Insights into young people's literacy, critical digital literacy, online communication and wellbeing: summary report

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Online environments are an integral part of the lives of many young people. Surveys indicate that almost half of 10 to 15-year-olds in England and Wales spend three or more hours online on a typical school day (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2021). Popular online activities include social media and video game playing; in 2020, almost 9 in 10 (87%) of 12 to 15-year-olds said they use social media sites, and the same proportion of this age group say they play video games, for an average of 1 hour and 28 minutes at a time (Ofcom, 2021).

Concern about the negative impact of the digital world on young people has increased in recent years (see, e.g., Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS], 2021; United Nations, 2021). A growing body of research explores aspects of young people's online lives and mental wellbeing (see, e.g., Kandola et al., 2021, Kelly et al., 2018, Orben & Przybylski, 2019). To date, however, fewer studies have examined the relationship between literacy and critical digital literacy engagement and wellbeing.

This report presents findings from a survey exploring young people's attitudes and behaviours when navigating online environments. The survey's design was informed by a review of the literature, focus group discussions with young people, and interviews with academic and industry experts, and it reached 7,494 young people aged 11 to 16 in late 2021. Findings indicate that high literacy engagement is associated with better critical digital literacy attitudes and behaviours. In turn, compared with young people with low critical digital literacy engagement, nearly three times as many young people with high critical digital literacy had high mental wellbeing (11.6% vs 30.2%).

Such findings suggest that young people with low literacy engagement are at risk of missing out in the digital age, and that supporting young people to develop confident, critical approaches to reading, writing and communicating both on and offline may have the potential to support wellbeing. This is likely to be of growing importance as our dependence on digital forms of communication increases. We would like to thank The Sir Halley Stewart Trust for their support for this project, which we believe is particularly timely in helping support effective digital engagement alongside the changes in regulation anticipated in the Online Safety Bill.

Key findings

Many young people are motivated to read online as content matches their interests, but online reading also inspires wider reading. Although the percentage of young people writing fiction is relatively equal on paper and on screen, few feel confident about posting their writing online.

- Most of the 11- to 16-year-olds responding to the survey used digital devices regularly, most often for entertainment (such as playing video games). **8 in 10** (80.7%) said they used devices for this at least daily, and **7 in 10** (69.9%) used image, video or text-based social media.
- **More than half** (54.2%) of respondents said they found more things to read that related to their interests online. However, online activities could also inspire wider reading, with **3 in 5** (59.3%) young people saying that they found inspiration for things they would like to read online.
- Around **1 in 5** young people said they write short stories or fiction outside school daily, whether in print (21.4%) or on screen (19.0%). However, fewer than **3 in 10** (28.6%) young people said they felt confident posting something they had written online, and just 5.7% posted blogs or stories online in a typical day.

Most young people feel they know how to check online information, but only half take time to consider news stories. However, many feel that reading online can help inform and expand their thinking.

- **2 in 3** (66.6%) young people are confident that they know how to check if information they find online is true. However, while **3 in 5** (59.2%) young people said they would not share a news story if they weren't sure it was true, only **1 in 2** (52.5%) would take the time to think about whether news stories were true or not.
- **3 in 5** (59.0%) young people agreed that seeing other people's points of view online helped them to form their own opinion on different topics, and **more than half** (52.1%) said they used the internet to talk to people from places or backgrounds different from their own.

Most young people are considerate of other people's feelings when communicating online and many feel empowered by their use of social media.

- **4 in 5** (79.5%) believe it is as important to be polite online as it is face to face, and more than **3 in 5** (62.5%) think about the different ways people might interpret something before they post. In addition, **just under half** (46.2%) feel being online helps them learn how others are feeling.
- More than **2 in 5** (42.2%) say that their online life opens up lots of possibilities for them, and **1 in 4** (26.9%) that social media makes them feel like they can make a change in the world.

More boys than girls feel that chatting while playing video games helps them communicate better with friends. More young people who prefer to describe their gender another way say that writing on social media helps them express themselves.

