Unaccomanied Children and Young People:
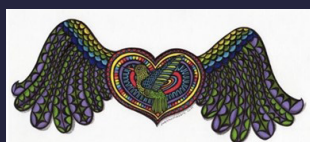
Social Media, Digital Worlds and Wellbeing

by J. Oddy, L. Morrice, L. Tip, N. Saide and M. Alzarei

Suggested reference for this report:

Oddy, J; Morrice, L., Tip, L. Saide, N., Alzarei, M. (2023): *Unaccompanied Children and Young People (UCYP): Social Media, Digital Worlds and Wellbeing.*
University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton.

Executive summary

The research project was conducted in Sussex in partnership with three charities that support Unaccompanied Children and Young People (UCYP). The study aimed to understand how UCYP use digital technology and social media, as well as the potential benefits and risks associated with their online engagement. The research used a variety of methods, including an online survey for care providers and key informant interviews with UCYP. The project team trained and supported co-researchers with lived experience to take a leading role, resulting in interesting methodological insights for working with this group.

The study found that UCYP use digital technology and social media extensively for communication with family and friends, entertainment, educational purposes and to stay up to date with current affairs. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok were the most used. While there are potential risks associated with social media use, such as exploitation, eye strain and other health implications, the study found that some of these risks can be mitigated through education and support. The findings highlight the importance of a balanced approach to technology use and the need for further research in this area.

The survey of care providers found that they recognise the importance of digital technology for UCYP's well-being, education, and integration, but also have concerns about the risks associated with social media use. The care providers responses indicate the importance of educating UCYP about online safety and the potential risks of social media.

The study recommends that care providers and young people work together to promote a balanced and healthy use of digital technology and social media. This could include providing education and support for online safety, promoting positive social media use, and setting limits on technology use. The study also recommends further research to explore the implications of UCYP's social media use on their social and emotional well-being.

Overall, the study provides important insights into how UCYP use digital technology and social media, as well as the potential benefits and risks associated with their online engagement. The findings highlight the need for a balanced approach to technology use and the importance of educating UCYP about online safety. The study also provides valuable methodological insights for working with this group, demonstrating the effectiveness of research tools based on written text and the potential of using games such as Kahoot for research and dissemination of strategies to support well-being.

Introduction

In 2022, by September, the UK received 5,152 applications for asylum from unaccompanied children (Refugee Council, 2022). An Unaccompanied Child is a child under 18 who has arrived in a country seeking asylum without a parent or legal guardian to care for them. They are entitled to special protections under international and national law (Refugee Council, 2022). In this report we use the term Unaccompanied Children and Young People (UCYP), rather than the more commonly used Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC). We prefer this term as by removing "asylum seeking" the term foregrounds that they are first and foremost children when they arrive in the UK and should be treated as such (Kaukko 2016). At the same time, scholars such as Vergara-Figueroa (2018) have noted the problematic status of the term "forced migration" and other all-encompassing terms that seek to categorise forcibly displaced populations. She argues that although terminologies may be helpful "as … legal and political concept[s] to formulate policies of temporal protection, these terms are ill-disposed to comprehending the complex, structural, institutional, and everyday dimensions of the phenomenon" (2018, p. 7). Therefore, the research team is aware of the limitations of this term, and its potential to homogenise vastly different groups of young people and their experiences.

UCYP experience the dislocation of family and social relations and vulnerabilities associated with being a looked-after child, layered with the experience of being a forced transnational child migrant: Family left behind in often precarious circumstances, negotiating passage across borders with strangers/smugglers/traffickers, coupled with post-migration experiences such as isolation, bullying, racism and uncertain migration status are well-recognised sources of psychosocial stress (e.g. Derluyn and Broekaert, 2005; Rutter, 2006; Morrice and Sandri, 2018). This makes UCYP a small but vulnerable group. Separation from family members is an important threat to the mental health of refugee children (e.g. Vervliet et al. 2014). In Belgium, 41% to 58% of unaccompanied refugee adolescents had symptoms of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress, and mental health problems that sometimes lasted several years (Derluyn et al., 2009). A similar picture was found in the UK (The Children's Society, 2018).

Why this study is timely

Over the last decade, politicians in the UK have become increasingly vocal in their anti-immigration rhetoric. For example, in 2012, Home Secretary Theresa May stated that she aimed to "create, here in Britain, a hostile environment for illegal immigrants" (Hill, 2017). A decade later, on April 27th, 2022, the Nationality and Borders Bill became an Act of Law, enhancing the hostile environment towards those seeking asylum. The provisions of the Act relating to refugees and the asylum system focus heavily on penalising refugees who travel to the UK through "irregular" means (Refugee Council, 2022).

Human Rights organisations have stated that the Nationality and Borders Bill has severe implications for unaccompanied and separated children for several reasons. Firstly, it calls for age assessments, which as the Refugee Council (2023) noted, "… are likely to lead to more children being incorrectly identified as adults, losing the support they need and exposing them to risk". Secondly, one of the Bill's key provisions is the introduction of a new two-tier system for asylum seekers, which would classify individuals as either "inadmissible" or "admissible" based on a range of factors, including their mode of arrival in the UK. Those deemed "inadmissible" would be denied the right to apply for asylum and instead be subject to expedited removal from the country, potentially an offshore facility. This provision has raised concerns that unaccompanied and separated children, who often arrive in the UK without documentation or through irregular means, could be at risk of being classified as "inadmissible" and denied the right to claim asylum. Thirdly, the Nationality and Border Bill removes the legal obligation for local authorities to support some groups of asylum seekers, including those over 18 who have previously been in local authority care. This could leave many unaccompanied and separated children without the necessary support and protection to rebuild their lives in the UK.

The concerns about the Nationality and Borders Bill and its impact on UCYP are warranted. In recent months, there are increasing concerns about the safety of separated children in the UK. An investigation by the UK Observer newspaper in early 2023 raised concerns that several unaccompanied refugee children were going missing from hotels where they had been placed by the Home Office (Townsend, 2023). In response to questions from Parliament, Robert Jenrick, Minister of State for Immigration, stated that 440 of the over 4,600 "unaccompanied minors" who have been housed in hotels since July 2021 have gone missing (UK Parliament, 2023). While nearly half of them have been found, 200 remain unaccounted for, 13 of whom were under 16 when they vanished (UK Parliament, 2023).

The disappearance of hundreds of UCYP from hotels in the UK underscores the vulnerability of this group of young people. Care providers, e.g., institutions (and individuals within these institutions, such as foster carers, teachers, and social workers) need a deeper understanding of the day-to-day lives of UCYP and their networks. Research indicates that refugees increasingly use information and communication technologies (ICTs) for various purposes (e.g., Marlowe & Bruns, 2021).

Our research sets out to understand the digital worlds of UCYP. The digital worlds of young people refer to the virtual spaces where they spend time engaging with digital content, socialising, and gaming. These digital worlds can take many forms, including social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, video-sharing sites like YouTube and TikTok, online gaming platforms, and virtual reality environments.

We also refer to social media in the report. Social media refers to a set of digital communication platforms that enable individuals and organisations to create, share, and exchange information, opinions, and content with others. Social media platforms provide a space for UCYP to connect and interact with each other, build and maintain relationships, and engage in a variety of activities, such as sharing photos and videos, posting updates and messages, joining groups or communities, and following accounts of interest (Doná & Godwin,

2018). Social media platforms are typically web-based and accessible through desktop and mobile devices. Examples of popular social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube. According to studies, the use of social media on personal mobile devices like smartphones has improved connections between recently arrived refugees (Pottie et al., 2020).

