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“The world we live in now”: A qualitative investigation into parents’, teachers’, and children’s perceptions of social networking site use

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Background. Younger children are increasingly using social networking sites (SNS; Ofcom, *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report*, 2019, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/108182/children-parents-media-use-attitudes-2017.pdf). In doing so, they may experience both benefits (e.g., enhanced social capital) and risks (e.g., cyberbullying). Parents and teachers play an important role in shaping children’s perceptions via internet mediation behaviours (Livingstone *et al.*, 2017, *J. Commun.*, 67, 82).

Aims. An understanding of both children’s and adults’ perceptions of the risks and benefits of SNS use within the home and school contexts is limited within current literature. This study explored parents’, teachers’, and children’s perceptions of the risks and benefits of SNS use and how adults mediate this.

Sample(s). A sample of 42 participants, including 13 parents (aged 28–48), 14 teachers (aged 26–54), and 15 children (aged 7–12), participated within this study.

Methods. Participants took part in one-to-one semi-structured interviews exploring SNS use and risk and benefit perceptions, as well as internet mediation behaviours with adult participants.

Results. Findings highlight bonding social capital as the main benefit. Children recognize stranger danger as a risk but fail to perceive the wider online risks (e.g., cyberbullying). Parents’ and teachers’ restrictive mediation behaviours are informed by perceptions of stranger danger, safeguarding, and children lacking online responsibility.

Conclusions. Findings highlight the importance of shifting guidance from stranger danger to discussing the wider SNS risks, as well as the benefits; it is crucial for greater financial investment and policy to overcome barriers to e-safety education.

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Immersed within a digital society since birth, children of primary school age are increasingly participating online (Turner, 2015). Since their conception in 2004, social networking sites (SNS) have shaped online communication. As online platforms which allow the user to create a profile, share information, and interact with others (Lu & Yang, 2014), SNS span many online communicative services such as Facebook, SnapChat, and Instagram. Although possessing less focus upon the sharing of content, gaming platforms such as Fortnite, also provide opportunities for socializing online (Du, Grace, Jagannath, & Salen-Tekinbas, 2021). Despite age restrictions of SNS averaging 13 years, 4% of 5–7 year-olds and 21% of 8–11 year-olds currently own an SNS profile (Ofcom, 2019). Engaging with SNS can be beneficial but equally there are many risks. Adults manifest their risk concerns within their mediational involvement (Lee & Chae, 2012; Livingstone et al., 2017).

‘Mediation’ is defined as the strategic management of children’s media use via restricting use, technical monitoring, and communication (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). Children report being informed of internet safety by parents and teachers equally, highlighting the mediating role that both play within children’s online awareness (Ofcom, 2019; Shin & Lwin, 2017).

Research which prioritizes children’s perceptions of SNS use remains limited. Due to the age restrictions of SNS, it is often believed that children aged 7–12 years are not accessing it. Exploring both parents’ and teachers’ perceptions of SNS is important in understanding what influences their mediation behaviours, as well as how these shape children’s access to, and perceptions of, the risks and benefits of SNS use.

Benefits and risks of SNS use

Mesch and Baker (2010) propose that online interpersonal communication is only possible with some degree of online disclosure. Thus, to engage with SNS, the user must disclose information (English & John, 2013). The appropriateness of online disclosure shapes audience response (Lin & Utz, 2017). Appropriateness is judged by the content of the disclosure and the nature of the audience (disclosure personalism framework; Bazarova, 2012). For example, public disclosure of intimate information would be inappropriate, whereas private disclosure (e.g., via a direct message) to a friend would be appropriate (Bazarova, 2012). The inappropriate disclosure (over-disclosure) could lead to reputation impairment, negatively impacting self-esteem (Baruh & Cemalcılar, 2015; Bryce & Fraser, 2014). The appropriate disclosure, however, could benefit social capital, enhancing self-esteem (Lin, Levordashka, & Utz, 2016; Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007). It could therefore be argued that online disclosure behaviours are a key catalyst to the risks and benefits of SNS use.

Adults typically disclose more successfully due to greater life experience (Hoofnagle, King, Li, & Turow, 2010; Madden et al., 2013). Children may be less successful due to less awareness of over-disclosure risks (Lange, 2016; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011; Runions, Shapka, Dooley, & Modecki, 2013). For example, children are more likely to share passwords and experience cyberbullying (the use of digital means to direct aggressive and hostile behaviour towards an individual with the intention to upset or harm, Meter & Bauman, 2015; Tokunaga, 2010). On the other hand, children who have grown up within a technical world may be skilled at managing their online disclosure (Ofcom, 2019).

Online disclosure can impact social capital: the maintenance of social networks (Putnam, 2004). Bridging (forming) and bonding (strengthening) friendships can

positively impact self-esteem, social skills, and well-being (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Using SNS for social capital goals, however, can increase over-disclosure (Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Ellison et al., 2007), which may result in friendship difficulties due to misinterpreted communication (Meter & Bauman, 2015; Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009). Social capital is particularly important during development (Leonard, 2005) and thus the SNS risks and benefits associated with social capital may intensify during childhood.

Children develop self-concept from an early age (Burns, 1979; Goffman, 1978). Self-concept considers our perceptions of our past, current, and future selves contextualized by our beliefs and identity (Altheide, 2000; Goffman, 1978; Rettie, 2009). Importantly, children can explore self-concept more strategically through online self-presentation: conveying information about the self to manage impressions of others (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). The disinhibition of SNS use allows children to systematically disclose about the real self, ideal self, or facets of the false self (impress/compare; deceive; explore; Donath & Boyd, 2004; Hall & Pennington, 2013) more so than offline (Schouten et al., 2007).

