

Social media, social capital and adolescents living in state care: A multi-perspective and multimethod qualitative study

Abstract

Social media are used daily by billions to communicate. Adolescents living in state care are no different, yet the potential implications of their social media use are. Despite the global use of social media and evidence highlighting their role in social capital cultivation, how adolescents living in state care make use of social media remains unknown with discussions tending to focus exclusively on risk. Using data from a four-year Digital Life Story work (DLSW) research programme, this paper explores adolescents' and social care professional's (n=45) perspectives on the everyday use of social media by adolescents living in state care. Using an ethnographic multimethod approach, extracts of conversations from the four English residential homes engaged in the DLSW programme were thematically analysed. Three major themes emerged; *contacts as currency*, *promoting and protecting the self* and *transitions*. Analysis illustrate how adolescents living in state care use social media as active digital agents and the need to reframe this usage to enable benefits to be enacted. The paper concludes that urgent research is needed to enable practitioners and policy makers to show a deeper appreciation of the potentials of social media enabling a more balanced approach to succeed in practice.

Keywords: Social media; social capital; adolescents living in state care; internet; residential care

Introduction

The continued diffusion and accessibility of social media applications have seen use accelerate exponentially (Statista, 2017). Approximately 2.34 billion people use social media and the numbers continue to grow (Statista, 2017). Research suggests that 92% of 13-17 year olds go online daily and have at least one social media account (Chaffey, 2016). It is reasonable to assume that a similar proportion of adolescents living in state care have access to social media. Despite a growing call for a more 'digital resilience' informed perspective (Telenor Group, 2013; Hammond and Cooper, 2015; Ecorys, 2016), potential communications via social media can be foregrounded solely as risk. Usage rates dictate that risk needs to be part of safeguarding conversations, but not the only part given attention. Safeguarding via attempting to block access alone is shortsighted. To safeguard children and adolescents, policy makers and practitioners must engage in this space.

Research has consistently highlighted how social media apps can be a resource for acquiring psychosocial benefits of belonging to networks, known as social capital, through cultivating connections within these networks. A sustained research agenda able to inform practitioners and policy makers regarding how adolescents living in state care engage with social media and how this engagement may act as a resource for promoting benefits from belonging to prosocial networks is vital. To date, this is absent.

The current paper represents a step-change. It will illustrate how adolescents living in state care use social media purposefully as active digital participants.

The paper starts by outlining fundamental features of social media. The concept of social capital, literature concerning its relationship with social media and the applications of these phenomena to adolescents living in state care are then discussed. The context of the data generation is then outlined. From the analysis of a multi-perspective and multimethod qualitative data set, the potential role of social media in assisting the accrual, and use, of social capital during and beyond one's time in care is illustrated. The paper concludes by offering expansive ways for social policy and social work practices regarding social media to be underpinned by offline best practice ideas.

What is social media?

Broadly speaking social media platforms are internet-based storehouses of user generated content/data. These are accessed through a person (user) creating a profile and accessing an account. Profiles are linked to users and display information about them. Social media platforms rely on users becoming part of other users' online social networks. This is achieved by accepting requests or by requesting to join the networks of others. Users can choose different levels of privacy, limiting who can and cannot view different elements of their profile.

As there is a dearth of research regarding how adolescents living in state care use social media, the following sections will consider social media usage by adolescents more broadly. This knowledge will then be translated to existing literature regarding adolescents' experiences of living in state care.

Social capital and social media

Research on the use of social media to form, maintain and extend a range of relationships suggests accessibility to social capital is enhanced via social media use. Social capital is an approach to examining the psychological and social benefits engendered through individual's social networks (Bourdieu, 1983; Coleman 1990; Putnam, 1995). Social capital research is an expansive area. Of particular interest to this discussion are the 'network' elements of the concept. Namely: the 'linking' of contacts to formal structures and organisations that may assist with opportunities and personal progression; the 'bonding' of fragmented social life; and the 'bridging' of communities to those beyond people's immediate physical and psychosocial environment (Putnam, 1995). The application of social capital to the experiences of adolescents living in state care is underutilised and largely absent in relation to personal transitions. The application of social capital to social media is however more established.