Understanding the digital worlds of UCYP is a good place to begin to examine some of the safeguarding risks they are vulnerable to, but also how social media and other digital resources can be leveraged to support social cohesion, integration, and a sense of belonging.

This report illuminates the connections between UCYP's well-being, social hopes and aspirations, and the immigration and social care policies governing their lives. The findings are based on a participatory research study between October 2022 and March 2023 examining how UCYP engage with social media and digital resources.

Four objectives guided the project:

1. Explore how UCYP experience and engage with the digital world to support their social integration and sense of belonging in the UK, and how these interplay with their transnational lives and connections.

2. Identify what UCYP perceive as risks to their safety and well-being from digital engagement and how they navigate these risks.

3. Co-design and co-produce a pilot project with UCYP which will embed new knowledge to promote positive mental health among UCYP.

4. Establish a knowledge base and appropriate methodologies to apply to further research and dissemination.

From pursuing these four lines of inquiry, the study identifies the resources that support UCYP and outlines key recommendations for young people, care providers and further areas of research.

Methodology

As outlined in the research objectives, co-designing a research methodology with UCYP was paramount. For this reason, it was decided that a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach would be taken. PAR is a research methodology that involves the active participation of individuals or communities in identifying problems, designing solutions, and implementing actions (Maguire, 1987). PAR aims to promote social change by empowering

individuals and groups to take control of their own lives and to address social issues affecting them (Fine and Torres, 2021).

In brief, PAR has multiple genealogies, stemming from "grassroots organising, popular education and liberation movements" around the globe (Fine & Torres, 2021, p. 14). PAR is a continuum of cross-disciplinary approaches to participatory inquiry. Central to PAR is the notion that research is intricately linked to social change. One of the main reasons why PAR is particularly important for working with UCYP is that it values their lived experiences and perspectives. These young people have first-hand knowledge of the challenges they face and the solutions that would be most effective for them. By involving refugees and asylum seekers in the research process, PAR can uncover insights and solutions that may not have been identified otherwise. Additionally, by participating in the research process, refugees and asylum seekers can feel a sense of agency and control over their lives and experiences, which can be empowering and affirming (Fine and Torres, 2021).

As noted in the introduction, UCYP are a vulnerable group of young people, many of whom have experienced displacement, trauma, and uncertainty (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2005, Rutter, 2006, Morrice & Sandri, 2018). They face significant challenges in accessing education, employment, and social services. They also have limited opportunities to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives. PAR offers a unique approach to engaging these young people in research processes that can lead to positive change in their lives.

Moreover, PAR offers a platform for these young people to develop their skills and competencies. Through their participation in the research process, they can develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills that are essential for their future. This approach can also enhance their self-confidence and self-esteem, as they take ownership of the research process and contribute to the creation of new knowledge.

Notwithstanding, PAR does not erase power imbalances that arise in research or knowledge production and working with youth also introduces another power dynamic. However, because PAR with youth often aims to shift power within the research process; instead of researching on participants, young people define the research questions and methods and are given the tools to "name, interrogate, and address the social factors that oppress them" (Aldana & Richard-Schuster, 2021, p. 4); for Fine (2018, p. 80), PAR is a "radical epistemological challenge" because it involves an intergenerational and collective process of critical investigation that addresses the social conditions that affect youth. By doing so, PAR avoids "damage-focused" (Tuck, 2009) approaches, moving "away from pathology and linearity" of traditional research designs (Tuhiwai Smith et al., 2018, p. 5).

Heeding the scholarship relating to PAR and young people, youth and community engagement was embedded in the design of this project. Two young people, with lived experience of forced displacement, as well as part-time roles working with UCYP, were recruited to the research team. These co-researchers, or Young Leaders, had pivotal roles throughout the research process, including designing the research materials, leveraging their networks to facilitate the research roll out with different organisations, gathering the data, as well as analysing the data and identifying key findings. The Young Leaders also determined

the final output from the research, a video produced by young people with a forced migration background.

The academic investigators in this project sought to provide more of an advisory and supportive role, in recognition that people with lived experience of forced displacement would be best placed to guide and facilitate the participatory research.

Designing a participatory research methodology

An integral part of the research was to train and support Young Leaders as co-researchers. Co-researchers have a key role throughout the research design process, from co-designing the research questions to co-facilitating focus groups and to conduct qualitative interviews with UCYP. As such, in this report, we refer to the Young Leaders at times as co-researchers, as well as co-facilitators in recognition of the multiple roles' researchers play within a PAR project (Fine & Torres, 2021; Fine, 2018).

The research project began with two online workshops, with the two co-researchers with lived experience of displacement, and the Research Fellow to co-learn about different approaches to research, designing questions and an approach to rolling out the research to UCYP.

Table 1:

Timetable for PAR design

Week	Topic
19th October	Expectations, Introduction to Photovoice, different types of research, bias and validity.
26th October	1) Ethics 2) Informed consent and risk mapping 3) Visual methods - Drawings 4) Facilitating Focus Group Discussions
31st Oct - 4th of Nov	Organising the research with the different groups of young people and doing the workshops
Nov	Data collection: Facilitating the workshops with groups of young people
December	Start the data analysis
March 2023	Recording a documentary, with Young Leaders

The first two sessions in Table 1 above focus on strengthening the co-researchers' skills in research. The sessions were informed by experiential learning, which is the process of learning by doing (Kolb, 1984). By engaging students in hands-on experiences and reflection, they are better able to connect theories and knowledge learned in the classroom to real-world situations (Kolb, 1984). For example, as a pre-task for the initial workshop, the co-researchers were asked to share a photo of themselves to introduce themselves to the group. They were invited to be as creative as possible (see Figure 1).

Figure 1:

Introducing ourselves

The initial task of sharing a photo and thinking creatively about how an image can be used to represent something, served as an introduction to photovoice. Photovoice is a community-based research technique where participants take pictures of the people and things that have importance to them and describe to researchers what each picture means (Humpage et.al., 2019).

During the initial PAR sessions, the research fellow modelled the SHOWed photovoice methodology for analysing images (Strack et al., 2004). This method aims to generate conversation around the images and includes the following questions:

1. What do you see in this image?

 2. Why did you take this picture?

3. What is happening here?

4. How does this relate to our lives?

5. Why does this condition exist?

6. What can we do about it?

 7. How could this image educate others?

(Strack et al., 2004, p. 51)

Throughout the PAR design sessions, the co-researchers modelled the SHOWed method by analysing different artefacts they chose to share with the group. This was later replicated, to some degree, within the workshops with UCYP, where the co-researcher used visual methods such as PowerPoint, and images, to stimulate discussion with the young people and model creative facilitation methods. Notwithstanding, when the co-researchers facilitated the workshops, some of the young people did not want to engage with creative or drawing activities. This served as an important learning for the whole research team. The young people's resistance to using creative methods in part could have been their unfamiliarity with the type of exercises. It echoes Wharton's (2020) experience with unaccompanied girls and young women who were reluctant to engage with the creative approaches she had planned and preferred instead co-constructed research spaces of open-ended discussion. As a team, we reflected that more time needed to have been allocated towards co-designing the research methods to be used during workshops, so that everyone felt comfortable using creative methods in workshop design.