Online presence can enhance visibility to cyberbullies, resulting in victimization (Dredge, Gleeson, & de la Piedad Garcia, 2014; Park, Na, & Kim, 2014). Friendship difficulties, due to misinterpreted communication online, can result in cyberbullying if left unresolved (Beran & Li, 2008). Also, trialling out the ideal self or a noticeably false self can expose children to ridicule from peers who may identify the inauthenticity (Dredge et al., 2014). The long-term adverse mental health impacts of cyberbullying are widely reported within literature (Cowie, 2013; Smith, 2012; Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, & Tippett, 2006).

Parents and teachers

Parenting styles are driven by the goals of the parent embedded within their perceptions of that scenario (Baumrind, 2005; Darling & Steinberg, 1993). Parenting styles are adapting to the digital age: internet parenting styles (Livingstone et al., 2017).

Internet parenting styles which depict restrictive mediation behaviours (ultimate goal of limiting access to risks; Livingstone et al., 2017) are the most prominent within the digital age (De Morentin, Cortés, Medrano, & Apodaca, 2014; Kirwil, 2009; Livingstone et al., 2017). Enabling mediation behaviours (ultimate goal of enhancing access to opportunities and benefits; Livingstone et al., 2017) are less prominent. Internet parenting styles inform family digital literacy practices: the interaction between children and parents to shape technological involvement in the home (Plowman, Stevenson, Stephen, & McPake, 2012; Sefton-Green, Marsh, Erstad, & Flewitt, 2016). For example, the use of enabling mediation behaviours may foster a family digital literacy environment incorporating SNS use (Zaman, Nouwen, Vanattenhoven, De Ferrerre, & Looy, 2016).

Restrictive mediation behaviours predict less time spent online by children and less exposure to both the risks and benefits (Lee, 2013; Livingstone et al., 2017; Symons, Ponnet, Walrave, & Heirman, 2017). Enabling mediation behaviours increase not only children's access to the benefits but also the risks (Livingstone et al., 2017). Restrictive mediation behaviours positively predict children's negative SNS perceptions (Lee, 2013). Whereas, enabling mediation behaviours may enhance children's positive perceptions (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Nikken & Jansz, 2006). Importantly, this highlights that parental mediation behaviours and perceptions impact their child's access and perceptions of SNS use.

Children recall their teachers' online guidance equally to that of their parents (Ofcom, 2019); this emphasizes their influence upon children's SNS use. Within the United Kingdom, teachers mediate children's SNS use predominantly via e-safety education. E-safety lessons vary hugely between schools and have been widely criticized (Barnard-Wills, 2012; Grey, 2011; Shipton, 2011). E-safety is often not prioritized in comparison with more traditional subjects, such as Literacy and Numeracy (Woollard, 2011). E-safety also requires technical resources (e.g., laptops, iPads) which are limited in many school settings (Alkhatabi, 2017). These barriers to e-safety education restrict teachers' delivery. Subsequently, this may impact children's understanding of the risks and benefits.

Teachers' perceptions of SNS use are often related to over-disclosure concerns regarding blurring the personal and professional spheres (Sharples, Graber, Harrison, & Logan, 2009; de Zwart, Lindsay, Henderson, & Phillips, 2011). These concerns may be heightened with primary-aged children, who are perceived as a greater safeguarding concern (Sharples et al., 2009), influencing teachers' negative perceptions (Hew & Brush, 2007).

Teachers with negative SNS perceptions may deliver more risk-focused lessons (Kalmus, von Feilitzen, & Siibak, 2012). This may result in children perceiving the risks more so than the benefits (Livingstone et al., 2017) or having limited understanding altogether (Manca & Ranieri, 2016). On the other hand, teachers who perceive SNS use more positively may deliver more balanced lessons, considering both the risks and the benefits.

In line with Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development model, the influence of parents and teachers upon children's perceptions of SNS use emphasizes the impact of the microsystem (immediate environment; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). When we also consider the broader societal perceptions of SNS use influencing e-safety education, it is evident that the macrosystem (social and cultural environment) is also influential upon children's digital development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Christensen (2016) argues that the individual cannot be explored as a lone entity within this model and that the social ties between the individual and the surrounding systems must also be explored. In light of this, this study adopts a cross-comparative approach investigating perceptions across groups. This is a novel approach in considering how the relationship between these groups influences development.

Research focus

Research considering the role of parents and teachers within the development of children's SNS risk and benefit perception is limited. We know that children aged 7–12 years are accessing SNS and both parents' and teachers' advice is an important source of information. Yet, we do not know how perceptions and mediation behaviours may directly impact children's perceptions of the risks and benefits of SNS use.

This study aims to explore parents', teachers', and children's (7- to 12-year-olds) perceptions of the risks and benefits of SNS use, as well as adults' mediation behaviours, via thematic analysis of one-to-one semi-structured interviews with a cross-comparative approach. With children, perceptions of the risks and benefits will be discussed regarding notions within the literature: over-disclosure, social capital, self-presentation, and cyberbullying. With parents and teachers, we will explore their own perceptions of the risks and benefits of SNS use, as well as their mediation behaviours. Developing a cross-comparative understanding of parents', teachers', and children's perceptions of the risks

and benefits of SNS use, and how adults' perceptions impact children, will support the design of education, interventions, and policies advising children's SNS use.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through seven primary schools across England to ensure generalizability of findings across UK regions (Table 1). All schools were opportunistically sampled. The lead researcher is an ex-primary school teacher and previously taught at three of the schools (one school in the South and two schools in the North); therefore, these schools were contacted directly. The remaining four schools were recruited following emailing schools across the United Kingdom. Participants consisted of 13 parents (aged 28–48 years; 84.6% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 38.69$ years), 14 teachers (aged 26–54 years; 64.3% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 35.69$ years; including a headteacher), and 15 children (aged 7–12 years; 40% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 9.60$ years). One child's data was omitted from analyses due to a technical error with the recording.