Steinfeld et al. (2008) use two elements of Putnam's (1995) formulation of social capital to differentiate the types of social capital gained from engaging with social media, in particular Facebook, using a friend typology. They suggested that bonding social capital was a feature of 'real friends' found in tightly-knit, emotionally close relationships. For example, family members and highly valued friends. Whereas bridging social capital was a feature found in 'Facebook friends'. These were typified by: "...loose connections between individuals who may provide useful information or new perspectives...but typically no emotional support." (Steinfeld et al., 2008: p. 436).

boyd (2006) highlighted an apparent difference between 'Facebook friends' and 'real friends' in popular youth discourse. The most striking difference was in terms of investments made to uphold these two friend typologies. boyd (2006) suggested that 'Facebook friends' offered users an imagined audience, guiding behavioural and cultural norms. Whereas 'real friends' were those users reported feeling psychologically closer to and who they were willing to invest more time with to maintain relationships. Ellison et al. (2010) highlighted that Facebook-related communication may serve as a social lubricant. They reported that users may convert weak social ties or 'Facebook friends' into closer ones via sharing requests for support and/or information. Mango et al. (2012) suggested a similar trend; highlighting social media may help adolescents negotiate a psychosocial need for permanent relationships in a geographically mobile world. Such practices are likely to be of use to adolescents in state care, a population frequently reported as needing additional support to make important societal, developmental and care-specific transitions (Stein and Munro, 2008; Butterworth et al., 2016).

The role played by social media tools in enabling the maintenance and promotion of established and newly established social relationships are consistent research messages (boyd, 2008). These types of communication and their benefits are not limited to social media. However, social media does present as an efficient way to maintain and/or generate social capital and one popular amongst adolescents.

Translating existing knowledge of social media and social capital to adolescents living in state care

The majority of knowledge regarding social media usage and social capital cultivation emerges from research with United States (US) undergraduate students. Using this knowledge base is problematic due to differing everyday life experiences. Guadagno et al. (2013) begin to demonstrate the applicability of existing evidence around adolescent's uses of social media and experiences of social capital. Surveying participants (n=303, 237 US undergraduates and 86 homeless young adults), Guadagno et al. (2013) highlight similarities between groups in terms of the ubiquity of, and use of, social media to stay in touch with friends. However, they indicated that undergraduate usage could be characterised as recreational, whereas homeless young adults tended to be more purposeful. This purposeful trend was replicated in Humphry's (2014) Australian sample of homeless young adults. Humphry (2014) characterised her samples' goal-directed use as seeking psychological proximity, support and physical shelter.

Homelessness is a significant issue for adolescents transitioning from state care (National Audit Office, 2015), as is residential instability (Sinclair et al., 2007). Social media enables the creation and maintenance of larger, diffuse networks from which to draw a range of physical and psychosocial resources. Such a feature is likely to be of use to adolescents experiencing transitions within, and beyond, state care. In their work, which utilised computer simulations in relation to residential mobility and socio-economic conditions, Oishi and Kesebir (2012) suggest optimal social networking strategies.

Despite being based upon a sample experiencing differing life phases meaning optimal strategies for specific life phases is obscured (N=247, mean age 31.11 years, SD = 11.81, range 15 – 81 years), they concluded that when residential permanency is stable, a small number of deep contacts are optimal. Conversely, when residential stability is not guaranteed, broad social networks with shallow ties are beneficial (Oishi and Kesebir, 2012). The applicability of the 'optimal' strategy suggested by Oishi and Kesbir (2012) to adolescents experiencing state care requires a more situated consideration.

A rare example exploring the perspectives of adolescents in state care towards digital media (encompassing social media) is provided by Sen's (2016) exploratory work with ten adolescents. Through a series of interviews Sen (2016), concluded that his sample's digital media usage was largely similar to that of their peers. The work called for more research to observe digital practices during transitions and lacked the situated perspective of social care professionals examined elsewhere (Hammond and Cooper, 2015).

