborated, arguing that 'understanding the content side of [digital media literacy] means knowing the context of why such messages were created and what they mean within the social context' (Park, 2012, p93). Despite this acknowledgement, Park's (2012) discussion on this was brief: her emphasis was on examining the difference between device and content literacy rather than exploring the nuances of online social literacy.

Similarly, Tanya Notley (2009, p1209) argued that 'the same online network can be used differently by individual members depending on their ICT capabilities', inferring that platform affordances do not motivate behaviour alone – online social literacy levels can differ, and that this in turn can shape behaviour on these sites. However, her focus here was more on the risks of exclusion this could create for the individual, rather than on the shifts that may occur in relationships as a result of changing literacies in social settings online. Notley's (2009) and Park's (2012)

findings will be built on in this chapter as I discuss how changing literacies online may shape relationships.

Finally, Yuli Hsieh (2012, p9) connects the new uses of SM to literacy by discussing 'online social networking skills', noting that 'an additional type of Web–use ability, namely, online social networking skills may emerge from the rapid incorporation of social media into mainstream Web activities'. However, his theoretical observations on SM use are narrow, implying a need for a wider, empirical study that considers literacy with all CMC use, not just SM. As such, many authors have highlighted the need to develop a new form of skills when socialising online, but have not closely examined how this may be built over time with an array of CMC.

In this chapter I add to existing literary debates by considering a new type of literacy that has emerged over many years. I refer to this as CMC literacy, defining it as the ability to understand when, where and how to share content with any given audience at the time. I illustrate how these new literacy skills are increasingly required to use CMC effectively, especially when attempting to maintain and manage an array of relationships online.

I then note the negative repercussions experienced by those who failed to obtain these new skills and the subsequent problems they encountered. These problems included a growing need to understand new online etiquettes; the social issues caused by online network collapse; and the repercussions of a loss of control over personal privacy. Each of these issues was often exacerbated by a lack of CMC

literacy, in turn making the resolution of these problems even more challenging, and negatively impacting on participants' relationships.

This chapter ends with an exploration into how participants endeavoured to solve their CMC-related problems. I consider how people cultivate this new form of literacy, suggesting that education on CMC use may assist with this process. I also note how the increased use of WhatsApp seen by 2018 allowed for participants to safely and privately build confidence and literacy skills, noting how this finding may impact on literacy education initiatives and future research into CMC use.

Before examining the different 'problems' the AML participants faced and how they attempted to solve them, I will first summarise how participants engaged with a range of different CMC throughout the study, what roles they attributed to each platform, and on what basis these expectations were established. This builds on existing academic explorations of the 'roles' of different platforms (Gershon, 2010; Brody & Peña, 2015; Miller et al, 2016; Peer, 2017; Chambers, 2017; Carpenter et al, 2018) and provides a context for how participants navigated the CMC- landscape during this time.

CMC use over time

As Chapter 3 illustrated, portable device uptake and use greatly altered communication opportunities between 2005-2018. Numerous different forms of

CMC were also developed during this time, with adoption and usage rapidly

changing year-on-year as new platforms were introduced, settings and

functionalities on existing platforms altered and different forms of CMC went in and

out of popularity. Some new forms of CMC were introduced, cherished but then

quickly rejected (such as BBM messaging on BlackBerry phones, or SM such as Bebo

or Myspace). Others became an integral part of participant online communication

and were used in varied manners for numerous years (such as Facebook or video

calling).

By 2018 most of the participants were engaging with multiple CMC platforms

throughout the day. While typically the older participants often adopted and

favoured the use of one form of CMC (such as Skype or email), the younger or more

technologically-enthusiastic participants regularly used a wide range of different

types of CMC. Many participants engaged with SM on an almost daily basis, rapidly

shifting from one site to another.[31] While Facebook had been the prime form of SM

used by the AML participants for years, the introduction of numerous other SM

platforms that offered different functionalities and services meant that participants

broadened their SM and CMC portfolio. This was also evidenced in Ofcom's

quantitative studies: Ofcom reported that Facebook's popularity decreased

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[31] In this chapter I separate CMC and SM based on participant experiences. While CMC is an overarching term that incorporates all online communication (including SM), I consider SM to be online platforms that consist of wide networks, where content is typically shared with a number of people at once. I include Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter as SM, and differentiate them from other forms of CMC such as email, video calling and instant messaging. While they maintain a number of similarities that I will outline in this chapter, I also discuss throughout this chapter why this distinction is important when considering participant experiences.

between 2017 and 2018, and there was an increase in popularity of other forms of

SM or instant messaging (IM) (Ofcom, 2019a; see also Brown et al, 2020). Ofcom

found that alongside Facebook's decrease in monopoly:

> There has been a corresponding increase in the use of WhatsApp (61% in
>
> 2018, up from 54% in 2017) and Instagram (38%, up from 31% in 2017).
>
> When asked about their main site, again while Facebook remains the most
>
> popular, internet users are now less likely than the previous year to consider
>
> this their main site (58% in 2018, down from 70% in 2017) and more likely to
>
> nominate WhatsApp (23% vs. 16%), Instagram (5% vs. 3%) and YouTube (4%
>
> vs. 2%) (Ofcom, 2019a, p9).

As use of a range of CMC became normalised, these participants began to consider

each platform to have a distinct 'role'. While these roles were typically socially

motivated, they also often connected to the affordances of the platform, and how

its functionalities could drive certain kinds of use. Miller (2016) refers to this as

'scalable sociality', where he found that the extent to which a platform was private,

combined with the size of the audience at hand, shaped how people socialised on

different sites.

From my analysis of how and why the AML participants changed their use of CMC

over time I have established four key attributes that shaped how participants

considered and engaged with each platform:

1. How public the platform was (e.g. was it for private messages or a profile on a SM site?)

2. How permanent the footprint was (e.g. Snapchat posts were temporary vs. longer lasting and retrievable 'Tweets' on Twitter)

3. Who the audiences were (e.g. were they approved by the user (in, for example, synchronous 'friending') or were they invisible (through asynchronous following, or publicly visible profiles)?)

4. What content was shared (e.g. images vs. text-only statuses vs. video clips, etc.).

These affordances led to each platform being assigned certain 'roles' as a result of the communication or content they were associated with. Many of these roles were considered in a comparison to the roles of other platforms, where participants were able to 'scale' how they socialised across different forms of CMC (Miller, 2016; Miller et al, 2016). For example, many participants reported that Facebook had a different function to WhatsApp and to email, due to their expectations of what content was appropriate for each form of CMC, and based on their historical use of these varied platforms.

Table 2 examines the main forms of CMC participants were still using in 2018, and illustrates how the four key attributes identified above shaped the 'roles' participants assigned to these platforms. This analysis provides a technological context for the social and cultural motivators that will be discussed throughout this

chapter. These findings are summarised in this manner as they align with many of the different 'roles' highlighted in other academic studies regarding each forms' affordances and the different uses of CMC (see, for example, Gershon, 2010; Hsieh, 2012; El-Jarn, 2014; Miller, 2016; Miller et al, 2016; Chambers, 2017; Parks, 2017; Carpenter et al, 2018; Quan-Haase et al, 2018). However, it is worthwhile briefly summarising this specific sample's experiences here, as by comparing each form of communication in relation to each other in this longitudinal manner, I am able to provide a cohesive context for my exploration into how participants navigated these different platforms over time in the main body of this chapter.

Table 2 - The 'roles' assigned to each platform and how the AML participants' engaged with them, based on the four key attributes identified above.

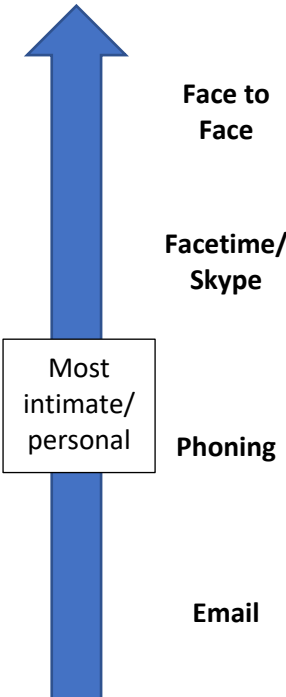| Platform 'role'	Public profile?	Permanent footprint?	Approved audience?	Type of content?
Facebook –by 2018, conservative, 'neutral' posts were shared with wide networks	For the majority in the beginning, yes. Some discovered private groups/ settings optimisation in later years as they began to prioritise privacy.	Participants struggled to confidently remove content without deleting Facebook (and even then they were concerned about what data the site had), instead settling for 'hiding' content.	Facebook encouraged wide networks, which often led to social discomfort as different contexts collapse. This motivated participants to limit the content they shared in later years.	Initially a wide array of content (pictures, text, public conversations) was shared, however this became more conservative over time as participants became more aware of their broad audience here.
Twitter – witty updates/ news	Yes (usually) – this was considered an integral part of Twitter, shaping the content shared by participants.	Participants were highly aware of their 'online footprint' on Twitter, and how it could be interpreted in the future. Thus they often carefully considered the content they shared.	Asynchronous 'following' meant that unless they made their profiles completely private, anyone could follow them or retweet their content. Could lead to public debate with strangers online.	Typically text. The character limit led to participants curating pithy and witty posts and becoming critical of the relevance of content shared by others. They carefully considered how to present themselves, e.g. professionally.
Instagram – aesthetically pleasing images	This was chosen by participants, with some opting to remain public, and others choosing to make their profiles as private as possible.	Participants liked to perfect their Instagram content and play with the 'aesthetics'. Some would regularly delete content as they adapted their online image, leaving only certain content visible.	Depending on privacy wants, there were both visible and invisible audiences here. Some were more relaxed about letting strangers 'follow' them here than, e.g. 'friend' them on Facebook	Instagram was typically used for image sharing. This led to careful curation and editing of images. They also used Instagram for following content that aligned with personal interests, e.g. images from the Beauty or Fitness sectors.
Snapchat – carefree personal content	No – Snapchat offered different gradations of privacy, with participants	No – Participants appreciated Snapchat for its disposable content, allowing	Participants tended to deliberately only maintain a very select, small part of their	User-generated videos and images. In the final years of the study some participants began to also use it for

	typically only sharing with close friends.	them to be more carefree and relaxed here.	network on Snapchat, with all audiences being visible.	instant messaging and video calling.
Email- personal contact with family/ work	No – private messages were typically exchanged with limited people.	Yes (especially in work context), but not something that participants worried about.	Yes – participants maintained control over who emails were exchanged with.	Older participants used for ongoing conversations/ sending pictures; younger participants typically used email in a professional context.
WhatsApp[32]- multimedia communication with an array of relationships	No – private and encrypted messages.	Not something participants considered. They could delete or save photos/ conversation threads where wanted.	WhatsApp was appreciated for its nuanced audience control, where participants often partook in multiple group chats/ single conversations at once.	WhatsApp was used as a multimedia communications app. Messaging was commonplace, but pictures, videos and voice notes were also often exchanged.
Facebook Messenger- wider private messages with 'weaker' ties	No – private messages were exchanged. However, the Facebook brand made some concerned about how private their data was.	Not something participants considered. They could delete or save photos/ conversation threads where wanted.	Messages were private, although Facebook Messenger was often turned to for less 'close' connections as it provided access to all friends on Facebook.	Participants mainly reported using this for text-based conversations.
Skype/ Facetime[33]- intimate conversation	No – Video calling was typically only conducted with close ties.	Not something participants considered. Videos were not saved or reviewed.	No invisible audiences – only conducted with known people.	Video, allowing for non-verbal cues and a more conversational/ informal tone to be created.

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[32] The nuanced uses of WhatsApp over time will be considered throughout this chapter, as its relevance for this sample grew and it was increasingly deemed to be a new form of communication within its own right, separate from traditional SM such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.
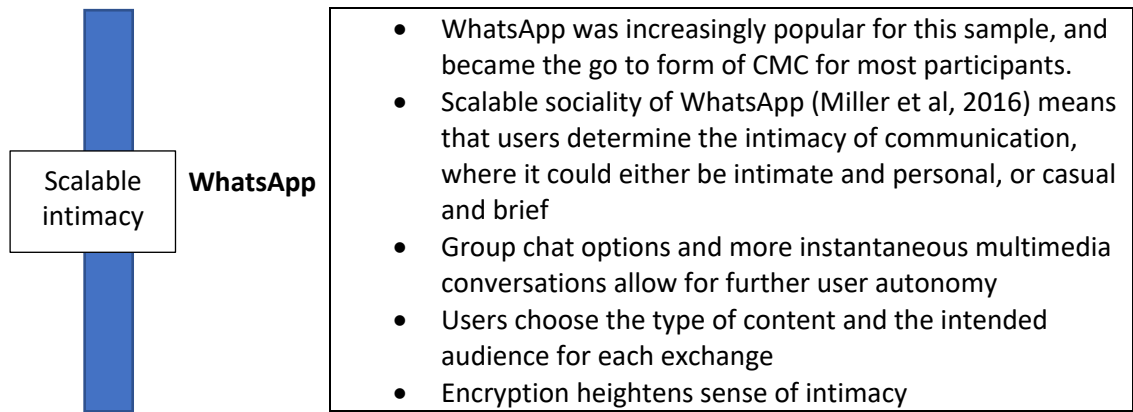
[33] With the study period ending in 2018, the uses of video calling reported here came before the rapid increase in and changing use of video calling after the spread of COVID-19 and subsequent UK lockdowns (Fuchs, 2020).

As increasing amounts of CMC options became available, these participants

established an unspoken hierarchy as to when and how each form of

communication should be used. This hierarchy appeared to be generated by

participants and the people within their personal networks – thus varied from

person to person – however there were clear themes across the sample. For

example, it appeared that the more cues that were available (e.g. the ability to read

facial expressions, hear a voice, communicate emotion) the more intimate and

personal a form of CMC felt. Scholars have also noted this apparent hierarchy,

often also concluding that a form of communication that offers more cues also

provides a deeper sense of intimacy (Walther & Parks, 2002; Chambers, 2013; El-

Jarn, 2014; Cao & Lin, 2017; Parks, 2017). This hierarchy of how personal a form of

communication felt to these participants specifically is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3 - AML participants' perceptions of how intimate different forms of communication were, based on their reported experiences.

	Positives	Drawbacks
Face to Face	• One-to-one • Close and intimate	• Time consuming when compared to CMC
Facetime/ Skype	• Replicates face to face • Transcends physical distance • Affordable • Facetime = faster and used on the go	• Need to focus and be 'present' • Time consuming
Phoning	• Personal – more cues available • Can be more efficient than texting	• Can be time consuming • Can cause social awkwardness: no time to think of responses
Email	• Longer messages than other CMC forms allow • Can be formal or informal, depending on the relationship	• Need to consider audience: deemed too formal by some • Slower response rate

Most intimate/ personal ↑

Scalable intimacy — **WhatsApp**

- WhatsApp was increasingly popular for this sample, and became the go to form of CMC for most participants.
- Scalable sociality of WhatsApp (Miller et al, 2016) means that users determine the intimacy of communication, where it could either be intimate and personal, or casual and brief
- Group chat options and more instantaneous multimedia conversations allow for further user autonomy
- Users choose the type of content and the intended audience for each exchange
- Encryption heightens sense of intimacy

Least intimate/ personal

	Positives	Drawbacks
Texting	- Feels more intimate than social media - More common in early years: many replaced it with WhatsApp by 2018	- Lack of cues - Can feel less personal than phoning - Lacks efficient multimedia sharing
Facebook messenger	- Facilitates both one-to-one communication and group chats - Useful for organising events with wider connections	- Less personal than WhatsApp or texting - Not as common as other forms of instant messaging
Snapchat	- Temporary nature of content is fun, relaxed - Disposable and low commitment content - Used by younger participants for more personal exchanges	- Niche appeal: only considered intimate by young participants - Deemed vacuous and unnecessary by older participants
Facebook	- Suitable for weaker connections - Facilitates maintenance of relationships with minimal effort	- Can feel impersonal - Can offend/ annoy if unsuited for the occasion, e.g. public post from a close friend
Instagram/ Twitter	- Can follow non-friends and build connections - Content can reach many people - Private messaging option for more personal messages	- Connections can feel superficial - Potential for abuse from wider audience - Pressure to curate a certain tone = less natural, intimate

More intricate factors also motivated how this sample used different CMC. For instance, speed of response shaped how conversational and 'in the moment' an exchange felt, in turn determining which platform participants used for a specific type of communication. Daniel exemplified this by articulating how he used WhatsApp and texting differently, and how he felt when someone tried to communicate with him over these different forms of CMC. He deemed WhatsApp to be more instantaneous, as those who messaged via it could see when a message was received and read, thus felt pressured to respond faster than when texting:

> The kind of openness that WhatsApp gives you makes me feel uncomfortable sometimes. 'Cos if someone texts me I don't feel the urge to respond to them, or the urgency to respond to them in the same way as if somebody WhatsApp'd me. If they WhatsApp'd me I feel like I have to get back to them, it's like an instant conversation. If somebody texted me a text, I think 'deal with that later when I've got the time'.

> **Daniel, age 33, 2016**

Daniel drew clear distinctions between WhatsApp and texting and the behaviour their functionalities motivated. This reiterates the point made by scholars that as individuals develop new social norms, two forms of communication that are similar in many ways (for example texting versus WhatsApp) can take on different roles and uses, depending on the platforms' affordances, how the user wishes to perceive them and how others utilise it (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Parks & Roberts, 1998; Gershon, 2010).

Finally, different types of CMC were perceived by this sample to be appropriate or inappropriate depending on the nature of the relationship that they were being used for. For example, email was seen as suitable for longer forms of communications with a distant friend or for workmates, but was not seen as appropriate for a quick and casual exchange with a close friend. Phoning was appropriate for when a more intimate, involving conversation was needed, but not when it was unexpected, as this could be seen to be a time-consuming intrusion. Conversely, a Facebook comment was appropriate for incidental, quick communications between loose ties, but sending a message here where a more intimate form of communication was expected – such as a phone call from a close friend to receive a health update – could be seen as cold and uncaring. Thus by 2018 the wealth of CMC options available meant there were increasing expectations regarding when, how and why each form would be engaged with, providing the user with both freedom and constraints over how to communicate online.

The need for CMC literacy

It is evident that over the 14-year research period technology and CMC platforms changed greatly, where by 2018 there were numerous means through which to communicate with others online. Users greatly increased and varied their use of different CMC, developing perceptions of each form based on their affordances and social expectations of use. As such, over the course of the research period these

participants needed to adapt and develop new skills in order to effectively communicate online. I refer to these skills as CMC literacy.

I define CMC literacy as the skills needed to understand when, where and how to effectively communicate and share content via a range of CMC with other people.[34] Determining the appropriate approach that is required comes with understanding the relevant social norms and expectations for each interaction on each platform, and then managing relationships appropriately. This involved understanding each platform's affordances, the relationship and the social norms associated with it, and the individuals' media ideologies in each context. Thus CMC literacy involves a complex and ever-changing set of skills. The level of CMC literacy needed in order to communicate with any given group may alter depending on the norms and expectations from the audience at hand, where, for example, people who only use Facebook may expect a different type of behaviour from their network than those who use multiple forms of CMC. Those with fewer connections on a platform may expect different behaviour than those with a greater number of connections. This will be explored in more detail in the next section.

It is evident from the above exploration that the expectations for use across different platforms often changed over time. The reasons for these changes – and

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[34] I use the term literacy here in order to create connections between prominent academic and regulator work on media literacy (discussed throughout this thesis (Hobbs, 1998; Livingstone, 2004; Ofcom, 2020a)) and literature on online communication norms, ideologies and etiquette (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Gershon, 2010; Hsieh, 2012; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Miller et al, 2016; Carpenter et al, 2018).

the manner in which they came about – were often a result of issues these participants encountered while using certain CMC. The following section examines three core 'problems' associated with growing online networks between 2005-2018, and how these participants identified and resolved these issues over time. It also considers how the problems experienced and the solutions used to manage networks were often connected to the degree of CMC literacy an individual illustrated.

Problem 1 - Online expectations, norms and etiquette

Following the rise of CMC and its availability across numerous devices these participants began to develop certain expectations for how each platform should or should not be used. A type of etiquette was formed, where these expectations were often based on personal experiences and interactions with others. Not adhering to these expectations could be problematic and lead to exclusion. This was where CMC literacy became increasingly important: having a knowledge of what content to share where and when was deemed progressively important, and those who struggled to gain and illustrate these skills were increasingly caught in moments of social awkwardness online.

Some participants displayed subtle and nuanced degrees of CMC literacy, where they developed an understanding of the content that was relevant on any given site and were considerate of their online audiences. These were typically the younger

members of the sample, who used multiple sites in an array of sensitive ways: this informed the basis for a number of the platform perceptions and expectations presented in Table 2. They were knowledgeable about the affordances of each platform and the manner in which people were already behaving on the site. This meant that they thought carefully about how the types of content they shared was perceived by others. From this, they developed more finetuned levels of CMC literacy that befitted their given audiences at the time, creating roles and expectations for each platform. This was illustrated by Robert's nuanced uses of CMC:

> I feel like Twitter used to be the kind of- classed itself as slightly more highbrow in that news stories would be a big deal, you'd search this hashtag on a news story, get all information on it [...]. Facebook is now probably even more the main one than before [...] it's also kind of replaced YouTube as well in a way 'cos it has so many videos being shared and posted [...]. And the messaging service is really good [...]. I feel like Instagram is more like if people have particularly nice photos [...] Instagram seems to be the one a lot of celebrities have rather than on Facebook [...]. Snapchat I use quite a lot still, but it's kind of become even bigger as well 'cos now it has the messaging service as well, so as well as photos you can chat to people.
>
> **Robert, age 19, 2015**

Although it was mostly the younger participants who displayed this nuanced view of multiple sites, it was also evident that older members of the sample had an

understanding of the perceived 'correct' or 'incorrect' behaviour on sites. For instance, Denise and Mick both discussed feeling embarrassed by the content some people shared on Facebook, believing they showed a lack of awareness over the relevance of their behaviour (claiming, for instance, that no one cared about photos of what someone else's lunch looked like).