Participants were recruited via opt-in consent letters distributed amongst parents (at the end of the school day when collecting their children) and teachers (within the staff room). These letters comprised information about the nature of the study, participant ethics (right to withdraw; informed consent; anonymity of data), and the lead researcher's email address should they wish to confirm interest in participation. Following expression of interest, these parents and teachers were contacted to arrange an interview date and time at their school. Initially, parents provided consent for their child to be interviewed; children were also verbally informed about the ethics of the study and their right to withdraw at any time by the lead researcher at the beginning of the interview, children were then asked to independently provide verbal assent prior to commencing the interview. Children were reminded that none of their responses would be shared with their parents or children unless the lead researcher felt that they were in danger. Parents and children were recruited as pairs from the same family, except for one child whose parent was not interviewed. Two children were interviewed with the same parent. All teachers, except one, directly taught a child interviewed to ensure perceptions could be related to both teacher and parent mediation.

In order to explore socioeconomic status across the North and South of England, each school's Pupil Premium was used as a proxy measure. Pupil Premium is a government grant provided to schools based on the number of children receiving free school meals, or

Table 1. Participant demographic information for ethnicity and school county

	<i>n</i>							
	Ethnicity			School county				
	White	Asian	Mixed	Essex	Sheffield	Stoke-On-Trent	Surrey	Norwich
Parents	11	2 ^a	0	3	4	4	1	1
Teachers	14	0	0	3	2	6	1	2
Children	11 ^b	3 ^a	1	3	5	4	2	1

Note. ^aOne parent and two children with English as an Additional Language (EAL); ^bOne child registered with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

living with a family household income below £16,190, within that school population (Education & Skills Funding Agency, 2020). In Sheffield, 28.5% of children were pupil premium; in Stoke-On-Trent, 26% children; in Surrey, 19% children; in Norwich, 10% children; in Essex, 7% children.

Measures

Interview questions

The interview questions had a semi-structured design comprising of separate flow charts for parents, teachers, and children (Appendices A–C). This design was implemented based upon academic rigour within the qualitative research community concerning participant-led data (De Wet & Erasmus, 2005; Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017). A flow chart was implemented in response to Deatrck and Faux's (1991) recommendations for child participants.

All interviews began with asking whether the participant owned or had access to any SNS accounts, as well as what their general online activity entailed (Table 2). Participants who identified as not owning/using SNS were asked to explain what SNS were used for. This was to ensure that all participants possessed an accurate interpretation of what SNS are in line with Lu and Yang's (2014) definition of SNS (online platforms with the opportunity to create a profile, share information, and communicate with others) and Du et al.'s (2021) extension of SNS to incorporate games with similar services.

Parents and teachers were firstly asked about their own SNS use to ascertain how familiar they were with SNS. As with child participants, parents and teachers who did not use SNS were also asked to explain what SNS were used for. To explore perceptions of SNS use, parents and teachers were asked about their children's/pupils' SNS use as well as what they believed the risks and benefits to be. To investigate internet mediation behaviours, parents and teachers were asked about their parenting/teaching methods around SNS use. Internet mediation behaviours were operationalized in relation to Livingstone's (2017) definitions. Enabling mediation behaviours were identified in responses depicting openness towards and support of children's SNS use, whereas restriction mediation behaviours were identified within responses suggesting the limitation of children's SNS use.

Vignettes

Vignettes were adopted due to their effectiveness in collecting qualitative data from younger children (Barter & Renold, 2000). Vignettes addressed notions including over-disclosure, social capital, self-presentation, and cyberbullying. A vignette about co-use

Table 2. SNS profile ownership amongst children, parents and teachers; not including co-use

	Profile ownership, <i>n</i> (%)						
	Facebook	Instagram	SnapChat	YouTube	Whatsapp	Other ^a	None
Children	1 (7%)	2 (13%)	6 (40%)	4 (27%)	4 (27%)	5 (33%)	3 (21%)
Parents	10 (77%)	5 (38%)	6 (46%)	4 (27%)	6 (46%)	0	3 (21%)
Teachers	12 (86%)	9 (64%)	2 (14%)	2 (14%)	6 (43%)	1 (7%)	3 (21%)

Note. ^aExamples include: Roblox, Music.ly; Funimate; Minecraft; Fortnite.

Table 3. Vignettes and their related theoretical notions and sub-notions used in the child interviews

Theoretical notions	Sub-notions	Vignette
Over-disclosure	Public	Claire has a Facebook account. On her public profile she has her date of birth, school, and the name of the town she lives in
	Private	Sam sends Sarah direct messages on Instagram telling her about his secrets
Social capital	Bridging	David made a new friend on Facebook
	Bonding	Adam uses Instagram to keep in touch with his old friends from primary school
Self-presentation		Azeem worries about posting photos on Instagram in case he does not get any likes
Cyberbullying	Victimization	Rachael read a status on Facebook that was about her and it made her feel upset
	Perpetration	Craig posted a photo of Rebecca on his SnapChat story to make his friends laugh
Co-use		Sameer shares his SnapChat account with his mum

was also to open a dialogue about parents' mediation behaviours. These were broken down into sub-notions to ensure that nuances within these notions would not skew the data (Table 3). Children were asked to provide advice for an imaginary child and outline whether they would model this behaviour, providing explanations for their reasoning ('Would you do the same? Why/why not?'; Table 3). Names of imaginary children were consistent across all interviews.

Procedure

The procedure of this study was conducted in accordance with the COREQ guidelines (Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007). Prior to data collection, this study was submitted for a full ethical review to the first author's university research ethics committee. Ethical approval was granted following this. This study also complied with the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society. The lead researcher had a full Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check and completed all of the interviews with children, parents, and teachers.