Physical and psychosocial isolation are frequently reported by adolescents experiencing episodes of care and during transitions, within and beyond, state care settings. A wide body of research evidence suggests that social support whilst in, and beyond care, has the potential to increase successful outcomes during the life course. However, far from homogenous, the social networks of individuals in state care can become shattered by frequent placement moves (Dixon, 2007). In focusing on adolescents experiencing adolescence in state care, the role social media may play during the negotiation of compressed

and accelerated physical (within and beyond state care) and psychosocial, developmental transitions, emerges.

Research indicates social media may contribute; to increased self-esteem and mental well-being (Best et al., 2014), perceived social support, act as a safe space for identity experimentation (Best et al., 2016), help the maintenance of positive peer relationships and assist physical and psychosocial transitions (Yang and Bradford-Brown, 2013). Clearly, the potential benefits of social media apps for a population frequently reported as feeling; worthless, depressed and isolated (Fahlberg 1995; Stein and Munro, 2008) warrant examination.

Where instantaneous digital communication exists, offline vulnerabilities and complexities permeate, but these risks need to be more fully understood. Fursland (2010: p.1) described social media as “...emotional dynamite...” in relation to tracing and reunion in cases of adoption. Emotional combustibility is not limited to adopted adolescents. Neither are the ways to engage with adolescents to promote their online ‘safety fuses’. For social work policy and practice with adolescents, it is imperative that we rapidly begin to think, talk and do differently (Livingstone et al., 2011; Davies et al., 2014). This alternative perspective must be informed by a body of research currently lacking. This paper aims to address this gap by exploring *how* adolescents are experiencing social media utilising data from a four-year long participatory study. The Digital Life Story Work (DLSW) research programme explored ways in which digital media (including laptops, Smartphones, camcorders and

the internet) may encourage adolescents living in state care to engage in self-reflective dialogues (Hammond and Cooper, 2013; Hammond, 2016; Hammond and Cooper 2016). Because of the digital nature of the DLSW programme, conversations regarding adolescents' use of social media with their peers, SH (lead author) as the present researcher, and social care professionals were frequent. This data provides an opportunity to explore how adolescents living in state care use social media, and additionally their perspective on this use and those of the professionals in these settings.

Method

This paper is based on the analysis of various forms of data gathered during seven months of fieldwork within a four-year Digital Life Story Work (DLSW) research programme. This research took place across four residential care settings in England. Fieldwork visits aimed to facilitate and explore stakeholders' (adolescents and residential social care professionals) engagement with, and use of, digital media (including laptops, Smartphones and camcorders). An ethnographic methodology situating people as active agents, engaged in the construction of experience and meaning, was embedded within the DLSW programme. Consequently, fieldwork visits explored the dynamics of everyday situated relationships and lived experiences. The fluidity of context and topic resulted in a multi-perspective (adolescents and residential social care professionals) and multimethod qualitative approach being used. The range of participants and research methods enabled a robust and holistic account of the situated complexities of the everyday experiences of social media usage within, and across the care settings, to be constructed.

This inductive approach generated a data set which consisted of: reflective fieldnotes from focused participant observations; and transcripts from: situated ethnographic conversations, focus groups, semi-structured interviews and in-situ recordings of conversations stimulated by the adolescent's use of their social media accounts during DLSW facilitation sessions. DLSW facilitation sessions involved SH (as researcher) working with adolescents to upload content (including webcam dairies, old and recent pictures) from their everyday lives to a bespoke private web tool. During such sessions, adolescents tended to have their social media profiles and the DLSW web tool open simultaneously, browsing interchangeably between them. This methodological approach enabled the researcher to construct an understanding of the broader significance of social media in the local contexts.