In between the PAR sessions with the co-researchers, there were also opportunities to contribute to designing the research tools. A google drive was set up, where all members of the team could make suggestions and edits to different documents, such as the informed consent forms, and the sample workshop (see Annexe 1) outline. In addition, the research team used a variety of digital apps, such as Jamboard (a google app), to co-create research questions. For example, Figure 2 is an illustration of a research question design exercise, whereby the co-researchers responded to questions that helped inform the research project.

Figure 2:

Collaboratively planning the research

The jam boards served as a way of keeping conversations flowing, which was helpful as the research team members were all based in different locations.

Google Jamboard was also a useful app in supporting the co-design of the project. At the outset, the co-researchers decided that they did not want an Advisory Group which included social workers, foster carers and other professionals (as set out in the original research proposal) and instead switched to including these professionals as research participants. Effectively flattening power inequalities embedded in traditional research design structures. As Figure 3 highlights, the co-researchers drew up questions to ask the care providers (adults) alongside questions for the young people.

Figure 3:

Co-Designing research questions with the co-researchers
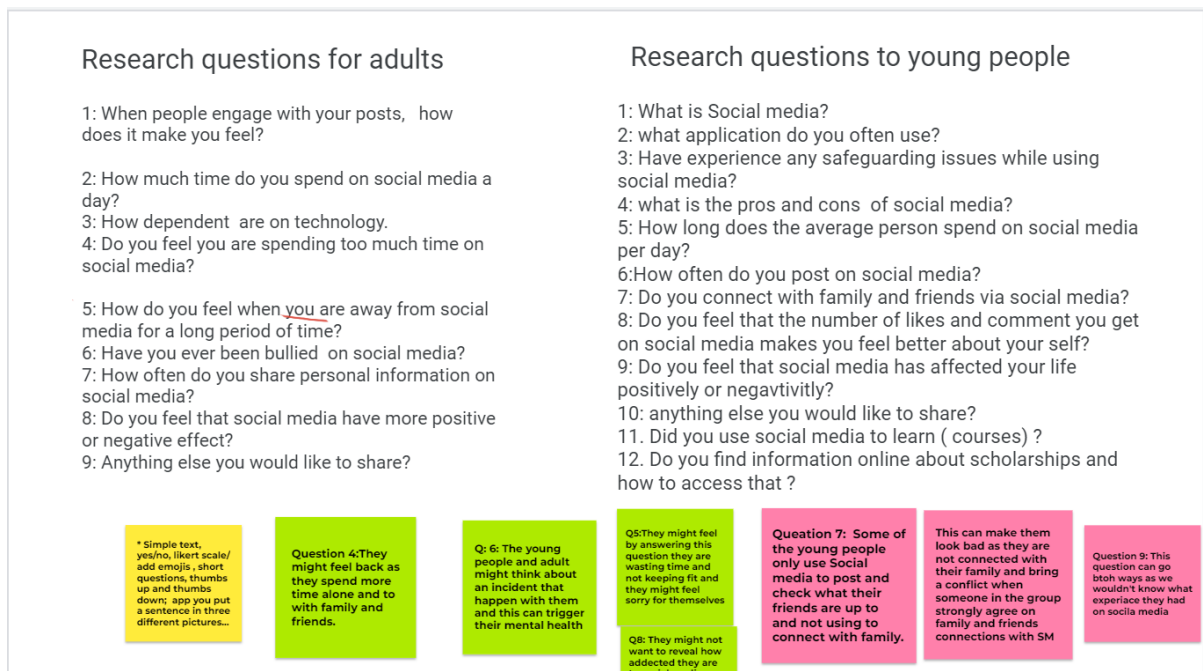
During the next session, the questions were then discussed as a group, from an ethical standpoint. The team also began to brainstorm creative approaches to seeking this information. As a group it was decided that there would be a variety of methods used. This included:

- Two-hour workshops with groups of UCYP: These sessions would take place in the charities supporting unaccompanied young people. The sessions would be facilitated by the co-researcher, with the principal investigators observing and being on hand to take notes and co-facilitate if needed. Within the workshop, the co-researcher would use a variety of methods which included Kahoot, printed questionnaires, as well as group questions to stimulate discussion. Questionnaires

were also available in Arabic, Dari and Pashto to enable young people to answer in the language of their choice.
- Online questionnaire for care providers: These would be anonymous and distributed via email through our networks. The findings would be shared with the UCYP in the workshops to provoke discussion.
- Key informant interviews with young people: This was decided after the initial data analysis phase, to gain a deeper understanding of some of the issues.

The co-researchers highlighted that the workshop sessions were an opportunity to raise awareness about online safety with the young people. The workshops were then expanded to include a small section which focuses on the need to critically analyse online sources and strategies for minimising risk of harm. In this way the data collection process evolved into a reciprocal exchange of information, reflecting PAR as an "education process for researchers and participants" who analyse the structural causes of identified problems through group discussion and interaction (Maguire 1987, p. 29).

Fieldnotes from one of the sessions noted:

> "His PowerPoint slides added reciprocity to the research process by raising issues about online safety. Participants listened carefully about the importance of online privacy and keeping profiles private, the importance of in-person social interactions and not just online. He explained about dimming the brightness on your phone at night to improve sleep and not keeping the phone plugged in beside your bed."

Research sites

The research was primarily conducted in Sussex, in partnership with three charities that support UCRYP.

[Enthum House](): A UK registered charity that provides provide a safe and sustainable home to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children aged 16-18.

[The Black & Minority Ethnic Community Partnership](https) (BMECP): BMECP is a community organisation and hub in Brighton and Hove that supports BME communities and their families, including UCYP. Within the BMECP hub, Sutton, and District Training (SDT) offer English language classes to UCYP. One of the co-researchers shared the research project with SDT, who agreed to act as a gatekeeper organisation, and connect us with the UCYP who used their services.

The [Hummingbird Project]() is a Brighton based charity, also located within the BMECP, that works with young asylum seekers and refugees in the area & campaigns nationally. The research findings were discussed with Young Leaders at the Hummingbird Project, as part of a final film-making workshop, which will be discussed in more detail later on in this report.

In addition, three key informant interviews were conducted in Canterbury, Kent where one of the co-researchers lived and worked.

Survey with care providers: The collaboratively designed online survey for care providers was shared with a foster carer, as well as staff members at Hummingbird Project to disseminate to their networks. A total of 11 care providers responded.

- Six foster careers
- One social worker
- One youth worker
- Three support workers

The surveys were anonymous and no identifying information was collected (e.g. age, gender and location of work).

Key informant interviews: Following the workshops, the project team met and after co-analysing the existing data, decided it would be useful to dig deeper into some of the themes. Two key informant interviews were conducted in Brighton with UCYP, two males from Afghanistan. They were 16 and 17 years old, one had been in the UK for 8.5 months, and one arrived in the previous month. Three further key informant interviews were held in January 2023, with three UCYP currently living in Canterbury: all were male and were aged 17. Two of the participants were from Afghanistan and had been living in the UK for 16 months and 20 months; whilst the other participant was from Sudan and had been living in the UK for 14 months.

For a more detailed overview of the research sites and samples involved in this research project, please see Table 2 below.