All interviews took place between May and July 2018 and were conducted by the lead researcher: a female PhD student. As an ex-teacher, the lead researcher had experience in safeguarding and child protection protocol as well as experience communicating with children, parents, and teachers within a school setting. The lead researcher had prior experience of qualitative methodologies and analysis; they also completed advanced training in preparation for the data collection of this study. The lead researcher had a pre-existing relationship with three of the schools recruited and therefore some children, parents, and teachers were familiar with them. To mitigate biases or assumptions towards the lead researcher, first names were used throughout the interview; this was utilized in particular to ensure that children did not feel as though they were communicating with a teacher. All participants were reminded of the lead researcher's role as a PhD student and their interest in exploring children's SNS use.

Most interviews took place during the school day within the school premises, two parents and three children (two families) were interviewed in separate rooms in their

homes on request. Interviews were designed to take approximately 20 min in length to avoid difficulties fitting into the school day. Interviews averaged at 19 min in length for parents and teachers, and 16 min in length for children. Each interview was recorded using a digital recording device that was placed on a table between the participant and the lead researcher. Participant consent for the interviews to be recorded was obtained verbally prior to turning on the device. All recordings were immediately transferred for transcription. All participants were assigned a unique numerical code alongside their category (e.g., Child 1). The corresponding participant's unique ID code and their demographic information were stored within a password-protected file to later be added to the transcription. All participants received a written and verbal brief and consent form prior to commencing the interview, and a verbal and written debrief following completion.

Data analysis

All recordings were transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher (to ensure accuracy and depth of familiarization with the data) into Microsoft Word documents, subsequently imported into NVivo software. Inductive thematic analysis was used, in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) framework, to elicit and interpret semantic patterns within relevant context. Within NVivo, codes were constructed independently within the context of each individual transcription to ensure that themes and sub-themes were not formulated prematurely (Braun & Clarke, 2013), these were then semantically compared. Initial codes were compared contextually to identify potential emerging sub-themes. Finally, these codes were compared across all participant groups to identify larger themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). These themes were combined to form broader themes and sub-themes via thematic maps. These themes were then further analysed and refined both via the repetition of the above process to ensure consistency and homogeneity (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and through discussion with co-authors.

Results

Three key themes were identified from the data: 'digital footprint', 'social capital', and 'e-safety'. All themes contained subthemes, and these are presented in Figure 1.

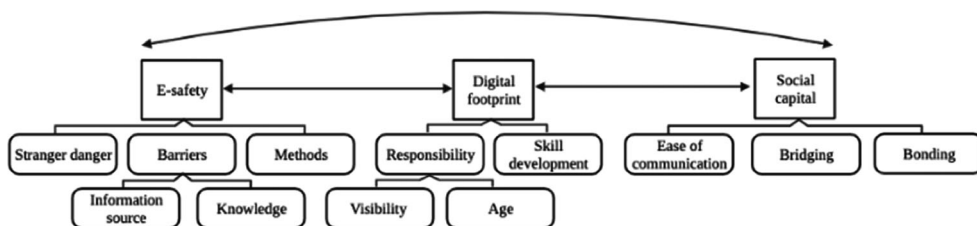


Figure 1. A summary of the key themes (square) and subthemes (oval) identified from the data. Key themes include e-safety, with subthemes of stranger danger, barriers (information source; knowledge) and methods, digital footprint, with subthemes of visibility (responsibility; age) and skill development, and social capital, with subthemes of ease of communication, bridging, and bonding.

Digital footprint

Children's *digital footprint* ('the digital traces each one of us leaves behind as we conduct our lives'; p.324, Weaver & Gahegan, 2007) was associated with *responsibility*; this was frequently linked with the *age restrictions of SNS*. Parents who described restrictive mediation behaviours ('we would regularly take their phone and look through and make sure that they were being appropriate', Parent 12) perceived younger children as not being 'responsible enough' (Parent 9) or 'not old enough' (Parent 2) to use SNS, despite uncertainty of official *age restrictions*: 'like Facebook is like not until you're a... is it 13?' (Parent 13). Similarly, teachers outlined age restrictions as associated with the *responsibility* of having a *digital footprint*: 'it's about whether a child is mature enough to use it' (Teacher 5). Parents describing enabling mediation behaviours ('I don't have a lot of restrictions on their internet', Parent 5) expressed concern for the potential stigma against the perceived irresponsibility of allowing younger children online: 'I purposefully and intentionally registered my son... even knowing that Instagram was actually not for 12-year-olds' (Parent 10). In line with parents and teachers, children associated *responsibility* with age, 'if you're my age, some friends can't really hold secrets' (Child 1), and subsequently the *age restrictions of SNS*, 'no, I'm too young now [...] there's age limits' (Child 15).

The *responsibility* of being visible online was also discussed. Parents outlined *visibility* as predominantly risky, 'I do know that you can... link... you can go on and on and on, so like a friend of a friend can look... so that is bad (Parent 9); this was also outlined by teachers, 'knowing what you say is there forever... because once it's there... even if you've deleted it, someone could have screenshotted it' (Teacher 4). This risk was also linked with *cyberbullying*: 'someone out there will find that or take a screenshot and send it far and wide' (Teacher 11); 'people were saying mean things and stuff and she lashed out on Twitter, she can't take that back' (Parent 12). Teachers regularly outlined an attempt to educate their pupils accordingly: 'I... m-make them realise that when they take a photo its got a digital fingerprint that they haven't necessarily thought of' (Teacher 10). Children also outlined *visibility* as risky. Children associated public visibility with over-disclosure: 'people might pretend to be your friends because they know everything about you' (Child 13). However, children did not view private *visibility* (i.e., disclosing to contacts) of general information as risky: 'Like your date of birth and that... should be in like a private profile' (Child 6).