- Almost **three times** as many boys as girls said they used a games console daily (65.5% of boys vs. 22.5% of girls), and almost **twice as many** boys as girls said chatting while playing video games helped them communicate better with friends (62.5% vs. 35.7%).
- Around **3 in 10** boys and girls agreed that writing on social media helped them to express themselves (30.7% boys, 34.0% girls). However, this increased to **nearly half** (47.3%) of young people who described their gender another way, suggesting that online formats may be an important source of self-expression for this group of young people.
- Significantly more boys than girls feel that their online life opens up possibilities for them. Indeed, there is a ten-percentage-point difference in the percentage of boys and girls who believe this (46.1% vs. 36.0%).

Compared with peers from higher-income backgrounds, fewer young people from lower-income homes say they know how to check if online information is true. However, more feel confident posting something they have written online and say using social media makes them feel like they can make a change in the world.

- Slightly fewer young people who receive free school meals (FSMs) said they know how to check if the information they find online is true (61.0% vs. 67.3% nFSM) and slightly more believe social media provides more genuine information about news than standard news channels (20.2% FSM vs. 15.4% nFSM).
- At the same time, more young people receiving FSMs said that writing on social media helps them express themselves (38.2% vs. 32.3%), more feel confident about posting something they have written online (35.4.% vs. 27.8%) and more said that using social media makes them feel like they can make a change in the world, with nearly **1 in 3** (32.4%) saying this compared with **1 in 4** (26.3%) of those not receiving FSMs.

Literacy engagement is associated with confidence in interacting online, critical approaches to online reading and the perceived benefits of online communication.

- While just **1 in 5** (22.0%) young people with low literacy engagement feel confident about posting their own writing online, this increases to almost **2 in 5** (38.8%) of those with high literacy engagement, emphasising the links between offline and online literacy.
- Many more young people with high literacy engagement said that they take time to think about whether news stories are true or not. **7 in 10** (71.0%) of this group said they did this compared with **2 in 5** (40.5%) of young people with low literacy engagement (a difference of almost 30 percentage points [pp]).
- Similarly, more of those with high literacy engagement said they know how to check if the information they find online is true (**77.7% vs. 60.0%**) and how to check who has written something online and decide whether they can trust them (**71.6% vs. 51.3%**).

- Fewer young people with low levels of engagement with literacy perceive the benefits of digital engagement. While more than **1 in 3** (34.6%) young people with the highest literacy engagement say using social media makes them feel like they can make a change in the world, this decreases to fewer than **1 in 5** (19.1%) of those with the lowest literacy engagement.

More young people with low mental wellbeing have read things online that support their mental health and feel writing on social media helps them express themselves. However, more young people with high mental wellbeing feel confident about critical reading online.

- More young people with the lowest mental wellbeing say they have read things online that have supported their mental health (50.3%, compared with 42.9% of those with high wellbeing). In addition, more young people with low mental wellbeing say that writing on social media helps them express themselves (39.9% vs. 29.4%).
- However, while **1 in 5** (22.1%) young people with the lowest wellbeing feel confident posting their own writing online, this doubles to **2 in 5** (40.0%) of those with high wellbeing.
- While more than **3 in 4** (76.2%) young people with high mental wellbeing say they know how to check if the information they find online is true, this decreases to **3 in 5** (60.4%) of those with the lowest mental wellbeing. Similarly, more of those with high mental wellbeing say they know how to check who has written something online and decide if they can be trusted (68.0% vs. 52.8% of those with low wellbeing).

Nearly three times as many young people with high critical digital literacy scores have high mental wellbeing.

- Finally, we constructed a variable based on responses to questions about critical literacy and digital engagement to allow us to explore any differences between young people with low and high critical digital literacy engagement.
- High literacy engagement was associated with better critical digital literacy attitudes and behaviours, suggesting that young people with low literacy engagement are at risk of missing out in the digital age.
- Young people with high levels of critical digital literacy also had the highest mental wellbeing. Indeed, compared with young people with low critical digital literacy engagement, **nearly three times as many** young people with the highest critical digital literacy engagement scores have high levels of mental wellbeing (30.2% vs. 11.6%).

More young people learn about trusting online information from parents than teachers.

- Parents and teachers were the most-cited sources of advice for young people in relation to learning how to decide if online information can be trusted. Half (50.6%) of young people said that parents had been sources of guidance for them in this area, while **2 in 5** (38.8%) said that teachers had provided online advice. However, almost half (48.3%) of young people said they learned how to communicate effectively online by themselves.