Table 2:

Overview of research sites and samples

Location	Date	Number/age of applicants	Country of origin
BMECP: 2hr workshop with UCYP	5 Dec	17 participants: 16 male, 1 female	Sudan, Kurdistan, Chad, Somalia, Afghanistan, Albania, Iran
Hummingbird: Key informant interviews	5 Dec	Two males (16 & 17)	Afghanistan
Enthum House Eastbourne: 2 hr workshop with UCYP	10 Dec	11 males 15-18 years	(1) Kurdistan (6) Afghanistan (3) South Sudan (4) Egypt
Canterbury: Key informant interviews	14 Jan	3 males 17 years old	(2) Afghanistan (1) Sudan
Online: Wellbeing survey for care providers	Nov-Dec 2022	11 participants (age/gender not requested)	Not available

Ethical considerations

In this study, the research team sought to mitigate risks through the co-designed nature of the project. As discussed, each question was critically reflected upon, from an ethical perspective, and adjusted accordingly.

Prior to rolling out the workshops, the co-researchers shared an information sheet with the organisations who worked directly with UCYP (see Annexe 1). The co-researchers met with the organisations' focal points to discuss the research in more detail. Informed consent was sought before the workshops began to ensure young people were clear on the study, could ask any questions and agree, or withdraw from participating in the research.

Within the workshops, a wide range of activities were employed to be attentive to the different needs of young people. Although use of written texts is often avoided in research with speakers of other languages, we used written questionnaires. This enabled participants to quickly and easily translate the text into their own language using google translate on their phones. Young people were given the option to respond in their own language or in English. Some preferred to answer the questions on their own, whereas others preferred to discuss in small groups and share their responses with others. To prompt further discussion the co-researchers shared the findings from the survey with carers and, as noted above, tips for online safety. A very popular, fun part of the workshops was the online game Kahoot. This was designed by co-researcher Saide and combined questions about the use of digital technology with general trivia questions. The young people played in teams with the winning team receiving a box of chocolates. They enjoyed the competitive element, and it proved a highly successful way of raising awareness about use of digital technology while at the same time providing the research team with insights into their understanding and use of digital technology. Figure 4 provides examples of the Kahoot activities.

Figure 4:

Screenshots of examples of Kahoot
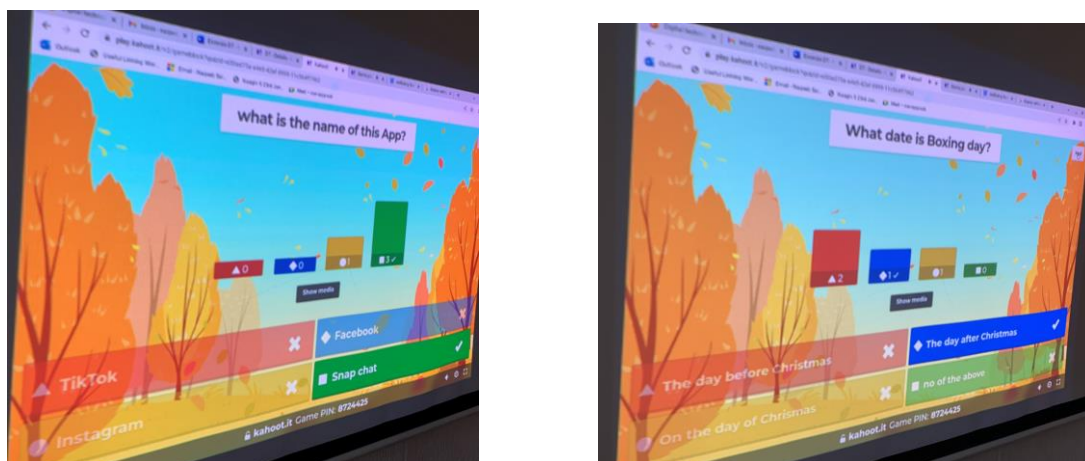
These considerations are central to equitable approaches to research design, and underline a more ethical approach to research, affording multiple opportunities for engagement and reciprocity.

PAR is founded on principles of collaboration and partnership, and it seeks to build relationships of trust and respect between researchers and participants. By involving UCYP in the research process, PAR prioritises their well-being and autonomy and can ensure that their needs and concerns are taken seriously. It is therefore a more ethical approach and, by prioritising the well-being and autonomy of the participants, PAR can ensure that the research is conducted ethically and responsibly.

Analysing the data

The research team met to collaboratively analyse the data. The data analysis process involved multiple steps:

- Data organisation: Prior to the data analysis workshop, the data was collated in google drive. Different members of the research team contributed to transcribing interviews and focus group discussions, translating surveys, compiling survey responses, and organising any other relevant data.
- Data coding: During the meeting, the research team began the process of coding the data. This involved assigning labels or tags to sections of the data related to specific themes or concepts, such as wellbeing. This process helped to identify patterns and relationships in the data that would inform the research findings.
- Data interpretation: After some of the data had been coded, the research team engaged in a process of interpretation. This involved discussing and reflecting on the coded data to identify key themes, patterns, and insights that emerged from the data.
- Collaborative analysis: The research team worked together to analyse the data and develop conclusions based on their collective interpretation of the findings. This involved:
  - Reviewing the coded data together, discussing key themes and insights, and identifying areas of agreement and disagreement. It was also an opportunity to see gaps in the research. Based on this, it was decided that further key informant interviews with UCYP were needed, to explore some of the emerging issues in more depth.
  - Refinement of findings: Following the meeting, the research fellow continued to refine the findings based on ongoing analysis and discussion. This involved revisiting the data, using NVIVO 12 to tag the data, identifying additional themes, and honing the conclusions drawn from the research.

- Deciding how to disseminate the findings: The research team discussed how to share the research findings and with whom. It was decided to share the findings with a group of Hummingbird Young Leaders, also from UCYP backgrounds. The research team decided that creating a film, with the Young Leaders discussing the findings would be a great way to raise awareness of the findings, as well as creating a resource that could be shared via social media for young people and caregivers. The co-researchers wrote a script based on the findings which was shared with a group of Young Leaders (2)

female and (4) male. A videographer, with lived experience of being from a UCYP background, was contracted to oversee the filmmaking workshops which ran over two days.

- Finalising the research report: Finally, the research team worked together to finalise the research report, incorporating their collective analysis and interpretation of the data. The research fellow drafted the initial report with other team members reviewing and contributing.

Findings

The findings section is divided into three parts. First, the survey results with the caregivers are shared. Next, the findings from the two workshops and the key themes that emerged are discussed.

Survey results with caregivers

The main themes from the surveys with caregivers focused on the ways in which unaccompanied refugee children and young people use social media and digital resources, potential risks associated with their online engagement, and the positive aspects of social media and digital resources in their lives.

According to the care providers, **UCYP use social media and digital resources for a variety of reasons.** This includes searching for family members and same cultural/religious groups, maintaining contact with their home country, watching local news, staying in touch with family abroad, communicating with friends, following news from their birth country, playing games, meeting new people, and understanding new countries' culture of asylum.

As Figure 4 illustrates, most caregivers had some concerns about UCYP use of social media.