Some parents and teachers outlined *skill development* as a positive outcome of digital footprint: 'I think she's going to be something of an emerging film-maker' (Parent 7). These parents and teachers often expressed co-use mediation behaviours: 'my son put up loads of pictures and some text with it, so we've... we decided to keep and use that [...] a nice introduction to sort of... photo journalism' (Parent 1); 'using it in the phone function to do up like light and dark and contrasting and shading' (Teacher 11). Parents expressing restrictive mediation behaviours were less *knowledgeable* of technology but recognized their child's skill development: 'I'll be like, 'oh I don't know how to do that!' and she'll be like, 'oh pass it here, mummy!' (Parent 11). Teachers also recognized their limited knowledge in comparison to their pupils', 'I have to be at the top of my game, but I'm not because they're so much more into it' (Teacher 10). Interestingly, children discussed *skill development* far less than parents and teachers: 'YouTube could also help you if you like creating stuff' (Child 12).

Social capital

The *ease of communicating* online was identified as a beneficial outcome of SNS use by parents, ‘our busy lives nowadays, we don’t have time to pick up the phone and talk to them on the phone and so I just think Whatsapp and SnapChat just keeps us in the loop really’ (Parent 4), teachers, ‘an easier way of getting things out there’ (Teacher 12), and children, ‘well Whatsapp is easy. . . you can just type it away’ (Child 6). Alternatively, *ease of communication* was also linked with the risk of cyberbullying: ‘my class was having an argument on Whatsapp [. . .] they were adding the stepsister in on it who doesn’t even go to the school’ (Teacher 1). Children also associated *ease of communication* with *cyberbullying*, particularly perpetration: ‘you might go further and post worse stuff’ (Child 7). Other than this, children did not discuss *cyberbullying* in much depth; Tokunaga’s (2010) definition of *cyberbullying* outlines that actions must be repeated in order to be considered cyberbullying and children’s experiences appeared to relate to isolated aggressive incidences rather than repeated events: ‘Yeah so I posted one of those like, “that’s stupid,” and then it was kind of like a fight’ (Child 4).

In particular, *bonding social capital* was highlighted as the key purpose of using SNS as well as a benefit. Parents and teachers outlined *bonding* with friends and family across distances, ‘my friends and family are in [country] so it’s much easier to erm contact them and. . . stay in touch that way’ (Parent 2); ‘through Facebook I’m going to see a friend in [country] this summer’ (Teacher 5). Interestingly, children also highlighted this: ‘if you have a friend who is far away from you, you can talk to him’ (Child 9).

As well as *bonding social capital*, parents and teachers discussed ‘keeping in touch with a wider community’ (Parent 12) suggesting *bridging social capital* as a benefit of using SNS. Although, children did not view this as beneficial instead stressing that they would only accept friend requests ‘if I knew them in real life’ (Child 7).

A minority of parents viewed *social capital* online as beneficial for their children, primarily *bonding* with friends: ‘their friends will be on there with their own accounts and they’ll be able to talk to their friends and things’ (Parent 5); bonding with family: ‘she’s his godmother and they send lots of like silly SnapChats and things to each other’ (Parent 12); *ease of communication* ‘he knows that he can speak to me or his dad anytime’ (Parent 4). These parents often depicted co-use mediation behaviours: ‘we use YouTube in the evening, it’s part of our bedtime routine’ (Parent 5).

Teachers perceived the ability to ‘chat to friends outside of school’ (Teacher 3) as a beneficial opportunity for their pupils. For example, engaging with wider communities and learning to collaborate/network: ‘breaking down barriers, y’know sharing experiences’ (Teacher 14). These perceptions linked with an educational approach, particularly relating to digital literacy: ‘schools use Twitter to share learning and some schools put writing and things on there’ (Teacher 6).

E-safety

E-safety predominantly stemmed from the risk of *stranger danger*. Parents and teachers frequently outlined their concerns around *stranger danger*: ‘talking to sort of adults on the other side [. . .] those things really do scare me’ (Parent 4). Over-disclosure was considered a predictor: ‘anything traceable basically that can link them back to the school’ (Parent 9); ‘you wouldn’t walk into a football stadium and put your phone number across the scrolling display for everyone to see, so why would you do something like that on the internet?’ (Teacher 13). Catfishing (stranger concealing their true identity via a disguise/pretence; Harris, 2013) was identified as a form of stranger danger: ‘you could be talking to

someone that says that they're this person but [...] they're completely someone else' (Parent 13); 'people can put on a full-on false account and you'd fully believe that' (Teacher 9). Grooming was also highlighted as a form of *stranger danger*: 'it was a man, there were questions that he was asking that really concerned me [...] all that kind of grooming side of things' (Parent 5); 'they're all really, really savvy and they could, again, just draw all these youngsters in' (Teacher 12).

Children mirrored parents' and teachers' concerns around *stranger danger*: 'I wouldn't add them because they could be a stranger' (Child 12). Equally, children identified over-disclosure as a predictor: 'people can look and like find out where you live and they could come round' (Child 8). Contrary to parents and teachers, children did not vocalize catfishing and grooming but rather outlined the *physical dangers*, specifically kidnap: 'if you've got information like where your school is erm strangers could come and kidnap you from your school' (Child 7). Children vaguely outlined the risk of being located by strangers: 'they can like look you up on other social medias and find where you are' (Child 9).