Participants

Ten adolescents living in state care (6 males and 4 females, *M* age = 15.3 years, age range: 14-18 years) and a total of 35 residential social care professionals (ages not sought) were recruited. The total sample (N=45) was taken from four residential homes across England. The homes were a mixture of state-run and independent sector providers. Managers self-identified these homes as mainstream children's residential homes.

Ethical considerations

The DLSW programme sought to use digital technologies to stimulate the sharing of self-reflective life narratives by adolescents living in residential

settings in the context of supportive relationships (Hammond and Cooper 2013; Hammond 2016). Ethical concerns for such a study were paramount. These considerations encapsulated those concerned with the 'doing' of the project (i.e. potential for inappropriate content to be created and shared) and its 'research' element (i.e. who should and could provide informed consent and issues around; anonymity and confidentiality). These elements were further sensitised by the emotive ethos of life story work and the residential state care context. Ethical approval was gained from the lead author's departmental ethics committee and the state care providers' research governance processes. Informed consent was gathered from relevant residential home gatekeepers, residential social care professionals and innovatively from adolescents themselves via the use of short Participant Information Clips (Hammond and Cooper, 2011). Participants were repeatedly made aware of the in-situ recording taking place during the implementation of the DLSW resources. Participants were informed that identifying details would be replaced with pseudonyms, as is the case in this paper. Where the potential to identify participants within other publications exists, alternative pseudonyms have been used.

Analytical procedure

Analysis was informed by a social constructionist framework. The 7 months of fieldwork consisted of 186 visits across the four care settings. The primary author's reflective fieldnotes from each visit were reviewed for references made to the use of social media. The fieldnotes contained reflective content whilst indicating topics discussed and activities undertaken during each visit. Reviewing the fieldnotes enabled the researcher to identify visits in which

conversations around social media occurred, directing analytical attention to relevant transcripts. The transcribed data relating to these fieldnotes were then reviewed with particular attention to social media. Following an initial identification of 125 relevant visits, a further 13 visits were removed leaving a data corpus of 112 visits. Relevant transcripts were then imported into Nvivo, to assist the structuring and analysis of the data set.

A data driven or 'inductive' thematic approach was employed (Clarke and Braun, 2013). This meant that after reading and re-reading transcripts, initial codes were created, revisited and then themes developed from the grouping of codes. In this way, themes were identified as emergent from the data set rather than being theoretically driven. These themes are articulated with theoretical insights and related literature to draw out their significance for policy, practice and to inform future research trajectories.

Analysis and discussion

Across the data three major themes emerged *contacts as currency*, *promoting and protecting the self* and *transitions*. Extracts illustrate each theme with discussions of their implications for policy and practice before conclusions are presented.

Theme 1 – Contacts as currency

For adolescents in state care maintaining connections or re-connecting via social media was experienced purposefully. Many adolescents talked about 'how many friends/followers' they had. The theme *contacts as currency* contained the connotation that those outside the immediate state care

environment and, indeed state care itself, were a more precious commodity. As with any economy, how the differing types and numbers of contacts in one's network were valued were effected by outside influences. In this theme, 'market forces' influencing availability and the 'value' of contacts were linked to attending school, placement stability and the number of potential local competitors.

Extract 1:

"Am not being friends with no one else from ere cos cos they'll probably nick my friends off here... I got a hundred and one friends on ere I have... I'm urm I'm crashing round one's later I am..."

Ian (17)

DLSW session: Ian, also present Steve, Robert and researcher

The *contacts as currency* theme contained the notion that, connecting and socialising with contacts beyond the local residential care context was something to be sought. Extract 1 illuminates a strategy deployed to protect the availability of 'goods' (social or otherwise) from local competitors.

Given Ian is likely to have experienced impaired levels of care in his life, an uncertainty about the availability of future social support is not surprising. However, taking this protective approach might reduce, rather than protect the accessibility of social capital. Providing a more concrete example, homelessness is often experienced by adolescents transitioning beyond care settings (National Audit Office, 2015). As such, Ian's ability to 'crash' or live for

a period of time at a mutual friend's house is likely to be reduced if he had added more peers from his immediate local residential context. By not saturating his social network with fellow resident's profiles, his strategy may reduce competition for resource from other care home residents. Paradoxically, this approach could have reduced the ability of Ian to benefit from contacts within the networks of others present.