However, there were other participants who simply felt confused by certain behaviours online. Eleanor and Cathy repeatedly mentioned Facebook, but felt so unsure about what people used it for that they avoided the platform. Julia had a Twitter account for the latter years of the study, but claimed to rarely use it as she did not understand how other people used it or how to share content herself, thus rejected it in the final years of the study:

> I have a Twitter but I don't understand it, for me it's just Facebook statuses
> and I don't see the point of it so I never use it. I think I set it up but never
> used it since then. **Julia, age 22, 2010[35]**

> *Interviewer: Twitter?*
>
> No, don't know how to work it. **Julia, age 30, 2018**

---

[35] Julia's experiences here also reinforce the finding in Chapter 3 that ownership is not indicative of use, by reporting that she had a Twitter account but did not use it.

Julia was showing a degree of CMC literacy here simply by being conscious of the fact that there were certain norms and expectations of behaviour and etiquette she should be applying to Twitter, but because she was not sure of what they were she erred on the side of caution and avoided creating or sharing anything. In these instances these unsure participants rejected certain online networks as they felt they lacked the ability and knowledge to properly utilise the site.

Age and online etiquette

Despite numerous participants from across the sample sometimes struggling to learn the expected behaviour for different platforms, it was clear that there were age disparities here, and that different age groups were engaging with CMC in varied manners. Ofcom consistently reported in their quantitative reports that older people are less likely to have a SM account than younger people (Ofcom 2008; 2009; 2011; 2014; 2015; 2017; 2018a; 2019a). This pattern was still evident by the end of the study: Figure 4 shows those that claimed to have a SM account in 2018 by age.

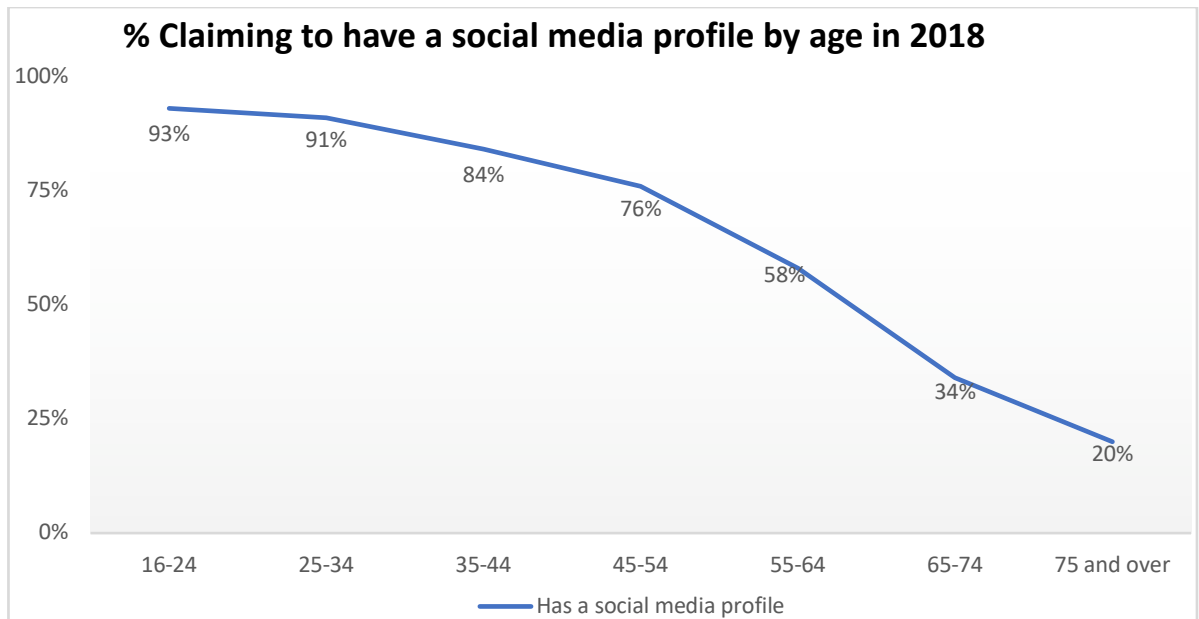## % Claiming to have a social media profile by age in 2018

Figure 4 - Percentage claiming to have a social media profile by age in 2018.

Findings from Ofcom's 2019 Media Use and Attitudes Report (2019a); chart created for this thesis.

Age was also connected to SM use and – in turn – CMC literacy within this qualitative sample. The participants who did not embrace any form of SM were also the oldest members of the sample (i.e. Cathy, Mary and Eleanor). They tended to maintain their points of view throughout the study, and their experiences differed greatly to the behaviour and attitudes reported by most of the other participants.

The difference in attitude and use between the age groups in this sample can be further examined by considering a leading sociological approach to social structure. By employing Pierre Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) theories regarding the divisions between social classes based on the forms of 'capital' an individual has, and how this may further them in life, it is possible to consider how this age divide may have

occurred. Bourdieu contended that there are three core types of 'capital' that

further an individual's social status: economic, cultural and social (Bourdieu 1986;

Gauntlett, 2011; Miller et al, 2016). By paying particular attention to discussions

around cultural capital (i.e., the knowledge you have) and social capital (i.e. the

people you know), it is possible to examine how and why perceived age divides

emerged in this analysis (Bourdieu 1984, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992;

Gauntlett, 2011).

Bourdieu (1984) argued that a key aspect of cultural capital was the ability and

desire to consider oneself as 'above' others on what David Gauntlett (2011, p2)

referred to as the 'social ladder', where an individual can 'demonstrate their

difference from those 'below'' them on said ladder.[36] The outlooks reported by the

younger members of the sample exemplified the development of this age-related

social ladder. The younger participants often discussed their behaviour online in

juxtaposition with 'older' people's behaviour, where they frequently pointed out

the differences they perceived:

> Older generations: their Facebook statuses are hilarious, it's like 'today me
>
> and the wife went to Loch Lomond' and it's like [rolls eyes] you know like a
>
> little speech. And it's like 'hope you and Carol had a great time', you know
>
> it's quite funny, they literally write to each other like they're sending post

---

[36] See also Hsieh (2012) for discussions on how user social capital in an online setting can lead to opportunities or inequalities in experiences.

cards […] It's a big difference, it's funny.

Jenny, age 24, 2016

I guess I use Facebook differently to what my mum uses Facebook for, 'cos all of me and my friends and my age group are just sharing videos.

Chloe, age 15, 2015

Like you get a lot of badly-behaved adults on Facebook that are just shocking, just someone should take them aside and say 'no, no, no, you can't go on Facebook, it's just not okay'. **Jenny, age 24, 2016**

These participants implied that in their understanding of the norms and etiquette needed online, they were 'above' the older people that they knew on the online social ladder. Jenny furthered this when arguing that Facebook lost its exclusivity when 'older' people – those she deemed separate to her on the social ladder in this instance – also began to use the site:

I think, and it sounds so bad, but I think when people were first using Facebook, it was this new thing that was quite cool and almost exclusive to younger people, 'cos older people just didn't know much about it when it came to social networking and things like that, not older people. And gradually as like older people started to get it was when the novelty had worn off […]. Even my mum said that when she starts to get it that's when she knows it's uncool. **Jenny, age 21, 2013**

In this sense both cultural and social capital came into play and shaped Jenny's perception of Facebook, where what she saw as a divide between the age groups could be a factor in who she considered as welcome or not welcome. She deemed older people as lacking cultural value (in terms of not understanding the types of content to post online) and social value (in terms of not wanting to 'associate' with them online by publicly friending them), thus they were considered to be further down the social ladder.

This was also apparent in the attitudes expressed by the more insecure older participants. In Chapter 3, I noted how Eleanor was afraid of accessing the 'secret society' of Facebook (Eleanor, age 73, 2009). Part of this was due to a sense that 'it's not for me', where certain SM were deemed to be an arena for other people who did understand the site, and thus she was excluded from trying to use it:

> It's all between themselves isn't it, I kind of – I suppose it's their
>
> independence actually, you know 'this is mine, this is what we do'.
>
> **Eleanor, age 73, 2009**

Eleanor considered certain SM use to be a way for younger generations to express themselves and assert their independence, away from older generations. Eleanor accepted her perceived status online and 'bowed out' from having a profile,

however many other participants were unaware of the apparent social and cultural capital associated with SM, as illustrated in the next section.

The risks of using CMC with limited CMC literacy

Despite this social divide, a number of participants continued to engage with SM even when they did not appear to understand the different expectations associated with different sites. This lack of awareness of the different etiquettes and norms online led to these participants feeling confused when their behaviour on SM sometimes led to conflict and even the termination of certain relationships. They struggled to understand how to communicate with and differentiate their networks online, thus performing social faux pas and facing ostracization. Sheila exemplified this: she often conveyed a lack of awareness over any expected etiquette and behaviour on SM until it was often too late and she had committed a faux pas. She used Facebook for most of the study (albeit intermittently, as her lifestyle changed drastically and she went through phases of not having an internet connection). However she found in the latter years of the study that she was losing friends on Facebook after sharing certain beliefs and outlooks. She responded to this by curtailing the content she put online as she realised it could cause offence, however was bewildered by the need to do so:

> I don't post as many things as what I used to do to do with my political
>
> views [laughs] 'cos I've found not everyone has the same political views as
>
> me. I did lose a couple of friends on Facebook […] they thought because of

what I'd put I'd turned like racist, and I'm like 'why would you think that just

because I've got this thing on Nigel Farage or whatever on my thing, why

would you think that I would be racist, course not' […]. I'm thinking 'oh god

I've really got to consider now what I put on there'.

Sheila, age 44, 2017

Following this experience Sheila continued to post on Facebook, but chose content

that she felt was 'appropriate' when considering the audience she was conscious of

(i.e. her friends from church):

I was actually talking to [my son] about it this morning, I just said to him 'oh

well I just don't put anything politically on there now on Facebook', he went

'don't you?', I said 'no I just put religious stuff instead' [laughs].

Sheila, age 44, 2017

While Sheila showed that she developed a degree of CMC literacy (in that she

began to change the content she shared after realising it could cause controversy),

she still continued to use Facebook to share potentially contentious beliefs, again

not fully considering the wider, less visible audiences who may also see her

content. She chose what she was prepared to adapt (in this case, the content she

shared) however was not prepared to alter other behaviour that could be deemed

contentious (i.e., how frequently she posted, or how provocative her posts were).

Sheila experienced more serious relationship issues online when she separated

from her husband. She described the ending of their relationship as being a

traumatic and incredibly difficult experience, saying that she was apprehensive

about telling everybody she knew about what had happened. As such, she

discussed posting a Facebook status, arguing that this was simply to inform all of

her friends and family about the break-up at once and avoid further questions.

However, the public post led to a fallout with her in-laws, as they objected to the

nature of the relationship breakdown being discussed on a public forum:

> I obviously didn't tell anyone [about the break-up] for a good couple of
>
> weeks. I still got his friends and family on [Facebook]. I didn't want to think
>
> about it […]. But I did put on there [Facebook …] that I'd left because of
>
> domestic violence and- not a whole load of stuff on there, just to let my
>
> friends and family know, 'cos I don't have anyone on there that's not friends
>
> or family. And because I hadn't taken everybody off – [my husband] had
>
> blocked me straight away, more or less an hour after I left him – but his
>
> family were still friends on there, and I didn't think that I was putting
>
> anything derogatory on there, but they did and they weren't happy, and
>
> contacted the police and said that I'd put that I'd left [my husband] because
>
> of domestic violence: 'that's slander!' or whatever. And [the police
>
> contacted me and] just said, 'we're not telling you off, but just take it down'
>
> and I was like 'fine'. So I took it down, and I thought 'that's it: delete'. I
>
> deleted everybody that was to do with his side of the family. I didn't know

who it was that had said it, I couldn't trust anybody, and deleted everybody.

Sheila, age 41, 2014

For Sheila this combination of online miscommunication and offline relationship breakdown was distressing, as she found herself alienated from her husband's side of the family as a result of content shared online. She discussed feeling confused and ostracised, arguing that she had only wanted to share her experiences with friends and family. This exemplified a conflict in media ideologies (Gershon, 2010), where Sheila had a different concept of what was appropriate to share on Facebook than her husband's family. By not being cognisant of the expectations, norms and established etiquette associated with her Facebook network, Sheila encountered conflict and showed lower levels of CMC literacy in this instance. This had considerable negative repercussions for her ability to maintain these relationships.

Norbert Elias (1982) argued that for centuries not knowing how to behave in a social setting could negatively damage an individuals' relationships. He contended that even in medieval times 'every mistake, every careless step depresses the value of its perpetrator in courtly opinion; it may threaten his whole position in court' (Elias, 1982, p272). This translates to this study, where the misinterpretation of the social context the individual was in could jeopardise their relationships and lead to ostracization, as seen by Sheila's loss of her husband's family as a result of online actions and conflict in expectations.

This exploration into online etiquette, expectations and norms of behaviour regarding different forms of CMC illustrated that it was increasingly essential to consider the audiences at hand when posting certain content. This was arguably why the younger members of the sample often considered older people as 'different' online: they shared content in a manner that the younger participants did not consider relevant or appropriate for them as audience members.

The main issues regarding age and relevance for platforms seemed to arise when there was a parent-child dynamic at hand, for example Jenny's aforementioned response to her mum using Facebook. Thus rather than age being the sole divider here, it was evident that these participants struggled when different generations were bought together in the same context, where they were typically kept separate. This collapse of generations and different relationships will thus be examined in more detail below, forming the second key 'problem' encountered by these participants when managing networks online.

Problem 2 - Network collapse

The collapse of networks online – especially as technology developed and CMC use was increasingly expected – formed the second key issue that these participants faced. Over numerous years, Ofcom reported a rapid increase in the amount of internet users who claimed to have a SM account. They found that the number of internet users with SM profiles nearly doubled between 2007 and 2008 (22% vs 38% (Ofcom, 2009): a figure that more than doubled once again by 2018 (Ofcom,

2019a). Figure 5 illustrates this, showing the growth of internet users with a SM
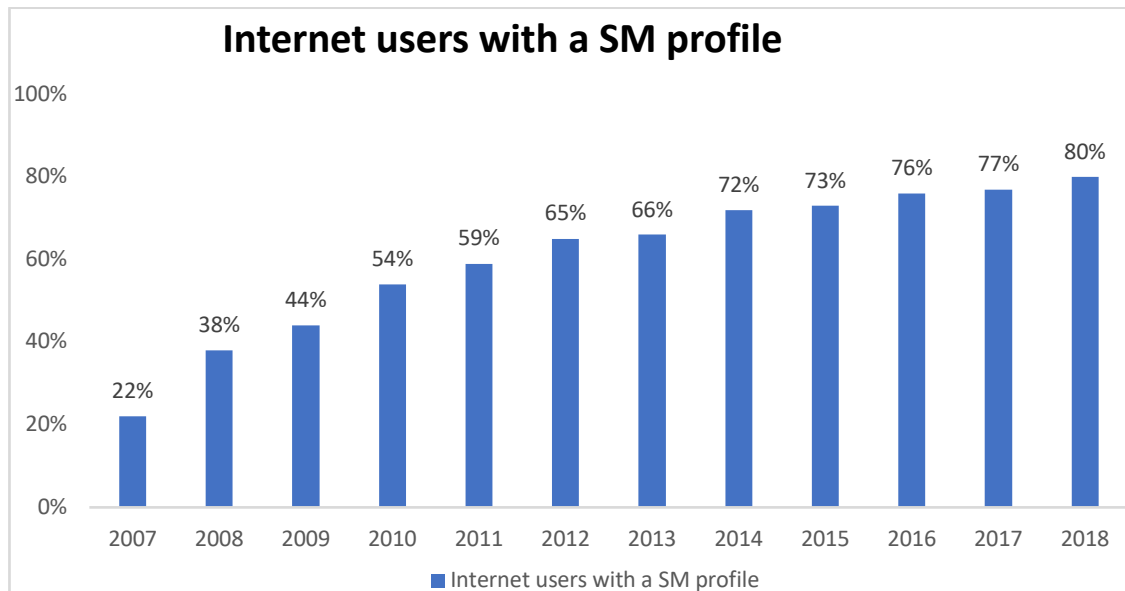
profile between 2007-2018.

Figure 5 - Percentage of Internet users with a SM profile.

Data utilised from Ofcom's Media Literacy and Media Use and Attitudes reports (Ofcom, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018a, 2019a).[37]

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[37] Ofcom changed the multiple-choice answers to this question in 2017 to include messaging services such as WhatsApp. This was noted in the 2019 chart pack (Ofcom, 2019a), where the question was phrased as 'I'd now like to ask some questions about your use of social media or messaging sites or apps – so websites or apps like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp and YouTube. Do you have a social media profile or account on any of these types of sites or apps?', where previously this question only included SM (Ofcom, 2019a). As such, this graph may not be able to offer a direct comparison year-on-year due to this option change. Furthermore, this is a contentious question choice, as WhatsApp and other messaging apps differ when considering many of the attributes typically associated with SM by these participants (i.e. it is not public, it facilitates one-to-one conversation or group conversation, and it is encrypted) and the qualitative findings in this chapter imply that it was used very differently to SM. This will be examined further below when I discuss IM, and please see the Methodology in Chapter 2 for more discussion regarding the issues faced when analysing changing question formats over time.

The increasing use of SM meant that most of the participants – and, in turn, most of their friends and family – eventually created and used their own SM profile. With this came multiple online networks, where each site had its own method of grouping connections into an array of systems, whether through mutual connections (such as 'friends' on Facebook and Snapchat) or through the ability to 'follow' other people (such as on Twitter and Instagram).

Chapter 1 noted how prior to the rise of CMC use relationships were already traditionally considered to exist across a network (Granovetter, 1973; Parks, 2007; Jarvis, 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). However, it also established that as relationships are increasingly managed and engaged with online there has been a shift in how individuals' networks work. Scholars have contended that SM use especially has motivated a drastic reconsideration of how different types of relationships are grouped and mapped out across personal networks, with individuals needing to re-evaluate how they manage their relationships (boyd, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2014; boyd & Donath, 2004; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Chambers, 2013, 2017; Meikle, 2016; Parks, 2017).

The collapse of different relationships into one place online has been noted as causing complications and conflict as different groups are pushed together (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Meikle, 2016; Chambers, 2017). Graham Meikle (2016, p99) discusses this 'context collapse', noting that this was problematic as 'social media enable the walls that we build between different parts of our world to come down. Our different social contexts collapse into one' (see also Miller et al, 2016). Rainie

and Wellman (2012) connect this context collapse to the challenges to representations of self that many experienced as they increasingly socialised in online spaces. They argue that as different relationships and contexts are collapsed online, the individual has to re-learn how to manage different networks in order to allow these different aspects of self to flourish rather than condense (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). With increased use of SM comes a network collapse: each individuals' different personal networks – and in turn, their different contexts – are collapsed together into one or multiple online networks.

This network collapse was problematic for this sample in multiple ways and prevalent throughout the study period, where participants frequently encountered problems with their relationships as a result of numerous networks clashing online. First of all, there were a number of occasions where familial relationships were condensed into the same online network as friendships, causing embarrassment and discomfort all around. Many of the younger participants did not want to be in the same online network as their parents, as it felt strange to have parents and friends in the same online place, accessing the same content:

> I wouldn't like my mum to be on Bebo. I would show mum someone's photo albums, like after the Formal I showed her the photo album, but I wouldn't let her just go on Bebo. **Julia, age 18, 2006**

Mick also struggled with this parent-child online collapse, but from the opposite perspective: when his teenage son signed up to Facebook and 'friend requested'

him it caused Mick great discomfort, as he disliked his son seeing how he behaved

when with his 'real' friends:

> I was reluctant to have [my son on Facebook] - as soon as he got it he tried
>
> to 'friend' me and my wife – and I didn't accept it so he went on my phone
>
> and accepted it for me! […]. My wife was like 'why don't you want him on
>
> it?' and I was like 'well I don't want him seeing what I'm doing', not that I do
>
> a lot but if I go out for drinks and a picture goes up I don't want him seeing
>
> it!   **Mick, age 41, 2015**

Peter also found the combination of his friends and his child in one network on

Facebook disconcerting, especially as he himself did not use it. There were

occasions where he learnt about his friends' activities through his daughter, leaving

him feeling excluded but also unsettled by the collapse of networks that he did not

even know about or have a say in:

> My young girl was talking about this Facebook thing, believe it or not most
>
> of my friends are on Facebook – I'm not on it yet […]. She's sitting there and
>
> talking about my friends, and I'm like 'why are you talking about [them]?',
>
> she says 'oh Facebook, I'm friends with them all' […] all 50-year olds and I'm
>
> not even there.   **Peter, age 49, 2010**

Both parent and child alike felt discomfort over their loved one existing in an online

network alongside their friends, and this discomfort arguably drove the discussion

regarding 'older' and 'younger' users noted in the previous section: the collapse of different generations into one place felt unnatural and confusing for these participants, as they would typically be kept separate when in offline contexts.

These negative experiences were also noted across other relationships. The youngest participants especially noted how their networks of different friends often collapsed, especially as they grew older and transitioned from school, to college, to university, to work. As they aged they made more friends and acquaintances, in turn widening their online networks. For some, this could cause inconvenience and embarrassment: this was illustrated by Robert as he discovered that his friends from school were able to view the same content on his Facebook profile as his new friends at university, which his school friends used as an opportunity to embarrass him in the online presence of his new friends:

> The most annoying thing is in our friendship group we have this annoying habit that if you make a new friend on Facebook for some reason Facebook will kind of tell everyone 'so-and-so and so-and-so are now friends', and it gives you the option to like and comment on that. So especially now being at uni, if you kind of add them, say you become friends with a girl from college, one of my friends from school will [comment] 'oh is this the one you told me about?', just to make an awkward situation.
>
> **Robert, age 18, 2014**

Julia and Dean also discussed either witnessing or encountering relationship issues as the collapse of numerous networks into one place made it possible to see controversial behaviour as it happened, allowing for multiple people to be involved in one relationship breakdown:

> My friend's boyfriend was cheating on her with another girl and we found out through Facebook, through her wall on Facebook […]. Everyone can see it.
>
> **Julia, age 20, 2008**

> It has changed, I used to love Facebook […]. If a girl chats to me my girlfriend gets the hump with me, it's bait if you know what I mean, if a girl talks to me straight away I get a phone call: 'who's that chatting to you, I can see it' […]. If I get a message I have to go on and delete it quick […] it's too much hassle.
>
> **Dean, age 20, 2009**

Elizabeth especially continually struggled with Facebook, as – much to her distress – she repeatedly inadvertently came across estranged family members online:

> It's just a nightmare now, people come into your lives that you really would rather not and yeah, it's the very reason I don't like doing things like [Facebook] […]. It's family who I don't know, I've got three sisters I never met, I saw them at my brother's funeral and now they're trying to get to know me, they're harassing me, they won't leave me alone, I've had to

actually block one of my sisters, that's not a nice thing to have to do […]. It's very stressful.