E-safety methods were frequently outlined by all participants. Parental mediation behaviours were perceived as a socially expected e-safety strategy: 'you just think, "where were the parents then?"' (Parent 4) and primarily restrictive. Parents perceived settings as useful for minimising children's risk exposure (mainly to stranger danger): 'I think that's the main thing, checking privacy and settings' (Parent 6). Teachers were similar in that settings were often viewed as an e-safety strategy: 'we try and make children aware that that's proof that it's a safe website' (Teacher 5). Parents also vocalized monitoring their children's SNS use: 'I'll do it behind your back or by means of technology we have installed in the house' (Parent 13), and disallowing private use: 'we've got our computer down in the living room' (Parent 8). Teacher mediation behaviours also depicted monitoring and restriction of use: 'there's things that they should NOT be doing and that's something that we really have to get across' (Teacher 14).

Often, these teachers and parents felt they had limited *knowledge* about SNS: 'I started out on the internet in 1993 which is quite a long time ago and it was a lot different then and it's kind of outgrown me' (Parent 1); 'I know it's around but I just don't know enough about it' (Teacher 10). Few parents and teachers vocalized enabling mediation behaviours: 'I don't have a lot of restrictions on their internet erm so...practically, they could go onto just about everything and anything as it goes...don't necessarily have a problem with that' (Parent 5), these participants presented confident SNS *knowledge* and regular discussions with children: 'they'll come to me with a message from somebody and...consider...what to do next' (Parent 12); 'I've shown them the power of the computer things like Inscape and Sketchup which design things' (Teacher 14). Empowering children's independent SNS use was important to parents and teachers but impacted by safety concerns: 'you want them to use the technology... but you want to make sure they know how to use it safely' (Parent 6); 'as long as it's used properly, it's a brilliant platform' (Teacher 4).

Teachers who described enabling mediation behaviours frequently mentioned the barriers to delivering *e-safety* education. These included lack of resources: 'it's not something that I've really had to look into here, we don't even use iPads so...[laughs]' (Teacher 9) and lack of time: 'as classroom teachers, if you've got to go out there searching for information...in busy...busy lives... you may not do that' (Teacher 11). Specific to SNS use, *barriers* consisted of its negative reputation: 'we don't use the internet because there's so much dangers' (Teacher 4) and the higher prioritization of core subjects: 'if

you've got targets in English and Maths to hit, that's going to take priority over learning about social networking sites' (Teacher 11).

Children described e-safety *methods* that reflected parents' and teachers' mediation behaviours. The use of settings was frequently outlined by children: 'if you're a private account then people that want to see your page you have to request' (Child 9). Selectiveness of contacts, 'I just don't think it's right to friend someone that I don't know' (Child 3), and limiting disclosure were also highlighted, 'you shouldn't like tell anyone your address...or email or...your age...and like things about that's private' (Child 15).

Discussion

This study aimed to explore parents', teachers', and children's perceptions of the risks and benefits of SNS use, as well as adults' mediation behaviours. Adults perceive the importance of engaging with the internet, yet are concerned about the risks of stranger danger; these concerns inform restrictive mediation styles both within the home and school environments. A focus upon the risks of stranger danger was consistent across adults and children, with most parents reporting using restrictive mediation styles. Our findings highlight similarities between adults' and children's perceptions of the benefits of SNS use, specifically in terms of bonding social capital. Further, our findings present an innovative approach to exploring cross-comparative relationships in children's and adults' perceptions.

Digital footprint

Adults acknowledged the importance of the digital age and recognized that their children would eventually have a digital footprint. Responsibility was perceived by both adults and children as important. Yet, what constituted responsibility varied (Ungar, 2009). Restrictive parents, as well as many teachers, perceived SNS age restrictions as an indicator of responsibility. Enabling parents tended to disregard the age restrictions, instead perceiving responsibility based upon their child's decision-making (Ozgar & Ucar, 2016). Those who believed their children would make ill-judged choices online tended to co-use more, whereas those who believed their children would discuss their use were more *laissez-faire*. Similar findings are reflected within research considering parent-child communication and parenting styles (Fitzpatrick, Marshall, Leutwiler, & Krcmar, 1996; Noller & Bagi, 1985).

Benefits of SNS use

All participants perceived bonding social capital as beneficial. SNS is often used as a medium for discussing and organising plans, as well as updating friends who live further away (Cornejo, Tentori, & Favela, 2013; Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009). Limited in opportunities to socialize, SNS provides children with a platform to communicate with greater freedom (Quinn & Oldmeadow, 2013; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Children vocalized the importance of bonding long-distance friendships (South & Haynie, 2004). Maintaining these friendships during childhood is embedded within the developmental benefits of social capital and well-being (Ferguson, 2006; Morrow, 1999). Importantly, our findings suggest that social capital is important for children, and that SNS is an empowering tool for achieving these goals.

Enabling parents described co-use of SNS with their children, whilst enabling teachers described more interpretive behaviours, both expressing their desire to assist children in digitally independence. Children who co-used SNS with their parents emphasized the benefits of social capital, supporting findings of parental mediation techniques impacting children's SNS benefit exposure (Livingstone et al., 2017). Children did not identify learning about the benefits of social capital in school; potentially, the educational message children receive is predominantly negative (boyd & Hargittai, 2013; Hew & Brush, 2007).

Risks of SNS use

Early internet research identified children's lacking understanding of stranger danger (Kraizer, Fryer, & Miller, 1988; Moran, Warden, Macleod, Mayes, & Gillies, 1997). Now, children are able to access online platforms more easily and can communicate independently (Sharples, Graber, Harrison, & Logan, 2008). Fear of stranger danger encourages restrictive mediation behaviours both by parents and teachers, even for those who are typically more enabling (Foster, 2014).