Extracts 2 and 3 are from webcam diaries recorded by Ross (18) approximately two months apart. The sequential nature of the extracts indicates a broadening social network strategy as advocated by Oishi and Kesbir (2012). The potential translation of weak social ties into stronger or closer ones, via a combination of offline and online practices, is also illustrated (Ellison et al., 2010).

Extract 2:

"...Yeah yesterday I went to my cousin's again... you know it's been quite cool cos I've been hanging around with him quite a lot recently with all his friends... loads of people it's pretty smart... need to add Steve and them lot on Facebook really..."

Ross (18)

Webcam upload from DLSW session: Ross, also present researcher

Extract 3:

"...been staying out yeah... been sleeping around my cousin Jim's getting to know Steve... he's on my course ...playing on Call of Duty with them a lot had

a good time with all them and you know they know people like that you know go to college and that...hang on...he's just DM'd [sent a direct message] me..."

Ross (18)

Webcam upload from DLSW session: Ross, also present researcher

The extracts highlight how Ross' offline and online networks intersect and how offline friendships can be facilitated online. They also begin to demonstrate the different connotations of making peer contact beyond the world of state care as a way to enable further network growth. This is not to deprecate the relationships shared between peers living in state care, but in the context of the *contacts as currency* theme, contact with those beyond state care was orientated to offer more potential social capital gains. In many ways 'importing' contacts from outside state care was appreciated as beneficial. For populations in state care, the *contacts as currency* theme indicates how broad social networks with shallow ties with peers beyond state care may be sought and orientated. Similarly, this theme converges and builds upon the trends emergent from previous research (Ellison et al., 2010; Guadagno et al., 2013; Humphry, 2014).

Narrative challenges and stigma facing adolescents in care also find resonance in the *contacts as currency* theme. In repeat interviews with adolescents placed residentially, Jansen (2010) discusses how the availability of simpler family narratives appealed to her Norwegian sample, with non-typical narratives experienced as stigmatizing. Stigma and shame are issues

described by many adolescents in state care (Rahilly and Hendry, 2014) and reported as particularly strong for those in residential care (Coram Voice, 2015). For the DLSW sample, non-state care contacts may have been experienced as a way to construct a distance from state care and a sense of connectedness with life before it.

As with monetary systems, the value of contacts will differ with supply, demand and competition. Hence, when transitions occur the value associated with different contact types is likely to fluctuate. How transitions from within, (including those across differing placement types) and beyond state care alter how this value is orientated is something discussed further in the *transitions* theme. A strategy aiming to enhance social capital provision via broad social networks with shallow ties and peers beyond state care is likely to be experienced professionally as problematic (Hammond and Cooper, 2015). How such networking approaches might operate for adolescents living in state care, stigmatised as particularly 'at-risk', is now explored.

Theme 2 - *Promoting and protecting the self*

Popularity is frequently seen as a prominent concern of adolescents. Social media profiles display the number of contacts in one's network. As Shapiro and Margolin (2014) recognise, for adolescents the size of friendship networks often operate as a popularity point of reference. Popularity is valuable as demonstrated in the *contacts as currency* theme and online popularity demands a degree of self-promotion. Despite the demands for online display, the need to manage contacts and shield the self from troubling

connections emerged across the dataset. This played out in different ways and is encapsulated in the emergent *promoting and protecting the self* theme. The theme highlights how adolescents are navigating the psychosocial concerns of experiencing a perceived 'smaller' social network, how they experienced contact with family members, negotiated joining, or not joining, networks occupied by professionals and the challenges of representing a coherent and cohesive online persona.

Extract 4:

"...Do you want to know how many friends I've got on Facebook? 28 or something. But I know all of erm (pauses) they're my proper friends... I don't add people I don't know..."