Figure 4:

Concerns with UCYP use of social media
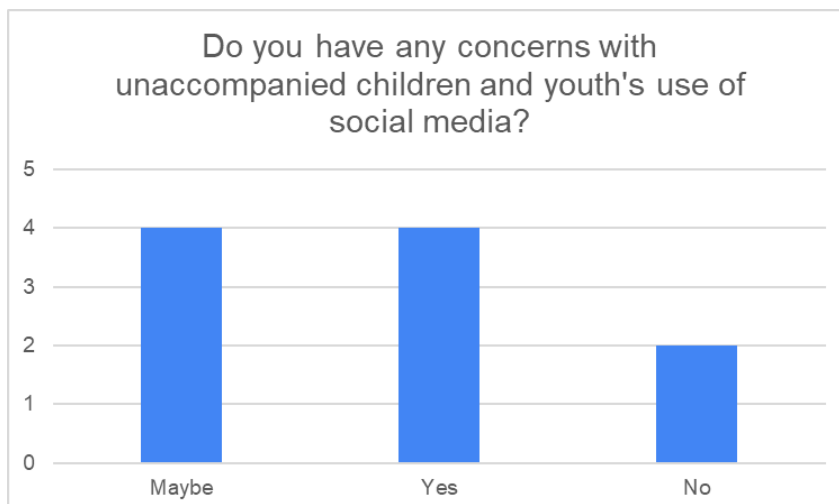
Some of the care providers identified potential risks associated with their online engagement. This included vulnerability to exploitation and radicalisation, disassociation with the "real" world, fake or false friendship groups/news, money scams, tracking and exploitation by agents or smugglers, trafficking concerns, and possible manipulation with wrong information access.

For example, one foster carer noted:

> "*They try to find cultural connections but sometimes are led astray and sometimes this is supported by social workers who want them to connect. One 16-year-old was allowed to travel 250 miles to visit people she'd never met and had only been talking to for a few weeks online. This consisted of two adult males who refused to identify themselves by name or dob etc. I refused to allow her to go.*"

This highlights the serious safeguarding issues that can arise from young people's engagement online and how care providers can either exacerbate these risks (in this case, the social worker), or minimise them (in this case, the foster carer).

A support worker noted that:

> "*Young people due to the adverse experiences they have been through and the uncertainty around their stability and futures leave them vulnerable to exploitation and possible radicalisation. Therefore, it is always something to be mindful of. It is also difficult to monitor and control.*"

Their example suggests that UCYP are perceived as being more susceptible to exploitation than other young people of a similar age. They also highlighted the difficulties of monitoring and controlling young people's social media use and engagement.

Whilst some care providers (36% - 4 people) felt that UCYP spent too long on social media, 45% (5 people) felt that they spent an average amount of time online. This suggests that some care providers were not worried about the amount of time young people spent on social media. This could be a result of the fact that many care providers who took part in this study identified positive aspects.

As Figure 5 highlights, some caregivers felt that UCYP spend an average amount of time on social media. This included communicating with friends and family, accessing websites from their home countries, supporting identity, resources for language learning, live worship from the mosque, socialising with friends, news of and connections with their home country, feeling closer to their homeland and friends, and finding information. This would suggest that a healthy amount of time spent on social media, balanced with other activities and interactions, can provide positive outcomes and connectedness for UCYP.

Figure 5:

Caregivers' opinion regarding UCYP use of social media

In your opinion, do you think unaccompanied and separated children and youth:
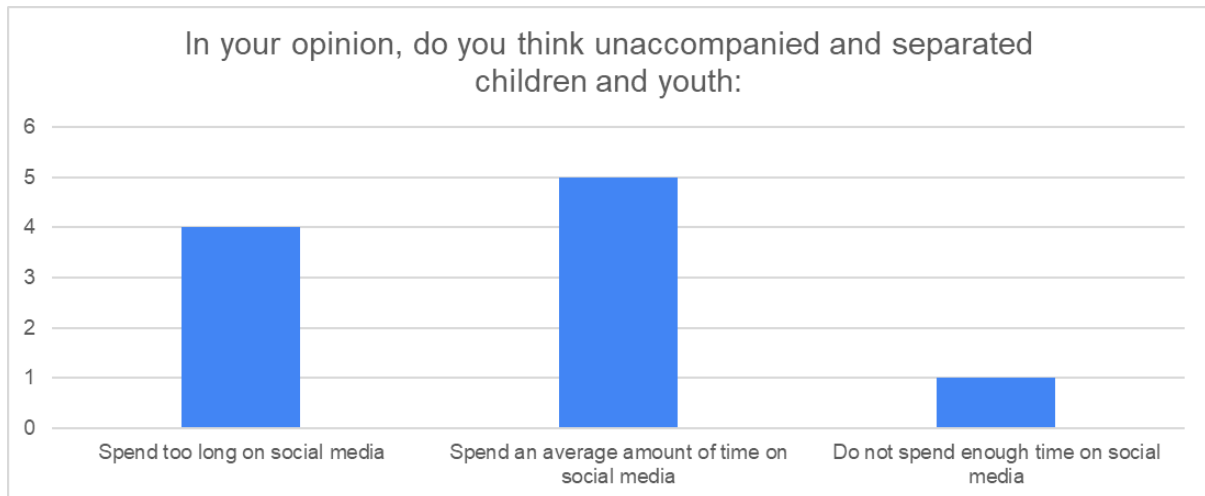
As highlighted in Figure 6, overall, foster carers, social workers and teachers felt that UCYP might use social media and digital resources differently to other young people, stating that they faced additional risks due to their vulnerable situation.

Figure 6:

Caregivers' perceptions of whether UCYP use social media differently

Do you think unaccompanied refugee children and young people use social media and digital resources differently to other young people?
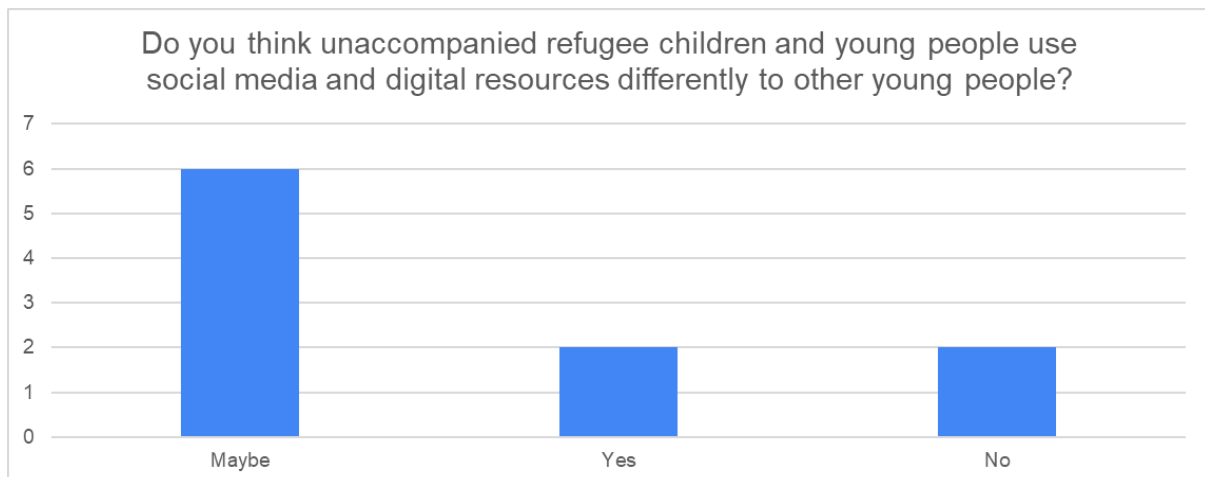
However, many also emphasised that all young people were exposed to risky situations online and this wasn't specific to UCYP alone. For example, one support worker noted:

"[UCYP are exposed to] *General money scams and being vulnerable to blackmail porn which is on the rise, but this is a concern for all young people.*"

These findings suggest that more broadly, young people need more digital literacy skills to navigate engagement and participation in digital worlds.