Bridging online is viewed as a precursor to forming relationships with strangers (boyd & Hargittai, 2013). Adults were particularly concerned about strangers catfishing children with the intention to groom and used restrictive mediation behaviours to prevent this. Yet, children were vocal about the risks of bridging online and were clear to outline their desire to bond social capital only; this suggests that adults' perceptions of the risk for children's bridging online behaviours may be less relevant today (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009).

Children perceived strangers physically locating them as the ultimate risk (Livingstone, Kirwil, Ponte & Staksrud, 2014), although rarely expanded on what would occur following this. Teachers vocalized that stranger danger education in primary schools often fails to outline the realities to avoid frightening children; also recognized within literature (Sharples et al., 2009). Perhaps this shapes children's limited view of the consequences.

A small minority of children acknowledged the risks of over-disclosure leading to cyberbullying. Children were vague when expanding on this, often discussing strategies to solve victimization: informing parents or resolving the issue themselves. Such strategies are commonly used in response to traditional bullying (Demaray, Malecki, Secord, & Lyell, 2013; Rigby, 2005; Sampasa-Kanyinga, Lalande, & Colman, 2020) but have been found to be less effective for cyberbullying (Machackova, Cerna, Sevcikova, Dedkova, & Daneback, 2013). For example, a child may attempt to solve the issue but due to online disinhibition (Suler, 2004) or misinterpretation exacerbate the situation (Steer, Betts, Baguley, & Binder, 2020). In fact, seeking support from friends (Fitzpatrick & Bussey, 2014) and school (Chan & Wong, 2020) have been identified as especially effective in coping with cyberbullying. Children therefore appear to lack appropriate coping mechanisms for cyberbullying. Children vocalized stranger danger risks far more than cyberbullying risks.

Enhancing privacy settings is important for reducing visibility to strangers but does not limit the risk of over-disclosure (Schacter, Greenberg, & Juvonen, 2016). Over-disclosure is still (if not more) possible even when visibility is private, due to disclosure between friends (Dennehy et al., 2020). Societal fears of stranger danger influence adults' restrictive mediation behaviours (Furedi, 2001). In reality, the likelihood of being contacted by a stranger is significantly less than other risks, such as cyberbullying (Livingstone et al., 2017).

E-safety

Teachers presenting restrictive mediation behaviours manifested stressed the age limitations and stranger danger risks; they also expressed a low understanding of SNS use (Krumsvik, Jones, Øfstegaard, & Eikeland, 2016). Restrictive teachers mitigated visibility online concerns by refraining from having a digital footprint due to fears of breaching professionalism policies (Rodwell, 2017).

Enabling teachers expressed a greater confidence with SNS use and had a digital footprint themselves allowing for flexible e-safety education, lowering the barrier of prioritization. An association between greater confidence and flexibility in teaching has been widely identified within research (Gudmundsdottir & Hatlevik, 2018; Wilson & Stacey, 2004). These teachers may also possess skills to safeguard themselves from unwanted contact (Nikolopoulou & Gialamas, 2015).

In these findings alone, e-safety education varied from daily to one day a term highlighting the lack of consistency across schools. Core subjects, such as Literacy and Numeracy, were regularly outlined as being prioritized over subjects where e-safety would most likely be delivered (Shipton, 2011). For teachers who lack understanding, prioritizing e-safety education is unlikely within an already overloaded curriculum (OECD, 2005). As argued by Shipton (2011), a lack of prioritization was identified within school budgets for funding devices for pupils.

Limitations and implications

The participants within this study were from a wide range of geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds across England. A limitation, however, is the lacking representation of a broader ethnic background. Research suggests parental mediation behaviours, and parenting techniques in general, vary with ethnicity due to cultural differences (Greenberg & Mastro, 2008; Swindle, Ward, Whiteside-Mansell, Bokony, & Pettit, 2014). Incorporating these measures would assist in further examining adult mediation within children's SNS use.

Further, some of the participants were known to the lead researcher due to their previous role as a teacher in their schools. To mitigate biases or censorship, the lead researcher made a conscious effort to ensure that participants did not feel uncomfortable in sharing information; for example, using first names and ensuring anonymity of data. Despite this, it is possible that some participants may have limited responses due to social desirability bias. It is important to consider this within interpretation of the findings.

An implication of this study is the use of a cross-comparative approach to exploring perspectives within a community. By investigating children's, parents' and teachers' perspectives this study presents an in-depth exploration of the social influences which shape children's development. In relation to the digital age, this is a novel methodological approach which is important in further understanding how children's perceptions and behaviours are being shaped within an ever-evolving connected world. Future research should continue this approach in order to strengthen our understanding in the nuances of children's digital reality.

Importantly, this study highlights the similar and differing perceptions that parents, teachers and children have about the risks and benefits of SNS use, as well as how mediation behaviours can impact these. Implications which require consideration are that adults are placing too great a focus upon stranger danger and this is skewing children's perceptions of the security that online settings provide. Teachers currently feel mixed in their ability to educate children about SNS use due to vague and widely differing e-safety

policies. Schools should prioritize e-safety education in terms of SNS use, despite age restrictions, and ensure that children are protected from the relevant risks (incorporate more on cyberbullying, not just focussing on stranger danger) but are also empowered in accessing the benefits.

Conclusions

This study is unique in its focus upon both adults and children's (aged 7–12 years) perceptions of the risks and benefits of SNS use and the role of adult mediation behaviours. Our findings highlight that younger children (aged 7–12 years) are using SNS and are doing so for the benefits of bonding social capital. Children are aware of the stranger danger risks and are utilizing settings to mitigate these. Problematically, children lack awareness of other risks such as cyberbullying. Adult mediation behaviours, both internet parenting styles and teaching styles, mediate children's perceptions of the risks and benefits of SNS use, as well as their access to SNS. Adults focus strongly on stranger danger risks and this is influencing children's online risk perception. Limited knowledge of SNS hinders all adults from educating children about their SNS use. For teachers, practical barriers of delivering e-safety education are a further hindrance.