Scott (14)

DLSW session, also present researcher

Extract 5:

"...I have known them, known them for years.....hang on, if, if I find one, I'll find a person, a good friend of mine.....she's been one of my best mates for ages..."

Tammy (15)

DLSW session, also present researcher

The extracts highlight the emergence of the different ways in which adolescents viewed and used social media. Given the myriad of advice informed by prominent 'stranger danger' discourse, conversations regarding the ability to manage one's networks, and therefore perceived risk, were

frequent. In this theme, adolescents constructed their own networks as smaller than others. These were experienced as a way to circumvent risk and not as a sign of being unpopular. Sen (2016) reported his sample had on average 107 Facebook friends, comparing this to an average of 176 research indicates US students had (Reich et al., 2012). The purpose of the DLSW programme, from which extracts are taken, was not to examine the number of contacts adolescents had, hence this data is not available for comparison. Even so, had such data been available, such a small sample would have made generalisations unfeasible. However, Scott's comments above highlight a more nuanced use of social media. In relation to the at-risk nature of vulnerable adolescents, this theme positioned 'unknowns' as risk.

It is important to recognise that accessing social media in the context of the DLSW programme was undertaken within the residential environment. Analysis presented is driven by data collected in this setting. A setting in which the ability to identify risk means the same risks are manageable and preventable. Such settings are also a context where adolescents have repeatedly reported feelings of loneliness and isolation (Dixon, 2007). Scott's apparent smaller network may have allowed him to generate feelings of psychological closeness associated with social capital gains from communication with 'real friends' (boyd, 2008). In agreement with previous research (boyd, 2008; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008; Sen, 2015), the use of social media to stay in contact with people known to adolescents was extremely prevalent and experienced as important. Extract 6, taken from a

conversation in which Sal (14) is showing the researcher contacts on her Facebook profile, illustrates this.

Extract 6:

“...talk to my family my family [clicking on the ‘friends’ button showing the profiles of her contacts] My niece...My home girl Laura.. My old foster carer... Wait there... My sister’s best friend ... my sister.. my older sister... urm my brother’s missis.... my er Laura’s boyfriend my Sister’s boyfriend err my brother Got a new tattoo has he? ...”

Sal 14

DLSW session, also present researcher

In extract 6 Sal demonstrates how she uses social media, like the majority of its users, to keep up-to-date with posts from her friends, and in this case, also her family. In the context of state care, contact of this nature may play out in numerous ways due to differing complexities. Professional’s views on such networking are frequently heard (Fursland, 2012; Hammond and Cooper, 2015), the voices of the adolescents themselves has been noticeable via its absence. Regardless of Sal’s experiences of state care and her relationships with those outlined, by keeping up with the everydayness of life events, a sense of being bonded to contacts can be maintained via interactions prompted by social media postings.

The *promoting and protecting the self* theme also contained instances where professionals had made attempts to add adolescents’ profiles to institutionally

created social media accounts. Data highlighted staff member and adolescents' perspectives and reactions to this practice in relation to how each sought to negotiate this contact.

Extract 7:

"...They were putting some really horrible stuff up on it so rather than ban them Obviously you can't monitor the kind of chat bit but even if we can't see what they're chatting about it makes them think twice before putting something rude on it..."

Chloe (Home manager)

Staff focus group

In line with the findings of Berridge et al. (2012), residential homes in the DLSW research programme were very concerned about how best to monitor internet use. Therefore, although attempts to reduce risk via an online presence had been made, the risk of the instant messenger function or 'chat bit' (which enables private content to be sent between users) persisted.

Regardless of their risk management orientation, digital safeguarding strategies can be interpreted in a variety of ways. How strategies are received are influenced by wider social, cultural and psychosocial experiences. This element was mirrored paradoxically in adolescents' reactions to attempts to 'add' or 'follow' them via social media in the *promoting and protecting the self* theme. As the following extracts illustrate, adolescents had differing ways to navigate this contact when interpreted as a monitoring activity.