Elizabeth, age 47, 2008

My real mother who I've never met visited my nieces erm after my brother died […]. And my niece, 'cos she doesn't know our history – mine and my late brother's – put the pictures on her Facebook and put 'family' […]. I look periodically at their pages […] and there was my mum, and that's the first time I'd seen her […]. There was my mum smiling with her arms around everyone and I wanted to punch her face […]. I thought 'how dare you?' Know what I mean? but then what can you do, and my niece doesn't know the hurt 'cos how could she?

Elizabeth, age 49, 2010

Elizabeth encountered serious issues over the course of the study where her estranged relationships – which she had deliberately removed from her day-to-day life – were suddenly able to access her online. The above quotes illustrate how upset this made her, as the collapse of different networks once someone is 'friended' – accompanied by the search features and 'tagging' capabilities on Facebook – meant she suddenly lost control over who she could communicate with, who could communicate with her, and what content was visible. The longitudinal nature of this research illustrates how Elizabeth was unable to escape from this issue as it repeatedly occurred over time: the ubiquity of Facebook use over many years meant she was constantly vulnerable to unwanted network collapse. Her experiences between 2008-2010 negatively impacted on her overall outlook of SM

such as Facebook, where she decreased her usage following the shock of

unexpectedly encountering her mother online:

> *Interviewer: How often do you go on your Facebook?*
>
> Never, never. I only went on there 'cos my nieces wanted me to, so I could
>
> see them and their friends […] they stopped using it so I in turn did,
>
> especially when I saw my mother on there, that was shocking.
>
> **Elizabeth, age 51, 2012**

For Elizabeth, a wider online network meant a loss of control over who could

contact her and what she may see online. Repeated negative experiences led to her

making the decision to avoid Facebook, to decrease the risk of unexpected social

distress.

The experiences outlined above illustrate how the collapse of numerous different

relationships online caused strife, embarrassment and genuine turmoil for these

participants. This exploration also highlights the next main concern that

participants felt when they increased their use of CMC and SM: the worry that their

sense of control and agency, especially over their privacy, was being threatened.

Problem 3 - Privacy and agency

The uneasiness expressed above by Elizabeth appeared to derive from her lack of

control over who could share or engage with her online. Many of these participants

discussed feeling violated when their loved ones crossed their boundaries regarding privacy and shared content online, as illustrated by Cathy when she discovered a family member had shared a picture of her on Facebook:

> I'm not happy [with] what I hear about Facebook. Someone told me my picture was on Facebook [...] it was my niece's hen party and I'm her Godmother [...] and the next thing somebody says 'there was a picture of you on Facebook' [...] and I said 'well get that picture off Facebook will you please!' That worries me. **Cathy, age 66, 2010**

Cathy felt that the unsolicited sharing of her pictures on a platform she did not engage with was an invasion of her privacy, especially as she was not included in the decision to share the content online in the first place.

Other participants also felt uneasy about the openness of some SM. They were confused by the notion of sharing personal information with their weaker ties (such as photos, updates on their day-to-day life, knowledge on their relationship status, etc.), as they considered this to be something they would only share privately with strong, close ties at the centre of their networks. As such, they maintained their preference for synchronous one-on-one communication with close loved ones, feeling this was both a safer and more intimate form of CMC:

> I'm not a member of any of the social networks sites like my young sons are. I don't need to, you know, if I want- my generation do not go on and

converse. If we wanted to converse- in fact we converse through Skype, it's

a small one, or we use the phone. I wouldn't want to be uploading my

photographs so every Tom Dick and Harry can see, and some people have

come unstuck because they think it's anonymous, which of course they've

learnt to their horror that it's not necessarily anonymous.

Donald, age 54, 2008

Donald felt that the use of one-on-one communication was more direct and

personal than more public forums, thus rejected the use of SM in order to protect

his sense of identity and agency. However, Donald's belief that he was protecting

his privacy by not engaging with SM at all was evidently not necessarily always the

case, as shown by Cathy and Elizabeth's experiences.

Furthermore, even those who actively used SM – thus were arguably more in

control over their content that was shared online – were often also subject to

unexpected consequences of online actions. This was evidenced by Chloe when she

described an altercation between two school friends, which rapidly escalated from

a private argument into a debate between multiple people on SM:

Yeah it comes across quite a lot with my friends and myself, like if you put

up a status about someone, and then the person knows it's about them and

they tag the person in it, and it comes up sometimes with an argument of

like 120 comments, and sometimes you- I don't get involved so much in

them, but there are people that will get involved, and there ends up being

> loads of people involved in this argument between two people […]. It's easy
>
> on Facebook and stuff to get involved in something even if you're not really
>
> involved, rather than if you're arguing in the real world you wouldn't get
>
> involved so much. **Chloe, age 14, 2014**

Chloe noted how the affordances of Facebook facilitated negative social behaviour, as networks grew and increasing amounts of people were able to communicate publicly. She claimed that the public statuses shared with a wide range of different people, accompanied by the ability to comment and 'tag' people in the post, facilitated a more chaotic and intense response to an argument that was initially between two friends. For Chloe, the escalation in conflict in her friendship group appeared to originate from the large networks online having access to a range of content, with the ability to quickly spread this content across many people's Facebook profiles. Once again it was apparent that the blur between the public and the private on SM threatened user control, where people quickly lost power over how their content was shared.

These problems could be exacerbated by the manner in which people were automatically categorised on certain SM. As noted in Chapter 1 the terminology used to identify and categorise networks online has been challenged in academia, where the term 'friend' especially has been critiqued for grouping individuals' complicated and ever-changing networks under one overarching title, thus failing to acknowledge the nuances and complexities that come with an array of relationships

(boyd, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2014; Rosen, 2007; Turkle, 2011; Chambers, 2013, 2017;

Lambert, 2013; Meikle, 2016).

This was also evident in this study. As increasing amounts of participants' loved

ones and acquaintances joined Facebook and entered their networks, some

participants began to struggle with the title 'friend' used to describe members of

their network on Facebook, arguing that this was not a term that was reflective of

the people that they had on their contact list. This was irritating for some, but it

made others reconsider what 'friendship' actually meant. For instance, Mick and

Daniel discussed feeling disgruntled over the term being attributed to an array of

relationships, where they did not want to accept certain people on their profiles as

they were not who they would class as 'friends':

> 'Friends' is a word the website [Facebook] uses that isn't an accurate
>
> description of the people on there. **Daniel, age 24, 2007**

> Now I have other parents wanting to be my friend on Facebook, and I don't
>
> like that […]. I don't want to be friends with someone my son plays rugby
>
> with's [sic.] mum and dad […] I don't accept people I don't know.
>
> **Mick, age 41, 2015**

For those that wanted to try to use Facebook purely for socialising (rather than to

build a large-scale network) the term 'friend' was even more confusing. After years

of avoiding SM Sally eventually signed up to Facebook with the sole purpose of sharing pictures with one friend in Australia, thus intending to only have one 'friend' on the site. However, on creating her profile she began to receive 'friend' requests from multiple people. As this did not fit with her initial reason for obtaining Facebook she rejected the requests, causing her to worry that she was inadvertently offending her other ties:

> I just joined Facebook, and probably offended 154 people by not having them as friends, but I only purely want it 'cos my friend is in Australia, and to send her photos. That was the only reason I logged onto it was to send them the photos. And I got bombarded then through my email address of 'everybody wants to be your friend', and I'm thinking 'but I see you every day!'. I'm trying to explain to people 'I only got this 'cos I wanted to send [my friend] some photos' so it was quite frightening of how people perceived this thing as you're ignoring them.
>
> **Sally, age 44, 2010**

Facebook's facility for connecting email addresses with other people on Facebook meant that many of Sally's contacts may have been automatically alerted to her presence online, something she evidently did not know about in advance or wish to happen. This unconsented publicising of her online presence was again deemed a violation of privacy expectations online, where Sally went from wanting a private interaction with one person on Facebook to unwillingly needing to manage the expectations of over a hundred people.

Regaining control and building CMC literacy

The above three problems discussed – the need to learn new norms and etiquettes, the need to manage collapsed networks, and the threat to privacy – led to these participants making deliberate efforts to regain control and manage their networks. These participants generally adopted two different approaches to handling these problems. The first was illustrated by Donald above: the deliberate decision to avoid the use of SM and restrict communication to one-on-one forms of CMC. While – as shown by Cathy's experiences – this was not a guarantee of total isolation from SM, it did mean that he felt he had far greater control over his privacy online, and did not encounter issues regarding network collapse or etiquette. This approach was adopted by Donald, Cathy, Mary, Peter and Eleanor (the oldest participants), and to a lesser extent by Daniel, Dean and Sally (arguably the less enthusiastic SM users in the sample), who – while they did not reject SM altogether – decreased their use of it over time.

Settings optimisation

The second 'solution' was often adopted by the younger participants, who remained prolific users but also increasingly wanted control over their privacy and networks in the final years of the study. They began to change the privacy settings on their SM, opting for more private rather than public profiles and editing who

could see any given content. This aligns with Miller's (2016; see also Miller et al, 2016) Goldilocks strategy, where CMC users utilise platforms' scalable settings to protect their privacy and ensure that they can control the amount of content or information others can view. For some participants this was a complex process, as illustrated by Jenny carefully managing her different platforms and settings to maintain control:

> So I've changed all my settings to [private] on any social media, like I'm very, very private. So with Snapchat I only accept people that I know, but on Instagram […]. It sounds stupid, but I've changed my interface so nobody can find me […] you just can type my name in and it won't come up […]. Like I'm very, very private, you wouldn't know anything about – wouldn't know where I stay, what I do, who my friends are, who my boyfriend is, anything about my personality: you wouldn't know anything about me at all if you went on my Instagram or Facebook.
>
> **Jenny, age 26, 2018**

These participants became increasingly cautious over who they allowed into their networks on each platform, 'layering' their relationships over different sites, depending on how private they wanted to be. Each site became a platform for different relationships based on what information they wanted to be shared with any given audience. These participants even changed the settings on specific sites in order to have content shared with only certain aspects of a wider network where

relevant, as illustrated by Chloe having her mum as a 'friend' on Facebook but blocking her from her posts:

> I like the fact that on social media my parents don't know what I'm doing [...]. I'm friends with my mum on Facebook but I tend to block her on a lot of things I post [laughs] and I don't have family members on anything else. I do like that I have my own privacy and can do what I want on the websites.
>
> **Chloe, age 14, 2014**

This not only helped Chloe maintain her privacy from her mum, but also helped her efficiently deal with her collapsed networks without causing any offence. This effort to maintain control over privacy and collapsed networks (while still adhering to online etiquettes) involved reasonably complicated actions and carefully thought out planning to ensure that content was only seen by the desired audience. For example, Robert joined a closed, private group on Facebook so he could share content with his friends while maintaining his reputation with his conservative family:

> Now there are like quite a lot of closed groups where people post all of these kind of stupid things [such as funny images and videos], but it's good, so you can only tag other people within that group, so I tend to invite some of my friends into this kind of closed group on Facebook, and if there's something funny on there you can tag them, but you know that only other members of the group can see that [...]. They've probably been around for a

while but they're becoming more popular now as people's parents or

whatever become more involved on Facebook, and they wanna be able to

you know have fun with their friends but they don't want their grandma

knowing.   **Robert, age 20, 2016**

Jeff Jarvis (2011, p93) argued that the issue with social networking sites 'isn't

privacy but control', however also claimed that the 'conventional wisdom today is,

of course, that privacy is dead. The internet wounded it. Facebook killed it' (p102).

However, these participants illustrated how they could utilise different settings on

specific sites, as well as categorise networks across different platforms, to regain an

element of control over their networks. By learning about the affordances of each

platform and applying their acquired CMC literacy they were able to manoeuvre

between different sites, learning how to juggle their wide networks in a way they

considered socially appropriate. This was fuelled by their growing desire to remain

private online. Numerous authors claim that the next generation of young people

(coined as Generation Z) prioritise privacy online (Williams, 2015; Seemiller &

Grace, 2017; Iqbal, 2018). This was reflective of the behaviour of the youngest

members of this sample, and implies that this tendency to alter public networks on

SM to suit private needs may continue to grow over time, where the ability to

manage privacy settings may become a key factor behind the decision over how to

navigate different forms of CMC.

However, this behaviour was generally restricted to the younger participants. The

other participants in the AML sample often appeared to struggle to overcome the

problems and consequences associated with a lack of CMC literacy. Their low

awareness of how to manage online etiquette and expectations, collapsed

networks and challenges to privacy meant they struggled to manage their networks

throughout the research period. Participants such as Sheila, Elizabeth and Dean

especially struggled greatly as a result of not being able to overcome these three

core problems, as they unknowingly committed social faux pas and felt their privacy

was invaded.

Instant Messaging for building CMC literacy

While the optimisation of platform settings allowed the youngest participants

greater control over their online networks, it did not help those who lacked CMC

literacy and thus were unaware of how this option could benefit them. However,

there was evidence that the increasing use of instant messaging (IM) – especially

WhatsApp – provided another opportunity for this sample to build CMC literacy.

Deborah Chambers (2017, p2) highlights the benefits of using WhatsApp to manage

relationships, as it facilitates 'user agency by offering communication choice and

privacy' and can liberate certain users from pre-existing social or cultural pressures

(see also Miller, 2016).

By the end of the study period all participants who owned and used a smartphone

were also using WhatsApp. This increase in WhatsApp's popularity was also evident

in Ofcom's quantitative research, where they found use of WhatsApp increased

from 54% in 2017 to 61% in 2018 (Ofcom, 2019a). The AML participants claimed it

had many benefits: instant communication, the ability to see when the other person was last online/ had read a message (thus providing the user greater agency and peace of mind) and a controlled way of communicating with either single people or groups. Each of these benefits facilitated greater ease and control over privacy for these participants:

> You can have a group, group chats on WhatsApp, which is just really handy when you're trying to make plans with people from university, we're all over the world now so we can use WhatsApp to keep in touch. My friends from Portsmouth are in different areas so when we want to arrange to meet up it's just easier to do it in a group conversation […]. Got a family WhatsApp now as well […] it just feels easier and it's less public [than Facebook].
>
> **Julia, age 27, 2015**

The ability to communicate with multiple groups was a key benefit noted by many participants. As discussed above this sample began to express a growing desire to be able to compartmentalise their online networks and control who saw what content. WhatsApp catered for this need, as they were able to maintain multiple group message threads with an array of people easily within one application:

> I'd probably miss the group chats. And I feel like with people- when they're- one of the girls like lost their phone or something and they're not in the group chat; they miss out so much.
>
> **Jenny, age 24, 2016**

The ability to control who was spoken to when, as well as the many multimedia aspects of WhatsApp (such as the option to share pictures, videos, voice notes, etc.) meant that different levels of communication could take place via different forms of CMC within one application, depending on the relationship and the content of the message. Elizabeth used WhatsApp in this manner to learn more about prospective partners who she initially met on online dating sites:

> *Interviewer: What do you do with your phone?*
>
> [It's] just for WhatsApp: verifying what a guy is like before we meet each other, [to] send pictures and videos, not those sort [laughs]! Just to verify what they were like then and now, 'cos people send old pictures […]. Voice message so I know what they sound like.
>
> **Elizabeth, age 55, 2016**

Although security was not a prime affordance discussed by the majority of this sample, the encryption of WhatsApp's messages provided an extra level of privacy that was appreciated by a minority, especially as they felt this could not be gained elsewhere via CMC:

> I use WhatsApp to talk as well, there's a big thing about WhatsApp introducing the end to end encryption earlier this year, [it is] seen as the

best means for messaging someone so it's a good one to use.

Robert, age 20, 2016 [38]

As such, by the end of the study the use of IM – and WhatsApp especially – allowed these participants to adhere to the values and expectations of behaviour discussed in the first section of this chapter regarding publicness, permanence, audiences and content, while managing their numerous networks in a manner they felt comfortable with. The use of IM permitted multiple networks to be accessed at once online, however facilitated the more private forms of CMC these participants increasingly desired, where they were once again able to categorise their relationships into different groups. This negated the problems associated with network collapse and created greater opportunities to learn certain etiquettes and norms of communication online with a smaller, controlled audience. Thus it in turn allowed participants to develop their CMC literacy in a 'safe' environment, as they learnt how to communicate with different people in separate conversations and control who received specific forms of content, all within a private and low pressured environment.

As such, it is essential that IM is not grouped with SM when CMC is researched and analysed (as was seen earlier in Ofcom's 2019 survey question on SM usage), due to their differences in affordances and uses. For this sample IM offered an entirely

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[38] Security will be discussed in more detail in the Chapter 5.

different terrain through which to communicate with loved ones and develop CMC literacy than SM offered, in turn becoming a key tool for building CMC literacy.

The need for CMC literacy education

As technology developed and these participants adopted an array of CMC platforms, participants had to rapidly adapt their pre-existing understandings of social norms and etiquette. This was often difficult, confusing and jarring, as it disrupted long-standing expectations of interaction. This is illustrated by Elias' (1982) argument that the process of developing an understanding of how to behave in certain social settings with certain people has been based on hundreds of years of humans finetuning their behaviour in specific interactions. Elias (1982) contends that people have learnt how to display a degree of self-restraint in different social interactions based on social and cultural expectations passed down from their parents. Elias also notes that:

> The web of actions grows so complex and extensive, the effort required to behave "correctly" within it becomes so great, that beside the individual's conscious self-control an automatic, blindly functioning apparatus of self-control is firmly established (Elias, 1982, p233).

It is therefore evident that there is a complex socially and historically embedded process behind how people learn to 'correctly' engage and interact with others while maintaining a clear sense and portrayal of self. However, it is also apparent

that the uptake and prolific use of SM and CMC may have challenged this pre-established form of socialising, as the rapid development in CMC meant that these individuals were suddenly having to renegotiate how they communicated with others appropriately, with no clear etiquette or norms passed down to them from previous generations to help guide their behaviour.

This exploration has uncovered that managing networks and socialising 'correctly' online is a delicate and multifaceted process, one that has been made even more complicated by the uptake of multiple forms of CMC into daily communication. Rosen (2007, p22) warned that 'in the offline world, communities typically are responsible for enforcing norms of privacy and general etiquette. In the online world, which is unfettered by the boundaries of real-world communities, new etiquette challenges abound' (see also Peer, 2017). The lack of clarity over how individuals should or should not behave online meant that participants had to quickly establish their own sense of right and wrong, creating expectations of online etiquette, managing collapsed networks and optimising settings to maintain privacy. While IM proved to be one of the key forms of CMC for helping these participants navigate the problems they encountered online and for helping them build CMC literacy, it was still evident that a number of participants were struggling with network management by the end of the study period.

In order to overcome this ongoing issue, some participants noted that there should be more education provided on how to communicate with others online, so that they did not behave 'inappropriately' or face ostracization. They felt there should

be a new set of more clearly articulated norms established to govern how people

behaved online and ensure social safety:

> Yeah people should have more guidance on it. I think [communicating online
>
> is] a standard integral to a lot of people's lives yet they've not had the
>
> training or background to know of the standards or consequences [to CMC
>
> use], so I would agree there needs to be some sort of training […]. People
>
> learn from experience, like what we've had over the past few years with
>
> tragedies like people being bullied online with terrible consequences with
>
> individuals involved […]. Through experience people will learn to have a
>
> slightly less gung-ho attitude about Twitter: even now, people are pulled up
>
> on using racist language, so already it's entering people's consciousness
>
> about what is agreeable, whether they agree with it or not they know there
>
> are standards to be upheld, in a way they're learning to behave in a more
>
> conservative manner.   **Daniel, age 30, 2013**[39]

Daniel felt that there should be a clearer consensus on what was right and wrong

online – based on these newly formed expectations of social behaviour – that

should be widely promoted in order to avoid social faux pas and potential

alienation caused by collapsed networks and threats to privacy.

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[39] The issue Daniel raises here regarding online cruelty and bullying will be explored in
Chapter 5.

Scholars have also called for an increase in education, noting that it is important that people learn the appropriate etiquettes for communicating with others and managing relationships online (Manzoor, 2016; Miller et al, 2016; Norton et al, 2017; Peer, 2017). However – according to the younger members of the sample – despite the increase in education on computer/ internet literacy skills in school there was still no formal education on how to navigate different CMC platforms and develop CMC literacy (within this sample's experiences). Chloe pointed out that while she and her contemporaries were taught how to be safe online, there was less education on how to communicate with others online. For instance, she argued that while they were advised on what to do if they were bullied online, there was a lack of clarity on what online 'bullying' actually entailed, and thus no information on how to avoid inadvertently becoming the bully yourself:

> I know most of [how to behave online] from just like morals […] but some people wouldn't know, we've never been told that there's a two-year prison sentence now [for posting abuse online] so I think it does need to be more advertised like so younger children do know that what they're saying is wrong. 'Cos it's really easy on Facebook to say something without knowing about it […]. I know last year we had lessons on cyber bullying in like ICT lessons and if you feel like you're being bullied on social media, where to go, who to speak to. But we were never really told what's ok and what's not ok to say on it, and what could happen from it.

Chloe, age 14, 2014

Thus education was present, but did not explicitly address the subject of CMC

literacy, why it was important and how to develop it. This was even more

problematic for older people, who were often unable to access any form of

education at all (as exemplified in Chapter 3). Ofcom also noted this, warning that a

divide between how different age groups converse could have wide communication

and social repercussions:

There is increasing polarity between different age groups in terms of

communications activity.

Whereas 25 years ago, all age groups shared just two common means of

communication – landlines and letters – the landscape is now considerably

more varied, and there is a risk that common means of communication that

cut across demographics are becoming increasingly rare, with implications

for social connectivity and information-sharing (Ofcom, 2016, p6 – their

emphasis).

While WhatsApp was by far the most common form of CMC used within this

sample, it was still not discussed or adopted by Mary, Eleanor or Cathy (the oldest

members of the sample). For those who had limited experience with CMC, learning

the appropriate norms and building CMC literacy could be a daunting task, where

'rules' of communication were seemingly unspoken and inconsistent. Participants

who were not regularly communicating online with an array of different people

from different networks had less opportunities to develop these skills. As such,

these participants continued to lack the incentive to learn how to behave online

and develop CMC literacy. This could have a direct impact on their relationships, as

participants such as Sheila found themselves losing friends and entering into

conflict with loved ones. This ostracization could lead to a harmful negative spiral

that was increasingly difficult to exit, where those who felt they were using

platforms 'correctly' were unforgiving of those they felt were behaving 'incorrectly'

online, wanting them to cease their behaviour or, even worse, leave their network.