Findings from the workshops with UCYP at BMECP and Enthum House

The findings below are drawn from two workshops with UCYP.

Digital technology and social media is very important to UCYP

Many young people stated that social media and digital technology more broadly, was integral to their day-to-day lives. For example, one participant stated that "*Without a phone we are nothing*", whilst another agreed, adding "*If we don't have a phone we wouldn't live.*" The amount of time spent on social media daily varied between respondents, with some spending four hours or less, others spending five hours, and a few spending up to 12 hours. The reasons for using social media for such lengths of time included staying in touch with family and friends, playing games, watching videos, and learning new skills. Several of the participants noted that social media is the first thing they check in the morning because they want to make sure everything is okay with their family back home. For some it was a means of expanding their friendship group through Facebook connections and associated social media with "fun time" and games. Others mentioned using it for everyday tasks, like online shopping and card payments.

Evidently, social media and digital technology play a fundamental role in UCYP everyday lives, and is a means to connect with friends and family, but also for recreational purposes, like listening to music, following football, and as other participants reported, to watch films, funny films and chatting to friends.

UCYP use more social media in the UK than in their country of origin, for multiple reasons

Nearly all respondents use social media more in the UK than in their own country. The reasons for this include the availability of internet and Wi-Fi in the UK, as well poor connectivity and the high cost of internet in their home countries. The increase in the use of social media upon arrival in the UK underscores the findings that highlight that UCYP use social media to stay in touch with their families and friends who may still reside outside of the UK, or who are in the asylum system in other parts of the UK, or to try and find family and friends from whom they might have become separated on their journey. However, there were other reasons for the increased use of social media, including not going out a lot due to the weather, not being able to speak the language, not having many friends and not having much to do.

Some young people use social media more as they feel isolated in the UK. As one participant noted, he "*just sits at home all day*". Another participant explained: "*In Afghanistan all day I was busy with other things, here I don't have that.*"

Interestingly, many of the young people mentioned that they used apps like WhatsApp, but not necessarily always to connect with friends that they had made in the UK. These findings are indicative that young people use social media more, however this is due to a sense of loneliness, and not accessing other opportunities for social interaction in the UK.

Young people are exposed to new and unfamiliar social media apps in the UK

Respondents mentioned various apps that were new to them when they came to the UK, including Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Gmail, and YouTube. The most active social media channels varied between respondents, with some being most active on WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok, while others more active on Facebook and Messenger.

Social media and risks to young people's mental health

Some of the respondents reported recognising that social media had a negative effect on their wellbeing. For example, in the first workshop at BMECP, 12 of the 17 UCYP indicated that they thought they spent too much time on their phone, and thought it was bad to spend a lot of time on their phone. Several respondents reported experiencing headaches related to phone usage. When the co-researcher asked why they thought social media was good or bad, a female participant explained that although:

"*It is good to have your phone to keep in contact with people, it can also be bad for you because when you get bad comments on social media this can make you feel bad, plus it's bad for your eyes and your posture*."

Others highlighted that although they wanted to be informed about what was happening back home, following the news could be upsetting. For example, one participant shared that he didn't like how algorithms brought certain news events to his feed. He said that whenever he liked content on Facebook, he then would get more news of what was happening in Afghanistan which made him feel upset. Furthermore, videos and other news sources were often shared in Whatsapp groups, which made it hard to escape from receiving news items that could be distressing.

Digital technology as an educational resource

Although the previous section highlighted how young people felt social media negatively impacted their wellbeing, there were also many examples of the positive aspects of "digital worlds." Language apps were seen as being very important, and it was observed during the workshops that young people used language translation apps as a matter of course. Not only did young people use digital technology to interpret worksheets and exercises, but they also said that they used it to communicate with other students and their teachers. Many

participants mentioned that they also used non-traditional language learning apps, like TikTok and YouTube to improve their English.

However, a few of the young people did not access these apps due to the lack of availability in their mother-tongue. One participant described how he saw social media as a form of "public learning", and others as a form of free access to information and education. For example, one participant mentioned that he used social media to watch videos about making money, therefore serving a function of financial literacy. Another described using it to read "philosophy books", whilst others noted that they learnt other languages and recipes online. This suggests that social media impacts young peoples' mental health and well-being in different ways, and that furthermore, they are aware of some of the negative and positive consequences of using social media.

Summary of findings from the workshops

Overall, the responses suggest that people use social media primarily for communication with friends and family, amusement, and to stay updated with news and information. The most used apps are WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Some of the benefits of social media that were mentioned include learning new skills, language, and cooking, and staying connected with friends and family. However, excessive use of social media was associated with negative effects such as eye strain, headaches, and a negative impact on studies and well-being. In addition, particularly at the workshops held at BMECP, many young people shared that they used social media excessively because they felt lonely and had nothing to do. The themes that emerged across the responses include communication, news and information, learning, and negative effects of excessive social media use.

Key informant interviews with young people

The key informant interviews offered an opportunity to go into more detail about some of the issues that were raised in the workshops.

Four key themes were identified from the interviews: (1) Use of social media for staying in contact with family and friends, (2) Use of social media for making new friends and connecting with people in the UK, (3) Negative effects of excessive social media use on mental health, and (4) Strategies for reducing social media use.

1. **Use of social media for staying in contact with family and friends:**

Most of the participants described using social media, such as WhatsApp, Messenger, and Instagram, to stay in contact with their families and friends. They used social media and WhatsApp to have regular phone calls with family and friends back home. In addition, some young people mentioned that they used social media to connect with older siblings who are

placed in detention in the asylum system in other parts of the UK, or relatives that they have become separated from on the journey. Notwithstanding, some participants were unable to connect with their families who were either back in their country or origin or who they had been separated from. For example, one participant, from Afghanistan stated:

> *"I have not been able to contact them after the Taliban took over and they moved to a safer place, and I do not have their addresses or contact numbers or even social media accounts."*

This highlights that although most young people use social media to stay in contact, depending on the situation in their country of origin, for others, it is not a possibility. In those cases, social media is often used to try and find missing friends or family members.

2. Using social media to connect with people in the UK:

Two of the interviewees shared that they used social media to make new friends and connect with people in the UK. They mostly used WhatsApp and Instagram to stay in touch with their friends, and they occasionally played games together. Both of these participants had been in the UK for over a year, which suggests that UCYP's use of social media may change. In the workshops, many of the young people stated that they used social media primarily to connect with people back home, however what wasn't examined (and would be key for further research) is whether young people's interactions on social media changed the longer they stayed in the UK.

3. Limited use of social media for news and information:

None of the interviewees stated that they used social media to follow the news in their country of origins. Instead, they mostly rely on their families for updates. The interviewees at the BMECP mentioned specifically that they did **not** want to be kept updated to follow the news in their home country, because they found it upsetting. Instead, they watched funny videos online to distract themselves.