Extract 8:

“...they tried adding me and I just declined it (laughs) ... I don't exactly want them knowing my fucking business...”

Chelsea (15)

Adolescent Focus Group

Extract 9:

“... I've got two profiles.... one they know about and I use like properly and one I've got hundreds of friends on...”

Natasha (15)

DLSW session, also present researcher

Social media can make visible aspects of social life that users can spend time trying to avoid. For adolescents living in state care, adding an organisational/professionally run profile highlights a connectedness to experiences of state care that may not always be desirable. From a sociological perspective, adding such a profile may be akin to spoiling ones' identity, leaving oneself open to experiencing stigma (Goffman, 1963). Experiences of shame resonate across the state care system (Rahilly and Hendry, 2014; Coram Voice, 2015). For Chelsea and Natasha, adding a profile that was overtly a residential home, would have opened their online identity to becoming spoilt. Something, they were protective of and keen to avoid.

Interacting and continually representing and re-representing one's self via social media are not unique features of adolescents in state care. Choosing or not choosing to add colleagues/peers, 'pruning' contacts, deleting embarrassing photos or social media profiles ahead of job interviews, highlights the growing awareness of online self-presentation. Ironically, Chelsea and Natasha were in many ways protecting their online privacy, something that adolescents are actively encouraged to do.

In line with Ballantyne et al. (2010) and Sen (2016), extracts 8 and 9 highlight that adolescents can be very protective of their online privacy. It is the conceptualisation of what is meant by privacy that can differ between stakeholders. In extracts 8 and 9, this worked to distance online representations of self from state care, but not all attempts by carers to 'add' or 'follow' adolescents via social media were interpreted negatively. This will now be explored via the *transitions* theme.

Theme 3 - *Transitions*

Though not a homogeneous group, adolescents in state care tend to experience a great deal of placement instability (Sinclair et al., 2007). Frequent moves dislodge and disrupt connectedness. For adolescents living in foster or residential care transitions beyond care may be permanently on the horizon. Alongside moves to prolong and assist transitions into adulthood, evidence of the need for psychosocial support, effectively someone to show adolescents the way, consistently emerges. As does the role of transitions

beyond care in exacerbating pre-existing mental wellbeing and health issues (Akister et al., 2010).

Towards the final phase of the DSLW programme Kerry (16) had been told that for 'behavioural reasons' she was to be moved to another placement. For adolescents living in state care, transitions can often be accompanied by the inability to maintain relationships. Essentially, previously experienced relationships can be severed, as can the potential to make use of social capital cultivated in these relationships. The ability to call on a social capital reserve via social media becomes more overt when considered in relation to evidence highlighting that, not only do adolescents living in state care move to independent sooner than their peers, they do so quicker, younger and with fewer resources and support (Stein and Munro, 2008). For Kerry, the ability of the residential home's social media profile to support her transition emerges.

Extract 10:

"...Cos I l'm like leaving soon yeah, and if they, if they'd have never like put that up yeah I wouldn't actually to be able to that much get in contact with them... except for phone but they've, but they need they need like other phone calls don't they?"

Kerry (16)

Semi-structured interview

Rather than an intrusion or attempt to monitor, this theme orientated social media as a channel of communication and as a way to call on one's social capital reserve. This theme is similar to the adolescent-parent connections

identified by Coyne et al. (2014). The profile was experienced as a resource, one that may be deemed particularly important before, during and after accelerated and compressed transitions.

The transitions theme also contained interpretations of the role of social media before, during and after transitions experienced from a residential social care professional perspective.

Extract 11:

“...I mean we even ended up with kids that have left here, have moved on with them putting in a friend request... I mean which is quite nice (pause) it’s a good way for them all to keep in contact...”