As Gauntlett (2011) argued in his critique of Bourdieu's concept of social capital:

> As a use of the idea of social capital, though, [Bourdieu's] is the most
>
> depressing of the models, as its focus is only upon the middle and upper
>
> classes making sure that their spheres remain exclusive. Here, social capital
>
> is another tool in the armoury of the elite, deployed to ensure that the
>
> 'wrong' kind of people don't enter their circles (Gauntlett, 2011, p2).

By considering this theory in terms of CMC use and literacy, those with 'high' CMC

literacy are the 'middle and upper classes' trying to maintain their sense of social

exclusivity. Those with limited CMC literacy are the people in the 'wrong', struggling

to enter the online social circles. While it is contentious to draw conclusive parallels

between Bourdieu's class divides and the divides between those with and without

CMC literacy, it is evident that this sense of 'wrong' and 'right' behaviour can have a

dramatic role in shaping how accepted an individual is online. Therefore, the

provision of CMC literacy education would have been greatly beneficial for many participants, where even the younger participants (who often illustrated high CMC literacy skills) desired clearer and more explicit guidelines on how to manage their networks online.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how the development of numerous CMC platforms between 2005-2018 led to an increased need to manage networks online, where different platforms were associated with different roles and expectations of behaviour. It found that in the endeavour to manage multiple networks these participants encountered three interconnected issues: the need to create, learn and abide by certain norms and etiquettes online; the need to manage collapsed networks online; and the need to maintain control and privacy online. The ability to navigate and overcome these problems was often associated with the degree of CMC literacy an individual showed, where their understanding of what content they could share when and where online either helped or stalled their management of different relationships.

The amount of CMC literacy shown by these participants differed across this sample. The younger participants typically illustrated higher levels of understanding regarding the nuances between the different platforms, and knew which content was appropriate for any given audience. However, it was evident that even the most prolific users of CMC felt that they lacked clarity over how they should behave

online, where their expectations of behaviour were often based on their observations of others, rather than a clear understanding of the 'right' and 'wrong' way to behave.

Thus, this exploration has highlighted the need for CMC literacy education, where participants desired a clearer consensus over how best to navigate and manage their online worlds. In order to combat this complex issue, I contend that it is crucial to draw more explicit connections between CMC education and media literacy. Rather than treat CMC literacy as an extra online 'skill' that could be built, it is more beneficial to emphasise the significance of this new form of literacy by aligning it with existing media literacy narratives and developing relevant education that positions CMC literacy as an increasingly essential need.

The fifth and final chapter of this thesis takes a step back from these more detailed examples of participants' CMC use to examine the wider social and cultural context found during the time of the AML interviews. It examines how the use of CMC was discussed in the UK news, where it was often presented in a highly negative light, invoking panic and uncertainty. This exploration builds on the conclusion here that CMC literacy is essential for building confidence with and navigating CMC use, as it shows how participants developed fears based on the moral panics they encountered, but also how they overcame them in order to maintain their relationships.

Chapter 5 - Moral panics, fears and relationships

Introduction

While the Adults' Media Lives (AML) sample had almost unanimously adopted the internet and computer mediated communication (CMC) by the end of the study, they still reported feeling a number of apprehensions and uncertainties about doing so. These ranged from minor reservations to genuine fears, where they claimed to be afraid of the potentially negative outcomes of CMC use. Some, such as Tim, had first-hand experience with encountering concerning content on the internet, as he struggled with receiving abuse on social media (SM) from anonymised figures. Others noted that many of their fears were perpetuated by media – especially news media – hype, where they reported hearing horror stories about the downsides of CMC use. These moral panics – defined as occurrences that are framed as a threat to society and in turn may generate social anxieties and fears (Cohen, 2002) – shaped their perceptions of CMC and associated technology. For participants like Dean and Jenny this led to years of concern regarding how safe they and their loved ones really were online, motivating them to alter their behaviour when using CMC.

This chapter examines the fears expressed by the AML participants within the context of their use of CMC and relationship management. It considers where and how these fears originated (whether from first-hand experiences or the wider moral panics they encountered), how these participants coped with their fears

(either through use or avoidance of CMC and associated devices) and how relationships factored into this dilemma. It identifies three core fears that participants discussed regarding CMC use: fears concerning their wellbeing online; fear of addiction; and fear for their online security. I utilise newspaper stories and headlines from the research period – accessed via online newspaper archive Nexis – to provide an insight into the wider mood and content circulated by the press at the time, in turn indicating the types of narratives the participants may have encountered throughout the study.

By examining participants' responses to fears longitudinally, this chapter identifies how relationships, moral panics and personal fears were connected. It illustrates how concerns for relationships play a pivotal role in an individual's choice to (or not to) continue to engage with CMC, as they place loved ones at the centre of their decision making. For some, the fears stirred by moral panics meant they avoided CMC and attempted to prevent their loved ones from using it. For others, fears generated new, unexpected behaviour, where they embraced CMC in nuanced manners to face their fears and maintain relationships.

Literature review on moral panics

For decades, scholars, regulators and media producers have disputed the extent to which media engagement may 'affect' people (Barker & Petley, 2001). These debates presented different audiences from passive to active, from the structuralist

arguments (Wilson, 2009), where audiences were considered to be passive receptacles, the uses and gratification model (Brooker & Jermyn, 2003; Ruddock, 2007), where individuals were thought to interpret messages in a manner most beneficial to their needs, to narratives that present audiences as active decoders of media messages (Hall, 1973; Fiske, 1989; Brooker & Jermyn, 2003; Jones & Holmes, 2011).

Those who claimed that media *did* have an effect on audiences often presented their arguments from a highly negative stance, where it was predicted that engagement with certain media could lead to negative, dangerous and even violent behaviour (as noted by Barker & Petley, 2001; Trend, 2007). These concerns were often covered in mainstream news, where journalists warned of the threats posed by certain media. This subsequently evoked impassioned objection from scholars wishing to dispel such findings by defending media audiences (as well as the media itself) and challenging the assumptions made about 'passive' audiences who may be at risk (Barker & Petley, 2001; Trend, 2007). These types of debates were present, perpetuated and circulated in popular press at the time of the study, with the AML participants identifying particular news stories or narratives of fear that made them feel concerned about the internet and CMC specifically.

This chapter examines what impact these discourses themselves may have on the audiences at the centre of the debate, gaining a deeper insight into how the narratives surrounding – sometimes even generated by – media may motivate fears, and how this impacts on the use of CMC and relationships. In order to do this

it is beneficial to first examine one of the most prolific discourses on fears and media, which focuses on the concept of moral panics.

Moral panics

Stanley Cohen is widely considered to be the first author to thoroughly introduce, analyse and exemplify the concept of moral panics (Cohen, 1972, 2002; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995; Messenger Davies, 2013; Krinsky, 2013; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2013; Schinkel, 2013). In his 1972 paper 'Folk Devils and Moral Panics', Cohen describes fights that took place at a seaside town in England during the 1960s between youth groups labelled as 'mods' and 'rockers', and the subsequent news coverage of the events (Cohen, 1972, 2002). Cohen (2002, p1) identifies the events that unfolded as a 'moral panic', arguing that:

> Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests […] the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight.

Cohen's example presents news coverage as the instigator of the moral panic, as journalists created evocative headlines that positioned these youths of the 1960s as 'folk devils': deviant figures to be chastised and feared (Cohen, 1972, 2002).

Cohen's model has since been extensively referenced in academia, with different moral panics (and the folk devils they identify) being widely considered by numerous authors (see, for instance, Hall et al, 1978; Ungar, 2001; Marwick, 2008; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009; Critcher, 2010; Szablewicz, 2010; DeYoung, 2013; Krinsky, 2013; Smith & Cole, 2013; Schildkraut et al, 2015). Scholarly evaluations of the concept have shifted the focus of moral panic definitions over time. Throughout many subsequent studies, the disproportionality of the response to supposed societal issues has become an integral definer of moral panics, where academics claim that moral panics are often perpetuated by hyperbolic and overexaggerated narratives (Hall et al, 1978; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009; Critcher, 2010). For instance, Chas Critcher (2010, p2) commits his entire description of moral panics to exaggeration, arguing that 'moral panics are by definition disproportionate reactions to perceived threats'. While in the third edition of his original paper Cohen (2002) warns that too much emphasis on disproportionality could undermine valid concerns about genuine societal problems, it still became an integral part of moral panic discourses. This trend in research (to dispute mass media coverage) evidently set a tone where journalists and scholars were often at odds, conflicting over the extent to which certain social issues that were explored in

popular discourse were genuine threats (Trend, 2007; Marwick, 2008; Messenger Davies, 2013).

In turn, the actual 'problem' is lost in amongst all this turmoil: public conversation often focuses on accusing and defending the effects of media, not on the nature of and solution to a societal problem, and certainly not on the impact these debates may be having on the people, such as the AML participants, who hear them. This can lead to an ambiguity over the source of social problems, leaving individuals existing in a 'culture of fear', unsure of what to be afraid of and what to dispel as simple disproportionality (Trend, 2007, p25; see also Cohen, 2002; Marwick, 2008; DeYoung, 2013; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2013; Schinkel, 2013). This will be examined in detail in the remainder of this chapter, as I explore which moral panics are deemed relatable and stir fear in the AML sample, versus which they ignore and reject.

From moral panic to cyber panic

There is a general consensus in academia that moral panics regarding media engagement are not a new concept: fears over the impact of new media have been propelled since the invention of the printing press, through to the penny dreadfuls of Victorian times, the electrical telegraph, comic books and television (Sandywell, 2006; Trend, 2007; Szablewicz, 2010; Smith & Cole, 2013; Hampton & Wellman, 2018).

It is thus unsurprising that negative news stories and moral panic discourses have also been repeatedly applied to the internet. As with other media, many academics have been quick to defend the internet and reject narratives that they claim exaggerate the negative consequences of use (Craig & Petley, 2001; McCartan, 2010; boyd et al, 2011). However, fears and uncertainties continue to surround the internet, and the UK news coverage continues to ardently warn of its dangers (Craig & Petley, 2001; Kuipers, 2006; Sandywell, 2009; boyd et al, 2011). I will now briefly outline some of the main concerns that academics considered over time regarding the use of the internet and CMC.

In the mid 2000s (when the AML study began) fears over individuals using online forums and social networking sites to meet with potential online predators were widely circulated (Trend, 2007; Marwick, 2008; Sandywell, 2009; Smith & Cole, 2013). This included discourses warning of paedophilia, pornography and abuse that were widely covered in the UK press (Lawson & Comber, 2000; Craig & Petley, 2001; Kuipers, 2006; Ponte et al, 2009; Bishop, 2014).[40] During this time narratives also focused on negative behaviour as a result of internet use. This was often directed at young people, where in their content analysis of newspaper coverage Cristina Ponte, Joke Bauwens and Giovanna Mascheroni (2009) note that the tendency of the press to focus on the risks of the internet – rather than the

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[40] While the focus here is on existing academic literature, I provide examples of some of this coverage through my own exploration of headlines from during the research period in the second part of this chapter, when I consider the experiences of the AML participants.

opportunities – led to disproportionate claims over young people acting in aggressive or sexualised manners online (Ponte et al, 2009). The propensity to present young people as passive, naïve characters undermined their agency and reinforced the implication that they were at risk online (Ponte et al, 2009) – something that will be examined in the main body of this chapter.

Another negative side effect identified was the potential damage caused by supposed internet addiction (Szablewicz, 2010). Scholars note that this concern accompanied the changing technological landscape, where portable technology allowed for increasing amounts of access to the internet throughout the day, driving journalists to claim an increase in internet and device addiction (Smith & Cole, 2013; Molloy, 2013; Hampton & Wellman, 2018). This negative and cautionary tone was heightened by a growing emphasis on online abuse, where increased use of the internet was connected to a growth in cyber bullying, and the press called for SM to adopt stricter, more explicit policies on stopping online cruelty and 'trolling' (boyd et al, 2011; Smith & Cole, 2013; Bishop, 2014). Rachel Young, Roma Subramanian, Stephanie Miles and Amanda Hinnant (2017) note that journalists are quick to draw a connection between youth suicide and cyberbullying, using such tragedies as cautionary tales against cyberbullying, but presenting them in an oversimplified and alarmist manner (see also Felt, 2017).

While the concerns above continued to circulate, in the latter years of the study period there was a growing emphasis on cyber security and privacy, where a rising sharing-culture across an array of SM – as well as the normalisation of everyday

activities, such as banking, taking place online – led to journalists calling for

increased regulation over what could and could not be shared, and who could

access said content (Sandywell, 2009). Lee Jarvis, Stuart Macdonald and Andrew

Whiting (2015) examined coverage on 'cyberterrorists' (such as hackers) in the

news across multiple countries between 2008-2013, and found that the UK news

released more reports on cyberterrorism than other countries, with an increase in

these stories from 2010. As is evidently a recurring finding, Jarvis et al (2015) also

noted that coverage on cyberterrorism oversimplified the problem and was most

likely to be presented as concerned in tone (rather than providing sceptical or

balanced coverage).

The above analysis offers an insight into the key themes that make up what have

been referred to as 'cyberpanics' (Sandywell, 2006) or 'technopanics' (Marwick,

2008; Mathiesen, 2013): the moral panics of the internet age. Barry Sandywell

(2006, p46) notes that cyberpanics run the risk of focusing on overexaggerated

fears:

> Cyberphobia embraces a broad spectrum of responses to digitization
>
> ranging from the more passive forms of technophobia […] to the responses
>
> of those who indict digital technology as a medium of intrusive surveillance
>
> and on to extreme forms of anti-technological paranoia.

Marcella Szablewicz (2010, p456) considers the response to internet dangers to be

hyperbolic, noting that 'it is clear that the concern over this problem is

disproportionate to the concern over other social problems'. As with moral panics,

it is evident that disproportionality is once again a recurrent theme when discussing social issues in the context of the internet.

What impact do moral panics have on _people?_

While moral – specifically, cyber – panics can be reflective of genuine worries in a society, they can also be the _cause_ of such concerns and distract people from the truth by creating an over-exaggerated 'culture of fear' (Trend, 2007, p25). The tendency of the press and academics to resort to hyperbolic and often oversimplified rhetoric means that the actual problem often fails to be at the heart of the debates, where discussion ends up becoming a 'tit for tat' battle over who is right and who is wrong. In all this noise, the points of view of those exposed to moral panics – rather than those who create or write about them – are overlooked. Despite the extensive scholarship noted above there is little focus on the how non-academic, non-journalistic individuals respond to moral panics.

While studying moral panics some authors have identified this gap, but have not extensively researched it. One oft-cited example is an outcome of George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorielli's (1980) cultivation analysis, where they examined the extent to which TV watching cultivated views of the world. They found that those who were exposed to negative content on TV over time were likely to adopt a 'mean world' outlook , where they increasingly deemed

the world to be a cruel, unkind place (Gerbner et al, 1980). Trend (2007, p9) associates the tendency to adopt this outlook with moral panics, arguing that:

> …Audiences become convinced over time that life is more dangerous. Not only does this lead to heightened public anxiety […] It makes people likely to support reactionary public policies advancing quick fixes for fear rather than those that address the complexity of community concerns. In this way the mean world effect is an impediment to healthy civic discourse.

Exposure to overhyped moral panics can therefore sway people's perceptions of what is actually dangerous in their day-to-day lives, and make them more likely to support public policy 'quick fixes' in the hope that the supposed source of their fears will be eradicated.

Scholars have thus called for the impact of moral panics to be examined on an individual level (Trend, 2007; Szablewicz, 2010). As Trend (2007, p6) notes, 'parents may approach media violence quite differently from professors who study the subject or the industry professionals who produce it' (see also Kuipers, 2006; Szablewicz, 2010). This will be pivotal in this chapter, as the AML sample comprises of individuals from an array of backgrounds and with differing priorities (e.g. participants include teenagers, parents, charity workers, IT specialists, etc.) who would have varying knowledge, priorities and concerns that may be shaped by moral panics.

Furthermore, the changing autonomy of 'folk devils' is also altering how people respond to moral panics. In her study on Chinese internet 'addiction', Szablewicz (2010) notes the heavy cultural emphasis on morality in China, attributing this to the drastic responses from some parents to moral panics regarding internet use. Szablewicz (2010) concludes that further research into the 'folk devils' in her paper – i.e. the supposed internet addicts – and *their* response to the moral panics that surround them would be beneficial. Similarly, Justine Cassell and Meg Cramer (2008) discuss how girls are more likely to be the subject of moral panics than boys, positioned both as victims of dangers and as folk devils themselves. As such, Cassell and Cramer (2008, p64) emphasise the need 'to demonstrate the unique psychological and social effects of the moral panic on young women'. In both these instances the folk devils – the subjects of moral panics – are at the centre of the debate and understanding the impact of the moral panic on them is considered crucial. This will be built on in this chapter as it is possible to use the longitudinal data to examine the ongoing experiences of the individuals who trod the line between 'victims' and 'folk devils', exploring their responses to the fears circulating around them.

Methodologically, the limited research noted here is either quantitative (Schildkraut et al, 2015), highly theoretical (Szablewicz, 2010), or very specific to certain demographics (e.g. Kuipers' (2006) focus on American versus Dutch people, or Cassell and Cramer's (2008) focus on young females). Thus, there is a need for a more detailed examination into how this 'culture of fear' (Trend, 2007, p25) shapes

the attitudes of individuals from an array of backgrounds. By examining this subject qualitatively and longitudinally, this chapter provides a more detailed insight into how individual experiences may shape responses to fears generated by external narratives.

Finally, whilst conducting this literature review no extensive analysis on how responses to moral panics may shape behaviour and attitudes within relationships was found. This is surprising, given the extent to which this thesis has thus far found that relationships play an essential role in the adoption, attitudes towards and use of media. While Trend (2007) and Cassell and Cramer (2008) alluded to this by mentioning parental responses to the representation of children in moral panics, the resulting impact on their relationships was not examined in detail. This chapter illustrates how individuals' responses to moral panics are deeply connected to their relationships, as they tune into narratives that may present dangers to loved ones, and subsequently strive to protect them while still using CMC and associated technology.

Considering the root of fears

The next section of this chapter will consider the issues and fears presented above regarding cyberpanics (online wellbeing and abuse, addiction, and security risks) in connection to relationships. It offers a wider insight into how and why fears may be

generated when considering internet and CMC use, the role relationships play in

motivating/ diminishing these fears, and how participants find solutions to their

concerns.

The origin of the fears and who created content to perpetuate them was not always

explicitly discussed by participants in this study. On occasion, participants did

clearly articulate what motivated their fears: some quoted specific events covered

in the news that unsettled them; others referenced personal experiences they had

that drove a sense of fear. However, not all participants were this detailed. Instead,

many participants discussed a building sense of fear over a number of years,

generated from an array of different sources. They often could not remember

where their apprehension initially came from or identify a specific moral panic they

engaged with. Instead, they simply discussed a general sense of unease that had

been perpetuated in a variety of ways, both experiential and unsubstantiated.

Sometimes they had personal experiences; other times they engaged with over-

hyped moral panics. Frequently, it appeared to be a combination of both. This was

then exacerbated by anecdotes from loved ones, responses to experiences with

technology over numerous years, and personal cultural expectations and beliefs.

In order to provide an insight into the wider context at the time, I refer to

newspaper articles published during the research period that relate to the fears

participants mention. Through considering the cultural attitudes perpetuated in UK

press towards the internet, CMC and facilitating technology at the time I can provide another layer of context regarding what may have shaped their fears, and how this connects to personal experiences and how they conduct their relationships.

Fears concerning wellbeing and abuse online

Children's wellbeing

A dominant discourse in academia and the media regarding online dangers tends to focus on children as potential victims. Moral panics are frequently stirred when children are perceived to be at the centre of online dangers, where there is 'a "process of escalation" as negative attention and fear of "emerging problems" shifts from one target to the next' (Molloy, 2013, p193; see also Barker & Petley, 2001; Gauntlett, 2001; boyd et al, 2011; Messenger Davies, 2013). These moral panics focus on representing children as innocent victims, without agency and highly vulnerable to the corruptive forces online such as online predators (Barker & Petley, 2001; Gauntlett, 2001; boyd et al; Sandywell, 2009; Mathiesen, 2013).

However, scholars have also noted that young people may also embody the role of the online deviant, performing the behaviour that is at the root of a moral panic (such as lying about identity, posting provocative content or accessing disreputable websites such as pornography sites) (Cassell & Cramer, 2008; boyd et al, 2011;

Mathiesen, 2013). These contrasting narratives are also considered by academics to be heavily gendered, where girls are positioned as being both especially at risk of being a victim but are also deemed to be more likely to behave in a more corrupt manner online. As Cassell and Cramer (2008, p54) note, 'they are ascribed roles of naivete ́, innocence, or delinquency in the media', and that:

> The local and national news frequently quotes parents proclaiming the risk to the children of wayward, deviant men trolling the internet. But, reading the stories more closely, we find that the parents see their own children— primarily their daughters—as equally deviant, and that the attribution of blame is shared between the predators and the girls themselves.

While Kay Mathiesen (2013) notes that the threats concerning children's use of the internet are often highly exaggerated (see also Marwick, 2008), they still generate a great deal of fears from concerned parties, i.e. parents. Chapter 3 provided a more detailed analysis of how the parent-child dynamic shifted in response to the changing technological landscape – and how this in turn changed parenting structure and discipline. However, it is worth returning to this dynamic here and examining it from a different thematic angle, as it was evident that many of the AML parents' concerns about their child's access to certain technology and/ or online platforms derived from fears generated and perpetuated by moral panics.

The parents in the AML sample often expressed fears that were not based on personal experience. For instance, some parents had children who were too young

to own their own devices, but feared what would happen if they did in the future.