4. Strategies for reducing social media use:

Young people who took part in the interviews described negative consequences for excessive social media use. For example, X said:

> **"***I used to play lots of online games in my first year in the UK and that had a negative effect on my mental health and wasted too much of my time and then I started to delete the games. Now I use most of my time on social media to be in touch with friends here.***"**

X went on to say that he reduced his social media use by reading a book about self-awareness and mindfulness, going to the library, and focusing more on his studies. He also

shared that he had been motivated by his "more active classmates" and that made him "want to catch up with them." Two of the interviewees highlighted the importance of engaging in physical activities to limit their social media use. Y advised young people to not waste their precious time on things that do not give them anything and to engage with people around them. Similarly, X suggested doing sports like football, cricket, volleyball, and gym to avoid excessive use of social media.

5. Young people do not think that they use social media differently than other groups

To triangulate the reflections from the care providers, many of whom were unsure if UCYP used social media differently from other groups, the interviewees were asked to reflect on whether they thought asylum seekers and refugees used social media differently. All three were unsure. As one interviewee pointed out:

> "*I don't think there is a big difference between the way asylum seekers young people use social media with other young people. Because I think they mostly used social media to connect with each other to post photos of videos on social media and playing video games.*"

However, they later expanded and pointed out that:

> "*Some asylum seekers, even some of my friends, have had contact with their family in Afghanistan and I think social media is a really good way to contact them.*"

This example highlights the need to recognise the diverse experience of UCYP, and avoid homogenising experiences. As the findings illustrate, many young people use it to connect with people they have been separated from. However, some young people, due to displacement, have not been able to remain in contact with their families. Others shared how they used social media to distract them from feeling sad and missing their families and life back home.

Although some of the UCYP felt that they didn't use social media differently, a few shared that they avoided certain types of social media. For example, two participants both said that they didn't like videos and famous stories about families and togetherness as it made them feel sad and miss their home and families.

In summary, the interviews highlighted deeper insight into the importance of social media for staying in touch with family and friends and making new friends in the UK. However, excessive social media use was again noted as having a negative effect on mental health. Young people found it essential to find ways to reduce social media use and engage in other activities, such as sports or spending time with friends.

Overall summary of findings

The research study explored the use of social media and digital resources by UCYP and the potential risks associated with their online engagement. The findings from surveys, workshops, and key informant interviews revealed that UCYP use digital technology primarily to communicate with family and friends, to stay updated with news and information, and for distraction and amusement. WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube were identified as the most used social media channels. Some of the benefits of social media use included learning new skills, language, and cooking, as well as staying connected with friends and family. However, excessive use of social media was linked to negative effects such as eye strain, headaches, and a negative impact on studies and well-being. Some participants said that even when they did go out to meet with friends that they all tended to spend time on their phones, rather than chatting together.

The study also identified potential risks associated with UCYP's online engagement, due to many of the young people not having used social media prior to arrival in the UK. In discussing the findings with the co-researchers, they noted that many young people had an increased vulnerability to exploitation, disassociation with the "real" world due to their excessive use of social media, the potential to fake or false friendship groups/news, and the possibility of becoming victims of money scams, and possible manipulation with wrong information access.

In the case illustrated by the care provider, UCYP were more susceptible to tracking and exploitation by agents or smugglers, with real trafficking concerns. Some care providers expressed concerns about UCYP's excessive use of social media, while others felt that they spent an average amount of time online. This could be because social media and digital resources can provide positive outcomes and connectedness for UCYP when balanced with other activities and interactions.

The research study revealed that some UCYP use social media and digital resources differently from other young people and that they face additional risks due to their vulnerable status. Care providers identified positive aspects of social media and digital resources in the lives of UCYP, such as communicating with friends and family, accessing websites from their home countries, supporting identity, resources for language learning, live worship from the mosque, socialising with friends, news of and connections with their home country, feeling closer to their homeland and friends, and finding information.

In summary, the study highlights the importance of understanding how UCYP use social media and digital resources, the potential risks associated with their online engagement, and the positive outcomes and connectedness that social media and digital resources can provide when used in a balanced way. It highlights the significance of digital technology and social media for UCYP, indicating the importance of maintaining social connections, learning, and identity development. At the same time, the study highlights the potential risks associated with the online engagement of UCYP, emphasising the need for caregivers to support them in developing safe and responsible digital behaviours.

24

The findings suggest the need for tailored guidance and support to promote safe and responsible use of social media and digital resources among UCYP.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the research study on unaccompanied and separated refugee children and young people (UCYP), the following are the main recommendations for care providers, young people, and areas for future research:

Recommendations for Care providers:

The study revealed that most care providers recognize the benefits of social media and digital resources in the lives of UCYP, including communicating with friends and family, accessing websites from their home countries, language learning, and socialising with friends. However, care providers also had concerns about potential risks associated with online engagement, such as exploitation, radicalisation, trafficking, and fake news. Therefore, it is recommended that care providers need to monitor and support the UCYP in their use of digital technology and social media to prevent and manage any potential risks. This could be supported by:

a) Providing education on safe internet usage, and raising awareness of potential risks, such as exploitation and radicalisation, and providing training on how to identify and report these risks.

b) Encouraging a balanced approach to technology use, promoting face-to-face interactions, physical activities, and other hobbies and interests.

c) Fostering an open dialogue with young people about their online activities, encouraging them to share their experiences and concerns.

d) Helping UCYP to access online resources that can assist in their integration, such as language learning apps and tools, and support their use of social media to stay connected with family and friends.

Recommendations for Young People:

The study showed that UCYP use social media primarily for communication with friends and family, amusement, and to stay updated with news and information. The excessive use of social media was associated with negative effects such as eye strain, headaches, and a negative impact on studies, as well as respondents reporting that social media had a negative effect on their mental health. Therefore, it is recommended that UCYP should use

social media in moderation, balancing their online engagement with other activities and interactions.

a) Be aware of the potential risks associated with excessive use of social media and digital technology and seek support when necessary.

b) Use digital technology and social media to stay connected with family and friends, but also to learn new skills, such as language learning.

c) Be mindful of the impact of social media use on mental health and take breaks when necessary.

d) Encourage each other to put phones down and do something different, e.g. sports or other physical activities, focus on studies, or arrange to meet in person.

Recommendations for future research:

1. The study revealed that UCYP use social media more in the UK than in their home countries for several factors including the availability of internet and Wi-Fi in the UK, the high cost of internet in their home countries, having less to occupy their time within the UK, and the fact that they have become physically separated from family and friends. Future research could explore the relationship between the availability of internet and Wi-Fi and UCYP's social media use, as well as the potential implications of this on their social and emotional well-being.

2. Furthermore, an examination of the relationship between social media use and academic performance, would provide UCYP and educators with key tools and go-to apps that could support them to thrive within the UK education system. However, there is little information on the negative effects of constant social media usage of UCYP, especially if it results in disengagement from their new environment. Further investigation into the role of social media and digital technology in the integration of UCYP into host communities could yield more in-depth insight and support the development of guidelines for caregivers and strategies for UCYP for promoting positive outcomes.

3. Our research did not ask about how phones and digital technology were used by UCYP during their journeys to the UK or about ongoing contact with people who had facilitated their access to the UK. In the light of children going missing from hotels this is a critical area of further research.