Summary and discussion

Findings from this survey indicate that online platforms can offer valuable opportunities for literacy, communication, self-expression and support for many young people. Most use digital devices and social media daily for entertainment. However, many also say they find reading material online that matches their interests, are inspired to read more widely by online content, and feel that what they read online can help inform their opinions and expand their thinking. Most of the young people responding to the survey say they prefer to socialise in person, and are considerate of other people's feelings when communicating online. At the same time, a significant percentage (particularly boys) said chatting while playing video games can help them communicate better with friends. Findings also suggested that young people who prefer not to define their gender may benefit more from the opportunities for self-expression and identity exploration offered by online platforms.

However, while online communication platforms often require young people to employ traditional literacy skills, broader and more complex literacy skills, including critical digital literacy, are equally important (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Helsper & Smirnova, 2015). Young people who do not have these may be disadvantaged in terms of both employment prospects and in using online communication to support positive and enriching relationships. Young people's responses to the survey suggest a need for greater support for literacy and digitally mediated literacy practices to ensure that these lead to positive outcomes for all young people's learning and wellbeing. For example, few young people say they feel confident about posting their own writing online. Furthermore, while most are confident that they know how to check if the information they find online is accurate, only half take time to consider if news stories are true. Responses also suggested that fewer young people from lower-income homes feel confident around critical approaches to reading news and information online, and fewer girls than boys feel that online engagement opens up possibilities for them. This must be addressed to enable all young people to thrive in the digital age.

Notably, initial findings indicate that high literacy engagement is associated with better critical digital literacy attitudes and behaviours[1], suggesting that, in the digital age, young people with the lowest literacy engagement may be at risk of missing out in both the offline and online spheres. This may be through a lack of knowledge around critical engagement when reading information online or a poorer sense of empowerment resulting from engagement with social media. In turn, young people with high levels of critical digital literacy engagement also reported the highest levels of mental wellbeing. Indeed, compared with young people with low critical digital literacy engagement, nearly three times as many young people with high critical digital literacy had high mental wellbeing (11.6% vs 30.2%). These findings suggest that improving literacy engagement and developing positive critical digital literacy attitudes may have the potential to support young people's wellbeing.

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[1] There was a statistically significant, albeit weak positive correlation between literacy engagement and critical digital literacy scores, $r(4963) = .35$, $p < .0005$

Acknowledgements

Appendix

Sample characteristics

The survey ran in October and November 2021, receiving responses from 7,494[2] pupils aged 11 to 16[3] in schools across the UK. Slightly more boys than girls took part (boys *n* = 3,869 [51.6%]; girls *n* = 3,110 [41.5%]; I would rather not say = 248 [3.3%]; I describe myself another way *n* = 267 [3.6%]). 10.3% (*n* = 767) of respondents receive free school meals (FSMs), 81.9% (*n* = 6,109) do not receive FSMs, 6.3% (*n* = 470) don't know and 1.5% (*n* = 111) would rather not say[4].

Most respondents identified themselves as White British (64.2%, *n* = 4,472), White Irish (0.9%, *n* = 62), White Traveller of Irish heritage (0.5%, *n* = 37), White Romani (0.2%, *n* = 17) or other White background (6.7%, *n* = 463); 4.4% (n= 303) as Asian or Asian British Pakistani 2.6% (n = 178 as Indian, 0.9% (n = 65) as Bangladeshi, 0.9% (n = 62) as Chinese and 1.8% (n= 125) as any other Asian background; 3.1% (n = 216) as Black or Black British African, 0.9% (n = 62) Caribbean or other (0.5%, n = 32) Black background; 1.8% (n = 125) as any other mixed race background, 1.5% (n = 104) mixed White and Asian, 1.2% (n = 86) mixed White and black Caribbean, 1.1% (n = 78) mixed White and black African; 1.1% (n = 76) as Middle Eastern and Middle Eastern British and 5.7% (n = 398) would rather not say.

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[2] Comprised of 7,135 full responses and 359 partial responses (more than two-thirds of survey completed)
[3] Age groups: 10-11, *n* = 40 (0.5%); 11-12, *n* = 2451 (32.9%); 12-13, *n* = 1918 (25.8%); 13-14, *n* = 1315 (17.7%); 14-15, *n* = 855 (11.5%); 15-16, *n* = 866 (11.6%), [no response *n* = 49]
[4] [no response *n* = 37]

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