Thus, it was apparent that their fears were generated by panics they had

encountered, rather than as a result of fears derived directly from the behaviour of

their children. These participants would explicitly refer to stories in the news

impacting on how they felt about the safety of their children (again, usually

daughters) online, in turn shaping how they considered introducing them to/

responded to their use of CMC, the internet and facilitating devices. For instance,

Denise – who had her daughter in 2009 – grew increasingly concerned about her

daughter's use of technology and the internet during the study. She was conscious

of the potential disproportionality in news coverage, where she argued that (as

Gauntlett, 2001; Cassell & Cramer, 2008; boyd et al, 2011 also claimed) moral

panics may reflect public fears but may also work as a tool to ensure sales:

> Good news doesn't sell as well as bad news does it, or scandal news should
>
> we say, I guess it never has really, but then you gotta say 'well actually
>
> maybe that's what public are interested in' [...]. I think it is the style of news.
>
> **Denise, age 41, 2018**

However, despite her cynicism over – and often outright dislike of – the content

presented by the news, she was still influenced by this coverage. She reported

monitoring the manner in which her daughter used the internet as a result of these

'horror' stories:

We've been conscious of what she's looking at which is why she's only got

the kids versions of certain apps […]. I do think I have to have responsibility

as a parent for what she views […]. Everyone knows this mythical dark web

exists, I don't know how you get there but I don't want to know.

Denise, age 41, 2018

Denise's reference to the 'mythical dark web' here could reflect reports she had

encountered in the news, as shown by her claim 'everyone knows [it] exists'. A

search on the Newspaper Archive Nexis uncovered that a number of UK articles

during the research period referenced 'the dark web', often in an alarmist manner

while discussing the potential wider dangers of internet use. For example, in a *Daily*

Mirror article from September 2018 about online scams the journalist lists the

'hacking tools' and personal email addresses that can be easily purchased on the

dark web for low prices (Sommerlad, 2018). The *Scottish Daily Mail* also published

an article in 2018 headlined 'Is any child safe online?', claiming that men who have

viewed child sexual abuse content online have used the dark web to protect their

identity and gain access to this content (Drury, 2018). Thus Denise was evidently

aware of and engaging with stories regarding the internet that she felt may affect

her daughter's safety. In this sense, relating to negative news coverage regarding

the internet shaped her level of engagement with the moral panic and in turn her

behaviour when allowing her daughter online.

Dean also responded to negative media coverage about children online, initially feeling fearful for his younger sister and female cousin and how their behaviour online may endanger them:

> I do not like Facebook anymore, I used to like it but don't anymore. Kids nowadays don't realise how dangerous it can be […]. See my little cousin for instance is 13; she goes round all day [mimes holding a phone up and taking a selfie] taking photos of herself, her body, herself, her and her friends, putting it up on Facebook for anyone of any age to look at that, and I think it's wrong […]. That can get exploited easily, they can get like paedophiles for instance on that thing, I think it's dangerous and it should be addressed more, but I don't know how they can stop that happening 'cos that's what it's all about isn't it?   **Dean, age 21, 2010**

Dean's attitude reflects the response to moral panics noted by Cassell and Cramer (2008) above, where his fears concerned the young girls in his life who he deemed to be both vulnerable but also behaving in a provocative manner. It was likely that his concerns derived from a combination of his own personal observations of his cousin's behaviour and fears generated by press coverage, as his concerns reflected the tone of a number of the alarmist press articles that were circulating during the research period. For instance, an article from UK newspaper *The Sun* asked in a 2013 headline 'Have your children gone over to the dark side of the web?', referencing young girls' use of Instagram and Snapchat and speculating over whether they glamorise eating disorders or provide a forum for sharing provocative

images (The Sun, 2013). A *Daily Mail* article from 2008 focuses on girls as being in danger online, with the headline reading 'Millions of girls "at risk" online: Shock report reveals that parents are blind to the dangers of Facebook, Bebo and Myspace' (Revoir, 2008). This headline's emphasis on three areas of concern – that girls are the victims; that parents are oblivious; and that three specific SM sites are to blame – could exemplify the motivations behind Dean's fears at the time.

This was only exacerbated when Dean's daughter was born in 2011, as he immediately began to worry about her potential future behaviour online, and the dangers she may face:

> *Interviewer: Got any worries?*
>
> […I've got] loads of worries, they could ruin my life! [...Such as her] going to school and being pressured to have sex, taking drugs, smoking. Mostly what I'm worried about is Facebook, stuff where other people can speak to her without me knowing, influence her without me knowing about it. It scares me.   **Dean, age 23, 2012**

While he worried about a whole range of potential ways his daughter could get into trouble, Dean placed the internet and SM at the centre of his concerns. He reported feeling helpless and unable to prevent the troubles she may face online, potentially due to his own repeated issues with using the internet throughout his time in the

study period.[41] Dean's lack of confidence and literacy online may have exacerbated his fears, where he worried about potential dangers but was unsure of how to avoid or prevent them. Facebook (the form of SM Dean had the most issues with during the research period) became the 'folk devil' in Dean's eyes, symbolising all of his fears. This fear was arguably perpetuated by media focus on vulnerable girls online, where he associated Facebook with reports on people (both the victims and the predators) lying online:

> You always hear about with underage kids: men saying they're 16 when they're really like 40 and stuff like that, and they go and meet up and something happens to the girl […]. It could be a fake picture, a fake profile, and I think that's really dangerous.   **Dean, age 17, 2006**

> It's obviously up to the individual, obviously no father wants their daughter to go on Facebook when they're 13 and say they're 18 and have geezers chatting to her, but you don't know that, they'll have their iPhone, they'll be doing – you don't know that, so that's just what happens, you've just gotta be careful, it's up to the individual to be mature about it. I was the same at that age, but now I've got a daughter I think differently […]. I can't adapt how I feel 'cos all I want to do is protect my daughter.   **Dean, age 24, 2013**

---

[41] For instance, Dean struggled with knowing what (and what not) to share on Facebook for a number of years, shied away from using email as he was unsure of how to communicate with CMC, and tended to rely on others around him to resolve difficulties he encountered online, rather than learning how to overcome problems himself. This is illustrated in more detail in both Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, as well as later in this chapter.

Dean's sense of helplessness is evident here, as he predicted a chain of events that

he would have no control over: his daughter would adopt her own iPhone, he

would be powerless to stop her doing so, and she would use it to behave in a

deviant manner on SM. Through the longitudinal analysis it is possible to observe

how Dean's fears escalated over time, and how this may have been a result of a

combination of factors: his aging daughter becoming increasingly independent; the

changing technological landscape, that he struggled to keep up with; and his

wavering levels of confidence and literacy, where he often claimed to struggle to

understand the internet and CMC, wishing he could live without it. For years Dean

claimed there was not anything he could do to alleviate his fears, however in 2018

he took drastic measures by volunteering for a group that claimed to catch online

predators, facing his fears head on:

> I've started working voluntarily for this thing called 'Catching Online
>
> Predators' – I'm not sure if you've heard of this before – but it's like you
>
> have an account where you're like a 13-year-old girl, and like loads of guys
>
> try to speak to you and stuff, like initiate a meet, like paedophiles pretty
>
> much. And like the company I work for will go, like they'll be like 'oh yeah
>
> we'll meet you at the station at this time' and my company will go and catch
>
> the predators and put them in jail sort of thing […] 'cos I've got a little girl I
>
> know how dangerous the internet is, and all these people trying to chat up
>
> these young kids […]. And I feel quite passionate about that 'cos I've got a
>
> little girl you know I've always been passionate about things like that, that's
>
> why I don't like the internet, I've never really liked the internet for reasons

like that. I feel like I'm doing something quite productive.

Dean, age 29, 2018

For Dean, finding a way to feel 'productive' after years of fears and uncertainty over how to resolve this complex problem provided him with the belief that he was helping his daughter. While he was not solving his immediate recurring fear (that his daughter may behave in a provocative, deceitful manner on Facebook) he tackled his fears by pursuing the ultimate folk devil on the internet – online predators and paedophiles (Barker & Petley, 2001; Gauntlett, 2001; Sandywell, 2009; McCartan, 2010; boyd et al, 2011; Mathiesen, 2013).

A Nexis search uncovers an array of headlines from the *Daily Mail* during the research period warning of paedophiles online, such as 'Paedophiles increasingly targeting girls on social media for webcam sex' (Martin, 2012), and 'Paedophile made girl, 9, strip live on phone app' (Camber, 2017). There was encouragement from some UK newspapers to pursue these online folk devils, where a number of newspapers ran campaigns to catch the online deviants, such as online bullies or paedophiles. For instance, *The Sun* launched its own campaign named 'target a troll', stating 'The Sun today urges our readers to combat the menace of sick internet "*trolls*"' (Francis, Lazzeri & Heighton, 2011, p8). Ian Marsh and Gaynor Melville (2011, p14) warn of the repercussions of such encouragement by the press to uncover folk devils such as cyberbullies or online predators, arguing that '…the

panic orchestrated by the British press encouraged an atmosphere that sparked a series of brutal attacks on suspected paedophiles'. While, again, there is no evidence that Dean encountered these specific headlines or academic responses, he notes that 'you always hear about' underage children who are at risk online, implying that he addressed the fears he held for his daughter within a culture that at times condoned – even celebrated – the hunting down of the folk devils. Dean's pursuit of online dangers meant he was actively seeking the folk devil he had been fearful of for so long, reinforcing his perception that the internet was a dangerous place by making his supposed mythical fears real.

The anxieties generated by the culture of fear surrounding children's wellbeing online not only shaped parents' perceptions of their children and how they should 'manage' them (e.g. in a protective versus dismissive manner – see Chapter 3 and Chapter 4) but also shaped their own personal outlook of the internet and CMC. While fears over children's wellbeing is positioned as a core motivator of moral panics (Molloy, 2013; Barker & Petley, 2001; Gauntlett, 2001; boyd et al, 2011; Messenger Davies, 2013), it was evident that this sample were also deeply fearful for their own wellbeing online.

<u>Personal wellbeing</u>

Another main fear discussed by these participants related to their concern that people on the internet may be cruel and aggressive, and that they may become

victims of such abuse. This was initially attributed to what Azy Barak (2005, p87) referred to as 'the special characteristics of the Internet, such as anonymity', which he argued made the internet 'more prone to provide the means needed for unlawful and unethical behaviors' (see also Sandywell, 2009; Miller, 2016). However, as time went on anonymity was not considered the only reason for cruelty online: during the research period CMC and social media (SM) garnered a reputation from academics and the press alike for providing a platform for 'new forms of harassment, predation and stalking' (Sandywell, 2009, p48). As such, the participants' general concerns about the potential to be on the receiving end of abuse online reflected the fears presented in public discourse, and these concerns appeared to escalate over time.[42] These fears were often intensified by news coverage, where a number of the participants explicitly noted having seen harrowing and concerning press coverage on online abuse:

I've heard of cyber bullying online, people killing themselves, it's ridiculous […]. It's horrible, I feel sorry for these people getting bullied over the internet […]. I heard in the news the other day they're gonna be banging people up for it [putting people in prison for online cruelty…] it is Facebook

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[42] Of course, over the study period Ofcom's discussion guide was updated to reflect the changing cultural as well as technological landscape. Thus, concerns shown by the press, regulators and ongoing research surrounding abuse and harms became a topic discussed in the 2018 in-depth interviews. Once again it is therefore difficult to untangle which discourse drives which, and worth caveating that many of the 2018 quotes were prompted by a question about perceptions of online harms. However, the longitudinal data – illustrating that these concerns have been building over an extended period of time – allows for connections to be made between external narratives of fear and participants' discussions.

[that have] been sued haven't they recently?

Dean, age 29, 2018

Right from the word go I've been aware [of online abuse] from stories I've read in the media, how hatred, crime, bullying, anything like that, it will always be there, 'cos the system is there for it to be used on [...]. The way I look at it is you wouldn't put yourself in danger by walking in an area you knew was dangerous, so why do that on social media? What I've read in the media is [that] an awful lot of these things are happening through these social networking sites.

Sally, age 52, 2018

Sally and Dean both noted here stories they had seen about online bullying through news coverage. During the study period, the UK press covered online bullying extensively, warning about the negative impact it could have, once again especially in regard to children. For instance, Dean's reference to suicide as a result of abuse online may have derived from newspaper articles covering this topic, such as *The Guardian's* 2008 article (titled 'Death of 13-year-old prompts cyberbullying test case') which discusses the suicide of a 13-year-old girl after receiving abusive messages from a woman assuming a fake identity on Myspace (Pilkington, 2008). The *Daily Mail* published an article in 2012 named 'Poison of the Twitter trolls' (Scott, 2012), addressing the threat of abuse on SM site Twitter. Each of the above examples illustrates the manner in which the press drew attention to the negative repercussions of online bullying throughout the research period.

Sally – who throughout the study was generally uninterested in SM and claimed to only use CMC in a limited manner – argued that the solution to the problem was avoidance: if you steered clear of areas of SM that were rife with abuse, then you would not become a victim of it.[43]

However, this was not considered to be a solution by the majority of the sample, especially those who regularly used SM. Some participants instead adopted a course of action that involved observation but limited active involvement. Claims of this behaviour often came from participants who used SM regularly, and who had actually encountered such cruelty online through personal experience or observation. Despite their familiarity with SM, some grew increasingly concerned over time as they accessed wider networks online, followed celebrities on SM such as Twitter and gained access to new content and discussion threads available on said celebrities' pages. For example, Elizabeth noted the online response following a celebrity's controversial appearance in the UK version of television series *Big Brother* in 2018, and how it epitomised the potential for issues to rapidly escalate on Twitter:

> That Roxanne Pallet, she pretended someone hit her in the Big Brother
>
> house, everyone took against her quite rightly but that just gave everybody

---

[43] This avoidant response was also evident in Chapter 4, where participants handled confusing new online etiquettes by simply choosing to not engage with certain forms of CMC.

ammunition to take against her […]. People will just spew out hatred […].

People write comments, somebody will say something really innocuous, and

then someone will say something really horrendous and you'll think 'there's

no call for that'. Then someone will write 'there's no call for that', and I'm

thinking 'don't write it 'cos then you're gonna get a barrage!' […]. I don't

need to have a second life of misery online you know so I just keep my

thoughts to myself you know.

Elizabeth, age 57, 2018

Elizabeth's observations of abusive behaviour online over time made her afraid to

participate in online debates for fear of being on the receiving end of cruel

comments. She noted actual, personal experience of observing abuse online, rather

than simply having a response to hypothetical moral panics. Tim also adopted this

approach, but only after experiencing first-hand abuse himself from strangers on

anonymous forums such as Ask FM, gaming sites and even non-anonymously on

Facebook:

I've come across Ask FM yeah. I don't agree with that at all, that's the thing

where people post anonymous questions to other people, which I think is

wrong […]. When I was on it- for example I had an argument with someone

else, someone didn't like me […they] posted something really abusive to me

saying 'you're ugly and spotty and no one likes you', and it just irritates me

'cos they can do it anonymously, which I think is wrong.

Tim, age 15, 2013

This guy messaged me on Facebook and started threatening me and so on and really being quite nasty and trying to scare me. And then he managed to get my phone number, and he was phoning me like saying weird things and trying to scare me, and it did get to the point where I said 'if you don't stop I'm actually gonna call the police', 'cos it's quite strange.

Tim, age 16, 2014

After numerous instances of receiving cruel and aggravating messages online Tim also concluded that the best solution was not communicating with a wider audience, adapting who could access him via SM and instead only communicating with genuine friends and family online. He removed himself from public debates online and stopped responding when he saw threatening content. Thus, for these participants resorting to observation only – rather than personal involvement – felt like the safest response to their fears.

However, for some participants the need to have an online presence in order to maintain relationships – especially when their careers required them to use SM to develop work connections – meant that avoidance or pure observation was not feasible. Jenny – one of the most prolific users of SM in the sample – also discussed feeling afraid of online abuse and bullying, following a combination of observation of such behaviour herself while on SM, and through coverage in the news. In fact, Jenny noted reading several specific stories in the press that made her feel

concerned. For instance, in 2012 she began to follow a story regarding Olympian Tom Daley receiving abuse on Twitter:

> The benefit of Twitter is that you can see into a celebrity's life and stuff, but I think like a disadvantage is that you get all these people, like saddos that sit behind the computer and thinks it's okay to say these things to people, 'cos they just don't realise that they are human beings […]. With when that thing happened with Tom Daley [where a teenager sent the Olympian a cruel message on Twitter], I followed that one and there was like a massive backlash to that guy, and I went on his Twitter and saw what he was saying, and it was horrible what he was saying, and I think it's becoming more – everyone's growing more aware of it.   **Jenny, age 20, 2012**

Examples of the types of articles Jenny may have encountered were found on Nexis. *The Sun* repeatedly covered the abuse Tom Daley received online in 2012, with headlines such as 'Father of Tom troll "so sorry"' (The Sun, 2012), and 'Diver Daley's troll let off' (Crick, 2012). Her awareness of and concern over this issue escalated when she saw press coverage on online bullies (often referred to as trolls) and suicide following cruelty on Ask FM, reinforcing her pre-existing concerns and motivating even more fearful discussions regarding public spaces online:

There's another thing like Ask FM that I heard about through the news, and I think a young girl committed suicide because she was getting bullied. And I think that's disgusting.   **Jenny, age 22, 2014**

Did somebody not get prosecuted because they were writing stuff to the McCanns [the parents of missing British child Madeline McCann], and it was like a 60-year-old woman or something? And it's like 'why are you on Twitter writing abuse, you freak?'. And like *The Sun* did a thing about the trolls and catching the trolls – I think it's funny 'cos it's *The Sun* and it's ridiculous – but I do see where they're coming from because people are horrible.   **Jenny, age 22, 2014**

Jenny's references towards press coverage of some of the more prominent events that had occurred following the use of SM illustrate how a moral panic in the press can stir up fears in their audiences. In the above example, Jenny showed a degree of contempt for the newspaper presenting the issue, but does not contest or express scepticism over the tone or content of their coverage. Instead, if anything, her increased awareness of the reported potential threats from a newspaper – combined with her personal experiences of viewing said abuse online first-hand – exacerbated her fear of using SM in a public manner. This had a negative impact on her career ambitions, as while she wanted to build up a client base for her make-up business and share her content online, she was fearful of the potential abuse she may be opening herself up to:

I really enjoy doing [make up videos on YouTube] 'cos it's quite creative […] but you also see the dark side of it 'cos some of the YouTubers that I follow they get so much abuse, like and a lot of them have said 'I don't know if it's even worth doing it' […]. It'd kind of take the fun out of it, and you think 'why would I put myself – make myself so open and vulnerable?' […]. You're much more open to getting abused by people. 'Cos you're- there's things for people to pick out, 'cos it's your personality that you're putting on the line. It's something that you enjoy doing and people can shoot you down for it. As much as people say 'oh its ok you don't know who they are they're just trolls', I think it could potentially affect your confidence.

Jenny, age 24, 2016

Due to her fears of being exposed and vulnerable online, Jenny avoided creating the videos discussed above, and instead focused on promoting her business as a make-up artist on Instagram. However, she remained cautious and limited the content she shared. She was caught in a dilemma between wanting to publicise her content and widen her network to ensure new business, but also wanting to maintain her self-confidence:

When I started my make-up business I was posting pictures of people I did, 'cos that's the best way to promote yourself, so I was taking photos and putting them online. So I made it public, and I was really, really nervous 'cos I never did that before and I was like any random person can see my page, but I thought 'oh it's make up, it's fine, it's not like a personal thing', but I still felt – because

> I'm so private on social media, I think that's why I felt more vulnerable when I
>
> first started posting about make up 'cos I was like this is a part of me I'm
>
> opening up to be criticised by people.   **Jenny, age 24, 2016**

Although Jenny eventually chose to open her network and share work-related

content online, thus was not deterred entirely by fear, it took her a number of years

to reach that stage. Prior to this she had discussed the issue numerous times before

finally constructing a system that would balance her fears with her wish to progress

her career (i.e. by controlling her privacy settings and content sharing). This was

arguably partially due to the increasing sense that in order to be successful she *had*

to have an online presence, driven by her observation of many other beauty

professionals online over time. While her fears and concerns did not ultimately stop

her, they played a huge role in shaping how she chose to behave and engage with

her wider relationship network online.

While many of the fears noted above were generated by news articles or second-

hand stories, it was evident that some participants had first-hand experience of

seeing or even being part of abusive encounters. This therefore reinforces the

notion that that while fears may be overexaggerated they were not always

unsubstantiated, and moral panics cannot be simply written off as unsupported

hysteria (as warned by Cohen, 2002).

This fear of online abuse was most evident in the participants who spent a lot of

time online and used SM regularly, but was not exclusive to the SM users. Cathy –

who ardently refused to use SM for the entirety of the study – still discussed feeling deeply fearful over the repercussions of having an online presence. In Chapter 4 I noted that she felt that her privacy was violated in 2010 after she was made aware of a photo of her on Facebook. This happened again in 2014, and it became evident in this interview that another aspect of Cathy's irritation was that she was fearful of the potential of being a victim of online abuse:

> I met someone who said 'oh yeah I saw you on Facebook', I said 'did you now!?'. It was [from] a fancy-dress party […]. I said 'right who put that on there?!'. It was my niece […]. I said 'don't you ever, ever put my face on Facebook, ever'. I don't want it on, people sending my face on Facebook […]. It's the comments people can make, they can hurt people. They think it's a joke, it's one thing saying something as a joke, it's another thing writing it down, and it can be transcribed into something else, and it's no longer a joke and it hurts people. That's why I'm against- some of them I think it's a sign of bullying you know?   **Cathy, age 70, 2014**

Cathy's immediately negative response to hearing about a photo of herself being on Facebook highlights how strong the narrative of fear surrounding the potential of online abuse was, especially as she was uncertain of the context it was being used in and who was able to see it. Cathy lacked first-hand experience with Facebook but was still greatly fearful of the thought of being the subject of abuse, based on what she felt she knew about the site.

The above exploration highlights how personal fears and apprehensions could also have a negative impact on how this sample conducted their relationships. For participants such as Jenny, it meant limiting her invisible audiences and being careful with how much of her identity she was prepared to share online, potentially restricting her network and social/ professional opportunities. Tim continued to use SM, however claimed to greatly limit his content sharing, observing rather than joining in discussions or potential episodes of cruelty he saw online. Cathy totally avoided all access to SM, where the aforementioned instance seemed to cement her general dislike of the concept of SM. In this sense, her fears shaped her use of CMC, where she voluntarily excluded herself from the forms of online communication that many of her loved ones evidently used.