Primary schools should prioritize SNS education with children from 8 years and educate teachers to empower them in their e-safety delivery. Methodologically, our study is unique in its cross-comparative approach to addressing community perspectives. Theoretically, our study indicates the importance of significant adults acting as key mediators in children's use of SNS to help promote their development safely. Yet, this should be balanced, considering both the risks and benefits.

Conflicts of interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contribution

Beatrice Hayes: Conceptualization (equal); Data curation (equal); Formal analysis (equal); Funding acquisition (equal); Investigation (equal); Methodology (equal); Project administration (equal); Resources (equal); Validation (equal); Visualization (equal); Writing – original draft (equal); Writing – review & editing (equal). **Alana James:** Funding acquisition (equal); Supervision (equal); Validation (equal); Writing – review & editing (equal). **Ravinder Barn:** Supervision (equal); Validation (equal); Writing – review & editing (equal). **Dawn Watling:** Conceptualization (equal); Funding acquisition (equal); Supervision (equal); Writing – review & editing (equal).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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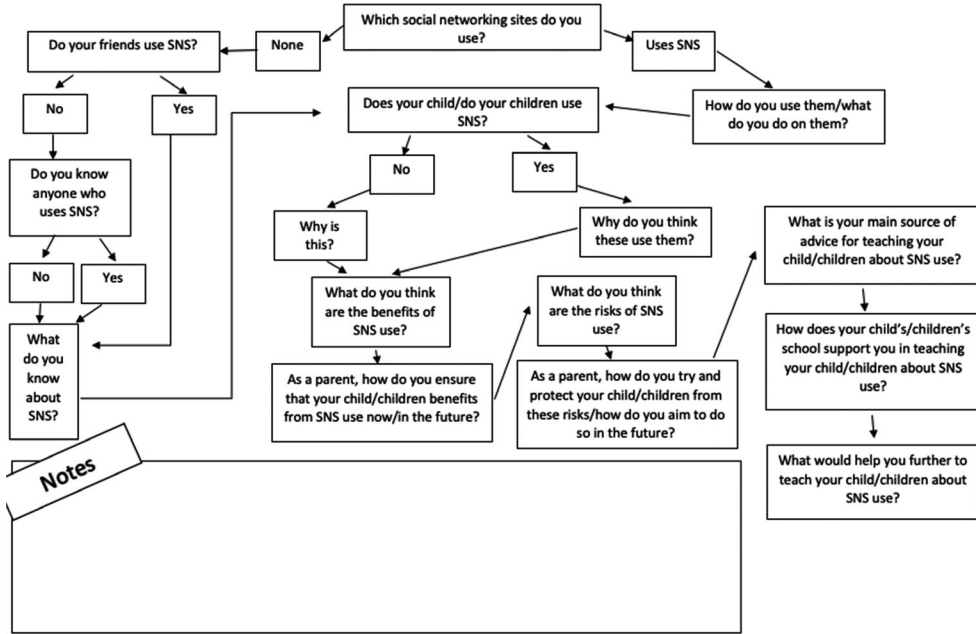
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Appendix A: Interview flow chart: Parents

Parent's interviews

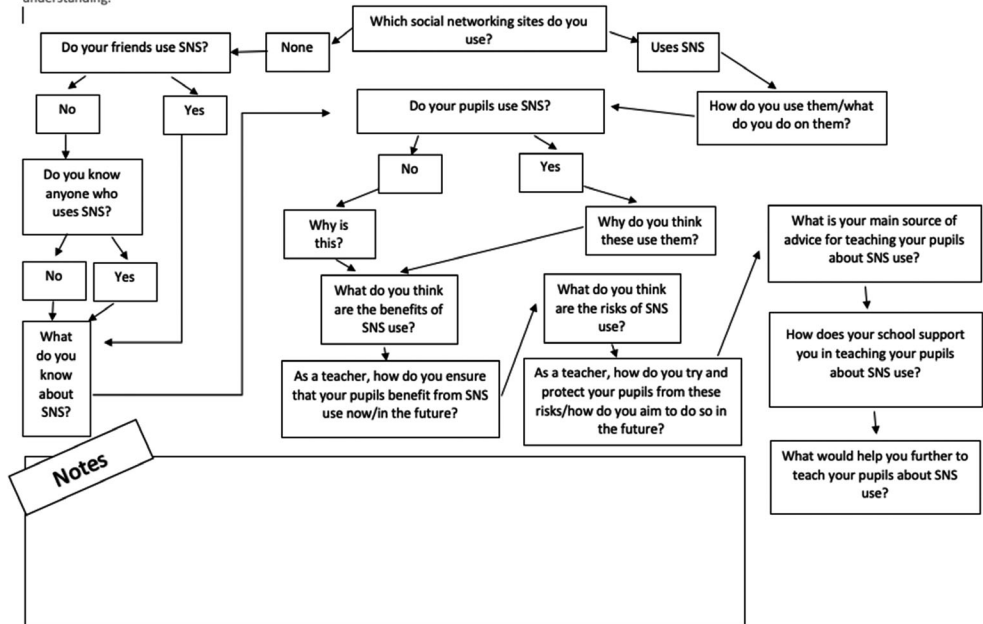
Aim: To understand what children perceive as risky and beneficial about social networking site use. / To explore how parents mediate their understanding.



Appendix B: Interview flow chart: Teachers

Teacher's interviews

Aim: To understand what children perceive as risky and beneficial about social networking site use. / To explore how teachers/e-safety mediate their understanding.



Appendix C: Interview flow chart: Children

Children's interviews

Aim: To understand what children perceive as risky and beneficial about social networking site use.