4. To overcome a limitation of this pilot study, it would be beneficial to consider how various factors such as vulnerability and privilege can affect a young person's use of social media and digital resources. By examining the usage patterns of different subgroups of UCYP, such as females, specific ethnic groups or educational backgrounds, future studies could provide more detailed insights into their digital experiences. This approach would help care providers gain a better understanding of the nuances of UCYP's digital world.

Conclusion

Through collaboration with our partner, the Hummingbird Refugee project, and through training and supporting co-researchers with lived experience to take a leading role we co-designed and co-produced a research project from which emerged interesting methodological insights for working with this group. Firstly, research tools based on written text which participants could translate into their own languages using translation apps proved a highly effective way of working with mixed language groups with varying levels of English language. Young people were able to understand and digest the questions in their own time; they also had the option of responding in their own language if they wished. This was followed by group discussion and reflection on their answers, primarily in English, but co-researchers and others in the group were also able to interpret most of the languages spoken. Secondly, the Kahoot game was highly popular and engaging. Not only did it prompt issues for discussion, it enabled the co-researchers to introduce tips and strategies to support safety and well-being online. Both groups were disappointed when the games ended and would have liked more, suggesting that this tool could be developed further and used more widely for research and for dissemination of strategies to support well-being.

The study provides insight into how UCYP use digital technology and social media, as well as the potential benefits and risks associated with their online engagement.

While there are potential risks associated with social media use, such as exploitation and radicalisation, these can be mitigated through education and support. The findings highlight the importance of a balanced approach to technology use and the need for further research in this area. The recommendations for care providers and young people are focused on promoting a balanced and healthy use of digital technology and social media, while areas for future research are focused on exploring the implications of UCYP's social media use on their social and emotional well-being.

Annexe 1:

Call for participants, designed by co-researchers and research fellow

Sample workshop

Before the workshop

- Facilitators would have held an introductory session (15- 30 minutes) to inform participants about the research and/or share an information sheet/poster about the research.
- Informed consent forms shared, read out loud and signed.
- Ask participants to share their favourite song.

Workshop overview

This is a sample of a workshop. Remember, we only will have time for two activities. The icebreaker, ground rules and caregiver feedback are compulsory, but you can change/edit/improvise the other activity ideas. Look at the UNHCR listen and learn guidebook for ideas to adapt to our research questions. UNHCR - Listen & Learn: Participatory Assessment with Children and Adolescents

Phase	Facilitator	Student activity	Time	Materials needed
Icebreaker and introductions	**Game of choice!** E.g Get into a line according to birthday/ height without speaking		5 minutes	Name stickers
Ground rules To address group dynamics and how they can work well in the workshop. To establish and agree upon boundaries that can be returned to later if necessary.	Explain that we want to create a good environment for discussion. What do we need to do/consider to make that happen? E.g. listen when someone is talking. Write down point and stick poster up. You can ask all participants to sign it.	Participants to develop ideas about ways of working	10 minutes	Flip chart paper Pens
Activity 1 Statements from adults/agree disagree line	Read out a statement Ask participants to share why they have chosen their position	Young people move to the piece of paper	25 minutes	Statements from survey Three pieces of paper with a tick, cross and ? **See p.31**

Activity 2 Photo Voice	SHOWed method (go through the questions)	Young people share a photo that represents what social media means to them	25 minutes	You will need to inform young people prior to the session to pick a photo that represents what social media means to them/what they like/their favourite site. You might also want to start by sharing a photo. This could be printed so that everyone can see and analyse it together. You could use a photo of someone in school uniform for example, to start a conversation around safety and identifiable info on the web
Activity 3				
Activity 4 Survey/questionnaire	Share link to the anonymised survey (still to be developed)	Young people complete the survey. As discussed, this should be short- max 5 questions with checkboxes/emojis etc.	10 minute survey	Survey link
Certificates, vouchers, food and party time	Thank everyone for participating. Give the participants their certificate and voucher. Start the music play list and bring out the food.			Certificates £25 vouchers

References

Aldana, A., & Richards-Schuster, K. (2021). Youth-Led Antiracism Research: Making a Case for Participatory Methods and Creative Strategies in Developmental Science. *Journal of Adolescent Research.* https://doi.org/10.1177/07435584211043289

Chilisa, B. (2012). *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. SAGE Publications.

Dona, G. & Godin, M. (2018). Mobile Technologies and Forced Migration. in: Bloch, A. and Dona, G. (ed.) *Forced Migration: Current Issues and Debates.* Routledge. pp. 126-144

10.4324/9781315623757-8. Derluyn, I., & Broekaert, E. (2005). On the way to a better future: Belgium as transit country for trafficking and smuggling of unaccompanied minors1. *International Migration*, *43*(4), 31-56.

Fine, M. (2018). *Just research in contentious times: Widening the methodological imagination*. Teachers College Press.

Fine, M., & Torres, E. M. (2021)*. Essentials of Critical Participatory Action Research*. American Psychological Association

Hill, A. (2017, November 28). "Hostile environment": the hardline Home Office policy tearing families apart. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/nov/28/hostile-environment-the-hardline-home-office-policy-tearing-families-apar

Humpage, L., Fozdar, F., Marlowe, J., & Hartley, L. (2019). Photovoice and refugee research: The case for a 'layers' versus 'labels' approach to vulnerability. *Research Ethics*, 15(3–4), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016119864353

Kaukko, M. (2016) 'The P, A and R of participatory action research with unaccompanied girls', *Educational Action Research*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 177–193 [Online]. DOI: 10.1080/09650792.2015.1060159.

Maguire, P. (1987). *Doing Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Marlowe, J., & Bruns, R. (2021). Renegotiating family: Social media and forced migration. *Migration Studies*, *9*(3), 1499-1516.

Morrice, L. and Sandri E. (2018) *Improving education for refugee background students: Research findings*. Centre for International Education, University of Sussex.

Pottie, K., Ratnayake, A., Ahmed, R. *et al.* How refugee youth use social media: what does this mean for improving their health and welfare?. *Journal of Public Health Pol* 41, 268–278 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41271-020-00231-4

Refugee Council (2022) What is the Nationality and Borders Bill? https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/refugee-asylum-facts/what-is-the-nationality-and-borders-

act/#:~:text=In%20July%20of%202021%2C%20the,refugees%20and%20people%20seeking%20asylum.

Rutter, J. (2006). *Refugee children in the UK*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

Townsend, M. (2023) They just vanished*. The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jan/21/they-just-vanish-whistleblowers-met-by-wall-of-complacency-over-missing-migrant-children

Vergara Figueroa, Aurora. (2018). *Afrodescendant Resistance to Deracination in Colombia: Massacre at Bellavista-Bojayá-Chocó*. 10.1007/978-3-319-59761-4.

Wharton, A (2020) *Unaccompanied girls in England: (Re)Constructing spaces of belonging and learning.* University of Sussex. Unpublished PhD thesis

UK Parliament (2023) Unaccompanied Children https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-01-24/debates/290AF292-5D7E-411C-8FB8-A6E0F288365C/UnaccompaniedAsylum-SeekingChildren

UNHCR. (2022). Asylum in the UK. UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/uk/asylum-in-the-uk.html#:~:text=How many refugees are there,are hosted by developing countries