However, for one participant the desire to build and maintain relationships online outweighed her fears of online abuse. Although Elizabeth was more reserved on public forums such as Twitter, she continually communicated with others on online dating sites throughout the research period. She considered online dating an opportunity for identity play, carefree behaviour, and a chance to meet an array of new people:

> [Online dating is] a brilliant godsend […]. The old-fashioned world that I grew up in where there was no mobile phones and was no internet, where the only people you knew were the people in your vicinities or your friends, or your place of work, or where you socialised. You soon go through them with a dose of salt, and then you get a name for yourself and they say it

behind your back 'she's got a name for herself she's been with him, him, him' and then nobody would touch you with a barge pole […]. Now you can get a reputation in Wales and no one needs to see you again, you can get a reputation in Tenerife and no one needs to see you again, you can go to Germany, you can go to Holland, you can go wherever you want, and have a free holiday, drinks, fun time, and come back whiter than white quite frankly.   **Elizabeth, age 53, 2014**

Thus Elizabeth's desire to form new relationships – whether casual or more meaningful – was a key driver to remain active on online dating sites. However, she was also sceptical, claiming that people often lied online and could at times even be abusive or cruel. Elizabeth adapted her use of online dating sites over the course of the study, responding to the occasionally abusive – and often deceptive – behaviour she had seen by developing her own online strategy. She changed her behaviour in order to ensure she was not the victim, instead becoming the deceiver:

I haven't got anything- the only thing true about me on there is the colour of my eyes frankly, so they wouldn't be able to track me down in any real sense. I said to my friends 'whatever you do just don't tell them...' […] – you can tell the truth about you in personality wise, but who tells the whole world their age, who they are, your deepest darkest things […]. You wouldn't tell people that in a bar so why should I write it all down? […]. I

probably couldn't lie about the colour of my eyes 'cos I'm black, but I

probably would of if I could [laughs].   **Elizabeth, age 46, 2007**

Elizabeth attributed her own dishonesty to her fears of potential cruelty if the

relationship went wrong, arguing that 'they'll get really arsey if you don't like them,

do you know what I mean' (Elizabeth, age 54, 2015). This fear could have derived

from both her prior experiences with observing abuse on Twitter, as well as – more

specifically – warnings in the UK press at the time that women communicating with

men online could be in danger. For example, in 2016 *The Guardian* published a

number of articles on women deceived by online romantic interests. They note the

racial abuse that women may be subject to online, with the headline 'The women

abandoned to their online abusers; They face harassment including death threats

and racist abuse' (Laville, Wong & Hunt, 2016). Another *The Guardian* article from

the same year warned that meeting men from the internet may be dangerous due

to deceptive behaviour, claiming 'a man pretended to be a successful doctor to

impress women on a dating website, secretly filmed them naked and blackmailed

them for thousands of pounds, a jury has heard' (Morris, 2016, p1).

Elizabeth associated the withholding of personal information with safety, and

accounted for this behaviour by claiming that everyone else was doing the same, so

she was simply protecting herself:

> I had a date last week and he was very upset, like 'ooo you lied about your
>
> name', and I was like 'well yeah – you know – but you know my name now',
>
> and after talking to him clearly he lied about a lot more, he wasn't working
>
> for a start, he made up he was this big deal, he put his card behind the bar,
>
> but after a few wines he let everything slip [laughs].

Elizabeth, age 53, 2014

Elizabeth reported to behave in a manner similar to the feared figure who faked

their identity online in order to meet unsuspecting strangers. Thus Elizabeth

handled her fears of deceitful behaviour from strangers online, as well as concerns

that she could be a victim of abuse if she handed out information to the wrong

person, by becoming a 'folk devil' herself (Cohen, 2002).

Elizabeth claimed that she acted in this manner in order to continue her love for

forming new relationships online without the fear of being the subject of abuse if

something went wrong. Elizabeth arguably combined her own personal experiences

with online dating – where she reported encountering a number of men who

altered personal information online – with fears generated from media reports on

aggressive strangers. Her fears were thus based on both personal experiences and

moral panics surrounding the dangers of communicating with unknown people

online. This reinforces the notion that deviant 'folk devils' are not always evil

wrongdoers, but can be sympathetic individuals with their own agendas, illustrating

how the oversimplified discourse on moral panics can be problematic (McRobbie &

Thornton, 1995; Ungar, 2001; Szablewicz, 2010).

Fears concerning anti-social behaviour or addiction

Where stories of online abuse and cruelty online generated real fears in some participants, many were also concerned about behaviour that could be considered anti-social. Chapter 4 discussed the potential for people to make unwitting social faux pas when using SM if they had not yet formed CMC literacy. One of the biggest faux pas noted by academics and the press was behaving in a manner that implied an addiction, where people were accused of anti-social behaviour as they increased their device and CMC usage, in turn ignoring the 'real' world around them (Gergen, 2002; Turkle, 2011, 2015; Molloy, 2013; Hampton & Wellman, 2018).

This was evident in a number of newspaper articles published during the research period, with headlines such as 'Dot Compulsion; Networking sites have us hooked, online & blinkered' from *The Sun* (Tattersall, 2011) and 'How your smartphone is ruining your life' from *The Independent* (Petter, 2017). Others called for a 'digital detox' (such as in *The Sun* article 'Do you need a cyber sabbath? Meet the digital detox devotees' (Tweedale, 2013)) reinforcing the narrative that the over-use of technology is wrong. Patricia Molloy (2013, p194) argues however that studies claiming an increase in online addiction are often overexaggerated, where a medical discourse is used to imply that online addiction is a health problem, despite professionals 'yet to recognize or acknowledge Internet addiction as a medical condition' (see also Szablewicz, 2010; Kardefelt-Winther, 2017). Molloy (2013)

problematises the use of the term 'addiction' itself when referenced in relation to the use of the internet and facilitating devices, arguing that the expression is manipulated to stir up concerns. This section examines how the language around 'addiction' is used by participants, how it is connected to perceived anti-social behaviour that is seen to damage relationships – thus generates fear in the sample – and how these individuals found solutions to this problem.

Throughout the study, the term 'addicted' was often used by the AML participants, by both self-proclaimed 'addicts' and those critiquing the behaviour of others. Thus, fears of addiction and anti-social behaviour were typically the most experiential fears noted by this sample, where participants often used examples from their everyday lives to discuss their experiences and fears. Some people in the sample – usually the older or less technology-enthused participants – condemned what they considered to be addictive behaviour. They considered the apparent addiction to be problematic for a number of reasons: it was thought to be rude, detrimental to social development and harmful to general wellbeing. Once again, these perceptions were often perpetuated by what these participants had heard in news coverage:

> I mean the problems I might hear about [are] obviously documented in the newspapers and that sort of thing […]. You see them with their face down looking at their mobile. Their mobile is more important to them than it is to

me […]. They seem to need it, I would suspect my generation don't.

Donald, age 62, 2016

Donald associated reports of addiction with his own observations, connecting the two and using what he had read to reinforce the notion that younger generations were behaving anti-socially. This emphasis on generational differences was evident when considering fears over addiction, where often the older participants condemned the younger people in their lives for overuse of technology (especially when they were seen to provide a bad example to those around them):

> We did tell [my son] off, like 'you bring your children here but we have to look after them while you're on your phone' […]. It's annoying, you know what I mean, it's annoying. It doesn't appeal to me you know. It's not nice, we wouldn't go round someone's house then five minutes later your phone is out and [you're] not even talking to them […].
>
> ***Do you see it as an addiction?***
>
> I think it is. What would you do without mobile phones? You talk to people, you interact with people? They're stuck on their phone all day and week, that's no good. **Peter, age 52, 2013**

While some participants berated loved ones for showing signs of 'addicted' behaviour, other members of the sample claimed to be the so-called 'addicts' themselves. The term 'addicted' was most likely to be used by the more technology-enthusiastic participants in the earlier years of the study as they

asserted that technology and online platforms increasingly played a key role in their daily lives. Denise illustrated this by noting all the applications she had put on her iPhone and how the device had become an essential aspect of her life:

> I got a Vodafone package, it's really good [...]. I downloaded some music onto it, downloaded a few apps, Farmville, I can't believe I've got into it but my friend kept sending my invites and now I'm addicted! [...] I love it, if you can't tell [laughs].   **Denise, age 33, 2010**

Julia showed a similar enthusiasm for accessing CMC on her laptop once she started at university in 2007, saying that checking for new messages rapidly became an addiction:

> Well I started using the internet in the first couple of weeks when I was [at university...] and now it's really tempting, you're out and – it sounds so sad: 'I'm addicted to it', but if you've been out and away from your computer for too long you want to check your emails...   **Julia, age 19, 2007**

Julia especially struggled with the sense that she was 'addicted' to CMC and facilitating devices throughout her time in the study. Once she adopted a portable device and could access the internet on the go, she received numerous penalty fines for going over her phone contract allowance (as discussed in Chapter 3) which she attributed to her 'addiction' to the internet:

I got a bit naughty using my data in Australia so I've got to pay for that, I

think maybe it's 150 [GBP…]. Last time I checked it was about 90 plus my 40

for my phone […]. I don't pay my phone bill but I haven't broken the news to

my parents yet. It was stupid I know it was but I'm just so addicted to the

internet.   **Julia, age 24, 2012**

Thus she did not take full accountability for her actions, rejecting some

responsibility by arguing that her 'addiction' was the cause of her overspending. By

using the term 'addicted' she called on popular narratives surrounding the 'side

effects' of internet use to imply that her use was not her fault.

Many other members of the sample discussed feeling drawn to their devices to the

extent it was 'unhealthy', exemplifying the addictive behaviour condemned in

moral panics (as noted by Molloy, 2013). For instance, Jenny argued that 'there's a

real thing that if you don't go on your phone like you get anxiety' (Jenny, age 26,

2018), and claimed to have a high dependency on her device:

Interviewer: how important is your phone to you out of ten?

It's quite sad but I'll probably say like ten […] probably more now, I have it

on me all the time. And it's like, it's bad, like I know it is, I think it's

unhealthy, but I have it on me constantly. 'Cos my life is on it, bank, social

media, Facetime, shopping, I can do everything on it, so if I didn't have a

smartphone I'd be lost. I think there was like a day where it broke or

something and I was like going 'oh it's quite nice not having an iPhone' but I

think deep down it was like 'I need to get my phone back!' Like trying to be calm like 'it's really nice not being able to get on social media', but deep down I was like 'aaah I need my phone back!'   **Jenny, age 23, 2015**

Mick also admitted that he felt dependent on his phone despite the fact that he would 'like to say' that he was not addicted to it:

> ***Interviewer: we talked a bit about how the amount of kit the family have- are you addicted to media tech?***
>
> I'd like to say no, but if I walked out the house without my phone I'd feel like my right leg has been chopped off […]. I'd like to say no but it would be like going cold turkey, I'd be all 'where is it, where's my phone?!'. Like today I was bored for ten minutes so was playing a game on my phone to pass the time […]. If a mate is late to meet me, you play on your phone […]. In that respect I'd probably say slightly addicted, I can't just sit in peace, I have to get my phone out.   **Mick, age 42, 2016**

These participants showed an awareness of and insecurity regarding the social distaste for 'phone addiction' by using negative language about their own behaviour. This was furthered by participants who admitted to irritating others by behaving in this manner:

> ***Interviewer: Are you using the internet more 'cos of having a phone?***

Yeah definitely. I would say probably use it much more […]. Where there's Wi-Fi access I'll check it wherever I am, which can annoy my girlfriend quite a lot. Even though I don't need it I think it's out of addiction to the technology.   **Dai, age 29, 2008**

Thus, as with Elizabeth and her tendency to be flexible with the truth when online dating, many of the AML participants embodied the 'folk devils' presented by the press, claiming to perform the addicted behaviour that was vilified. If anything, the moral panic surrounding addiction to devices and the internet provided them with a justification for their behaviour, as participants dismissed accusations of anti-social behaviour from loved ones by claiming addiction, thus implying they blamed the technology and platforms for compelling them to use, not themselves for any over-use.[44]

As with other fears, it was unclear where many of participants' concerns originated from: participants showed fears over becoming the type of person who was addicted to their device, but it appeared that these fears were not generated from one particular source, but a general culture of considering over-use of technology to be a negative behaviour. They mentioned hearing negativity from loved ones, from press coverage and from reflections on how their behaviour had changed year-on-year.

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[44] Further discussions on technologically deterministic language can be found in Chapter 1.

In her study into the moral panic surrounding gaming addiction in China, Szablewicz (2010) concluded that future research should 'acknowledge the impact of moral panics on the "folk devils" they create' (p465). Thus, it is useful to examine how the self-proclaimed 'addicts' in this sample responded to the negative discourse that surrounded them. Firstly, a number of these participants created rules for themselves so as to not become the media-addicted folk devils represented in public discourse. Once some sensed what they considered to be the actions of an 'addict', they consciously managed their behaviour. For example, Julia, Jenny and Sheila all enforced rules on how long they could use their phones for, arguing that if they went some time without them then there was not a problem:

> [On] some of my days off I've started going for a coffee by myself on a weekday and I've started leaving my phone behind when I do it, 'cos I've found that I was going out […] and I'd just sit on my phone and not look up for half an hour, so I've started leaving my phone at home to try and not be one of those people that just sits on their phone […]. The first couple of times I hated it, and I would never do it on a weekend or anything, but on a week-day when I'm off and no one else is I would do it. But you do feel just safer if you've got your phone there to hide behind.
>
> **Julia, age 27, 2015**

Julia admitted to not enjoying her enforced breaks from her phone as they were a shift away from behaviour she had grown accustomed to, however in her

endeavour to avoid the stigma of being 'one of those people' she still altered her phone use.

Sheila also placed restrictions on how long she could stay on her phone, developing her own strategies for limiting her usage by being cognisant of how much battery life she had used. This meant that she felt justified in her use, where time spent on it was deemed necessary and therefore not problematic:

> *Interviewer: do you ever feel you're too attached or addicted to your phone?*[45]
>
> No. I have done banking and that this morning but my phone is on 87%. I mean that's not good, I like it to be around 90 something, but I have been doing all my emails, I've done everything I need to do today. That's how I realise what I'm doing, is by the percentage that's left on the battery. When that starts going down I know I've been on it too long. I don't want it ruling my life.   **Sheila, age 43, 2016**

Even Donald, who appeared to buy into the moral panics and concern surrounding addiction, worried that he too could potentially become the folk devil. Thus he deliberately curbed his behaviour so as to ensure he did not fit into the stereotype:

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[45] 'Addiction' was a theme explored during the 2016 interviews, as evidenced by the interviewer explicitly asking participants about their perception of and experiences with device 'addiction'.

Interviewer: would you ever say you feel addicted to your devices?

To be fair yes, I mean I always used to snort at the people looking at their phones every two seconds. If I allowed myself to run along with it I could see myself doing it as well, but I intentionally don't look at it, but that's intentional 'cos I know I could get myself dragged into 'have I got a text? Have I got an email?'.   **Donald, age 62, 2016**

Here, fears of behaving incorrectly or anti-socially led to self-regulating behaviour.

Similarly, Jenny attempted to impose rules to curtail her phone use while trying to work:

I've never got my phone out of my hand […] like I'm always- even when I was revising today the girl I was revising with, we were like 'that's it we'll just switch our phones off' 'cos we're that bad. So we just switched our phones off and put them on the table, and then literally about two seconds later we were like 'I'm just gonna really quickly check something', and then that's it, like I could sit on my phone for like 5 hours, 6 hours.

Jenny, age 24, 2016

However unlike Sheila and Donald, Jenny and her friends evidently struggled with their attempts to restrict use. While Jenny claimed that her usage was problematic, for other members of the sample this type of use – and subsequent associations

with addiction – was not seen to be an issue. This appeared to be because they drew reassurance from the belief that everyone else was behaving in the same way, thus they were not behaving abnormally or inappropriately. For example, Chloe justified her sense of addiction by arguing that everyone she spent time with used their phones in a similar manner, especially those in her age group:

Interviewer: do you ever feel like you're addicted to your phone?

Yeah [laughs] I don't like not having it on me, I want it here with me now [during this interview] [laughs]

Have you ever heard of a digital detox where people switch [their] phone off?

No, I haven't felt the need to. I haven't heard of that saying before but it's probably just my age group 'cos we're always on [our phones].

Chloe, age 16, 2016

This was further exemplified by Julia's change in attitude in the latter years of the study, where after years of berating herself for her addictive behaviour she determined that she was part of the majority in her behaviour, not minority. As more and more of her friends found WhatsApp to be a useful resource she rejected her earlier concerns that she was addicted, implying that the moral panics discourses she once responded to may in fact now be deemed as disproportionate:

Interviewer: generally speaking there have been times where you've been addicted, do you feel that still?

No, much less […] I spend a lot of time on WhatsApp but I don't feel worried about that, it's my way of keeping in touch [….I like] to be on my phone and it's generally in front of me but I wouldn't say I'm addicted.

Julia, age 28, 2016

Relationships were at the heart of how participants justified or condemned CMC use, and the amount of participants who had first-hand experience regarding supposed addiction may indicate why they altered their responses to moral panics over time. For the older members of the sample – the participants who also used CMC the least – addictive use was deemed problematic and something to be condemned. This was arguably due to a lack of interest in or perceived need for CMC, thus they struggled to understand why people would behave in what they deemed to be an anti-social manner. Their concerns often derived from a sense that those they berated were harming their 'real life' relationships by using their phones and ignoring those around them. In this instance, those least likely to feel compelled to use their mobile phones or CMC were more likely to side with trending notions that addiction was a moral problem.

Other members of the sample admitted that they felt addicted to their devices, and expressed a degree of shame over their behaviour as they were aware of the negative associations with 'over-use'. This often happened after loved ones had condemned their actions, potentially as a result of them buying into moral panics. As such these participants felt pressured to strike a balance between using CMC to

communicate with people, but not in *excess* so as to avoid the disapproval of other loved ones.

Finally, some participants such as Chloe generally tended to disregard any negative discourse surrounding the use of phones that implied their behaviour was anti-social. They argued that it was an integral part of their everyday lives, and in fact expected behaviour within their social circle. Once again this was attributed to age: if all of their social circle was using CMC and their phones in that manner, then in *not* being like them they faced exclusion.

These experiential examples highlight how a personal connection to the feared object may alter how an individual responds to a moral panic. The less interested a participant was in CMC and facilitating devices the more they condemned the actions of others, especially if they had engaged with narratives that propelled the notion that this behaviour was the result of an inappropriate addiction. Conversely, those who increasingly saw CMC as an integral part of their lives were more inclined to dismiss these narratives. Thus in exploring fears of addiction it was evident that the 'folk devils' in this instance were behaving in more complex manners than implied by popular discourse, where their supposed 'addicted behaviour' was often consciously considered but justified because it was deemed vital for maintaining relationships.

Fears concerning online security

Academics have noted a surge in fears regarding online security, referring to this response as 'cyberphobia' (Sandywell, 2006, p48; see also Sandywell, 2009; Smith & Cole, 2013). Sandywell (2009, p39) attributes this to the rapid introduction of new technology and ever-changing potentials of the internet in recent years, where:

> Some commentators see e-criminality as the most significant threat facing an increasingly globalised world. The Internet, the Web and cyberspace have been described as the 'wild west' of new forms of criminality organised on a planetary scale.

This form of criminal activity is positioned by Sandywell (2009, p42) as triggering a new set of fears, where on the one hand there are the invisible, unpredictable threats from hidden cyberterrorists, but on the other there are narratives of a surveillance state, a very present but 'faceless Power ('Big Brother') controlling our lives' (see also Turkle, 2015; Lee, 2018).

This was evident in press coverage during this research period, as journalists warned about the dangers of sharing information online as phishing scams, online identity theft and apprehensions over voice activated services such as Alexa entered the public discourse. *The Mirror* published an article in 2018 about invisible cybercrime on big businesses called 'Cybercrime undetected' (The Mirror, 2018), and *The Guardian* warned of a lack of user privacy when accessing the internet

through a Wi-Fi connection in 'The Guardian view on internet security: complexity is vulnerable' (The Guardian, 2018). The fear of technology 'eavesdropping' on conversations was perpetuated in articles such as *The Mirror's* article headlined 'Telly Tale; Snooping smart TVs & Alexa can spot love cheats' (Bagot, 2019) and *The Mail on Sunday*'s 2018 article (titled 'Alexa, can you shut up!') that claim that the device is spying on residents (Hitchens, 2018).

Academics have noted that the blame is often placed on the victims of such crimes, where they argue that the onus is put on users of the internet for oversharing and jeopardising their security, 'leaving them vulnerable to victimization by someone in their network' (Smith & Cole, 2013, p216; see also Sandywell, 2006, 2009; Lee, 2018). In this regard internet users are positioned as both the victims of and cause of security risks, where they are blamed for opening themselves up to potential dangers online.

The AML participants often reported to have fears regarding their online security. Some of the participants were vocal about potential threats to their security, where the fears they discussed were often connected to stories they had heard from the media regarding the possible dangers of the web. These participants typically discussed the stories that were relevant to them, identifying with victims' stories that reflected their own insecurities. For example, Mary engaged with stories that positioned the elderly as prime victims of online security threats, letting this shape

what she shared online and showing that the thought of *potential* threats, rather than experienced threats, generated great apprehension:

> All the scams around people – they reckon a lot of old people have been done out of their money, how they're handing over pin numbers, doing all this on the internet. They can find out everything about you, [people from] another part of the world knowing where you live, how much money you've got. You haven't got any private life in my opinion now, 'cos everybody can find out.   **Mary, age 82, 2015**

Mary's fears – exacerbated by the stories she heard – meant she changed her view on sharing personal details, in turn shaping how she claimed to behave in her day-to-day life, even when not online:

> I'm very wary when I have to give pass numbers, pin numbers, very, very wary who's got that now. They sell- I didn't realise they're selling information once they have your phone number, your name and address: once they have your information it's sold. Even [if] I go to a shop now they ask for anything, say 'I'll get in touch, give me your phone number'. I say 'I don't give out my phone number, I'm ex-directory'. I don't give out my phone number just willy nilly.
>
>   **Mary, age 82, 2015**

This cautious outlook was also evident with Elizabeth when further discussing her reported behaviour on dating sites. While she claimed that withholding – even faking – personal details was a response to the belief that 'everyone's doing it' and an act of self-protection from cruel or abusive comments, she also argued that it was an attempt to protect herself from wider security threats:

Interviewer: on the dating sites [are you] putting personal information in?

[Laughs] I make it all up [...], my name's not real, my age isn't real. People put all that stuff in then say 'why don't you tell the truth?' Because they can go and steal your identity or they you know, they know too much about you. I dunno why people put everything real in there, you know 'cos everyone can find out everything about you or steal your identity, things like that […]. I'm not going to put my date of birth or my name or anything personal, for everybody to read, that's just crazy.