Stephen (staff member)

Semi-structured interview

The psychosocial needs of adolescents at critical transition points are well-established (Stein, 2008; Stein and Munro, 2008; Butterworth et al., 2016). The repeated message is that consistent relationships may prepare, support during and assist after transitions. However, adolescents repeatedly report feeling abandoned and isolated at a point in time when they are at their most psychologically vulnerable (Butterworth et al., 2016). The need to be supported before, during and beyond transitions should not be surprising messages to anyone who has experienced transitions themselves. Yet many of us are likely still to be in contact with people who we shared relationships with prior to these transitions. Though the type of social capital gained from

relationships may change from bonding to bridging over time as the individual becomes relocated and commences new relationships, the support of previous relationships undoubtedly assists transitions. The role of social media in enabling support to flow across transition points offers dynamic and attuned ways to proceed.

Summative conclusions

This important paper represents a vital step-change illustrating *how* adolescents living in state care use social media purposefully as active digital participants. The paper illustrates the psychosocial opportunities afforded by social media for adolescents in state care, whilst problematizing default assumptions of social media as solely risk. We argue that the social networks generated by social media should be viewed as an important potential resource for psychosocial support and that the risks of social network use shift as adolescents mature and progress towards independence.

The three themes construct a portrayal of the meaning and value of social media for adolescents living in state care. Theme 1, *contacts as currency* underlines how the number and quality of connections established through social networking can act as a much-needed social lubricant, for a population facing harder, faster and steeper transitions into adulthood with fewer resources than their peers do. The social capital lens helps to position the short-term risks of social networking within the medium and longer-term context of the lifelong legacy of state care experiences. Theme 2 *promotion and protection of the self* indicates the contextual complexity through which

adolescents navigate their online and offline persona and relationships. The display of an online persona requires the careful curation of self-presentation and this content management incorporates the way in which relationships are established and disclosed. The final theme '*transitions*', helps to link the social capital and positioning processes of the first two themes. Relationships can be positioned as harmful or nurturing, hindering or facilitative to varying degrees as adolescents move through their experience of life before, during, and after care. How adolescents perceive, respond to and value online and offline relationships, and how these relationships interconnect, will vary across this journey. What does not is the need to support adolescents in pursuing their digital resilience.

Our study has limitations. As with any qualitative study, findings are not intended to be representative. The DLSW programme sought rich, in-depth and situated understandings emergent from residential care settings. No account is static or contextless. Accounts involving dynamic and rapidly evolving digital technologies are a critical case in point. By focusing on social media as a vehicle for social capital accessibility, the nuanced ways in which different social media applications may be used for different social capital reasons were not available to this analysis. Future research must recruit adolescents from different placement provisions, explore how social media types and access (i.e. Smartphone, tablet, laptop etc) impacts social capital provision and be more longitudinal in design.

Like other forms of social networks, those generated through social media play a part in opening up opportunities for friendship and support for adolescents, as well as potential challenges to their safety and wellbeing. We suggest that social workers and carers have an important role in guiding adolescents in assessing and managing associated risks. However, the manner in which this is achieved is important, as becoming digitally autonomous is a progressively important part of transitions to independence.

Our findings suggest adolescents must be seen as active agents in the development of their social relationships. The role of social workers would be to carefully negotiate a way to support adolescent's digital resilience development. We believe that social workers already hold the relationship skills and dispositions to accomplish this, but we recognise that there are gaps in the education and resources available to support them in understanding the risks and benefits of social media. A further challenge is the dominance of the risk paradigm within the system of state care. Although there are many initiatives that challenge the dominance of this paradigm (Signs of Safety for example), risk and associated blame still play a confounding role in the decision-making that surround adolescents in state care. We contend that further research into the impact of social media through the conceptual lens provided by social capital is required. Evidence-based policy informing more focus on social media costs and benefits within social work education, would enable a more balanced approach to succeed in practice.

What remains clear is that without robust research evidence, practitioners and policy makers risk obscuring the social capital loss legacy of state care experiences. We are not advocating a 'social media free-for-all', or presenting it as a 'magic wand'. We are arguing that there are positive ways to engage with the elephant in the room who is swiping and tapping away on their Smartphone. The next step is to learn how.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participants, Prof Beth Neil and the editor reviewers for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of the paper.

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