Elizabeth, age 50, 2011

This awareness over the security of online data was increasingly discussed following the UK's changes to its General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2018. For some, increased awareness came simply from first-hand experience with the matter, following the influx of emails participants said they received from companies updating them on their new policies:

Interviewer: GDPR […] how did that affect you […]?

So as a consumer [I] found it mildly annoying [...]. There was the opt in or opt out, a lot of places wording it as 'you don't have to do anything, if you don't we'll still communicate with you' [...]. With [my] iPhone its really easy to unsubscribe, so [the] amount of junk emails I got: I just clicked 'unsubscribe' though, made it easy to get rid of spam [...]. For me it was quite refreshing to dump a lot of these things that you used years ago.

Denise, age 41, 2018

As such, while awareness was raised, these participants did not necessarily feel more reassured or fearful as a result, but simply happy to lighten their inboxes. For others, this brought their attention to more general rules and guidelines on data use, raising their awareness to the potential dangers of security breaches and sources of fear online:

Interviewer: GDPR, how aware of it were you?

Let's call it data protection act, and it was turned into GDPR which turned greater responsibility onto companies for safeguarding data, and there's heavy fines for companies that fall foul [...]. One thing it shows is data is not secure, a number of occasions companies have fallen foul [...] you just need to look at the banks, where data has been breached, I was breached and it took a long time for them to tell people [...]. Whether they need to report it there and then or do a damage limitation thing first, I don't know, I suppose the latter 'cos you don't want to scare people, but there's got to be some

sort of regulation, and I think it's pretty obvious that our data security is

poor. **Donald, age 64, 2018**

For these participants, high profile cases such as the changes to GDPR led to a

reconsideration of the complexities of regulation, driving them to think about the

nuances around data collection and management and potentially motivating an

increase in awareness, and even literacy.

However, Dean showed a lack of awareness of the GDPR changes, where he failed

to notice any of the media hype or direct communications he may have received

following the changes:

Interviewer: Did you hear about GDPR?

No

Do you use email?

Rarely mate

You might have got a load of emails about it.

[…] I don't really look at them, I just delete everything.

Dean, age 29, 2018

This lack of awareness (or interest) in changes to data regulation indicated that

although fears were often built up via media coverage, there were still members of

the sample who were not paying attention to such discourses. This is key given the

extent to which Dean engaged with moral panics surrounding children at risk

online. This further highlights that participants were more likely to engage with discourses that they personally related to, and that they could see having an impact on their relationships. Dean was highly preoccupied with the danger that his loved one's could be in, but much less aware of the dangers he himself could encounter.

Dean's lack of engagement with emails in 2018 could be attributed to his negative experiences with phishing emails two years earlier. In 2016 Dean fell victim to a phishing scam, where he responded to an email from an account pretending to be the HMRC and had to deal with serious repercussions as a result:

> Someone done fraud on my account […]. I got an email from the HMRC but it was not them, it was a fake email, and said 'oh yeah put in all your bank details, you're due this much' […]. I didn't know 'cos I never use it, I never do anything via email they never send me things via email. I put in all my details, where I live, my phone number, my sort code: everything, I didn't realise, I forgot about it, then I got a ring from my bank […]. I had to phone up EE and change all the passwords, had to go to the bank and get a whole new account […] work got delayed 'cos they paid into the bank account I didn't have any more […]. I had just replied to the email without thinking.
>
> **Dean, age 27, 2016**

In this instance, Dean's lack of awareness regarding some of the potential dangers online in 2016 led to him unwittingly putting himself at risk. Dean's security threat and subsequent confidence knock meant that he disengaged himself from future

opportunities to increase his knowledge and potentially lessen his fears. Thus while there is a tendency in the academic literature on moral panics to position them as overexaggerated discourses to be approached with scepticism (Trend, 2007; Marwick, 2008; Sandywell, 2009), Dean exemplified the perils of totally ignoring popular discourse, where in not being aware at all he was also at risk. This event greatly affected his confidence, where instead of endeavouring to understand what went wrong and how to protect himself from future issues, Dean became so fearful that he limited his usage of the internet, especially with regards to e-democracy:

Interviewer: [Do you do] any government things online?

[…I] got a thing for voting, but got the Mrs to do it for me, I don't like doing things like that […]

You had your scare […]

When the bank rang me they were like 'never ever put your bank details online' […]. The one thing I've tried to do online and I've messed it up, I messed it up, I didn't like it before, that one thing I tried to do it didn't work, and it's just put me back even further, so that's it about that.

Dean, age 27, 2016

While Dean and Mary discussed security threats that they could relate to on a personal level, for the majority of the sample the fears they considered often

seemed a distant, unidentifiable threat. This actually heightened their concerns, where these fears were often seemingly perpetuated by a lack of certainty over what the threats actually were, who they were coming from and how to avoid them. These participants deemed security threats to be a complex, hard to solve problem, where they were unsure of the safest response to these fears. In some instances the risks were seen to outweigh the benefits, thus total avoidance was once again seen as the most effective and simple response. This was most evident when analysing discussions on voice-activated technology such as the Alexa feature by Amazon, where some members of the sample outright rejected certain technology because of Alexa and its subsequent association with security breaches. This perception of such technology derived from a fear that the voice activated feature meant that the device was always 'listening' to and recording conversations, potentially using this data for nefarious reasons (a fear that could have derived from awareness of the aforementioned press coverage on Alexa):

> Alexa: the spy in every home. 'Cos not only is Alexa listening to you, it's listening to everything, then they're using that information to make money […]. It's like the trojan horse […] the spy in every home. […] Every time they invent anything there's always a dark side. I don't need things I don't need and I don't need Alexa.
>
> **Elizabeth, age 57, 2018**

Daniel adopted technology that happened to have Alexa integrated into it, which caused a great conflict for him. He was uncomfortable with having what he

perceived to be a potential security threat in his home, thus restricted his usage – in turn limiting the functionalities of his device – in order to feel more secure:

> I had one Sonos speaker before but bought a second one for the bedroom [...]. A significant point of note with that one is it comes with Alexa technology which is a new technology in the home [...]. I don't use it at all, it was always my intention to never use that functionality [...]. Sonos is a great brand, I want to build out and bulk things as I go. [...]. Just as I was thinking of buying it they released a new thing with Alexa technology: that's not the reason I bought it [but] I read reviews in terms of quality of sound [...]. Alexa was never the reason, if they had an option without it for the same price I would have taken it [...]. There's always a message from Sonos saying I haven't activated it, but I've got no interest in it [...] it makes me safe from it listening to what's going on. Given the current climate I wouldn't even say that's a given, given what's going on, who knows what's going on [...]. Given the choice I'd have exactly the same speaker without that functionality.

Daniel, age 35, 2018

While Daniel took action to minimise the perceived threat from Alexa by refusing to activate it, he maintained concerns that there was still the chance of an unsolicited security breach in his home:

> *Interviewer: how present is that threat?*

I think it's very present. I think when I first bought it I thought 'if you don't ask it to do something it won't do it'. I think I've moved a long, long way from that now, I think that whether you ask it or not it could be doing something, and – I'd almost split it into three separate areas: there are things it could be doing that it shouldn't be doing 'cos there's some kind of glitch; there are things that it could be doing that you're promised aren't used in a certain way but then they are, so say Alexa has to be recording 24/7 to understand you're trying to attract its attention, it must be recording. Amazon say they don't record anything other than the commands to Alexa, but how do you know? And [3] there are things that might be totally unrelated to the hardware or Amazon where other people could be using it to breach your privacy […]. Sounds conspiracy theory but you think the stories we've seen over the last year means those things are much more possible than we are likely to believe.

Daniel, age 35, 2018

This awareness and nervousness of potential breaches to security – heightened by coverage on security threats in the media – was also reported by other participants. Sheila's suspicions that companies were not being open or honest about how they were using her data were exacerbated by her increasing interest in conspiracy theory Youtuber Q Anonymous – her prime source of news. She attributed QAnon's coverage to her becoming increasingly suspicious of undisclosed security breaches:

Google Plus has been hacked, Superdrug has been hacked, I've got a few

emails over last five months saying 'we're sorry to let you know we've been

hacked' […]. You have the option and choice to delete all the information

[…] but with Google Plus they haven't let you know, they're now close to

being closed down, and I know why 'cos Q [Anonymous] is very close to

getting behind it and they don't want that, so they're shutting down.

Interviewer: is your info safe online?

It's not safe no […]. I have a very low carbon footprint and I want a low

[online] self-footprint too […]. I'm not gonna let them allow my location, no.

[…There is a] new thing coming out for Amazon where they can deliver your

parcel to the back of your car, I'm not having that, they want your location

[…]. You're just Big Brother, you're all being watched.

Sheila, age 45, 2018

Sheila and Daniel found solutions to these security fears by avoiding sharing certain

personal information online or by switching off specific settings. However, where in

some instances total avoidance *was* possible, on other occasions participants felt

this approach was not feasible. For instance, numerous participants became

increasingly suspicious of Facebook, where they were uncertain of how secure their

data was and often showed a general mistrust towards the brand. Robert directly

related these concerns to the Cambridge Analytica scandal – highly covered in the

UK news in 2018 – where he became increasingly suspicious over how his data was used by Facebook:

> The Facebook business model essentially is that weirdly the customer is also the product, so you're using it and you sort of see Facebook as a service, but the fact so many people are using it makes your service useful to Facebook. There's mindless data they can sell to advertisers or companies like Cambridge Analytica […] they basically just have big graphs with demographics […]. The political aspect to it when they can see this demographic is connected to this element of political debate so we can target them […]. There is something quite sinister about using data in that way.
>
> **Robert, age 22, 2018**

Robert's fears derived from the more wide scale concerns covered in the press, but also from fears generated from much more personal experiences. For instance, he noted suspicions that his devices were recording his conversations and generating advertisements in response to what he had said:

> A few days ago [I] was here with [my housemate], he was on his phone showing me posters he wanted for his room, one was 'The Big Wave'. We were talking about it and looking on his phone, then I was on Facebook – on my Facebook on my tablet – and an advert came up for it […]. I don't know if it's 'cos the phone was listening in or on the same Wi-Fi, but it was odd […].

It does set off some advertising alarm bells […]. I don't think it matters too much but has potential to be a very slippery slope.

Robert, age 22, 2018

These concerns over how the companies who developed certain devices and SM were using personal data highlighted how a higher level of media literacy (when compared to levels shown by other members of the sample, such as Dean) could in fact exacerbate fears, rather than minimise them. Knowledge in these instances was often not a comfort: in fact it appeared that the more these participants learnt about potential dangers – even when this included potential solutions – the more fearful they became. This lead to a general mistrust of SM and especially Facebook, where fears grew as Facebook was increasingly accused in the news of misusing data. For instance, while above Sheila presented a seemingly simple response to bypassing a number of security issues online (i.e. when in doubt, avoid), she was less certain about how to handle her fears regarding Facebook:

Interviewer: do you trust Facebook with your information?

No, [I've] got a false [phone] number on it […]. Only problem with it is my photos, I have photos on there [as] private, you can put as 'for you only', so only me can see, but it does worry me that if it's hacked – I don't want people to see my family [...]. I'm uploading onto this website thinking they might be safe if my phone goes wrong, but then I'm thinking 'well maybe it's not safe, let's put it on a drive', but then that's Google, so I don't know.

Sheila, age 45, 2018

This uncertainty shown by some participants often seemed to be greatly connected to their desire to maintain relationships and online networks. For Sheila, her desire to preserve photos of herself and loved ones in an online space caused her a dilemma. Trying to find a solution to fears over data breaches on Facebook was evidently much more complicated than simply avoiding Alexa, as some felt they *could not* stop using Facebook due to the online relationships that endured via the site. This was evidenced by Daniel claiming that he would like to stop using Facebook because of these concerns, but felt he could not as this could damage his friendship network:

> I'd really like to delete my Facebook account, partly 'cos I don't use it, partly
> because there are clearly risks with them holding your information […] and
> partly to make a point as well. But there have been one or two occasions […]
> where I need to get in contact with somebody and I don't have any of their
> details, and I know I can get them on Facebook where I wouldn't be able to
> otherwise.   **Daniel, age 35, 2018**

Daniel felt cornered into a situation where his data may not be secure because of his want to maintain certain relationships (these conflicting emotions over Facebook were examined in more detail in Chapter 4).

It was evident that fears over security were complicated and difficult to quickly resolve. On the one hand, a lack of awareness or understanding regarding security

risks could temporarily lead to an 'ignorance is bliss' approach, which could evidently rapidly cause serious safety issues, where Dean's lack of suspicions put him in a vulnerable position. As a result he became deeply fearful, where rather than seek education he simply lowered his usage of CMC and the internet in general, hampering his development of literacy skills.

On the other hand, heightened literacy and knowledge did not appease fears. The participants who claimed to be aware of the dangers online continued to feel concerned. Therefore, while they created their own strategies for mitigating these problems there was still a general sense of uncertainty. These participants struggled to know what they could do to ensure their safety, which in itself caused anxiety. This was exacerbated when they felt that they were willingly putting themselves in a potentially unsafe situation, most exemplified by their continued use of Facebook despite their fears of security and data breaches. This was attributed to their wish to maintain their online presence and identity, as well as the sense that they *needed* to keep Facebook in order to maintain relationships.

Thus, while fears over security online were very evident, this sample struggled to come to a solution they were comfortable with. Despite their attempts to protect themselves and loved ones, by the end of the study period there was a distinct sense of uncertainty and frustration over how to be secure online, and often this was actually exacerbated by the desire to protect relationships. In this sense, the endeavour to maintain online relationships arguably played a pivotal role in the participants feeling a prolonged fear of security risks.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated that the key panics surrounding the use of digital technology and the internet are complicated and nuanced, where responses to each incident vary greatly. While the fear discourses surrounding the use of CMC (regarding child wellbeing, own wellbeing, addiction and security) may have been exaggerated or oversimplified, there is evidence that the panics discussed by this sample were considered relatable, based on some foundations evident in their lives. Thus, while moral panics can indeed stir up unsubstantiated fears, it is problematic to reject or belittle them altogether.

Additionally, rather than a prevalent moral panic being absorbed by one audience with one shared concern, this chapter found that different moral panics can impact on different people in various manners. Participants were much more likely to relate, listen and react to a panic that they felt connected to, such as Mary fearing for her security online after hearing stories about the elderly being susceptible to scams, and Denise fearing for her daughters' online safety following news coverage on the dangers young girls face online. This was most evidenced by Dean, who exemplified how fears that have been in place for a number of years – and have been increasingly enflamed by the culture of fear surrounding said uncertainties – could eventually lead to drastic action being taken to overcome said fears and protect loved ones.

When these participants found themselves relating to or at the centre of a moral panic, they often changed their behaviour in order to protect themselves and loved ones online, indicating that relatability is key in predicting the extent to which the moral panics may shape outlooks and responses to fears. Conversely, this tendency to respond to relatable panics meant that some participants rejected or ignored stories that they felt were not pertinent to them. For example, Dean claimed to have not heard of the GDPR change in 2018 as he did not access his emails, and Chloe felt unconcerned by narratives of fear regarding 'addicted' behaviour with CMC and mobile phones as she deemed her behaviour to be perfectly normal for people her age. This tendency to engage with narratives that reflected personal experiences, or to dismiss those that did not, meant that these individuals were at risk of constructing their own echo chamber based on the fears that they related to, as they continually engaged with stories that they felt spoke to them personally.

Both of these responses have literacy implications, as they imply that people may be tuning into or out of certain debates, depending on how relevant they consider them to be to their lives. On the one hand, this implies that some people could be left with a biased and hyperbolic perception of how dangerous CMC may be, leading to avoidance of services that could in fact be beneficial to them. On the other hand, some could be dismissing vital opportunities to learn about potential risks and secure themselves online, as they determined certain concerns as irrelevant to their lives (in turn potentially endangering themselves online). By cherry-picking which dangers they considered relevant and which were not, there was a risk that participants were not gaining a cohesive image of the risks and

opportunities the internet and CMC may continue to present, and in turn they were

hampering the extent to which they could continue to build a cohesive level of

literacy online.

Furthermore, while moral panic rhetoric aims to present a 'folk devil' deviant as

'other' and as the cause of social problems, this chapter showed that many people

within the sample were embodying the 'folk devil' figure themselves. Some

participants reported use of CMC that exemplified the behaviour condemned by

moral panic discourses. Some participants *did* think there was such a thing as phone

addiction – because they themselves were 'addicts'; some *did* believe that people

faked identities online, because they were deceitful online themselves; and some

were threatened by security risks, but continued to integrate the perceived risky

platforms or devices into their lives. While the emphasis on deviant 'folk devils' in

moral panic discourses tends to perpetuate an 'us' vs. 'them' dichotomy – between

those at risk and those creating the risks – it was evident that this was a much more

nuanced issue, where many participants trod the line between potential victim and

potential 'folk devil'.

As with the rest of the thesis, age and life stage once again appeared to be a

considerable contributing factor here. While many participants across the age

groups shared fears or assumed the roles of 'folk devils', there was a tendency for

the older members of the sample to be more likely to disapprove of or worry about

the usage habits of younger people. This could be attributed to the widespread fear

surrounding young vulnerable people online, often propelled in moral panics

(Cassell & Cramer, 2008; boyd et al, 2011). However, previous chapters in this thesis have shown that the older participants often felt isolated from CMC use, where they lacked understanding of the wider uses of the internet and CMC. Thus, by having limited experience with it, it is unsurprising they then became fearful of it. Their lack of experience or understanding of the behaviour they feared – combined with their exposure to discourses of fear surrounding said behaviour – could have motivated a one-sided, biased and unsubstantiated stance reiterating the belief that the internet was a dangerous place. This was evidenced by Donald, who's fears of the internet and CMC seemed to decrease after he increased his usage, thus gaining a deeper understanding of the benefits of CMC and a scepticism of exaggerated stories marketed by news sources.

Despite the genuine response to fears and uncertainties, these participants still continued to use CMC as was befitting for their needs. These needs often revolved around their wish to maintain relationships. It was apparent that much of the participants' behaviour could not simply be dismissed as deviant and wrong, but instead a means of furthering their relationships. Some faked identities online to advance online encounters and build new relationships in a manner they could not before (even if this dishonesty caused later difficulties, as was the case with Elizabeth). Many of the participants claimed to become the 'phone addicts' so besmirched by the press and academics, but only so that they felt they could effectively partake in their relationships via CMC. Some participants knowingly faced the security breaches they feared in order to be able to maintain relationships on sites they disliked, such as Robert and Daniel continuing to use

Facebook despite their apprehensions. Thus, while moral panics did indeed shape

fears and at times drive members of the sample to limit or alter their use of the

internet or CMC, their desire to continue and allow relationships to thrive often

surpassed their fears.

This chapter has found that while the concept, root and solution for moral panics is

incredibly complicated, the reasons why participants chose to engage with or

bypass them was relatively straight-forward. The majority of this sample (Mary and

Cathy aside) pushed through their concerns and fears in order to ensure that they

could maintain relationships with others. Even when this meant adapting,

increasing or limiting their use of CMC, they did so in order to ensure that they

could keep in touch with others and sustain relationships.

Conclusion and future research implications

Introduction

This thesis has considered the connection between relationships and the use of computer mediated communication (CMC) between 2005-2018 by analysing Ofcom's longitudinal data. It has shown that 2005-2018 was an era of dramatic technological and social change. It was a time filled with development and opportunities, where participants began to renegotiate how they utilised technology throughout their daily routine in order to engage with relationships in new and unexpected ways. During this time the UK saw ease of access to the internet grow as the in-home connections available developed from dial up to broadband to Wi-Fi. Numerous platforms for communication became popular during this time, including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Skype and WhatsApp. Mobile technology was increasingly optimised to facilitate on-the-go use, drastically altering how and where people used the internet and communicated with one another.

While the concept of CMC use and relationships has been studied previously (boyd, 2004, 2006, 2007; Rosen, 2007; Boellstorff, 2008; Turkle, 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Chambers, 2013, 2017; Garde-Hansen & Gorton, 2013; Baym, 2015; Miller 2016; Miller et al, 2016; Brown et al, 2020), this research offered a more extensive insight into the connection between an array of relationships, the forms of CMC used and the media literacy implications of said use than has previously been

attained. By examining this 14-year period longitudinally it was possible to gain a rare insight into how the same people responded to technological and social changes that impacted both the society they lived in and their everyday interactions and behaviours.

One consistent theme that ran throughout this research was how fundamental relationships were to these participants, shaping their emotional wellbeing and motivating their everyday actions. Regardless of wider events or developments, these participants consistently rooted their experiences in their personal relationships and their connections with others. This was further evidenced by the nature of this methodology and Ofcom's initial research aims: these interviews were not conducted with the intention of examining personal relationships, however they consistently remained integral in the discussion year after year. Relationships were constant, but disruptive. They lined everyday life but had the power to throw routines into disarray as they fluctuated and altered.

As time went on the use of CMC became intrinsic in everyday life, becoming an integral tool used in the maintenance of relationships. Its role moved from a novelty form of communication that required a degree of work and commitment to enact (via the use of desktop computers, wired internet connections and basic mobile phones) to a constant feature in daily – often hourly – activities. For some it was a necessary evil; for others it was welcomed and considered essential. By the end of the study all participants – regardless of their apprehensions or resistance –

had experience with using CMC and had adopted new technology that allowed them to communicate with others online.

This thesis examined relationships and CMC use across three thematic chapters. It began by considering the role of relationships in access to, uptake of and use of CMC and facilitating technology, exploring the extent to which they drove, encouraged or coerced loved ones into using new forms of communication to stay in touch. It considered how the AML participants managed their different personal networks online, examining some of the issues they encountered online and how they negotiated different platforms in order to overcome these problems. It was evident that participants were creating/responding to a new kind of etiquette and social expectation regarding the use of CMC, and understanding this was pivotal in order to successfully maintain relationships online. This thesis then identified the fears that participants felt regarding the use of CMC, examining where and how they were generated. It found that participants responded to narratives that they related to or that could negatively impact on their relationships, developing fears that reflected their personal priorities and working to overcome them.

Four overarching findings were evident throughout these chapters, emerging across each exploration and connecting the different aspects of relationships and CMC use presented here. Each of these findings has repercussions for current understandings of the use of CMC and debates on media literacy, creating an opportunity for wider discussion on how literacy should be presented and promoted as CMC continues to be integral to everyday life. I will consider and

summarise these recurring themes here, drawing together the key findings from this exploration into CMC use and relationships between 2005-2018. From this I identify areas that would benefit from further research in the future.

Key finding 1: There is a complex socio-cultural context behind technological adoption

The longitudinal aspect of this exploration allowed for an extensive insight into how an individual engaged with a form of CMC or technology over a number of years, and how and why their use may have altered as their personal contexts also shifted. The reported behaviour with platforms and devices was often connected with other matters that may be occurring in participants' lives, beyond purely technological developments. For many, personal cultural, social, and financial changes also shaped their perceptions of technology. By building an understanding of each participants' personal contexts and everyday lives – rather than simply using this data to seek overarching similarities and differences across the sample – it was possible to obtain a rare insight into how numerous personal experiences shape use and engagement.

This research highlighted how difficult – and limiting – it is to pinpoint one particular behaviour and attribute it to one cause. Instead, it illustrates the need to consider the multiple contextual factors that could motivate an attitude or behaviour that may have been developing for a number of years, as nothing stands

in isolation. An experience with one piece of technology shapes experiences with the next piece of technology (also noted in Hsieh, 2012; Miller et al, 2016; Parks, 2017; Brown et al, 2020). One positive uptake process meant participants approached the next with a more optimistic outlook, and vice versa. One relationship change affected other relationships, both positively and negatively. Crucially, each of these experiences impacts on other experiences: this research has shown that it is limiting to *only* consider CMC use in one period of time; to *only* consider one type of relationship; to *only* examine responses to one wider socio-cultural event. By considering how each of these relates to and shapes the next, I have been able to garner a cohesive understanding of how relationships and CMC use have shaped each other during a time of significant technological development. This is evident in the next three key findings.

Key finding 2: Different life stages provoke varied learning opportunities, impacting on usage, attitudes and literacy

There is a tendency in academia to associate certain emotional responses regarding CMC to specific age groups. For example young people are often associated with addiction and fear of missing out (Lanier, 2010; Turkle, 2011), and older people are typically associated with isolation and loneliness (Umemuro & Shirokane, 2003; Shapira et al, 2005; Temple & Gavillet, 2008; Blažun et al, 2012; Quan-Haase et al, 2018). There were also age-associated themes evident throughout this thesis. The youngest members of the sample were the most likely to claim to be 'addicted' to technology, were the most excited about seeking new forms of CMC, and were the

participants most likely to claim that CMC played an integral role in their lives. In comparison, the oldest members of the sample were the most resistant or apprehensive regarding technological change, using CMC on a much more limited and focused basis and not generally seeing it as *integral* to their daily lives.

However, it was apparent throughout this research that life stage often had a greater role than age in shaping how these individuals felt. The importance of considering life stage has been noted in previous academic debates (Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Frolova, 2016b; Benvenuti et al, 2020), however this thesis was able to further examine how the different types of relationships associated with varied life stages shaped participants' technological needs and opportunities.

For instance, those participants undergoing a stage of life that required more activities and forms of socialising every day had very different experiences to those who were at a quieter, slower paced stage of their life. While the younger participants were the most concerned about missing out on social occurrences online, this was typically motivated by their movement through school years, college or university. They discussed being part of multiple different groups and networks of friends, which were volatile and constantly fluctuating as they rapidly moved between school years, social clubs, friendship groups or part-time jobs. As such, they prioritised constant access to devices and CMC in order to be able to continually juggle these networks in an efficient manner. The movement through the education system and into the job market meant that these participants went

through rapid periods of change and were constantly altering their day-to-day routines, with technology and CMC having an integral role in these changes.

Conversely, a fear of isolation and exclusion could be connected to age, as it was the older participants who most often expressed these fears. However, this concern is once again more associated with life stage. These fears were often most apparent in the retired members of the sample, who argued that they no longer had a clear incentive (in the form of professional relationships or shifting social groups) driving them towards access or ownership. It was evident throughout this research that work played a significant role in motivating access to and the adoption of CMC and facilitating devices. Being employed – especially in a workplace that explicitly required device ownership and CMC use – could be considered a fundamental life stage. Those who were not under employment were more likely to discuss feeling a sense of isolation and a fear of being left behind. The majority of people not working in this sample were those who were beyond retirement age, offering an explanation as to why there is an ongoing academic association often made between age, isolation and literacy.

Acknowledging the significance of life stage (rather than simply age) is vital for future media literacy work. It implies that anyone who is experiencing a time of isolation from formal or informal learning opportunities (such as those who are not in education, a workplace that encourages CMC use or device uptake, or who live alone) could be at risk of not having proper access opportunities to build knowledge with CMC and facilitating technology. This is an especially pertinent

concern at the time of writing this chapter, as the spread of COVID-19 led to an era

of uncertainty and numerous lockdowns (Cleland, 2020; Fuchs, 2020). Many

workers were furloughed (CIPD, 2020) or even made redundant. Those who kept

their jobs but were asked to work from home may have struggled to transform

their homes into workspaces or access the technology they needed. Young people

may have lost the familiar interactions with their peers from education or

workplaces that were shown to be so pivotal in this thesis in providing learning

incentives and opportunities. By forcing the country into lockdown (however

temporary), the COVID-19 outbreak also forced a suspension of life stage shifts and

changes that people so evidently need to motivate technological use and literacy.

Key finding 3: People will strive to overcome their personal fears, apprehensions

and outright dislike of CMC in order to maintain relationships

During this time participants discussed feeling numerous concerns regarding the

use of CMC and the impact it may have on their loved ones, such as fears around

wellbeing and abuse online, fears of addiction and fears regarding online security.

Despite these concerns, this research found that time and time again participants

would go against their fears and personal opinions to prioritise maintaining

relationships. Some would adopt and use CMC platforms that they were

apprehensive about in order to keep in contact with their networks online. Others

would provide loved ones with devices even if they felt they were 'bad' for them, in

order to ensure that relationships could be sustained over CMC. Many participants

renegotiated the boundaries within their family household, establishing new rules and norms around the adoption of technology and use of CMC. While relationships were often the cause of fears, they were also the reason people would strive to overcome them. The finding that relationships are pivotal drivers of CMC uptake and use – despite considerable apprehensions and doubts – is essential for future media literacy research as it highlights how complex and non-linear the connection between attitudes and use can be. This leads on to the final key finding, which considers the impact of this study on future comprehensions of literacy.

Key finding 4: Existing notions of media literacy need updating to incorporate the role of relationships and new uses of CMC

Current academic notions of media literacy are generally concerned with the ability to access, use, understand and create with a range of media (Hobbs, 1998; Livingstone, 2004; Parry et al, 2017; Ofcom, 2020a). However, the findings of this research challenge these existing understandings of media literacy by illustrating that they may be outdated and limited, failing to incorporate new behaviours or account for nuances within each 'stage' of obtaining literacy.

Furthermore, there is limited research that explicitly connects relationships to literacy. While scholars have implied that there are associations between relationships and the development of online skills (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Notley, 2009; Tsatsou, 2011; Hsieh, 2012; Livingstone & Byrne, 2018), this research has

shown that there is an overt connection between relationships and literacy, where one can have considerable impacts on the other. As online literacy is considered an increasingly essential skill, the findings from this research add considerably to the field in a number of ways.

Firstly, while scholars often present access, ownership and use together, with 'access' typically used as the overarching term (Umemuro & Shirokane, 2003; Shapira et al, 2005; Temple & Gavillet, 2008; Blažun et al, 2012), each of these are in actuality distinctly different processes. This research highlighted that 'access' alone is not enough: the experiences had during the uptake process also play a key role in motivating attitudes and manner of use, but this process has thus far been under-researched (or even outright bypassed) in academic studies on this topic. Acknowledging the uptake process allows for crucial context into how and why people may approach their usage, as the confidence and interest generated during the uptake process has been shown here to shape their ongoing approach to said technology or platforms. Furthermore, the role of relationships in uptake is key: if a loved one was a motivator behind uptake this will again shape use and attitudes (e.g. if a family member encouraged uptake of a smartphone to ensure more communication via CMC, participants often then committed to learning how to use CMC relevant to that relationship).

Future literacy research needs to consider access, uptake and ownership as separate motivators of use, accounting for the differences between those who may have access to technology and platforms but do not use them; those who may use

CMC but do not possess their own devices; or those who may own devices but have limited access opportunities. By again acknowledging the role of personal contexts in motivating these different scenarios, it will be possible for regulators and educators to identify and assist those who need support with being able to access, own *and* use CMC and facilitating devices.

Secondly, it is evident that self-reported confidence and self-efficacy does not always reflect genuine skill and knowledge with media (Hatlevik et al, 2018). This research has illustrated that participants' 'understandings' of media were often based on their own experiences and their own points of comparisons, thus were disparate and highly subjective. Even when considering those participants who were regularly accessing and using the internet and CMC it was evident that they were doing so in very different manners: no two people were 'using' these services in exactly the same manner, and their understandings of them varied greatly. These diverse uses meant that their experiences with and 'understanding' of CMC and the internet shaped their perception of their own literacy, and they contextualised their experiences in comparison to those around them.

As such, there were diverse claims of literacy across the sample that did not necessarily correspond to actual knowledge or ability: Cathy considered herself a capable and knowledgeable user because she compared herself to her retired friends, despite being one of the more infrequent and limited users of CMC and facilitating technology in the sample. Conversely, Daniel – one of the arguably more literate participants – often discussed the limits of his knowledge as he also

compared himself to his friends and their understanding of media. Once again, knowing the personal contexts and relationships of participants here was essential. Participants made comparisons between themselves and those around them, which caused them to consider their own skillset through the lens of their friends or family. Thus, 'understanding' is a useful but currently incomplete framework through which to examine how people develop and consider their own online skills, as this is deeply embedded in each person's contextual situation.

Finally, it has been argued by scholars that the literacy element 'create' is often associated with and leads on to 'communicating' (Buckingham, 2000; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Park, 2012; Dingli & Seychell, 2015). This aspect of literacy became increasingly essential in how the AML participants maintained relationships over the research period. As they began to engage with numerous different platforms, they created and shared different content for a range of online audiences. They developed different expectations for behaviour across various platforms based on their affordances (i.e. how public the platform was; how permanent the footprint was; who the audiences were; and what content was shared). The rapid development of CMC meant participants had to quickly and frequently renegotiate how they thought about and conducted their relationships, establishing 'rules' and norms as they went. Much of this was unofficial, but failure to understand these new expectations and etiquettes could lead to isolation and exclusion. As many of these skills were learnt informally from loved ones, there was uncertainty and inconsistency over how platforms should be approached for different personal networks. While WhatsApp offered a more private, informal and

intimate means through which to develop CMC literacy and build confidence

(Miller, 2016; Chambers, 2017), those who wished to venture onto other CMC

platforms often struggled with the varied norms of privacy and sharing etiquette.

Thus, participants called for education on the skills needed to build CMC literacy

(i.e. the ability to understand when, where and how to effectively communicate

and share content via a range of CMC with other people) so that they could

'formally' learn and develop a more universal understanding of how different

platforms could be used. As the use of CMC becomes increasingly essential in

everyday life (Chambers, 2013; Baym, 2015; Meikle, 2016; Miller, 2016; Fuchs,

2020), failure to build CMC literacy could lead to rejection and isolation from an

increasingly essential form of socialisation, jeopardising relationships. As such, it is

imperative that CMC literacy is considered as a distinct, vital form of literacy that

should be acknowledged alongside existing media literacy discourses, and that

educators and policy makers should consider incorporating it into media literacy

education initiatives.

Conclusion

This thesis presented the crucial role relationships play in shaping every 'stage' of

media literacy, and showed how vital it is that both academics and policy makers

consider the importance of relationships when examining how and why individuals

develop (or lose) media literacy skills when using CMC. While existing academic

debates have noted the role relationships play in aiding the uptake of technology

(Frolova, 2016a; Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; Bragg, 2018) and the development of online skills (Notley, 2009; Park, 2012), this is the first time there has been such an extensive exploration into the role of numerous relationships in shaping all aspects of media literacy, and an explicit articulation of the connection between media literacy and relationships.

This thesis has illustrated that relationships play a crucial role *throughout* the development of media literacy. For instance, it shows that relationships are fundamental in motivating initial access opportunities, and both formal and informal relationships often encourage or enforce the uptake of certain devices or CMC platforms. Relationships are also vital in shaping how individuals perceive their own levels of 'understanding', as they build their perception of their own self-efficacy and capabilities by comparing themselves to their peers. Finally, relationships are a motivating force behind the development of CMC literacy, a new and vital form of literacy that connects to but extends the 'create and communicate' aspect of existing media literacy definitions (Livingstone, 2004; Parry et al, 2017; Ofcom, 2020a). Recognising and encouraging the development of this new form of literacy is more crucial now than ever before, as the disruption caused by Covid-19 forces many to engage with CMC in unfamiliar and challenging ways.

Future research implications

This thesis has examined the extent to which relationships were pivotal in the access to, uptake of and continued use (or rejection) of different forms of CMC

between 2005-2018. It has shown that relationships are essential in the development of literacy skills (both with regards to the internet and CMC specifically), and that people who are not part of these relationships can continually struggle. This has implications for how media literacy and CMC use should be researched in the future, where relationships should be positioned as key drivers of literacy. Furthermore, CMC literacy should be acknowledged as a growing and increasingly essential skill that requires the consideration of policy makers and inclusion in media literacy programmes from educators. This will help users understand how they can access and utilise different platforms online to communicate.

The key findings outlined here not only highlight the need to reconsider media literacy discussions, but are also pertinent when reconsidering widely referenced, disputed and adapted scholarly debates in media studies, such as the uses and gratification approach to media audiences (Katz et al, 1973; Ruddock, 2007; Thornham et al, 2009; Dolan et al, 2016; Rathnayake & Winter, 2018; Benvenuti et al, 2020). While this approach considers how media audiences use various media in a way that meets their own personal needs (Rathnayake & Winter, 2018), some scholars have argued that it fails to consider the social contexts that people exist within, thus attributing all agency to the user and not acknowledging that they may be confined by their social status, groups and/ or background (Katz et al, 1973; Ruddock, 2007; Parks, 2017). The importance of acknowledging cultural contexts is further substantiated when considering Chamber's (2017) conclusion that cultural norms, such as the varied attitudes regarding private and public behaviour across

different countries, play a vital role in motivating how people navigate different platforms (see also Miller, 2016; Miller et al, 2016). The longitudinal approach adopted in this thesis and my conclusions drawn in this chapter allow for this concern to be addressed, as I considered the wider experiences and personal/ cultural contexts participants existed within.

However, there is a need for further research to examine the manner in which people from different backgrounds develop CMC literacy and in turn navigate the different affordances of each platform. Although this sample did cover a broad cross section of the UK, it was not possible to comprehensively examine those from certain different demographic groups within the confines of this study. While gender disparities were discussed in this thesis (such as when exploring parental tendencies to assume daughters' were more vulnerable online in Chapter 5), they were not the focus of this research. As it was apparent that assumptions about gender differences can shape access and education opportunities, it would be beneficial to study these gender disparities in more detail in future research on CMC use, literacy and relationships. It is also crucial to further examine how people from various ethnically diverse, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds – as well as people beyond the UK – may also use CMC to meet their social needs, and how they may develop the necessary literacy skills to be able to communicate in this manner.

Finally, while this thesis focuses on 2005-2018, recent events show how important the study of this extended period is in providing a context for how people may be

experiencing the unprecedented outbreak of COVID-19 and its impact on the UK (and the rest of the world). It is evident that the disruption caused by COVID-19 will drastically change the manner in which people use CMC. Not only has the lockdown caused people to turn to CMC in order to engage with distant loved ones (see Ofcom, 2020d), but it has also made it near-essential to perform everyday tasks online. While the UK was moving gradually towards a way of life where online communication, daily activities and civic engagement were increasingly essential, events during 2020 have sped up this process, potentially leaving a wealth of people uncertain and isolated. While some may flourish during this time as they stay at home with family members who may encourage them to develop knowledge and skills, others may flounder, separated from relationships that may have been their main source of education.

Ofcom has announced a prioritisation of infrastructural consistency during this time, where they will focus on ensuring availability of strong internet connectivity and mobile signal (Ofcom, 2020e). However, I predict that this era of lockdowns will highlight a new wave of the so-called digital divide, illustrating a new gap between those that have access to relationships that can help with the use of CMC, and those who do not. Thus it is essential that future research considers the key findings from this thesis regarding the role of relationships when examining media literacy and the constantly changing use of CMC. This thesis has uncovered how essential relationships were in driving the use of CMC between 2005-2018, and has provided a context for why the events of 2020 may drastically alter relationships, CMC use and media literacy in the future.

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<u>Appendices</u>

Appendix 1 – Discussion guide used for stakeholder interviews

This discussion guide provided a structure to the interviews with Adults' Media Lives Stakeholders Alison Preston and Mark Ellis. It was adapted for each stakeholder based on their expertise and role on the AML project.

<u>Ofcom and Agency interviews: discussion guide</u>
Introductions: 5 mins
Ensure interviewee has had a chance to read the participation sheet, sign the consent form and ask any questions.

Please begin by telling me a bit about yourself:
- Name (if permission given)
- Career:
    o How would you like me to refer to you as for the purpose of this research?
    o How long have you worked there?
    o What first interested you in this job (i.e. about market research/ insight/ policy, where relevant)?

Role on the Adults' Media Lives project

- *Please tell me a bit more about your connection to Adults' Media Lives:*
    o How long have you worked on this project?
    o When did you first come to it?
        ▪ E.g. when it started, halfway through, only in recent years
    o Why did you first start working on this project?
        ▪ If key in its orchestration:
            • Why did you want to start AML?
            • Has your role changed on this project over time? In what way? How do you feel about this?

Adults' Media Lives: early days – set up and recruitment:
- Can you tell me more about how the study worked in 'early days'? (where relevant)
    o What was the purpose of the study? Main aims and objectives?
    o What kind of study was it initially methodologically?
        ▪ E.g. always planned to be longitudinal, one-off, etc?
    o How did you recruit for the study?
        ▪ What were your priorities when it came to recruitment?

- o What were the specifications for participants when you started?
  - ▪ How has this changed over time?
  - ▪ Was an explicit SEG included for them? If not, how is this measured?
- What were your favourite things about the study in the early years? Why?
  - o What were your least favourite things? Why?
  - o What did you learn from early years?
  - o How did this shape subsequent stages of the study?

Adults' Media Lives today
- How do you feel about the study today?
- Did you expect it to be the way it is today? Why/ why not? Positive or negative?
  - o Probe: have gone on for so long
  - o Probe: include the participants it does now
  - o Probe: have the types of discussions now
  - o Probe: the types of media consumed now
- How is your relationship with the participants?
  - o What are the pros to being in contact with the same participants over such a long period?
  - o What are the cons to being in contact with the same participants over such a long period?
- Do you ever feel that the participants prepare for the interviews in any way, or that they have altered their behaviours/ outlooks as a result of the study?
  - o E.g. do you think partaking in the study impacts on their literacy levels at all?
  - o How may this affect the outcome of the results?
  - o How do you avoid this happening?
- Re my PhD, do you have any thoughts on the methodology I'm using (briefly recap on my methodology for them)
  - o Probe: how do you feel about me analysing data from a project I was not initially involved in?
    - ▪ What are the benefits of my approach?
    - ▪ What – if any – are the downsides of my approach?

Adults' Media Lives future
- What do you think the future of Adults' Media Lives will be?
  - o Probe: positives/ negatives
- Do you have any concerns for the future of the study?
- What are you particularly excited about?

General conclusions
- What's the most interesting thing to have come out of Adults' Media Lives?

- o Personally for you
- o On a broader scale, regarding e.g. your perception of research, media literacy etc.
- What has this study taught you about media?
- What has this study taught you about qualitative/ longitudinal methodologies?
- What has this study taught you about engaging with the same participants?

- Has anything surprised you about the Adults' Media Lives study (considering each of the above)?

- Are there any final points you want to make about Adults' Media Lives?

Thank and close

Appendix 2 – Participant ages each year they were in the study

Table showing participant ages (estimated based on confirmed ages in 2018 – may vary slightly depending on interview date vs. actual birthdays).

	Year													
	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14	'15	'16	'17	'18
	Age													
Chloe	N/A – not in study									14	15	16	17	18
Tim									15	16	17	18	19	20
Robert										18	19	20	21	22
Jenny				16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Dean		17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
Julia		18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
Daniel	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35
Dai		27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39
Denise	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41
Mick	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44
Sheila	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45
Sally	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52
Elizabeth		45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	57
Peter				47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	57
Donald		52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	64
Cathy				64	65	66	67	68	69	70	71	72	73	74
Eleanor	69	70	71	72	73	74	75	76	77	78	79	80		
Mary	72	73	74	75	76	77	78	79	80	81	82	83	84	85

Appendix 3 – Parents in the AML sample and the estimated ages of their child(ren)

Table illustrating the AML parents and grandparents and their child (ren)'s approximate ages. Please note this was captured as accurately as possible, however clear ages of the participants' children were not established every year. Therefore I based their ages and age ranges on discussion from participants across their time in the study. This was especially the case for the participants who had adult children, as they rarely specified their ages.

Parent	Number of children	Year born	Age of child(ren) in 2018
Parents of young children			
Sally	Two: one son and one daughter	Before the study: daughter aged 8; son aged 17 when she entered the study	Daughter aged 21; son aged 30
Sheila	Two sons	Before the study: aged 10 and 7 when she entered the study	23 and 20 years old
Mick	Two: one son and one daughter	Before the study: they were both under the age of 5 when he entered the study	'Son in year 9; daughter in year 8' in 2016, so in 2018 son = approx. 15/16 years old; daughter = approx. 14/15
Denise	One daughter	2009	Approx. 9 years old
Dai	Two: one son and one daughter	Son = 2011 Daughter = 2013/ 2014 (wife was pregnant with daughter during 2013 fieldwork)	Son = 7 years old; daughter = 5 years old
Dean	One daughter	Born during the study in 2011	7 years old
Parents with adult children and grandchildren			
Peter	Two adult children – girl and boy. Two grandchildren (born during the study period)		
Donald	Two adult sons. No grandchildren		
Cathy	One adult child; two grandchildren		
Eleanor	One adult child		
Mary	Three adult children, multiple grandchildren, two great-grandchildren (born during the study period)		